Distillation of Resilience: Female Masculinity in Form
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A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
In partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
in the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon

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# Table of Contents

Permission to Use ........................................................................................................ i  
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................ ii  
Dedication ................................................................................................................ iv  
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................... vi  
Abstract ................................................................................................................... viii  

Chapter One .............................................................................................................. 1  
  Distillation of Resilience ....................................................................................... 1  
    1.1 Introduction ................................................................................................... 1  
    1.2 Elided Margins ............................................................................................. 3  
    1.3 Literature Review ......................................................................................... 4  
    1.4 Methodology ............................................................................................... 15  
    1.5 Methods ..................................................................................................... 20  
    1.6 Standard Deviation: The Research Participants ....................................... 23  
    1.7 The Research Process ................................................................................ 26  
    1.8 Data Analysis ............................................................................................. 27  
    1.9 Ethical Issues ............................................................................................. 28  
    1.10 Research Challenges ................................................................................ 29  

Chapter Two ............................................................................................................. 33  
  Female Masculinity in Form ................................................................................. 33  
    2.1 Site of Construction or Construction Site .................................................... 33  
    2.2 Tension: The Fence-Line .......................................................................... 34  
    2.3 Suspension: Bone-Cages .......................................................................... 37  
    2.4 Disruption: Clothes-Line .......................................................................... 39  
    2.5 We all Bleed for the Binary: Family Institutions ....................................... 42
2.6 Bones of Contention: Medical Institutions………………………………..48
2.7 The Devil’s Rope: Legal Institutions.................................................54
2.8 Disembodying the Body: The Embodiment of Resilience………………..56
2.9 Crossing the Vanilla Fields: The Distillate of Resilience………………62

References........................................................................................................69

Appendices........................................................................................................72

A. Artist Statement and Dedication.................................................................72
B. REB Interview Template............................................................................74
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my closest and oldest friend, Shauna Reist. Shauna had a longstanding simultaneous love affair with Djuna Barnes, Michel Foucault, William Shakespeare, and Judith Butler. Although I did not share the depth of her passion for Shakespeare or Barnes, I did acquire a profound respect for Shauna’s reading of Foucault and Butler. I am grateful Shauna made these critical introductions in 1996 when my own gender was adrift in a fledgling transgender community. At the time, I was uncomfortable identifying as trans but felt I had no other gender identity options. I felt an increasing pressure to surgically “transition” to a male sexed body. My resistance led to many late-night conversations with Shauna, which invariably led to deep, meandering discussions involving Foucault and Butler. I believe these discussions were an enormous contribution to my ability to reveal a gender identity that works for me, without the internal pressure, tension, or resistance.

Shauna came from Small Town, Saskatchewan, where she had a much more dangerous experience of gender fluidity than my own small-town experience. When she was sixteen, Shauna’s classmate referred to her as “too manly,” and this “manly” label translated into a “dyke” label. As a result, a field party was orchestrated to teach her what it means to be a “real
man.” A group of her peers poured a bottle of vodka down her throat, sexually assaulted her and left her to drown at the edge of what rural Saskatchewan people call a dug-out, which is a water reservoir used primarily for feeding cattle. Shauna managed to survive the rest of her youth, using her passion for literature to finish a master’s degree in English. During Shauna’s Ph.D. program, the deep shadows of Shauna’s experience accumulated in weight, and she committed suicide. Shauna gave me a firm foothold on gender identity at a time when my own gender had no home. I use this footing as the foundation for all the work I do on gender identity. Thank you, Shauna Reist. There is no language for your influence, or your presence.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With gratitude, I have an abundance of people, places, spaces, and experiences to thank for occupying my life with me. My ancestors who graciously hold a place at the table for me. May I be fearless and daring at my place.

Betty and Llyn Yelland, my grandparents who taught me how to swim upstream. I am becoming a very strong swimmer. Thank you.

Fin (Diane West), swimming in the deepest depth of the sea, for where else would I find you? Thank you for charting our course under the darkest of night skies. I can read our future in the strength of your knots. By the liminal light of the moon, you have found me, too.
Lesley Biggs, by some means you found a way to see the art while shaping the artist, a coarse carpenter cantilevered by context, meaning, and form. Thank you for trusting in an apprentice.

X, J, Liana, and Charlotte. You know who you are. Thank you for exploring your Identity, Life, and Being. Thank you for being curious about the threads that hold you together. The threads of our brotherhood hold us all.

The Senate.
Janine Lamothe.
Shirley Spidla.
Bradley Campbell.
Ruth Kinzel.

Thank you for always holding me in tension with myself. Your lyrical thoughts always elevate me. May we celebrate our own standard of deviation.
Abstract
This thesis reviews the ways in which female masculinity is defined, organized and ignored in dominant discourse. The objective is to demonstrate that female masculinity can be deemed a valuable category well beyond the borders of the gender binary. In this research, I pay careful attention to the construction of language around gender identities, and the ways in which female masculine identity has been dislodged from the category of trans identity. This research will shed light on the liminal spaces and magical places of identity in which masculine women dwell. The goal of this thesis is to determine and define common threads of resilience found in the lived, embodied experiences of masculine women who participate in the research process. Drawing on standpoint theory and genderqueer theories, these potential filaments of resilience will be examined through Photovoice methodology. Research findings will be organized into a visual art exhibition to further engage and encourage a public conversation about female masculinity as a gender.
Chapter One:

Distillation of Resilience

1.1 Introduction

2012—There was once a woman who I didn’t quite formally meet. Yet, we crossed paths and she changed my life. Deep in the Amazon jungle, the Indigenous Kitchwa community of Misahualli is nestled along the river. Kitchwa people have a very traditional gendered dress code. Women wear their hair long with swaths of polyester pinstripe suit material wrapped around their hips for skirts. Women have white cotton frilled and embroidered blouses buttoned to the throat, and another band of suit material for a shawl. The men wear their hair very short with a white open-collared shirt, a colourful sash around their waists, and black cotton short pants. Everyone speaks Kitchwa, few speak Spanish, and no one speaks English.

There were few tourists this far in the jungle. My partner and I stood out. We are Canadian, queer, white, women carpenters. As we walked along the shore, a Kitchwa woman approached me from my blind spot. I didn’t see her coming until I felt a gentle hand on my forearm and a face
bent sideways looking up into my face. I guessed her age to be in her 50s and I noticed she had strikingly short hair. Her face shimmered with kindness, keenness, and recognition. Her gesture struck me as distinctly masculine and I wondered about her hands; small, brown, weathered. What had they created? Who had they loved?? I wanted to tell her my hands build houses and love women, but we had no common language and no words were spoken. Just as magically as she appeared, she vanished into the jungle. This was the first time I noticed she was dressed completely like a Kitchwa man.

I continue to contemplate my perception of this woman’s masculine experience. Did she always wear men’s clothing? What was it like for her to stand out in her culture? What about her community? Did they respect her? Did she experience violence? Was she valued? Did she have any power to navigate and negotiate her life within her culture, community, family? What of her identity? Did she take a risk in initiating contact with me and my own short hair, men’s clothing and masculine presence? What about my own western cultural felt experience? My own violence? My own masculinity hidden in plain sight? Has anyone studied this liminal space we hold beyond the gender binary? Has anyone created a platform for our imperceptible social identity to become visible? Anyone who hasn’t transitioned to a trans identity at some point in time? Am I the invisible (masculine) of the invisible (queer) of the invisible (woman)? Is the Kitchwa woman of the jungle? Where are my people? Masculine women are bound by socially organized constraints of femininity and masculinity being defined by the gender binary. It is a potentially dangerous, if not merely disastrous, proposition to question another woman about her masculinity. The Kitchwa woman could have performed an act of gender treason just as easily as I viewed it as an act of gender bravery. In all my travels, she is the only person I have met with whom I have shared any sense of gender identity. Perhaps she felt kinship enough to approach me and the impact on my own life
was resounding. This woman inspired me to pursue my Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies MA by inviting me to explore the hidden significance of everyday life. A very brave act indeed.

1.2 Elided Margins

In Western culture, the sex assigned at birth is a primary determining factor in assessing and assigning one’s gender identity. This common interpretation of gender sets up the gender binary with which we are all familiar: “female” and “male.” In contrast, my thesis will examine various elements of transgressive masculinity specifically performed by female bodies. I am particularly interested in probing the lived experience of self-identified masculine women. My intention is to locate common themes of resilience within their experiences, as well as the challenges they face. I am also concerned with masculine women’s perceptions around trans identity and their reasons for potentially discarding this gender identity. Through this exploration, I would like to establish a basis for female masculinity to be recognized under a gender fluid umbrella as a category beyond female, trans, or male identity. Finally, I am curious about masculine women’s experience of
genderphobia and how they define this concept. Genderphobia can be defined as a fear, hatred, or dislike of someone based on their gender non-conformity. Do masculine women identify as having experienced genderphobia, and in what ways have they conceptualized such experiences?

Within queer theory, the terms genderfluid, genderqueer, gender ambiguous, and female masculinity are used interchangeably. They are used as a gender category for anyone who self-defines themselves in some way not fitting into the category of “female,” “male,” or “trans,” but some combination or variation thereof. I prefer to adopt the term genderfluid because it disrupts borders of sex, dichotomous gender, and sexuality. It does not assume that the sexed body, sexual identities and practices, and gender identities are coterminous. Gender identity and sexual identity must be considered separate identities from one another because many people see and experience them as distinct.

1.3 Literature Review

Although the current literature is sparse and covers very specific discourse within masculine female identity, this review will focus on the language and recent history of gender expression. Gender identity, categorization, and resistance are highly queried concepts within feminist and queer theory and conversation. The binary
opposition of sexes assigned at birth represents the most prevalent scheme for cataloguing people upon a casual glance within most human interaction in the western world. The creation of a sexed division often begins before birth when individuals, families, and communities want to know the sex of the fetus through medical imaging technologies or they speculate about whether it is a boy or a girl. An assistant at the birth of an infant, usually a medical professional, assigns a sex based on the visual inspection of a child’s genitalia—those who have a vagina, labia, and clitoris are assigned the gender “female”; those who have a penis and testicles are assigned the gender “male.” The other markers of sex assigned at birth (chromosomes, gonads, reproductive organs, and hormones) are thought to align with the external genitalia based on cis-gender criteria. The sex of the gender is announced—“it’s a boy,” or “it’s a girl” – and then is legally codified on a birth certificate.

From the moment of birth, an individual’s experience is structured by gender assignment based on the sex assigned to them following their birth. According to Burn, “the separation of man/boy/male and woman/girl/female is seen to make a difference in virtually every domain of human experience” (Burn, 1981, p. 362). The act of dividing the sexes into two distinct spheres reinforces heteronormative categorization and equates males with masculinity and females with femininity through their common actions and engendered presentation. The act of “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro-political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). It situates anyone who articulates a gender identity outside of the heteronormative binary as “subversive,” “deviant,” or “other.” Birth assigned women who express masculinity and relate it to their gender identity continuously challenge the dominant
discourse. In doing so, masculine women constantly frame and reframe the territory of their
gender identity or are culturally assimilated by the assumed binary of birth assigned sex.

Exploring the notion of female masculinity puts into question the meaning of the term
“masculinity.” Female masculinity challenges the myth that male sexed bodies act as the
exclusive vehicle for “masculinity.” The term “masculine” is so intricately interlaced with the
birth assigned male sex that it is difficult to define outside of anatomic maleness. In
heteronormative culture, masculinity is most often in a dichotomous dance with femininity, with
masculinity as the subject and femininity as the object. Masculinity is routinely considered to
“be what is stereotypical for men/boys as compared to women/girls, or is contrasted to
femininity” (Bailey, 2002, p. 337). Because masculinity is constructed in opposition to
femininity, defining masculinity in and of itself is more difficult. As Halberstam observes,
“although we seem to have a difficult time defining masculinity, as a society we have little
trouble recognizing it” (1998, p. 2). Masculinity in any body can be expressed through
behaviors, mannerisms, clothing preferences, posture, hairstyle, personality traits, and sometimes
career choices. Female masculinity reframes the birth assigned female body within these
culturally masculine attributes. Female sexed bodies with masculine characteristics navigate
social structures to attain safe physical, social, and political spaces to explore the fringes of
identity, often without the framework of language or the benefit of accessible traditional role
models.

Language is crucial in structuring the position of gender categories. They impose
boundaries on the experience of gendered persons, which are not necessarily salient in
heteronormative society. The word “effeminate,” for example, is used to describe a birth
assigned male who displays attributes of femininity, usually in an undesirable light. There is no
equivalent term for birth assigned females who display attributes of masculinity, positively or negatively. Female masculinity remains principally invisible within the construct of language. Terms such as “female masculinity” and “tomboy” are used to describe female sexed bodies who display masculine characteristics. There is also a lack of common terminology for masculine women who face discrimination based on a specified objectification of their masculinity. Tangible danger exists for birth assigned women who do not present a socially acceptable standard of femininity, as she is not male or female within heteronormative categories. Often the term “homophobia” is used to inaccurately define this discrimination, but this definition refers explicitly to one’s sexuality, not necessarily one’s gender identity.

We must also inspect definitions of cisgender, genderphobia, and transphobia. The word cisgender is a contemporary term defined by Eli R. Green (2006, p. 231), and is used to refer to people who self-define themselves as someone who is in alignment with their birth assigned sex and their social gender expression. In contrast, the term genderphobia is defined as a strong prejudice or dislike of those who do not identify as cisgender. Transphobia is defined as a negative response to transgender and intersex people, as well as other forms of gender-bending and gender non-conformity. At one time, these terms would have fallen under the umbrella term
"homophobia." But, as there has been an increase in awareness around trans identity, transphobia has been adopted to denote the specific experience of trans people. Stephens articulates a separation of genderphobia and transphobia by stating, “genderphobia is a more surreptitious form of discrimination than transphobia because it quietly adheres to hegemonic notions of gender behavior” (Stephens, 2005, p. 23). Although the term genderphobia is an umbrella term, it is not as prevalent as the term “transphobia.” Genderphobia is often mistakenly replaced with the term “transphobia.” This conflation of terms can create a very precarious environment for anyone who does not adhere to male, female, or trans identities.

The concept of trans identity is a recent invention. Yet historically, individuals have expressed their gender identity in opposition to the sex assigned to them at birth. In the absence of medical surgery, trans gendered individuals (who may or may not have identified themselves as transvestites or crossdressers) wore clothing and used padding or other accoutrements that helped them align their outward gender expression with their gender identity. In the 1950s, trans individuals—known as trans-sexuals— were assumed to desire drastic medical alterations such as multiple surgeries and hormone supplements to assist in achieving congruence between their gender identity and their now reconfigured anatomical body. This approach to trans identity, however, continued to operate within the binary of two genders since these individuals’ gender identity aligned now with their “correct” anatomical body. More recently, the emergence of cisgender identity—the alignment of one’s gender identity with one’s body sex assigned at birth—has had a contradictory effect on the concept of trans identity. On the one hand, trans and cis-identities have led to the construction of another binary. On the other hand, as these boundaries have solidified, the definition of trans has evolved into an identity that is less fixed in a gender binary.
Commonly recognized as “the third gender,” the trans identity has shifted to an umbrella term that includes the historical definition of people whose gender identity is the “opposite” of their assigned sex, as well as those people who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, and genderfluid. This expansion in gender identities and expressions has eased the expectation that trans people need surgical procedures and hormones in order to align their birth assigned bodies and gender identity. The availability of multiple gender identities and expressions challenges the notion that individuals need to give up one gender to embrace the aspects of other gender. Indeed, this understanding of trans identity acknowledges a range of gender identities, practices, and expressions that intersect with a range of sexual identities, practices, and expressions. At the same time, those who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, and genderfluid may not identify as trans, but those who adopt a trans identity may seek to incorporate the former gender identities as “trans.” This conceptualization of trans is thus based on a gender trichotomy-trans/male/female. Non-binary, genderqueer, and genderfluid, however, may resist gender trichotomy. This thesis examines in further detail the specific ways in which genderfluid identity is a unique identity distinct from trans identity. Through interviews with four participants who identify as masculine women (i.e. women whose gender expression is masculine and whose birth assigned sexed body is female), this research reveals the process of acquiring a gender identity. Recognizing that they did not fit in the cis-gender category, they moved from identifying as trans, then rejecting that identity, to the comfort of masculine femininity.

There are three main schools of thought about gender fluidity that argue that

Figure 10 Photo by J
female masculinity is a distinct gender identity and employ “non-essentialist, non-natural perspectives of gender, masculinity, and femininity” (Beasley, 2005, p. 238). One school of thought is primarily drawn from postmodern philosophy which argues that gender has no essential foundation, therefore categorization need not exist although its effects are deeply felt. Adopting a postmodern conception of the body, Judith Butler argues that there is no essential foundation to the self. Rather, she maintains the notion of the body as a vehicle of social control by stating, “culturally-constituted taboos are inscribed on the body to create the ‘abject,’ the ‘other,’ who is ultimately bound by the boundaries of the body, established and maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control” (Butler, 1990 p. 499). Butler uses Foucault’s idea of internalization to signal the accomplishment of “inner” and “outer” spaces of the body. Butler introduces the idea that the outer body can be used to reflect the identity of the inner space within a body by suggesting, “words, acts, gesture and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause” (1990 p. 500). She further articulates that these words, gestures, desires, and acts must be “performative” because “the identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications, manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (1990 p. 500).
These external words, acts, gestures and desires suggest the assumption of an equivalent interior gender core, and she argues that this assumption is “discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality (Butler, 1990 p. 499). Due to the incongruence of the “inner” and “outer” selves, her theory destabilizes the gender binary female/male as “natural.” Rather Butler points to the ways in which gender is constructed and performative.

In another school of thought, theorists such as Jack Halberstam believe that the categories of gender identification should be diversified to include any number of gender positions. Following Foucault, they argue that reverse discourses can bring new subject positions into view: “There is, Foucault suggests, a ‘reverse discourse’ in which one empowers a category that might have been used to oppress one – one transforms a debased position into a challenging presence. As a reverse discourse takes shape around the definitions of transsexual and transgender, it is extremely important to recognize the queerness of these categories, their instability, and their interpretability” (1999, p. 555). Halberstam favours the use of identity categories and the creation of new gender categories because they will help to recognize and mobilize political resistance for different groups of gender identities. But, importantly, Halberstam recognizes that these identities are neither fixed or “natural.” Just as the gay movement gave voice to gay-identified men and women and contributed more recently to the
emerging and quickly evolving visibility of the trans movement, the recognition of female masculinity as a distinct category contributes to this identity speaking on its own behalf, demanding its legitimacy or its position be acknowledged and actively enter discourse.

Halberstam and Butler disagree about the necessity and use of gender categorization, but they both rely on the notion of gender as performative to create a category for “female masculinity.” Butler, as philosopher, maintains gender is performative, therefore may not actually exist. Halberstam, as literary critic, argues although gender is performative, it exists in a social context, therefore room can be made to create numerous new categories. Both Butler and Halberstam restructure the categories of masculine and feminine to create gender identities that are more fluid and less fixed. Halberstam argues for the dislocation of masculinity from male bodies and refers to female masculinity as evidence of this dislocation. Butler destabilizes the notion that feminine and masculine are exclusively entwined with women’s and men’s bodies. This severance of birth assigned bodies from their gendered identities allows for an understanding of gender as fluid and not dependent on birth assigned bodies.

The third school of thought revolves around the emergence of contemporary transgender identity as a valid, self-sustaining category beyond the gender binary. This umbrella identity may include female masculinity and male femininity. A broadly defined trans category was popularized in the late 1990s and early 2000s when self-identified lesbian trans activist Leslie Feinberg used lived experience to advocate for many sub-identities under the trans label. Feinberg described herself as "an anti-racist white,
working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist.” Feinberg stated in a 2006 interview that her preferred pronouns varied depending on context:

“For me, pronouns are always placed within context. I am female-bodied, I am a butch lesbian, a transgender lesbian -- referring to me as "she/her" is appropriate, particularly in a non-trans setting in which referring to me as "he" would appear to resolve the social contradiction between my birth sex and gender expression and render my transgender expression invisible. And in an all trans setting, referring to me as "he/him" honors my gender expression in the same way that referring to my sister drag queens as "she/her" does” (Feinberg, 2006).

Currently, trans identity has narrowed in scope, and masculine or butch is not necessarily included. Trans identity is uncomfortable for many masculine women who maintain incongruence rather than assume a spectrum of gender (trans)itioning to “other,” as trans may imply. The assumption of trans identity renders female masculine expression invisible.

Following Feinberg, activists such as Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon have used their lived experience to forge a gender identity they collectively call “gender failure.” Their definition of gender failure is one who does not perform or enact gender in the ways in which social norms dictate based on their birth assigned sexed bodies. They use their creative skills to demonstrate publicly that there are identities beyond the binary and they are living proof. Both persons fluidly shift between a trans identity and a gender failure/gender fluid identity.

Within the last year, I have noticed a rapid shift in language around transgender identity being included in mainstream language. Some language attempts to recognize and expand inclusion by stating “trans and non-binary” rather than the trans umbrella term, although the umbrella term is all too common. Recently, Queen’s University submitted an equity survey to all Queens University applicants, including myself. It is a yearly census meant to track equity progress at the university. All applicants have access to previous census data going back to 2012 when the university started tracking equity. The statistics are broken down into undergraduate
and graduate schools, as well as the various faculties within the schools. Those categories are further broken down by birth assigned sex and gender identity. There were several questions pertaining to gender identity and sexuality. Initially, I was excited to see a section dedicated to gender identity and sexuality, until I read the disclaimer. Quoting the Ontario Human Rights Commission, the declaration stated, “For the purposes of this census gender identity is each person’s internal and individual experience of gender. A person’s gender identity may be the same as or different from their birth-assigned sex (adapted from the Ontario Human Rights Commission). The options identified below are based on the language used by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in the Policy on Discrimination and Harassment Because of Sexual Orientation and the Policy on Preventing Discrimination Because of Gender Identity and Gender Expression. Trans refers to a person who identifies with a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth, or to a person whose gender identity and gender expression differs from stereotypical masculine and feminine norms. It is also an umbrella term for those who identify as transgender, transsexual, trans, gender deviant, gender non-conforming, genderqueer or a similar term.

*Do you consider your gender identity to be trans, transgender, gender variant, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, two-spirit or a similar term? YES/NO.*”

Although I do not identify as trans, and openly resist standing under this “umbrella,” because for as long as I stand under this umbrella, my own gender remains invisible and misrepresented. Despite my discomfort, I felt it was the most accurate option for me so I indicated “yes” because I still had a desire to be counted. Would I be counted and how would I be counted if I indicated “no”? The census is problematic in that the census had a separate section for gender identity, meaning, I had already identified my sex as female. Now I have been
measured as a trans female, which is even more inaccurate than the blanket “trans” term. Last year’s census indicated there were 21 trans applicants for Queens grad school, 11 positions offered, and 9 seats accepted. I wonder of those 9 trans grad students, who is trans?

1.4 Methodology

*Unsettling the Homestead: An Archive of Female Masculinity in Saskatchewan* was my final project for Queer Theory 811, a course fulfillment of my WGST MA program. *Unsettling the Homestead* is a visual arts exhibit that investigates the personal lived experience of my own masculine, female body transgressing the borders of identity. This investigation of gender identity is expressed with archived images of gender fluidity, rural construction materials, artifacts of childhood masculinity, and narratives of resilience. Through this work, I created an intimate examination of the intersection of femininity, masculinity, trauma, and resilience. This work reveals the way in which genderphobic violence, and the resulting trauma and resilience, are written on a body living within multiple margins. I explored themes of private/public, power, accessibility, embodiment, and queering the homestead. *Unsettling the Homestead* was a public exhibition in which viewers were invited to anonymously share handwritten reflections of their visceral experience of the exhibit, and their own experience of gender.
The intention of this project was to inform and inspire my master’s degree thesis exhibition on the lived experience of resilience and genderphobia for masculine women. My personal goal of *Unsettling the Homestead* was to locate a strong and vivid thread of resilience in a liminal gender identity, and to encourage a public conversation about genderphobia and resilience. The result was a paper written about my discoveries made throughout the artistic process and the initial research findings based on themes found in the public written reflections.

The overwhelming positive response to this project reinforced the value of standpoint theory and community engagement as ways of giving a voice both personally and collectively. Community engagement can serve as the structural platform on which an emancipated viewpoint stands. A standpoint is the point at which an individual views the world around them. However, I’d argue that a standpoint represents the confluence of multiple positions that encompass race, class, sexuality, gender identity, etc.

Standpoint theory endeavors to find meaning from the specific standpoint of women and other societally marginalized groups in society. Standpoint theorists such as Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and Sandra Harding argue knowledge production must begin with women’s experiences, recognizing commonalities and differences in those experiences, while exploring the relations between power.
and knowledge. Harding states, “starting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order” (Griffin, 2009, p. 441). Although some theorists dispute Harding’s notion of research generating less partial and distorted accounts, I am interested in knowledge production rooted in women’s experiences, examining commonalities and differences as they may relate to themes of resilience. *Distillation of Resilience: Female Masculinity in Form* was an interactive installation exhibit which explored the gender identity and resilience of masculine women in artistic form. Public space is a heteronormative space in which queer lives and the bodies that live them are rarely noted for anything other than how those lives and bodies deviate. The research process and artistic practice were dedicated to creating a public and accessible space for masculine women’s experiences and expressions of gender to move from invisible to visible within this heteronormative space. The exhibit was an interpretation of how female masculinity disembodies the feminine and masculine within a gender binary, moving to embody a reconfiguration of gender without the binary, while inhabiting the home of a female sexed body.

Following this lifeline thread of resilience, the themes of tension, suspension, and disruption were explored. I used
colonial objects of femininity and masculinity as a common language to engage in diverse meaning. These objects, charged with symbolism, alter the context of their meaning as a way of questioning the attitudes, fears, and unwritten rules which have formed our culture and our own behaviour within it. A cow skeleton was used to represent female masculinity within a body, disrupting the caged confined tension of socialized femininity. The bones were suspended by trapping snare wire, in turn, creating enough tension to hold both the bones and the cages themselves up. The snare wire was suspended by logging hooks and chain, an imagining of the invisible powers of masculine heteronormativity just out of one’s sight-line. A clothesline of men’s white clothing was used to represent the burgeoning resilience of female masculinity in the exterior, public, material world; outside the body. Research participants’ photos were projected at a skewed angle onto the clothesline. These photos represented the research participants’ vision of their own masculinity. A barbed wire fence uncomfortably divided internal and external space into a binary. The embodiment of female masculinity was held in the work gloves and work boots precariously balanced on the fence post: that ghost in the room. The suspended bone-cages of female masculinity, the tension in the fence-line, and the disruption of the clothes-line were strategically situated to physically funnel the spectator towards the narrow point, which held a suspended chicken wire screen. This screen distilled research participants’ narratives into the final proof of their resilience.

I invited guests to participate, be curious, and share dialogue about the practises and language of gender and gendered resilience. I also invited the public to gently physically interact with any of the artistic elements. It was my hope that in queering the gallery through an invitation to touch and interact, the audience could share their own curious resilience and bear witness to the process of distilling the resilience of masculine women.
Little research has been documented on research-creation as an academic practice. Chapman and Sawchuck identified four preliminary categories of research-creation. *Distillation of Resilience: Female Masculinity in Form* falls within the category of “research-for-creation” (Chapman and Sawchuck, p. 7). Chapman states, “this is an initial gathering together of material, ideas, concepts, collaborators, and technology to begin the research-creation process. This gathering is ‘research’ in the same way that reading through recent journal articles, tracking down important references, or conducting interviews are key elements of producing various academic contributions to knowledge--conventional, research-creation, or otherwise.” (Chapman and Sawchuck p. 9). The process of collecting data through written narratives and photographs was used to reveal an artistic interpretation as a research practice. Creating *Distillation of Resilience* was an example of research-for-creation. Gathering data in an artistic means allowed room to siphon ideas and concepts into their current form. A means of artistic collaboration, working with research participants was a powerful component of this research-for-creation initiative. I kept track of my artistic process through field notes to track artistic progress and process, which in turn influenced an
ongoing process of meaning-making. Research participants submitted photo depictions of their own masculinity. The participants’ masculinity was characterized by themes such as driving on an open road, vacant buildings, the activity of dogs, an industrial door lock, men’s clothing such as Levi’s and cowboy boots, and a small sample illustrating the physicality of their bodies. From the photos and ongoing attention to process, different potential outcomes emerged, guided by the information given by participants. The outcome was *Distillation of Resilience: Female Masculinity in Form*, which endeavoured to create tension, suspension, and disruption of a space which genderfluid lives and bodies that live them are rarely noted for anything other than how they deviate from heteronormative space.

1.5 Methods

While standpoint theory was used to examine the points of view of masculine women, photovoice is an example of a research method that is useful for eliciting data that may deepen our understanding of the lived experience. Rooted in the theoretical assumptions of critical consciousness, feminist theory, and
documentary photography, photovoice is a participatory research approach that creates spaces and opportunities for marginalized voices to be emancipated. Photovoice is a powerful research method because it elicits rich data about the lived experience. Orbe (2000 p. 603) evaluates both the value and a potential critique of examining lived experience in research. Orbe examines the lived experience representation of marginalized individuals and groups as that representation “may lead to a caricature portrayal and possibly perpetuate the dominant construction of people and groups. The value of understanding lived experience is significant in its ability to advance understanding beyond the conceptualizations of social structures, in addition to and beyond the everyday world and interpretations of individuals” (Orbe, 2000 p. 608).

In a photovoice project, individuals are invited to take photographic representations of the research topic as they see it relating to themselves and their community. Individuals then select the photographs that are the most representative of their reality. Photovoice method includes an array of research tools. Sandelowski points out these research tools can be “photographs, logbooks, and interviews” (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 179). Not only do individuals take photos and keep logbooks to document the reality of their lives, but the visual image is “a means to enable people to think critically about issues in their community”
Researching the lived experience through photovoice can showcase how individuals living on the margin of society make sense of and interpret their world.

Using photovoice, data collection will be through five procedures: (1) introductory interviews, (2) photographs taken by study participants, (3) log books written as narratives about each photo by study participants, (4) in-depth interviews, and (5) the researcher’s field notes. I would like to explore an artistic, multi-media interpretive narrative for each of the participants based on themes discovered throughout the research process. Through my thesis and Photovoice project, I wish to honour and acknowledge the experiences other women have had because of their masculinity. I intend to accomplish this through a combination of written thesis and a curated community accessible visual art show of the Photovoice project as a fulfillment of a non-text-based thesis component. It is important that the Photovoice project be accessible to all members of our community to encourage conversations on the topic of female masculinity, while providing a platform that makes visible female masculinity, an identity that struggles with invisibility.

Masculine women are an ideal group with whom to use Photovoice method because they are extraordinarily invisible and marginalized in mainstream society. They are not represented in mainstream media, nor within our education, medical, or justice systems. Neither are masculine women represented in queer culture. Ironically, the more visible the trans movement becomes, the more invisible genderfluid people become because there is an assumption that genderfluid people are either confused about their gender or about to decide to transition to another gender.
1.6 Standard Deviation: Research Participants

To gain an understanding of the meaning and depth of the masculine female experience, I worked with four women who self-identify as masculine. To find these participants, I networked with queer organizations in Saskatchewan, as well as recommendations through word-of-mouth, which is also known as snowball sampling. This technique is implemented in cases where existing potential research participants recruit other participants from inside their own networks. Snowball sampling is particularly useful when working with a marginalized population such as masculine women. I have spent a great deal of time travelling throughout Saskatchewan developing and promoting women-in-trades programming, and I mobilized these networks to access potential research participants. Although a small sample, I reached a culturally diverse group of people with equally diverse lived experience.

X:

X is a Metis woman in her mid-fifties who has spent most of her life in Saskatchewan. She spent the first half of her childhood in foster care before being adopted by a professor who was a single parent. X identifies as a bi-sexual, non-monogamous, genderfluid woman who holds
both female and male genders within herself. Due to a significant physical disability she was born with, and her experience of foster care, X has spent significant periods of her life navigating foster, medical, legal, and psychiatric institutions. X has a profound understanding of her own gender identity and her own resilience. She likens gender to another “institution” she must navigate. X has found many ways to live alternatively with her identity, but notably, she was one of the first women industrial painters, and one of the first tradeswomen, in Saskatchewan in the 1980s. X requested the pseudonym X.

Liana:

Liana is an Indigenous, queer, two-spirit, monogamous woman in her early fifties. At birth, she was part of the “60’s scoop” and adopted into a middle-class white family in Alberta. Liana experienced extensive abuse in this home and documented the ways which this family impacted her gender identity as well as her cultural identity. Liana has worked for many years in a male-dominated trades-education organization. Liana has a profound understanding of her own gender identity. She spent many years in the 1990’s living in a trans community in a large urban centre before actively rejecting trans identity.
Charlotte:

Charlotte is a French lesbian woman in her mid sixties. She was born and raised in a large Catholic family in a small French community in Northern Ontario. She has spent over thirty years living as a lesbian in Saskatchewan. She attributes some of her resilience to the privilege of growing up in a middle-class home where she was afforded freedoms she doesn’t think lower class kids of her gender identity were afforded. She has been a human resources specialist for many years. Although human resources are not male dominated, as a self-employed consultant, she is afforded some masculine privilege she would not have in a structured work environment. Charlotte has always identified as a woman with a lot of masculine traits.

J:

J is a Caucasian, queer woman in her late twenties. She grew up in a small town in Saskatchewan and works as a trades apprentice. J questioned being trans before deciding to remain a woman. J recognized that she is not really a part of any queer community and most of her friends identify as straight women. Although she would like to be more involved
in the queer community, she does not think her gender identity is very welcome outside of trans identity. J requested the use of the pseudonym J for this research.

1.7 The Research Process

The research process was conducted in three stages. I conducted an initial meeting with each participant to establish a foundational relationship. I discussed the intention of my thesis research, the ethical considerations, expectations of the participants, my goals for the research outcomes, and any preliminary questions and feedback they had. There was an initial call out for research participants through word of mouth. The research intent included a summary of the goals of my research, my intention to use the data in a public art show, as well as a written thesis. Narrators had the choice of being identified or remaining anonymous. Once the respondents agreed to participate in the research, each participant used their own digital camera to take photographs that they believe reflect their own masculine identity. They gave a brief written or verbal narrative for each photo they chose to submit.
Following my analysis of the photos and corresponding narratives, I interviewed each participant. I intended on asking a short series of questions relating to their experiences of masculinity and resilience, as well as specific questions about their photos and narratives. In addition, I will invite them to share any other pertinent stories about their lives. However, during the first interview, it became clear that the research participant wanted to tell her story without probing questions or interruption. At this time, I shifted my focus to create space for each participant to give an oral testimony rather than an interview following a set of predetermined questions. During the testimony, the only questions I asked were for clarification, rather than probing or guiding the interview.

1.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis happened in two stages. The first stage involved collecting and analyzing the photographs and narratives of the participants. Once I transcribed the interviews and organized the photovoice/narrative data, I developed and analyzed thematic codes. These themes were established in the written component of the thesis. The themes also informed the second stage of the project, the research-creation of an artistic project. The artistic project was a multi-media narrative that represented a robust collective voice for the participants. This collective voice of female masculinity was used to generate dialogue for public and creatively contributed to a shift from invisible to visible for genderfluidity.
1.9 Ethical Issues

The foundation of my thesis relied on the participation of women in Saskatchewan who self-identify as masculine. Since I worked with, interviewed, and artistically, publicly represented masculine women, I applied to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board for behavioural research ethics approval. The application process addressed issues of informed consent of participants, as well as their voluntary, private, confidential, and potentially anonymous participation. In addition, I recognize that my own “insider knowledge” of female masculinity may have an impact on the research process. Although a preliminary search for participants requested volunteers who self-identify as masculine, there was a question of whose definition of masculinity would be used. Early in the research process, someone who presented as a feminine heterosexual woman wanted to participate in this study. When pressed on her lived experience of masculinity, she resolved her criteria for masculinity was how butch she felt when she wore a men’s pair of hiking boots. To solve the challenge of finding applicants who wield more normative power than they realize, I also asked for participants who can identify discrimination they have experienced based on their masculinity. Being able to self-identify as masculine, while also being aware of discrimination they have faced, established a baseline to work with.

I created a list of resources available in urban centers in case any of the participants needed support at any point in the research process. With a background in clinical social work, I
was aware the interview process may have disrupted traumatic experiences for the research participants. As a researcher closely tied to the research matter, I could provide empathy and understanding, but I was not in a role to provide clinical support and developed resources for referral if necessary. As a follow-up to the interview process, I verbally checked-in with each research participant to discuss any residual thoughts or feelings that came up during the interview process.

Masculine women are consistently negotiating the existence of their masculinity in their daily lives. These negotiations are done without the benefit of defined and common language or terminology. A lack of terminology is especially evident in the structural and social contexts of their experiences. Photovoice provided these research participants with an opportunity to speak about the experiences that have shaped their lives. Photovoice and standpoint theory provided a framework in which the research identified themes of resilience for masculine women. The visual arts exhibit provided a platform for participants to acknowledge and celebrate their success at living beyond the gender binary.

1.10 Research Challenges

Initially, the only defined parameter for seeking research participants was a self identification of masculinity. In discussing my search for research participants within my networks, an outwardly feminine, heterosexual, privileged woman insisted on being a part of the study because she feels butch on occasion when she wears
men’s hiking boots. I suggested perhaps her masculinity was more internal than external, and had she ever experienced discrimination directed towards her masculinity? After this encounter, I added this preliminary question to the parameters. Not only did this question narrow the scope of participants, I could use the answer to this question to gauge the depth of self-awareness from a participant to adequately contribute to the research process.

The first research challenge I faced was how to reconcile the assumption of someone else’s masculinity based on my own perception of masculinity. When going through my own networks in search of possible participants, there were certain individuals I assumed were in alignment with my own version of masculinity. The first person I asked to consider being a part of my research was incredulous I would ask her. She did not deny her masculinity, but she was obviously uncomfortable with discussing masculinity in a formal manner. When others agreed to inquire with their networks on my behalf, initially they joked about how many masculine women they know and how it would be relatively easy to find research participants. When they asked the women they had in mind, they were surprised to learn that these women did not identify as masculine and did not think they knew anyone to ask. I learned early in the process to ask an individual simply if they knew anyone who might be interested in participating. Often, I received a vague response that the person could not think of anyone, even though I was specifically looking at them.

As trans identity becomes more accepted in mainstream culture, another challenge faced in the same stream of inquiry was challenging the assumption that female masculinity simply falls within trans identity. In this experience, the response was indifference, as though gender is no longer an issue to discuss now that we have three gender categories. One person went so far as to imply gender is no longer problematic because we have introduced gender-neutral
bathrooms. Although the prevalence of these attitudes only reaffirmed my desire to talk about genderfluidity as a gender category, it also speaks to a deeply engrained cultural mindset which does not adequately represent the experience of the masculine women it is meant to represent.

I aimed to have five research participants, and initially I had five women agree to contribute to the research process. However, one research participant decided to withdraw very early in the process. This woman stated she identified as masculine and queer but did not want to upset anyone in her community, and workplace, by participating. She is from a small northern community and felt unable to participate in the study privately, so she decided to withdraw. The clear and present danger she felt in participating also reaffirmed my desire to examine genderfluidity as a gender category. Through these challenges I surmised the invisibility of being rolled into trans identity, the desire to remain invisible, and the perceived danger a conversation might have in a small community, are all very relevant reasons to keep the dialogue going.

One research participant has a long history of being institutionalized through the foster, medical, welfare, psychiatric, and justice system. This woman agreed to participate and felt the research was very relevant and crucial to advancing the visibility of genderfluidity. Very self-aware and astute, she had a deep understanding of her own experience of masculinity. However,
she needed a long period of time, space, and open dialogue to determine what she needed to feel safety and trust. There were several requested concessions to build safety and trust. Initially she requested not to be interviewed at all and instead wanted to prepare written narratives in her own time. As she submitted narratives, she then felt prepared to have a dialogue about the narratives. This dialogue led to an interview by way of several casual, brief conversations about her reflections on gender.

When the question of photographs came up, she did not want to participate and used choice words to describe working with a camera. After a period of months, she announced she had some ideas for photographs if I was willing to take the photos for her. This resulted in a photo shoot incorporated into the informal interview process. From all the photos I took, she selected the images she wanted to represent her masculinity and I deleted the others. From the final set of photos, I chose the ones I wanted to use in the exhibit and requested her final approval, which she granted. I also sought her approval to use her written narratives as a highlight in the exhibit and thesis. In this case, I suspect my insider-knowledge carried me a great distance in acquiring trust and safety with this individual. Another research participant recounted various times she feels like cisgender people have treated her in a way that makes her feel like an exotic zoo animal. I can not help but wonder if the participant who needed these concessions ever feels like a systemic zoo animal. In our most recent conversation, she was beaming with pride that her narratives were showcased and that she made such a significant contribution to my research.
Before an analysis of genderfluid resilience could occur, I first had to examine the diverse overarching experiences that the research participants recounted in their oral testimony and their photographs. The participants, in their own way, identified a process of disemboding themselves from the gender binary. The research participants then used a process of critical reflection of their experiences of tension, suspension, and disruption to re-embodiment themselves in the home of their birth assigned female bodies, despite resistance on many fronts to behave and identify differently. Liana eloquently related her own process of re-embodiment by stating, “for me its about coming to terms with accepting the male and the female characteristics of myself… it’s been years of personal work that has gotten me to that point. I’m not concerned about how anybody perceives me in my work environment, personal environment, or relationship environment kind of thing. I’m really comfortable with who I am, and I don’t make
decisions based on other people’s perceptions. It took a long time to get to that point for me.” In this statement, Liana identifies different environments within her life that she has had to navigate through a crucial and conscious process of becoming comfortable with her own identity.

2.2 Tension: The Fence-Line

One transgressive quality of female masculinity is that it is outwardly public as conveyed by dress, hairstyle, mannerisms, and speech. Genderfluid women operate in tension with male masculinity as a clearly defined benchmark to be measured against. In “flaunting” their own version of masculinity, the research participants experience being in tension by being visibly masculine outside of the private sphere where they are in constant comparison. In public spaces, masculine women walk a gendered tightrope between the tensions of both femininity and masculinity. Masculine women also operate in tension with female femininity as another benchmark which they fail at performing. J gave an example of her experience of moving from Toronto to Saskatoon in 2012: “In Toronto people would look but not necessarily with disgust, but here in Saskatoon you just get the judgement. You get people’s eyes just burning through your soul….so I keep to myself. I hated it but I knew it was for my best interest…. Further tension occurs when a masculine woman momentarily passes as a man, and then is “caught” being deviant by not having the birth
assigned body to match the masculinity. When this deviant behaviour is called out by the person who made the incorrect assumption in the first place, tension is created. The accuser’s angry, embarrassed, blaming, agitated, or betrayed response, and the unpredictability of the response, create tension with the genderfluid woman who is brave enough to be herself in public. Liana summarized what it was like for her to live in tension with socialized standards of masculinity and femininity; her experience demonstrates the risks that she took as she lived her life as a masculine woman: “I never felt like I was born in the right body at that time (as a child) and as I grew older into my teens I just became, unbeknownst to me at times, more and more masculine into my early twenties. No one could tell that I was female, including in men’s bars in Toronto. We made bets for money in bars in Toronto because nobody believed I was female. It was hard to use women’s washrooms because I was always getting kicked out…and I never knew how getting kicked out would go down.”

Genderfluid women are transgressive in that they attempt to occupy physical space as masculine women while outwardly resisting hetero-cultural constructs. Masculine women must maintain this space every single moment, or their identity will be absorbed by normative assumptions of trans identity. Transgressive behavior, creation of alternative discourses, and shifting of performative identities are spin-off effects of raising the visibility of genderfluidity beyond the binary and trans identity. This visibility could provide power and agency to masculine women’s identity and ease current cultural tensions.

Heteronormative masculinity objectifies masculine women’s gender identity into a trivial re-enactment of male masculinity, because it threatens heterosexual normalcy and all the structured components within. J spoke of being called a “she-male” and “dyke” as a way of regulating her masculinity. J made note of these particular slurs being more common in
Saskatoon than her previous residence in Toronto: “Moving back from a big city (Toronto) that’s pretty open minded to here (Saskatoon) in 2012 I think it was, there was a lot of negativity towards myself, so I had to dull my masculinity down because I was getting called a fag, she-male or a dyke … so that was a little bit shocking for me….”

J’s experience of publicly “dumbing down” her masculinity to minimize how often she was called a “fag,” “she-male,” or “dyke” reveals the instability of heteronormative masculinity and the violence necessary to maintain the fiction of its so-called “naturalness.” Through these revelations, Sinfield suggests that we see “masculinity plunged into inconsistency and anxiety; it is aggressive because it is insecure” (cited in Valentine, 1996: p. 153). As Valentine suggests, it is repetition and regulation of performative gender roles that preserves the dominance of heteronormativity. Regulation can be “achieved through laws and policies or through a carceral continuum of public pressure, genderphobic violence, separation of communities, and looks of disapproval” (Valentine, p. 149). Regulatory regimes are established by patriarchal rule to ensure the stability of the heteronormative relations, practices, and constructs. The policing of masculine women’s behaviour affirms male masculine power through the creation of ongoing tension in daily lives of masculine women. Often, the policing of masculine women’s behaviour comes through micro-aggressions such as the one J describe when her gender identity is questioned: “I am more masculine, but I consider myself female. There is no way I want to transition to trans, and I get that question a lot, do you want to be a boy? No, I’m very well a female, I just don’t fit.”

What might western culture look like if we found a way to ease this tension?
2.3 SUSPENSION:

BONE-CAGE

In the social constructionist view, gender is conceptualized and actively separated from anatomical sex as a process. The gender, behavior, actions, and appearance of females and males is viewed as socially constructed because codes of femininity and masculinity are chosen and deemed fit by society for societal usage. The subject is a “construct that identifies, labels, and considers certain social interactions as being appropriate for one’s sex” (Bohan, 1997 p. 32). But theorists, like Judith Butler offers an alternative understanding of sex and gender. Rather than gender being what defines who we are, it is a process we perform. Probing “nonconforming gender identities, using a social constructionist lens, is concerned with how these identities have been constructed and how their existence exposes the ways in which society’s gender norms are established and maintained” (Butler, 1990 p. 23). Research participants identified the ways in which they have been suspended by their genderfluidity, in flux somewhere between socialized
femininity and socialized masculinity. The naked identity of genderfluid women does not fit the caged confines of socialized female femininity, or the trap of socialized male masculinity.

The research participants in this study were diverse in their identity of race, gender, and sexual orientation, and in the labels they used to define themselves. When the four research participants identified their sexuality, one identified as lesbian, one identified as queer, one identified as two-spirit, and one identified as bisexual. In terms of their gender identity, one identified as butch, one identified as genderfluid, and two identified as women. All the participants recognized a need to separate their sexuality from their gender identity. All the participants also recognized their masculinity was suspended somewhere between their gender identity and sexual orientation. The only point of intersection they all shared was their identity as masculine birth assigned bodies and their resistance or rejection of trans identity. How the research subjects navigated these identity categories varied. For example, L identified as butch but identified the term butch to reflect a sub-category of her sexual orientation, rather than her masculinity as separate from her sexual orientation. X identified as genderfluid rather than non-binary or genderqueer. X stipulated her genderfluidity is suspended between the identity of genderqueer and non-binary because genderqueer can, at times, be related to sexuality, which she wants to separate from her bi-sexual identity. X also identified genderfluidity as being markedly different than non-binary because she associates the category non-binary with trans identity, from which she is careful to separate her identity. Both Charlotte and J identified as women but recognized a lack of language to adequately discuss what being a woman means to them and how that might be different than other women’s definition. Overall, a sense of suspension between identities, without the safety net of a common language, creates a ghostly impression of identity.
Female masculinity crosses borders of sexual orientation, race, and class, leading masculine women often to experience a sense of suspension when they cannot clearly determine discrimination aimed at their masculinity. Liana poignantly details this state of suspension as a moment in time when she feels like a ghost lingering over the scene of her own crime. When Liana walked through airport security, she felt suspended between two worlds. In her day-to-day activities, Liana is accustomed to navigating the world she has carefully constructed to create familiarity and safety for her gender identity. In this state of interruption at the airport, she does not know if her gender ambiguity will attract the interrogation, scrutiny, or detainment of the customs or security officers who find her gender suspect. For many years, Liana attributed her discomfort in airports to the tension of anticipated homophobia. It was not until she went through U.S. customs with a feminine partner, that she realized her masculinity was the target of interrogation rather than her sexual orientation.

2.4 DISRUPTIONS: CLOTHES-LINE

Tension is created by visibly resisting the norms of socialized femininity for women. Suspension is then
created by visibly navigating spaces that do not recognize or support female masculinity. Tension and suspension can lead to disruption when the participants have “violated” the gender norms, and encountered others’ agitation, clash, discrimination, threat, and hate. Three participants recounted occasions where a situation turned dangerous when a man incorrectly assumed their heterosexuality and then had their view corrected by one of the participants. For example, Charlotte recounted such a disruption when a man at the hotel bar made a sexual advance towards her. She was so startled and surprised that she blurted out in a brusque, masculine manner that she was gay, and that he was mistaken in his identification of her as heterosexual female. The man became aggressive and belittled her. When she defended herself verbally, the male bartender came to the aid of the other man, and they both became more aggressive. These actions could be interpreted as a homophobic response, but this woman understood the excessive aggression directed against her masculine response to the initial advance. She felt that her sexuality was not necessarily being called into question but rather the two men were “closing ranks” and drawing the boundaries around masculinity. Their response, however, demonstrates the insecurity of their own masculinity. The presence of a masculine woman demonstrates to them that masculinity is performed, and therefore is unstable. Queer masculine women’s desire and
pleasure exist independently from, and in competition with, heterosexual men. Genderfluid women being independent from men, and in competition with men, poses a moral juxtaposition to patriarchal expectations. The extraordinary aggression directed against Charlotte by two random strangers in a bar demonstrates how disruptive female masculinity can be to the insecurity of toxic patriarchal male masculinity.

This incident demonstrates the ways in which spaces are deeply gendered and governed by heteronormative relations. Navigating public spaces is a challenge for anyone who disrupts western perceptions of gender that are defined by the binary of “female” and “male.” The masculine woman occupies the public sphere as masculine, but heteronormativity has “othered” the woman as masculine; she is marginalized and constructed as neither a man nor a woman of virtuous quality. What happens when masculine women challenge the spaces they occupy? Participants reported physical assault, sexual assault, being kicked out of bathrooms, being held at airport security, receiving privilege when passing as male, being passed up for jobs when passing as women, being the object of public conversations about their gender, and continuously, in one shape or another, being asked why they don’t just decide to be men.
2.5 WE ALL
BLEED FOR THE
BINARY: FAMILY
INSTITUTIONS

Each research participant spoke of being a tomboy throughout their childhoods, and the positive and negative consequences they experienced. This is a period when some girls explore masculinity and challenge social expectations, through their involvement in sports, their playmate ideals, toy preferences, clothing preferences and appearance. According to Halberstam, the tomboy “stage” offers a period of freedom in a girl’s life, but that disappears when she begins to develop a female body, which serves as a signifier of heteronormative femininity: “The expression of tomboyism, which describes a period of female masculinity in childhood, is one transgression to the dichotomous categories that has historically been accepted to a degree. As a young tomboy enters puberty, the space she has had to express her masculinity no longer exists and she is confronted with a societal agenda that expects her to change her behaviour and preferences to femininity” (Halberstam quoted in Claire, 2013 p. 50). The tomboy “stage” is also the last time she is socially and culturally allowed to explore masculinity without it having a direct attachment to the formation of her sexual identity. As tomboys, the participants reported that they were able to explore their masculinity without judgement, and
therefore, they had boy best friends and spent most of their time with boys rather than girls and doing boy activities. One research participant submitted a very moving case of her tomboy experience and the socially slippery slope it can create for everyone involved.

“My brother decided one day he was going to teach me to whistle. He said girls weren’t really supposed to whistle but he would show me in secret. So we hatched this plan to climb on the roof of the car, to get up onto the playhouse, from there we climbed on to the playhouse, from there we climbed on the roof of the garage and sat up there like two birds and he taught me to whistle. First with just my mouth. Then with two fingers, then with four fingers. By the end of it all, we were producing these ear splitting, piercing, long, loud whistles which could probably have been heard from very far away. But we thought nobody could hear us because we were on the garage roof. Mom came out of the house to see what all the racket was about and found us. “What are you doing up there! Get down NOW!” I was so scared I froze and couldn’t move. My brother said “this is no time to be a GIRL.” “But I am a girl” I screamed at him. “No you are not” he screamed back. “Girls don’t play hockey and whistle, and you’re our goalie!” While we were figuring out my gender on the roof, Dad went and got the extension ladder and we got safely down. The resilience is in not knowing that one is supposed to be one way or the other. That we can be both.”

In this incident, X’s brother did not see his sister as a girl because she played hockey with him. Due to X’s gender ambiguity, her brother invited her to enter a space—the roof top of the garage—a potentially dangerous space so that he could teach her to whistle, but one that was seemingly free of parental surveillance. Not only is whistling a traditional masculine activity, but the complexity and loudness of the whistling reinforces its masculine coding. But these same
characteristics also drew X’s mother’s attention to their location. As a result, her mother not only disrupted the pleasure that brother and sister took in creating “ear splitting, piercing, loud, loud whistles,” but their discovery revealed her gender ambiguity. In this “dangerous” situation, her brother insisted that X was not a girl, relying on masculine coded behaviour as evidence while she confirmed she was based her birth assigned body. Despite obstacles and unwritten gender norms, two kids found a way to explore gender through their persistent challenging of gender rules.

What happens beyond the pivotal point of puberty when some young women sustain their masculinity? Retaining gender ambiguity through a process of repetitious behaviours and agency after puberty becomes culturally threatening, which in turn can become dangerous for the women bravely transgress gender norms and seek to preserve their fluidity. X shared a narrative that aptly captures her confusing experience of changing foster homes, which entailed a shift in gender regulation. As was true in the previous case, the foster mother sought to police gender norms while the foster father acquiesced to her demands.

“I moved to a new foster home. One Saturday morning, Dad said, “mother, I’m going to change the oil in the car.” I asked him if I could come help him. He replied, “what do you know about changing the oil?” and I said, “my other dad was a mechanic and my brother and I used to hand him things while he was under the car working.” OK, then, come along. My foster mother said NO! Girls don’t belong in garages. You are not allowed to go in there! Time stopped. I couldn’t believe my ears. Then they started arguing in German. I knew enough to know that when mom said nein! And Nicht! And Kein! That I definitely was not going to help dad. Another time dad mentioned he was going to mow the lawns. I asked if I could trim the edges like I did for my other dad. He said no, that’s a man’s work. I didn’t know there was such
a thing as “men’s work or women’s work” but mom said I belonged in the kitchen helping her and my sisters cook, and bake, and that if I wanted to do something I could vacuum the living room. I felt sad. I felt trapped. I felt like I belonged outside, doing outside things. I even offered to take out the garbage, but I was told no, that’s a boy’s job. My resilience at this time was to comply, I had to endure and get through this somehow. I often wished I was a cat. I noticed the cats in the neighbourhood seemed to have more choice, more freedom, than I did. They could come and go as they pleased and they could be outside.”

In this scenario, the second foster mother enforced gendered spaces through the regulation of work practices that were determined by birth assigned sex; masculine work took place in outdoor spaces; female work took place in indoor spaces. The second foster mother’s house rules devastated X, who had already experienced the freedom from house chores based on her interest in mechanical outdoor work rather than domestic chores that were coded feminine and seemingly appropriate for her birth assigned sex. Even though X complied with her foster mother’s demand, she still believed that her acquiescence represented resilience because it was a conscious choice to take the path of least resistance. Nonetheless, the gendered rules were such a
Clothing is an important signifier of gender; types of clothing (pants versus skirts), styles, colours, fabrics are all used to signal outwardly gender differences and are presumed to align with the birth assigned body beneath the clothes. Research participants vividly described the regulation of heteronormative femininity by other women, most notably their mothers and caregivers. Charlotte learned at a young age that in her family wearing a dress and keeping up with the visual public appearances of gender allowed her the freedom to manifest her masculinity in other behaviours. Interestingly, Charlotte also acknowledged that this experience influenced her adult fluidity of dress between masculine and somewhat more feminine, compared to the other participants who identified their style of wardrobe to be decidedly more masculine. Similarly, Liana’s adoptive mother attempted to exert control over her clothing choices. Liana often was denied the ability to wear clothing that reflected her own bodily comfort and gender expression: “My adoptive mother tried to put me in dresses, especially at grade one to go to school, and that was just like, the worst insult. Plus, she made my dress. Didn’t even come from a store so that made the insult worse for me. I had to wear a homemade dress on the first day of grade one was just horrifying to me. …had to
wear leotards and these fancy shoes with the buckles across the front…stuff you could never climb trees with.” Liana not only resisted wearing feminine girl’s in part because they restricted her movement, but she considered them second-rate because they were homemade rather than store bought. This distinction suggests that Liana also was aware of the ways in which clothes also are a marker of class/income.

The regulation of clothing choices for children is a common battleground for genderfluid girls who have few other platforms for exploring their bodily experience of their gender identity. The shared experience of battling a parent/caregiver for choices in masculine girls’ clothing may be one of the first locations masculine girls begin a process of disembodying themselves. For example, X also struggled in her childhood to wear clothing that aligned with her gender, but she was thrilled when she finally found clothing that felt right for her body. In various foster homes, X struggled with the limited clothing options available to her, until she moved into a home of five women and no men. X’s foster mom and four foster sisters all chose to wear comfortable cotton t-shirts, flannel shirts, and Levi’s. X’s first experience of wearing a cotton shirt and Levi’s imprinted a sense of embodiment so strongly that she still thinks of that clothing combination as her coat of armour. To signify the importance of having clothing options and the experience of not taking the option for granted, X submitted photo representations of herself in her flannel and Levi’s. To X, these photos represent her freedom of expression and a sense of coming home within her own body.
An essentialist theory of gender development promotes the idea that the marked birth assigned differences are indicative of differences in gender roles between women and men. An essentialist understanding of gender is based on a “perfect” alignment of birth assigned sex, gender identity, and heteronormativity. There is no room in this theory for a person to stray from this “natural” alignment because it is constituted by and reinforced through institutional relations. Patriarchal, heteronormative systems of power operate within and through medicine, law, religion, education, politics, and consumerism, to name a few sites. In particular, research participants indicated that the medical system played a key role in enforcing heteronormative ideals. Indeed, medicine as a site of patriarchal power has been subjected to extensive critique by feminist scholars and activists with the rise of the women’s health movement in the late 1960s.

Feminist scholars have argued in western cultures, women’s bodies, and, arguably, masculine women’s bodies and experiences, have been viewed as “abnormal” (Butler, 1993,
Ehrenreich & English, 1978, Fausto-Sterling, 2000). This research has demonstrated that women’s unique experiences of reproduction, as well as other women’s health issues such as depression and violence, have been pathologized and treated as an illness; or that the diagnosis and treatment of women’s diseases such as myocardia infarction (heart attack) have been until recently based on male experiences and physiology. When masculine women interact with the medical care system, they often interact with tension, suspension, and disruption. Three research participants provided specific medical experiences to show that deeply entrenched heteronormative biases among health care providers negatively influence the treatment of masculine women patients.

Research participants reported many medical encounters that differed from heteronormative women who were being treated for both gender-neutral medical experiences and for reproductive/sexual health. For example, when one research participant experienced the disruption of her gender ambiguity when she went to the emergency room for an acute case of tonsillitis. The doctor did not believe the gender indicated on her chart because she is tall, has a deep voice, and has a masculine presentation. The doctor abruptly lifted her gown to see her birth
assigned sex for himself. This research participant was shocked by his abuse of power and his objectification of her body. However, the research participant did not report this abuse of power because she did not know who to report it to, and she was reluctant to challenge his authority. In her eyes, this physician was responsible for her health care and she was unaware of her right to ask for a different health care provider. This experience left the research participant in a state of suspension--between her world as a patient who has a right to care and her world as a genderfluid woman whose body is objectified and abused within the medical system. This incident reveals the way in which a physician extended his medical authority beyond the immediate diagnosis to fixate on the research participant’s gender ambiguity rather than tonsillitis. The research participant wondered what tonsillitis had to do with her gender, and why gender ambiguity, which was irrelevant to her health problem became a source of disruption for the physician. The medical system is treacherous territory that masculine women are left alone to navigate these blindsiding abuses of power.

Psychiatry, as medical discipline, has for decades served as an arbiter of gender identity. In the past, psychiatrists have defined gender ambiguity, trans identities, and homosexuals as “deviant” behaviour requiring treatment. More recently, psychiatrists have been instrumental in deciding whether individuals are psychologically fit to have trans surgery. In her experiences with a psychiatrist, X understood that there was a “correct” gender identity with which she should comply. In this instance, not only did the doctor have medical authority over a child, but he was also a psychiatrist assessing a child in foster care. X was already well aware of the power that the foster care system exercised over her life; thus, X was primed to be suspicious of the doctor’s intentions.
“I was in a psychiatrist’s office being tested for something for school. At the end of all the tests the Dr. asked me to pick a toy to take home. I picked a blue car. He asked me why I picked that toy. I could tell by the tone of his voice that I had somehow picked the wrong toy, so to please him I said “I picked it for my brother”. Then he seemed satisfied. He asked me to pick another toy just for me, so I picked a red car without thinking.

Again, he asked me, why did you pick that toy?
Because I like it, I said. That’s a boy’s toy he said, pick another toy, so I tried to figure out which toy I was supposed to pick. He pointed and said, “those are the girls toys.” I don’t like them I said. Then I spotted the solution. It was a sucker. Something neutral. So, I picked that. The resilience is in not knowing and just being my natural self. The resilience is being willing to compromise and find a solution I and others could live with.”

The seemingly benevolent act of choosing a toy to take home turned into a test of X’s gender identity. Even as a child, X was savvy enough to recognize the tension she experienced in noting the doctor’s tone indicating she had done something wrong, but she didn’t quite know what. In expecting a correct answer, the doctor’s behaviour suspended X between choosing the “right” toy and choosing the toy she wanted. To placate the doctor’s authority, X avoided choosing the “correct” toy and found a solution by choosing a sucker. X’s solution to the problem brilliantly used a gender-neutral object to disrupt the doctor’s expectation and evaluation.
Charlotte, Liana, and X have each had a hysterectomy, but these procedures were informed by heteronormative biases held by the nursing staff. For example, during pre-surgery preparation, a nurse insisted that the participant provide a urine sample. When the participant could not give a sample, the nurse refused to say what the sample was for, which made the participant suspicious of the need for the sample. Later, in the operating room, it became clear that the urine sample was needed when a second nurse asked the participant if she was pregnant. The second nurse explained that doing a pregnancy test before each hysterectomy was part of the protocol. Although such a question is routine, the nurse observed that this was likely a rhetorical question in the participant’s case. The nurse seemed to assume that because the participant presented as masculine, she couldn’t possibly get pregnant because she was “obviously” gay. Initially, the research participant thought the first nurse was withholding information, which led the participant to feel as though the nurse was being secretive. But when the second nurse disclosed the reason for the urine sample, the research participant thought the first nurse was withholding information because the nurse was uncomfortable with the participant’s masculinity. The research participant felt invisible and discounted by the nurse’s secretive demeanour and lack of communication. The participant left the medical experience questioning what other pertinent health information might be censored due to a nurse’s discomfort with her gender ambiguity.

Assumptions were also made about the participant’s sexuality in the post-surgery period. In the presence of the participant’s female partner, a third nurse fumbled through the post-surgery care instructions, which involved, inter alia, abstaining from sexual intercourse. When the participant asked questions pertinent to her own gender and sexuality, the nurse deferred to the gynaecologist and then abruptly left the room without providing any information instruction.
Although the nurses’ responses could reflect her homophobic discomfort because she had to
discuss sexual intercourse with a queer woman, the research participant believed that the nurse’s
response would have been more positive if the participant had passed as feminine-queer rather
than masculine. In this case, the nurse’s feminine identity seems to have been disrupted when
confronted with a masculine woman whereas the nurse could align her identity with a feminine-
queer woman. Although admittedly only momentarily traumatic, this research participant
questioned the long-term personal health implications for genderfluid women who have been too
traumatized, or unaware, to advocate for their own best possible health care, including relevant,
surgical after-care instructions.

Despite ongoing disruptions to their health care, all three participants indicated that
having a hysterectomy was worth the medical experience. Each participant indicated feeling
more “at home” in their masculine female bodies now that they no longer had a uterus. One
research participant indicated the complete joy of a gender-neutral experience of no longer
having a monthly cycle of bleeding: “I had a hysterectomy more than twenty years ago. I haven’t
looked back, not even once. Saying good-bye to my uterus, and my monthly cycle, left me
grateful to be in a body that more accurately represented my own gender-balance within myself.
Without the monthly reminder of bleeding, I can honour my own body and its ability to hold that
gender balance. I don’t recall having any particular negative feelings about my blood-cycle but I
do recall a newfound freedom in being more myself without a uterus.” This research participant
clearly indicates a shift in her emotional well-being because of her hysterectomy, even though
this change was invisible to the outside world. More than twenty years later, the participant is
still marveling at the benefits of this change in her body. It’s as though a hysterectomy had the
power to remove some of the incongruent tension held within this research participant’s body.
Maintaining a birth assigned female body forces genderfluid women to constantly strive to maintain space for their masculinity and a hysterectomy is one unexpected way for masculine women to uphold their own gender balance.

2.7 THE DEVIL’S ROPE: LEGAL INSTITUTIONS

The result of not “growing out” of tomboyism and occupying public space by masculine women is under constant critique. Political and judicial authorities, due to the threatening nature of such “perverse” conduct, subjects genderfluid women to scrutiny and excessive policing. Overt policing is most evident in the historical police raids of queer spaces. Although the patrons were minding their own business, their lives were disrupted when they were charged for their perverse behaviour in accordance with heteronormative, patriarchal Canadian law. These actions by the police have been widely interpreted by gay activists as practices that actively enforce heteronormativity. X described the joy and resilience in finding a community and an emotional home, for the first time in her life, in a queer club being operated in a private residence: “When I was in university I met some very interesting people. They took me to a club where there were many people who looked like I did, who were both genders. I felt like I was in heaven. I stayed in this community for about twenty years and enjoyed all they had to offer. It was a very healing experience. The dancing, the
drinking, the drugs, the drag shows, the pool, the potlucks, the choir, the pride parades, the raids of the clubs, it was all very empowering. The resilience was spectacular.”

If these events were a celebration of pleasure and the sensual, of empowering and healing, then the raids and inspections were violating, potentially humiliating, involved publicly shaming, and sometimes were dangerous. Two research participants experienced police-raids and were aware of police attempting to enforce gender norms through the power of the law. According to one research participant, the police differentiated among gender identities in the levels of enforcement and violence that they directed at those found in the queer clubs. Those who conformed more closely to the dominant norms were treated less harshly and experienced less aggression than those who “deviated” from them. The participant noted that the birth assigned women who acted and dressed like women were never arrested because they passed the gender-inspection; i.e., they wore at least two items of women’s clothing. Those who didn’t were arrested and taken to city police cells for the night; then they were released the following morning without an official record.

The men found in the bath houses were randomly taken out of cells and beaten in the alley behind the police station for their “femininity.” Butch women often had it worse than their birth assigned male counterparts because they were routinely sexually assaulted by police officers in the same alley. One research participant faced such violence, but despite being sexually assaulted by police on two separate occasions, she refused to wear two pieces of women’s clothing. Moreover, despite the obvious potential routine violence, she maintained that the club was her haven; it was the only safe space where she could interact with people of her own culture. The participant noted her philosophical reluctance to agreeing with the rules because now she often wears more than two items of women’s clothing, but by her own choice.
If this club was her safe space of community, it is difficult to conceive of how unsafe the visibility of her masculinity must have been in her everyday life, outside the club, where she stood alone and isolated. How can masculine women promote change and reformation in the construction of their gender identity and the reclamation of public space?

2.8 THE BODY:

THE EMBODIMENT OF RESILIENCE

I have been reflecting on masculine identities for twenty-five years, and I keep circling around the same question: what makes some of us thrive, while so many of us flounder? The key lies in the notion of resilience, a concept that is rooted in research initially developed in the field of child psychology. The findings concluded that “many children who grew up under highly challenging circumstances (chronic, material, or social deprivations) developed into highly functional, often high achieving adolescents and adults” (Garmezy, 1973; Marsten et al. 1990 cited in McCubbin, p. 4).

Resilience research in child psychology coincided with research on normative human development and research on stress and coping. These three streams of research define
resilience as the “process of an individual’s ability to take advantage of exposure to various types of environmental challenges and turn the results of these challenges into a strength based, positive attribute rather than a deficit-based attribute” (McCubbin, p. 5). Resilience is also understood as a process rather than a trait, which can occur, or be learned, at any stage of life.

What does resilience look like for people who resist the gender binary? A literature on patterns of resilience for masculine women does not exist. However, there is limited literature available that focuses on resilience for people who have lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) identities. Masculine women may not, or do not, fall within any of these gender or sexuality categories. In the research that does exist for queer resilience, the focus is on the negative factors that led to resilience rather than the positive. As Beasley points “the presented findings in research on LGBT resilience documented deficits, disparities and/or disadvantages, but did not examine mitigating or averting factors; researchers presented their deficit-oriented findings as evidence their populations of interest were resilient” (Beasely, 2015 p. 164). There has been little research on a LGBT person’s ability to adapt to various types of environmental challenges and turn these results a strength-based, positive rather than a deficit-based attribute. Further, strength-based, positive experiences have not been accounted for in determining experiences that contribute to the building of resilience.

The themes of tension, suspension, and disruption were explored regarding genderfluid women’s experience of their gender identity, and those themes emerged from the common threads of experience related by the research participants. However, when attempting to reveal any potential of resilience, more contradictions than commonalities were discovered. The research participants were an extraordinarily diverse group in that they crossed categories of race, class, gender identity, sexuality, and age. The research participants credited a variety of
factors and experiences that enabled them to develop individual strategies of reliance. For example, Charlotte attributed her middle-class privilege to developing resiliency with respect to her gender fluidity. Charlotte believed her middle-class family’s position in their community afforded her freedom to explore her gender. Her family position protected her from some of the public scrutiny and judgement to which Charlotte feels working-class young women are subjected. Alternatively, X attributed the struggle of her impoverished upbringing, and her position in a blue-collar, masculine job, as a source of her gendered resilience.

Although the participants developed unique strategies of resilience based on their individual histories, they all experienced a process of consciously separating their gender identity from their birth assigned sexed body. Through the act of disembodying themselves, each research participant created a space to critically examine their femininity, masculinity, and gender identity, separate from their birth assigned bodies. In two cases, the research participants recounted a process of disembodiment by having a period when they identified as trans and immersed themselves in the trans community. Participation in this group gave them the space and freedom to actively question the permanence of their own gendered bodies. Similarly, when two research participants underwent hysterectomy and breast reduction surgeries, they also were able to critically reflect on the relationship between their gender identities and birth assigned sexed bodies, allowing them to untangle the two experiences.

Through an active investigation of their birth assigned bodies, the research participants determined to remain in their female-sexed bodies through a re-embodiment of their own individual blend of feminine and masculine characteristics. Once the two research participants who lived in the trans community for several years disengaged from this community, they were able to actively re-embodi their corporeal bodies as masculine women. They identified two
moments of agency—a rejection of some aspects of corporeal femininity (the body) and the choice to embrace some aspects of corporeal masculinity (the same body). For Liana acceptance came when she met First Nation men, some of whom were gay and others who identified as two-spirited. They taught her to accept both sides of herself: “It wasn’t until I started to meet other First Nation men that were gay, in Toronto, that taught me about what it was about to be a two-spirited person…most of my friends at that time were gay men and some would do the drag shows and other ones who were extremely masculine, and then others who were more flamboyant and that sort of thing really taught me about the female side of myself and what it meant to be two-spirited and it was accepting both the male and the female parts of myself. That’s when I got to the point of being more accepting of who I was at the time and after that I never really thought about going for reassignment surgery or that sort of thing. I just knew I had gotten to a point of accepting myself for who I was…I learned more to balance the two sides of myself…so there was no internal struggle anymore.”

Through a combination of the discovery of her two-spirit identity and role models to guide her own process, Liana was able to move away from the trans identity. In taking a step back from trans identity, Liana went through a process of finding ways to balance the two sides of herself. These strategies are possible since that the body is always already a discursive entity—it does not simply exist outside of discourse, or at least, it can not be ‘known’ outside of or apart from the grids of intelligibility that exist in our culture. Sullivan argues that “focusing on the materiality of sexed being does not mean relying on a notion of the birth assigned body, in fact, quite the opposite in this case. The research participants are ongoing and actively re-coding, re-signifying, and re-inscribing bodily being through a progression of disembodiment and re-embodiment. The aim of feminist theory, then, in Sullivan’s view, is not to replace patriarchal
myths with untainted birth assigned truths, but rather, to recode, resignify, or reinscribe bodily being (Sullivan p. 129). Liana used a positive reflection of a found community of First Nations men to recode, resignify, and reinscribe her own bodily being and accept both the male and the female parts of herself, allowing her to become more accepting of who she was overall.

The decision to leave the trans community began when the two research participants who identified temporarily as trans were questioned about their preferred use of gender pronouns by members of the trans community. These repetitive queries produced tension between the ways in which the participants understood their birth assigned bodies and gender identities and the insistence of being asked to identify with one gender or another. Although meant to be trans-inclusive, asking for one’s preferred gender pronouns excludes gender fluid people who resist identifying with just one gender, one set of gender pronouns, or no gender at all, which is what the research participants think the term “non-binary” does. The question of gender pronouns still suggests the operation of a gender dichotomy, or trichotomy, by having to choose a fixed gender—she/he/them. Although these research participants admitted to using “they/them” pronouns on occasion, they were both uncomfortable with using these pronouns because they represent them as trans rather than gender fluid.

The participants also advocate for using more than one gender to identify themselves, as they appreciate the use of multiple gender identities, depending on the context of their identity in any given moment. The acceptance of this liminal state, as Liana’s experiences demonstrates, is a process that took time: “I think I took Home Ec because she (adoptive mother) thought it was a good thing for me to take but I would have preferred taking auto mechanics in high school and industrial arts, that sort of thing, but I think she made me take home ec, cooking and sewing, um and to this day I don’t enjoy cooking and I don’t sew. Because of this experience, for a long
time I rejected everything female…it just didn’t feel right. I identify as two-spirited and I would like to say a balance between feminine and masculine, but I guess it depends on how people perceive me too… and how I identify changes sometimes throughout the day or throughout a conversation. Why do I need to be confined by only one option?” In rejecting the imposition of a singular, feminine identity by her adoptive mother, Liana ended up rejecting all aspects of her feminine side for a long time. In discovering her two-spirited identity, she recognized that she could embrace those elements of her masculine and feminine that she wanted, when she wanted.

As is true for other gendered beings who do gender, masculine women “do masculine femininity.” It is through “daily external and internalized (embodied) practices of resistance and conformity that gender identities are created and maintained” (Carr, p. 551). Insisting on gender ambiguity through, for example, the use of multiple pronouns, instills resiliency in genderfluid women. As this story indicates, the research participants came to feel at home in their bodies:

“When I was on the west coast it had a real impact on me. I attended a red cedar circle where the women were to go to the left of the circle and the men were to go to the right. After a moment of indecision, I went to the left. This elder followed me, tapped me on the shoulder, took my elbow and guided me to the very centre of the circle between the women and the men and pointed to where I was to sit down. The whole circle moved, and they were smiling at me, so I smiled back at them. I suddenly realized I was exactly where I was supposed to be. It felt like coming home and I felt calm and peaceful. A very effeminate man came in, looked left, looked right, and looked as confused as I had been, the elder smiled and walked him to the centre and the whole circle moved again. He sat down right beside me. We had a moment where we just smiled at one another and he/she took my hand. Half way through the ceremony the elders indicated we were to switch
with each other. When I sat down again I felt like I had entered another world. The man on my left reached over and shook my hand. My friend shook hands with the woman to his right. Nothing was ever said but I felt like we had both been welcomed to the “other” side. The resilience was in following the non-verbal cues and just gently going with the flow. By the end of the ceremony I felt like a changed person. I finally understood my place in this world. It is to stand in betwixt and between and just be.”

To “stand in betwixt and between and just be” is a beautiful analogy for taking the tensions, suspensions, and disruptions, and moving them into an embodiment of identity through the claiming of a gender fluid space.

2.9 CROSSING THE VANILLA FIELDS:
THE DISTILLATE OF RESILIENCE

This thesis examined the construction of masculine women’s resistance to heteronormative, disciplinary practices and the ways in which masculine women drew upon their experiences to create a space for the positive exploration of the relationship between their gendered and sexual identities and their birth assigned sexed bodies. In an attempt to conform to heteronormativity or by having those norms and practices imposed upon them by their families, the law, and the medical system, the research participants experienced various
forms of trauma—sexual and/or physical abuse, exclusion, and silencing. Despite this suffering, the research participants were able to critically reflect upon their experiences of tension, suspension, and disruption and move beyond the constraints of heteronormativity. One of the major contributions then of this thesis is to reinforce the analytical and experiential differences among the concepts of sex, gender, sexuality, masculinity, and femininity. When these categories are routinely separated, a new lens can be used to examine the experiences of masculine women, and we can then find a language to use as a framework to shift the power away from the default binary lens.

As with other invisible cultures, it can be difficult to find enough people to invite to participate, because, well, they are invisible. As indicated by the potential research participant who decided to withdraw, vulnerability and safety are two concerns that prevent participation. As a marginalized identity, the vulnerability of becoming more visible in their community had the potential to create a risk for their safety.

The process of seeking research participants was further hampered by the lack of language available to discuss such a marginalized gender identity. In several instances of screening for research participants, prospective participants were identified by an outside source, but the prospective participants did not identify as masculine, but rather lesbian or queer. Some of these prospective participants
firmly held a position of having more masculine characteristics but otherwise being the same as their heterosexual counterparts. Other potential participants identified by a third source didn’t identify as masculine in any way and found the suggestion offensive. In maintaining an identity that excluded masculine characteristics, these potential participants disqualified themselves. Another group of women who were not visibly masculine, had not experienced any discrimination, and generally fit heteronormative privilege, but self-identified as masculine was also excluded. These interactions were generally an awkward reminder of the entwinement of sex, gender, femininity and masculinity.

To date, the focus has been on the oppressive elements of heteronormativity, but this research suggests that even seemingly transgressive identities can become oppressive when they set up the notion of insiders and outsiders. Refusal to submit to new hegemonic relations can occur through an ongoing interrogation of the language we use in our communities through political, cultural, systemic, and social realms in our everyday lives. But alternative performative identities may further displace already marginalized groups from cultural acceptance and jeopardize their social, economic, and political opportunities. The tension between those who identify as trans and masculine women reveals that it is almost impossible to exist outside binary constructions. As Foucault and Butler have observed, sexual identities and practices are products of the ongoing construction of norms; while we can resist norms, we cannot completely separate them from our knowledge, experience, and our social understandings. Indeed, the notion of “alternative” pushes against but is dependent on the construction of norms.

The concept of gender fluidity gives rises to the creation of new gender identities that could serve the needs of a diverse group of people, allowing for a range of gender and sexual
identity expressions. In this thesis, the concept of gender fluidity helped to validate the experiences and identities of masculine women. The social discourse of female masculinity serves to upset heteronormative regimes of sexuality and dichotomous gender identity. Moving beyond the boundary provides a space for alternate and liberated performative masculine women’s identities. Acceptance of the concept of gender fluidity afforded masculine women to freely express their multiple sexual and gender identities when and where they choose. Masculine women were able to (re)construct their identities by reinterpreting their experiences and re-signing the meaning of their birth assigned sexed bodies. As a result, they were able to realize their personal role in the cultural, social, and historical construction of masculine women’s identity.

Through each stage of the research process—from finding research participants, awkward and misunderstood exchanges, limited language, the interviews, the taking of photographs, the exhibition -- each participant contributed to a process of siphoning through all the elements of the invisibility of gender fluidity, the historical trauma, and the resiliency of masculine women. This siphoning method led to the emergence of three broad processes—tension, suspension, and disruption that shaped the lives of masculine women. Further distillation of those themes provided insight into the strategies of resiliency that each research participant developed, which entailed disembodying and embodying their birth assigned bodies and genderfluid identities. The exhibition provided a platform for the research participants and other
masculine women to share their uniquely distilled experiences. Becoming visible on their own terms was empowering for the research participants. Participation in the research process and the representation of their experiences in the exhibition evoked feelings of pride and appreciation for their identities as masculine women. Each participant, in her own way, has committed to continue the work of making their gender identities more visible and carry on the conversation about genderfluidity. The last words of this thesis go to them.

“I found the experience to be extremely life affirming. It was great to be reminded about how far I have come in my growth and development as a human being. I am the sum of my many parts. I am filled with a renewed appreciation for my identity and the lengthy journey it took for me to be here. I am grateful to have been given the strength to survive this journey for my ancestors and for the ancestor I will be to others that come after me.”

-Liana
“My gender identification has enriched my life, and I dare say that of those around me, as it has allowed me to discover and express parts of me that social norms ‘for a woman’ would have denied us. I am so happy to be on the margins of the colourful mosaic that is the full human spectrum rather than the beige expectation so many are expected to accept. Not me. No thanks. No fun.” -Charlotte

“The research process has made me think about what looks like the trend of the ‘disappearing butch’ for anyone my age or younger. I love being who I am, even if that means standing alone at times because I know there are others out there.” -J
“Did this research process ever have an impact on my identity. I now look at the daily tension I experience through a genderfluid lens rather than a gender lens, and this new lens changes the way I am looking at everything in life. Having the language to discuss these things with others helps me have a deeper understanding of my own gender identity. With a deeper understanding of myself, I can have a deeper understanding of how I interact with the world. The things I used to identify as homophobic, I realize are deeply rooted in genderphobia.” -X
References


Appendix

Appendix A: Distillation of Resilience: Female Masculinity in Form Artist Statement and Dedication

Distillation of Resilience: Female Masculinity in Form is an interactive installation exhibit which explores the gender identity and resilience of masculine women. This exhibit is a partial thesis fulfillment for the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Master of Arts program. I had the opportunity to work with four women who identify as masculine and identify as having experienced discrimination based on their masculinity. These women generously shared their intimate lived experience of masculinity. The research participants gave formal interviews, written narratives, and photo representations of their own masculinity. Through this invaluable research, I discovered a common thread of resilience. The research process and artistic practice are dedicated to creating a public and accessible space for masculine women’s experiences and expressions of gender to move from invisible to visible. I have interpreted how female masculinity disembodies the feminine and masculine within a gender binary. Female masculinity moves to embody a reconfiguration of gender without the binary, while inhabiting the home of a female sexed body.

Following this lifeline thread of resilience, I explored themes of tension, resistance, and disruption. I used colonial objects of femininity and masculinity as a common language to engage in diverse meaning. These objects, charged with symbolism, alter the context of their meaning as a way of questioning the attitudes, fears, and unwritten rules which have formed our culture and our own behaviour within it.
I invite you to participate, be curious, and share dialogue about the practises and language of gender and gendered resilience. Please explore this interactive installation with all your senses. Feel free to gently touch any of the artistic elements. In sharing traces of your own curious resilience, you will bear witness to this process of distilling the resilience of masculine women.

Dedication:

**DISTILLED**

This installation Of identity distilled Dedicated to Shauna Reist 1974-2006 Gender Fluid You never quite made it To the Other side Of the fence But at last I found your boots In Oz And to the rest of you Who have lost Your own footing We honour you In the darkness And in the light
Interview Guide

Preamble: As I identify as a masculine woman, I appreciate and have a certain understanding of what it is like to experience the world as a masculine woman. I am interested in exploring themes of resilience for women who identify as masculine. Your story is a valuable contribution to my research on masculine female resilience. Your observations are important because they will contribute to creating awareness of your experiences that might otherwise be invisible to others in our communities. I would like to start by getting some background information about yourself.

Background

- Where do you currently reside?
- Where did you spend your childhood?
- What is your current occupation?
- How do you identify your gender?

Lived Experience

- As you know, I am interested in how masculine women negotiate and navigate in a heteronormative world. Please;

  - Describe your process of coming to identify as masculine?
  - Describe your childhood experiences of masculinity?
  - Describe your adult experiences of masculinity?
  - Describe any experiences of discrimination you have had directed towards your masculinity?
  - Do you identify as having a sense of resilience?
  - What characteristics do you feel you portray which contribute to your sense of resilience?