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From Graceful Adaptations to Jarring Collisions:
Oberlin Students' Experiences Integrating Divergent
Conceptions of Gender

Rebecca Witheridge
4/20/2010 Senior Honors Thesis
Anthropology, Oberlin College

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Rebecca Witheridge . Honors Thesis . Anthropology . Oberlin College . 4/20/2010

Introduction

At first glance, a somewhat intoxicated partygoer would see nothing unusual about it. The ceiling is decked out in colorful flashing lights, decorations cover the walls, and music blasts from speakers all over the student union. The air is sweltering and oppressive from the heat rising off of so many bodies. Guys and girls dance provocatively in pairs and in groups, and everyone is laughing and smiling and having a fantastic time. But unlike parties sponsored by other colleges and universities across America, first impressions at this event are likely to be misleading. Look again at the voluptuous, attractive girl wearing a black miniskirt and high heels. Glance back at the cocky jock in his baseball cap, popped collar shirt, and baggy jeans. Do a double take when you see someone and realize you would have difficulty deciding whether they are male or female if you tried. Take a good look at the students dancing all around you, and you might gain some insight into the way gender functions at Oberlin College.

Drag Ball, Oberlin College's largest school-sponsored party, is just one example of the ways in which many Oberlin students self-actively challenge gender norms and how doing so affects the ways that the broader student population forms their ideologies and practices regarding gender. All-gender or gender neutral bathrooms are present in almost every building owned on campus, and it is standard procedure for students to list their gender pronouns along with their names and majors before important gatherings. Words like male-bodied, female-bodied, male-identified, female-identified, transgender, and queer are commonly heard and spoken. We have a large and active lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) population, and many events, activities, groups, and classes are reflective of sex and gender issues. These patterns, ranging from gender identity oriented course offerings to queer night at the 'Sco, our dance hall, are indicative of a larger, overarching conception of gender that is prevalent and dominant on Oberlin's campus. This conception challenges traditional ideas of gender and gender identity as being fixed to the body, biological, and rooted in sexual dimorphism, and instead asserts that gender is fluid, socially and culturally constructed, and one's own choice. I am calling the first of these constellations of notions about gender the traditional conception of gender, and the second, the Oberlin conception of gender.

In this thesis I argue that after attending Oberlin College, my informants do not subscribe only to the Oberlin conception of gender or the traditional conception of gender, but rather see gender and their own gender identities through dual, competing conceptions. I show that my informants' experiences integrating such different conceptions of gender range from jarring collisions to graceful adaptations and mixtures of each. These differences in reactions are influenced by my informants' experiences prior to Oberlin—the more familiar they were with the ways gender is presented and discussed on campus prior to coming here, the more likely they are to accept and embrace them. I assert that the Oberlin conception and the traditional conception of gender have distinct implications for the ideological formation of my male and female informants as pertaining to gender. I have noted that my male informants tend to embrace the traditional conception of gender while my female informants tend to embrace the Oberlin conception of gender instead. Finally, I maintain that all of my informants have been

affected by their exposure to Oberlin's ideas about gender, whether or not they embrace them wholeheartedly.

Relevant Literature

The literature on sex and gender in anthropology (and the social sciences in general) is voluminous and therefore a comprehensive review of it is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I will briefly discuss the resources that have been most useful in framing my questions and theory throughout all stages of my research, and particularly in my construction of the traditional conception of gender and the Oberlin conception of gender. In concluding this study, I will return to the question of how my findings relate to the state of our knowledge about the anthropology of gender.

It is understood that “in Western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being with distinctive psychological and behavioral propensities that can be predicted from their reproductive functions” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 128). Importantly, Kessler and McKenna noted that though “genitalia are conventionally hidden from public inspection in everyday life [...] we continue through our social rounds to ‘observe’ a world of two naturally, normally sexed persons” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 132). The influence of gender stereotypes

is particularly strong because, unlike many other stereotypes that are merely descriptive, gender stereotypes are also prescriptive—they represent norms of behavior from which deviations are punished. For example, although the stereotype suggests that Jews are greedy, this is not viewed as a trait Jews should have. In contrast, gender stereotypes suggest that women ought to be nurturant and that men ought to be aggressive (Glick and Fiske 2000: 382).

In accordance with these views, biological men are encouraged and expected to be masculine (strong, powerful, independent, unemotional, etc.), and biological women are encouraged and expected to be feminine (nurturing, passive, attractive, emotional, etc).

This describes one element of what I am calling in this thesis the traditional conception of gender, which

encompasses a series of ‘un-questionable’ axioms about gender, including the beliefs that there are two and only two genders; gender is invariant; genitals are the essential signs of gender; the male/female dichotomy is natural; being masculine or feminine is natural and not a matter of choice; all individuals can (and must) be classified as masculine or feminine - any deviation from such a classification being either a joke or a pathology. [These beliefs] are held with such conviction that it is nearly impossible to challenge their validity (Hawkesworth 1997: 649).

This way of looking at gender is so difficult to influence or change because it is being reinforced and reproduced constantly.

Because stereotypes are not born of ignorance, but reflect social realities, changing them is not merely a matter of ‘education.’ Telling a young child that ‘women can be firefighters too’ carries little weight when every firefighter the child sees is a man (Glick and Fiske 2000: 367).

For this reason, discussing my informants’ experiences before they attended Oberlin is essential for understanding how difficult (or effortless) it is for them to integrate the traditional conception of gender with the Oberlin conception of gender. If they are from backgrounds that are highly traditional in nature, they are less likely to be comfortable with the Oberlin conception of gender, and if they are from non-traditional backgrounds, they seem more open to it.

In opposition to the traditional ideas of gender described above, recent literature is arguing that “the performance of gender (ways to hold, wear, and use the body to fit social expectations of what is appropriate for females and males) is what comes to be

mistaken as an inner, psychic self; it is the illusion of innate sex characteristics” (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008: 39). Rather than fixed and inherent in our bodies, “gender is something that we assert, create, and re-create now in our everyday lives” (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008: 39). Beginning with Erving Goffmann’s “notion that the body is not the self but the self is performed by the body” and that “we present the self we want others to believe us to be [...] based particularly on the context of the situation,” it is now understood that

‘each of us has become gendered and is continually being gendered in our everyday experiences in the world’ and that ‘sex, gender, and sexuality [...] are all to varying degrees socially interpreted, and all contribute to an overarching concept of gender that relies on both perceived sex and behaviors and their attribution as masculine or feminine’ (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008: 53, 3; Dozier 2005: 300).

However, contradictory notions of the body surface in the social sciences (and anthropology in particular). While the body has at times “been shunned as a basis for reductionist, essentialist, and therefore conservative views of human existence, and sciences of the body [have been] discredited as rationalizing and reflecting dominant ideologies,” there are many social scientists who are endeavoring to “[resocialize] the body, recognizing it as created and experienced through emotion and subjectivity in dialogue with or subjected by social practice and knowledge” (Worthman 1995: 600-601). These constantly evolving, academically grounded ideas about gender are important to my thesis because they are the same ideas that are trickling down to my informants from their coursework and through their general participation on Oberlin’s campus. These ideas—especially those that reject biology as the bedrock of gender—shape what I’m calling the Oberlin conception of gender.

Here I want to make clear that the traditional conception of gender and the Oberlin conception of gender are labels that I am imposing upon particular constellations of related notions about gender as discussed in the relevant literature and by my informants. This is not the terminology used by my informants, but is instead my attempt to make sense of the patterns in my informants' interview data and my observations of gender on campus. Also, even if an informant comes from an environment that upholds the traditional conception of gender, that person's every gender-related thought or behavior will not necessarily reflect that conception. These conceptions are simply names that I am giving to particular configurations of ideas about gender, and are intended to help with my analysis of informants' experiences and relationships with gender, not to explain *every aspect* of their gendered thoughts or actions.

Historically, the study of gender in anthropology has tended to stem at a very basic level from the nature/nurture controversy. In *Gender in Anthropology*, Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Nancy Johnson Black lay out the numerous theories of gender that have developed in anthropology since the late nineteenth century, including Evolutionary, Psychological, Materialist, Structuralist, Discourse Analysis and Sociolinguistic, and Reflexive approaches and orientations (Mascia-Lees and Black 2000: vii-x). There is still much disagreement today about the extent to which biology informs gender (Worthman 1995), but current literature on sex and gender "shows growing signs of a rethinking of the sex-gender dichotomy to overcome the stultifying effects of a reified biological-cultural dualism" (Worthman 1995: 610). Cultural anthropologists largely believe that gender constructs are "cultural interpretations of physical differences" that are open to change because culture, as defined by anthropologists, is "a system of meaning that is

learned and shared by members of a group” based within a historical and environmental context (Mascia-Lees and Black 2000: 2). However, it is important to note that “the definition of ‘sex’ fluctuates in dynamic counterposition to ‘gender,’ as feminist scholars attempt to conceptually disengage the ‘determinism’ of biology from the ‘constructivism’ of society,” and there is still disagreement among anthropologists over these terms and their meaning (Worthman 1995: 597). Joan Wallach Scott argues that

‘no matter how insistently feminist theorists have refined the term *gender* (purging it of all ‘natural’ connotations while promoting its status as a ‘social construction’), they have been unable to prevent its corruption. In popular conversation, the terms *sex* and *gender* are as often used synonymously as oppositionally; indeed, sometimes it seems that *gender* is simply a polite euphemism for *sex*’ and this is because there is no truly sharp distinction between the terms, due to ‘the difficulty of representing bodies as entirely social contrivances within the terms of the opposition between nature and culture’ (2000: 71).

Because the social sciences, including anthropology, still have not agreed upon the perfect boundaries between these and other terms related to gender, much ambiguity surrounds these concepts. As will be seen later in this thesis, my informants often mixed and combined these terms throughout their conversations with me, though their underlying ideas about these subjects seemed relatively clear.

The current ethnographic literature on gender and sex has two distinct, yet overlapping, focuses, both deriving from the presumption that “gender is arbitrary but determining, constructed but given by history,” with the first being the anthropology of making difference, and the second being the anthropology of decomposing difference (Morris 1995: 573). The first “focuses on the ways in which cultural orders construct gender and create subjects” while the second “focuses on the institutions of ambiguity, and it encompasses everything from institutionalized transgenering in non-western

societies to specifically framed gestures of parody and transgressions in North American theater” (Morris 1995: 573-574). This thesis is situated between both—the dominant way that gender is conceived of here at Oberlin is unusual compared with traditional Western notions of gender and, in fact, criticizes and rejects much of that notion of gender, which makes it very much a study of decomposing difference. However, the focus of this thesis is to show how gender is constructed and understood at Oberlin College, which makes it more similar to the anthropology of making difference.

As part of proliferating concerns about gender, anthropology has also turned to studying maleness and masculinity in particular, which is especially pertinent to my research. In response to the realization of “the taken-for-granted nature of men and manhood” in anthropological work, Matthew C. Gutmann pointed out that

a quick perusal of the indices to most ethnographies shows that ‘women’ exist as a category while ‘men’ are far more rarely listed. Masculinity is either ignored or considered so much the norm that a separate inventory is unnecessary. Then, too, ‘gender’ often means women and not men (1997: 403).

His somewhat recent review of the literature focusing on men and masculinity shows that “contrary to the assertion that men are made while women are born (albeit ‘in the natives’ point of view’) is the understanding that men are often the defenders of ‘nature’ and ‘the natural order of things,’ while women are the ones instigating change in gender relations and much else,” something that I noticed in my interviews (Gutmann 1997: 404).

Another important observation about masculinity that is pertinent to this thesis is its highly valued yet “uncertain” and “precarious” nature (Gilmore 1990: 1). David Gilmore’s book shows that across the globe, men struggle and fight to become men and to maintain manhood in order to be seen as real men, and they are constantly defending

their status as such. Holding masculinity in high esteem in this way is something I noticed in my male informants, and, as will be addressed later in this thesis, this affects their comfort level with the Oberlin conception of gender.

Anthropologists study gender all over the world in order to find commonalities between cultures while discovering aspects that make each culture's concept of gender unique (Delcore, 2007; Morris 1995). It is through cross-cultural comparison that the above understanding of gender has been supported, because gender does not function the same way in all parts of the globe. This thesis is not intended to be cross-cultural in nature, although there are certainly aspects of my work that could be meaningfully analyzed from a cross-cultural standpoint (and my findings do relate to research done outside the US, such as David Gilmore's study of masculinity). Instead, my main intent is to explore Oberlin's conception of gender within its own context, and to give the reader a window into how gender functions on Oberlin's campus in particular—as Clifford Geertz would say, my “theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004: 1124). There are, nonetheless, comparative implications that I will consider in my conclusion. For example, C.J. Pascoe's *Dude, You're a Fag* was particularly useful as a model for organizing and writing this thesis. Because her ethnography was conducted on masculinity in an American high school, it related to my own research on many levels, from location and method to subject matter. Relationships between this thesis and her work (and others) will be touched upon in the conclusion.

Methodology

The data used in this thesis is from fifteen ethnographic interviews I conducted from October to December of 2009. I interviewed six male-bodied male-identifying individuals and nine female-bodied female-identifying¹ individuals, all of whom heterosexual. Of my informants, eight were seniors, one was a junior, two were sophomores, and four were freshmen. Unlike most professional anthropologists who must slowly ease into the culture in which they are working and accrue informants over time, as a student at Oberlin College and therefore automatically an engaged participant, it was rather easy for me to access informants. A few of my informants were semi-close or close friends, while others were acquaintances I met through mutual friends or in an African American Studies class I was taking first semester. In the case of friends or acquaintances, I simply asked my informants if they were interested in being interviewed for a project on gender at Oberlin, and I interviewed those who expressed interest. In the case of the students I met in my African American Studies class, I emailed the class list with a description of my project and asked if anyone was interested in being interviewed, and I interviewed the students who responded and wanted to meet with me.

I chose to interview heterosexual, male-bodied, male-identifying and female-bodied, female-identifying students because, at Oberlin, their stories are not often told. Unlike in traditional American society where the dominant majority is composed of straight, male/female identities that are unmarked and invisible, and subaltern minorities that are composed of gay or gender-queer identities that are marked, at Oberlin all gender categories are marked. While straight, male/female individuals are not in the minority in

¹ Please consult Appendix I for definitions of terminology used throughout this thesis that may be unfamiliar.

terms of numbers, they do inhabit a marked category on Oberlin's campus because of the preoccupation with self-definition and public identity in relationship to issues of gender and sex that pervades the campus. I wanted to find out what these "normal" students think about gender and their own gender identities, and whether they are affected by the ways that Oberlin College's atmosphere challenges traditional ideas regarding gender. I was interested in how my informants relate to and identify with these traditionally accepted gender categories (i.e. male and masculinity or female and femininity). As an interviewer, I wanted to see what would happen when I attempted to make these categories visible and coax my informants into telling stories about what it means to exist in these categories.

In preparation for this project I consulted numerous texts on anthropological field methods (Clair 2003; Davies 2008), particularly those that focus on doing field work in one's own culture (Agar 1996; Aguilar 1981; Brown 1994; Moffatt 1992; Narayan 1997). To collect the data in this thesis, I used ethnographic interviewing techniques (Agar 1996; Angrosino 2002; Crane and Angrosino 1992; Heyl 2001; Levy 1998; Spradley 1979) and was also inspired by the life history method (Atkinson 1998; Langness and Frank 1981). I came to every interview prepared with a list of basic questions and used them as a guideline for the sessions. In this way, the interviews were only loosely structured, and I encouraged my informants to talk about whatever they felt was relevant to sex and gender, even if it was not on my initial list of questions. Each informant spent about an hour to an hour and a half with me, and I audio-recorded each meeting to avoid note taking. This rendered the interviews more conversational and enabled me to better preserve the actual words of my informants. Therefore, the quotations throughout this

thesis are almost perfect transcriptions of what my informants said. All of their names have been changed, and I also eliminated any names they may have mentioned during our time together. I have edited out excessive fillers, such as “like,” “um,” or “uh,” and cleaned up some run-on sentences where I felt it was necessary. I have, however, aimed to give the reader a sense of how my informants actually spoke during our conversations. I have used the symbols “[...]” to indicate portions of the interview I have edited out, generally to eliminate irrelevant side talking or times when I interrupted the speaker to ask a smaller clarifying question. I have also used brackets to clarify parts of the speaker’s meaning—for example, at one point I insert the word “[thought]” instead of the original words “was like.” When I say “society” or “our society” or “our culture” at various points in this thesis, I am referring specifically to American society.

Some might question my ability to be an objective researcher in view of my insider status. Many of the texts I consulted prior to conducting my research cautioned me that this could be the case, and I agree to a certain extent that, due to my close relationship with Oberlin College and my informants, there may be patterns I have missed that an outsider anthropologist would have identified. However, there is a well-established precedent of anthropologists working as insiders within the cultures they study, and such insider anthropology has many benefits as well as liabilities. Particularly, as an insider and friend to my informants, I was able to ask more personal questions than I may otherwise have. It has also meant that I have had extensive personal experience with many of the events and functions on campus that my informants discussed in our interviews (including Drag Ball, all-gender bathrooms, etc.), which better informs my interpretation of my informants’ remarks and experiences. As an Oberlin student for the

last four years—even outside of a formal research context—I have observed and experienced the complexities of gender at Oberlin, and this amounts to a kind of participant observation. Most importantly, in doing the formal research for this thesis I was able to interpret my findings (and reinterpret experiences I have had on campus) through the lens of an anthropology student and researcher. I am also able to situate my work in literature that extends beyond this culture, which strengthens my arguments.

Given more time, I would have benefited from interviewing more men. I had intended to have an even number of men and women in my sample, but various circumstances prevented this from happening. Also, due to the small proportion of the Oberlin student body that my sample represents, I would have chosen to interview more than fifteen students, and from more diverse backgrounds, time permitting—all of my informants were white except for one, and most came from middle to upper class backgrounds. I also may have benefited from interviewing only seniors as opposed to students of all years; this would have had some value because seniors have been exposed to the Oberlin environment the longest, and are most familiar with the discourses surrounding gender on campus. However, including freshmen informants gave me interesting insight into very fresh reactions to Oberlin's gender discourses; when I conducted these interviews, my freshman informants had been on campus for only three or four months and therefore their impressions of Oberlin were only just beginning to form.

Motivation for Study

I decided to study gender at Oberlin because issues of gender and sex have always fascinated me and I wanted to explore it from an anthropological, ethnographic

perspective—I wanted to understand gender as my informants understand it, and to study Oberlin as a social setting with particular cultural traits. I also know that my interest in these topics has been developed a great deal throughout my time at Oberlin, and I wanted to explore how my peers have been affected by the emphasis placed on issues of gender and gender identity here. As a straight, female-bodied female-identifying person myself, I wanted to see to what extent my ideas on these subjects are shared by my informants. In terms of methodology, while the literature on issues related to sex and gender is enormous and of high quality, I wanted to collect original data because I knew that gaining such novel experience would broaden and deepen my knowledge about, and interest in, these issues. However, I was also interested in how my interview findings relate to the general trends present in literature on sex and gender in the social sciences.

Organization

This thesis is organized into four main sections. Section one, “That’s So Oberlin!” will provide a detailed overview of what I’m calling the Oberlin conception of gender; the notion that gender is fluid, socially and culturally constructed, and one’s own choice. I will show that many of these ideas about gender floating around at Oberlin are based upon the same literature on gender in the social sciences that I discussed in this introduction—in fact, the first time that students are made aware of these ideas is often during their courses. Using interview data and my own personal experience, I will illustrate that Oberlin students think about gender in this way, and I will provide informants’ general descriptions of Oberlin’s student body in terms of gender. I will also touch on a few ways that this conception of gender is supported and encouraged on campus. I will briefly discuss all-gender bathrooms and Drag Ball, two examples of

Oberlin's attitude toward gender (that will be further explored in section three). This section will act as a backdrop for my interview data and provide the reader with important contextual information about the ways that sex and gender function at Oberlin College.

Section two, "Prior to Oberlin," is an overview of the experiences my informants had with gender prior to attending Oberlin College. First, I present the experiences of informants exposed to ideas of gender that fit my traditional conception of gender—backgrounds that are quite contrary to the Oberlin environment. I then describe the experiences of informants coming from non-traditional backgrounds that support ideas of gender that are very similar to the Oberlin conception of gender.

Section three, "Integration," shows that my informants do not subscribe to an Oberlin conception of gender or a traditional one alone, but instead tend to see gender and their own gender identities through both conceptions to varying extents. Using interview data, I show that my informants' experiences integrating their initial ideas about gender with the Oberlin conception of gender range from jarring collisions to graceful adaptations and everything in between. I also show that in discussing their ideas about gender my informants often contradict themselves, which highlights the tension they feel and the difficulties they encounter in combining the two conceptions. I will also delve deeper into my informants' reactions to Drag Ball and all-gender bathrooms in order to show the ways in which my informants see gender in both traditional and Oberlin-like ways. These examples illustrate that while some of my informants embrace the Oberlin conception of gender and its manifestations on campus, others are made uncomfortable and struggle with them.

Section four, “The Influence of Traditional Masculinity and Femininity,” discusses the significant differences I discovered between my male and female informants in their attitudes toward the Oberlin conception and the traditional conception of gender. My male informants are inclined to embrace the traditional conception of gender while my female informants tend to value the Oberlin conception of gender. As shown in section three, both my male and female informants experience an integration of their previous conceptions of gender with the Oberlin conception of gender, but doing so has different emotional and personal implications for them. These differences stem from their initial identification or comfort with traditional concepts of gender and gender roles. My male informants are attached to traditional masculinity and thusly find the Oberlin conception of gender to be threatening. They therefore tend to resist it, unless their prior socialization encouraged them to break away from traditional masculinity. My female informants, however, feel ambivalent about traditional femininity because they both desire to be feminine and also resist its negative origins and associations, so the Oberlin conception of gender is seen as liberating.

I conclude by reasserting that Oberlin’s way of conceiving of gender *is* different from the traditional American way of conceiving of gender, and that all students who attend Oberlin are likely transformed by it whether they embrace it wholeheartedly or not. All students undergo the process of integrating their traditional and Oberlin conceptions of gender, and all are exposed to the many manifestations of Oberlin’s conception of gender on campus. Finally, I will return to the question of how my findings relate to the state of our knowledge about the anthropology of gender.

Section I: That's So Oberlin!

“Oberlin’s kind of a weird microcosm... [a] petri dish of culture in itself” (David 11/04/2009).

* * *

It is no secret that Oberlin College and the Oberlin student body have a liberal attitude toward gender expression. Even a quick look at Oberlin’s entry on Wikipedia will underscore this fact, as there is an entire paragraph devoted to this aspect of Oberlin’s “campus culture” (Wikipedia, Oberlin College). In this section, using data gathered in my interviews and through my own observations of campus life, I will describe Oberlin’s student body in terms of gendered appearance and behavior, develop in greater detail what I’m calling Oberlin’s conception of gender, and illustrate that students become familiar with this conception of gender in part through academia. This will give the reader a better sense of what the Oberlin environment is like in regard to gender, and will provide some insight into what students mean when they say, as they often do, ‘that’s SO Oberlin!’ about what goes on here.

More Than Appearances

Like many liberal or progressive towns and campuses across the country, just walking down the street in Oberlin a person will notice that traditional gender stereotypes are often challenged in students’ dress and personal maintenance. Women sport short hair and men wear theirs long. Women don baggy jeans and flannel button-downs, and men wear tight-fitting t-shirts and even the occasional skirt. Some students wear highly eclectic amalgamations of clothing, in multi-colored layers. One student is notorious for his black lipstick and wild, shaggy dreadlocks. Of course, these instances of gender-bending clothing and adornment are not representative of the entire campus. There are

plenty of athletic male “jocks” and traditionally feminine “girly girls” present here, but conventionally feminine and masculine clothing styles are certainly not the norm.

Women here do not generally wear high heels to class, for instance, or spend hours primping in the morning. Personal appearance of the traditional sort is simply not the norm on this campus, and this was mentioned frequently throughout my interviews. My informants described the gendered appearance of students at Oberlin as “androgynous,” “just a little bit blurred” (Marisa 10/12/2009) and “something in between, like, neutral almost” (Charlotte 10/28/2009). One informant, Stephanie, told me how her father even noticed this aspect of the student body.

I remember driving home from here one time and my dad being like, ‘do you guys ever find that it’s weird here, weird at Oberlin, because, like, the guys are all pretty feminine and the girls are all androgynous and there’s this weird power thing?’ And it can be really true (Stephanie 11/18/2009).

I have heard many straight male students lamenting the unattractiveness of Oberlin women, something Marisa attributed to the non-traditional nature of their personal appearances.

I think it’s just that the girls here are... elevated in the sense that they aren’t spending all of their time trying to, like, look good for guys in these very, like, stereotypical ways. And everyone’s used to that from high school and so everyone’s really spoiled I guess in that sense, and then they come here and they’re like, ‘what do you mean you’re not trying to dress up for me?’ like, ‘what do you mean you’re more concerned with your classes and your life? That’s not attractive.’ And they, like... a lot of the people here are weird so a lot of the girls purposely try to like... remove any sort of, like, visible effort to look feminine, I guess? As in like, ‘no makeup! No heels! Only flannel shirts!’ kind of thing. And that’s... whatever floats your boat. But it’s unattractive in the stereotypical high school way that we’re all used to (Marisa 10/12/2009).

Aside from explaining her opinion on these male students’ reactions to the way female students dress, Marisa’s remarks begin to illustrate how gender functions at Oberlin.

Marisa hints that the reason why students here do not generally follow traditionally masculine and feminine norms of appearance is not due to individual preferences only—it is also due to underlying, critical reactions to gender norms. When I asked Jack, a male informant, to describe the student body in terms of gender, he discussed this motivation for students' behavior in great detail.

Well, you know, the issue here is that guys here don't tend to fit the traditional masculine norm and girls here don't tend to fit the traditional feminine norm... and... I guess the first thing to say is that Oberlin has this weird position in which because we don't like traditional gender categories [...] I think that there's a self-conscious effort on the part of guys here to move away from that, like, masculine, aggressive, overbearing, self-confident, jock kind of mentality. And obviously there are exceptions [...] but then on the other side of it, [...] I think there's a tendency to... for people who identify as female here to move away from, you know, making oneself up and dressing in traditional female sorts of clothing, wearing more hipster or more environmentally aware sorts of attire, not wearing makeup, on both sides showering much less frequently than anyone I knew at home! And... so not all of this is specifically related to concepts of gender, but I think there is a self-conscious effort for people on... well obviously it's not 'both sides' but since most of the people identify as either male or female, on those two sides is to move away from the traditional ways in which masculinity and femininity are articulated and um [...] my point overall would be it's hard to describe Oberlin in those two terms because I think part of what defines Oberlin's student body is the self-conscious effort to differentiate oneself from those traditional ways of describing gender (Jack 12/05/2009).

Here, Jack reaffirms the assertion that Oberlin students purposefully stray from gender norms and roles, not just in the way they dress, but in their general outlook as well. He also shows through his side-comment about self-consciousness that he is mindful of gender in a distinctly Oberlin way—he does not see gender as rooted in sexual dimorphism and instead believes that gender is fluid and that more than two genders exist.

The Oberlin Conception of Gender

When I asked her to talk about how Oberlin is different from other colleges, Claire described how the normally dominant crowd often becomes the non-dominant crowd.

What's normal in normal society is like... it's, like, not normal here? So, okay, everyone here thinks they're so non-conformist but in their conforming to each other, the normal people are non-conformist. It's weird as hell. Like, really weird. And like, you try to explain that to people! (Claire 12/02/2009)

This observation relates directly to Oberlin's conception of gender and how, as I have already begun to show, students here strive to challenge and re-define traditional understandings of gender and gender-related concepts like the masculine/feminine dichotomy. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the traditional American conception of gender is based on the body, biological traits, and sexual dimorphism. At Oberlin, the contrary is the dominant view. However, by no means do I intend to argue that every single American community has the same notions of gender, nor do I claim that Oberlin is the only place where gender is seen as fluid, culturally constructed, and an individual's choice. Rather, I claim that there are underlying tendencies in American or Western culture to see gender in particular ways (rigid, based in bodies and biology, and including only male and female genders), and that Oberlin's dominant ways of seeing gender are quite different from, if not the opposite of, those underlying general American tendencies. As already discussed in the introduction, "in Western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being with distinctive psychological and behavioral propensities that can be predicted from their reproductive functions" (West and Zimmerman 1987:

128). Another informant, David, asserts very clearly that gender conceptions are different here as compared to this understanding of traditional American society. He explained that Oberlin students' relationships with traditional gender categories are often complicated and problematized.

I mean, I've seen instances of feminine and masculine behavior, you know, in both sexes here, and um... obviously the whole 'girls like pink,' 'boys like blue,' is completely turned upside down on its head here at Oberlin, although I guess there are still some remnants. I think people are more nervous to kind of live into those respective roles here. I think there's definitely a small—small but very vocal—portion of the population here that's always trying to... to, you know, rearrange and reconstruct the way that we think about gender, so that, I think, presence here... just the very fact that we have to assert what are genders are at check-ins and things like that... uh... I think makes Oberlin specifically a very hard place to lock down a very solid definition of what it means to be masculine or feminine (David 11/04/2009).

In this quotation, David hints at the Oberlin conception of gender, which includes understandings of gender as fluid, socially and culturally constructed, and one's own choice. By talking about how it is hard to lock down solid definitions of masculinity and femininity, David invokes fluidity as opposed to rigidity, one aspect of the Oberlin conception of gender. Each of my informants is able to describe the Oberlin conception of gender to a certain extent. For some of my informants the Oberlin conception of gender is their personal view of gender, and for others it is a position they know exists but which they do not necessarily understand. For example, when I asked my informants to define the term itself they said,

I think male/female... I think choice, which is weird... and I think, like, gender roles, and stuff associated with that (Claire 12/02/2009).

As I understand it, and I admit that I don't maybe fully understand it, um... there's biological sexes—there's male and there's female—and that's pretty clear cut and no one's arguing about that... and gender is sort of the social distinctions that come out of that dualistic biological

structure... um... and so gender relates more to our social conceptions of what it is to be male or female, or you know... apparently one can be both or neither, which I also don't fully understand but... whatever (Alex 11/15/2009).

The first thing that I think of when I hear the word gender is... issues of gender identity and the difference between sex and gender. Um... I guess for the sake of the interview to give my perspective on that... sex being your physical sex, being male-bodied, female-bodied, intersexed... um... and gender being your actual, like, concept of self, being male, female, neither, both, any other possible combination... um... and not just combinations but things aside of being simply male or simply female, or any combination or absence of the two (Lee 11/13/2009).

Many of my informants specifically mentioned Oberlin's impact on this understanding of gender, implying that this concept of gender is different from the concept they had before coming here.

I don't know if it's because of Oberlin but I feel like, at least in colloquial terms, people... we have created that distinction between what sex is and what gender is and I think that my understanding of what gender is [is that it] is more a personal choice (Alyssa 12/03/2009).

Role... like after having gone to Oberlin, role is definitely the first [...] it means that it's basically... it's almost like gender is this kind of part or subsection of society where you're expected to act a certain way, have a certain outlook... exist in a certain way or type based on your organs or physical attribute (David 11/04/2009).

Gender I guess would be... the sort of, very Oberlin concept of gender being a social construct, I guess at this point has been, like, drilled into my little brain [...] I guess in a lot of ways gender and like male/femaleness is something that you sort of are... I mean at least I was raised thinking was a more biological thing. But then you come to Oberlin and you have gender neutral bathrooms and things like that, and it becomes the idea of it being a social construct, and you can decide whether... you can decide your own gender based on how you feel about it and it doesn't have to be your, you know, biological parts that make up your gender (Katie 11/03/2009).

Just a lot of seeing gender now as much more of a flexible issue that, any person I meet, I know that part from a PC view and part from a, 'I've been brainwashed this way' point of view, you define your own gender. You identify with your own sexuality and your sex, and whether you're a

female-bodied [or] male-bodied person is what you're born with (Nicole 10/28/2009).

The above concepts of gender are reinforced on campus in a number of ways, many of which school-sponsored or supported. Our Multicultural Resource Center hosts a number of events and programs on LGBTQ issues and the website contains a lot of related information, including materials from transgender and transgender ally trainings conducted by the center (Multicultural Resource Center). The Edmonia Lewis Center for Women and Transgender People is another place on campus where issues of gender and gender oppression are out in the open. The two most common ways that the school reinforces the Oberlin conception of gender are the all-gender residences and all-gender bathrooms. The College currently provides single-sex, co-ed, and all-gender housing options for students, and designations of single-sex and gender-blind housing is reviewed on an annual basis (Tyson, email to author, March 21, 2010). All-gender bathrooms are bathrooms that can be used by any individual regardless of gender, and they are present in all campus dorms as well as Wilder, the student union. Finally, we have Drag Ball, a large dance party where students dress in drag and other non-traditional forms of gendered clothing. It is the most famous way that Oberlin College challenges (or attempts to challenge) the gender binary. Each of these events/resources contributes to students' knowledge of and experiences with the Oberlin conception of gender—my informants' experiences with and feelings about all-gender bathrooms and drag ball in particular will be discussed in great detail in the third section of this thesis.

Students also take the lead on supporting the Oberlin conception of gender without top down influence from the school. For example, one dominant idea on campus is that gender is a choice—a person's gender identity is decided by that person alone, and

the rest of the world is expected to respect that person's identity. For this reason, it is standard for Oberlin students to list their gender pronouns (she-her-hers, he-him-his, third-gender pronouns) along with other pertinent personal information (such as their name, year, and major) at gatherings. This is even done in the absence of transgender or genderqueer persons because it serves as a demonstration of solidarity with the transgender and genderqueer community. Being mindful of gender pronouns is a specific example of the general mindfulness of gender issues present on campus. This is not to say that all students are comfortable with the Oberlin conception of gender (as will be seen in later sections) but there is an atmosphere of acceptance here that makes places like Oberlin unusual in comparison to traditional American society.

Academic Origins

David mentioned in an earlier quotation in this section that it is not necessarily the majority of students on campus that are vocally and constantly breaking down traditional conceptions of gender. Instead, it is more useful to think about this conception as being "in the air," perpetuated by the vast number of events, programs, and spaces on campus devoted to issues of gender. The number of students who are consciously and actively pushing gender boundaries is less important than the extent to which these ideas about gender permeate the campus atmosphere. Even without a huge number of extreme gender-bending students, the Oberlin conception of gender is taken so seriously and is so widely known because it is informed by current research in the social sciences, and the students here are studious and very much engaged in academics. Scholarly notions of sex and gender filter down from professors to many students on campus, even students who are not taking classes on those particular subjects. Flyers for guest lecturers and

workshops related to these issues are plastered on bulletin boards all across campus. It is almost impossible for students to avoid seeing words like ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ in conjunction with ‘PhD’ and ‘acclaimed author’ on advertisements and announcements posted in academic buildings. For those students who are taking classes related to these topics, these notions of gender are presented and upheld even more directly. When I asked Ashley where her notions of sex and gender come from, she replied,

honestly, like, classes... the classes here. I haven’t taken a gender and women’s studies class in awhile [...] I took the intro class so I guess the first day is basically separating gender from sex, which is something that most people already know, but um... we talked a lot about gender and sexuality and the intersectionality of different identities, and then I think what she was trying to do in the class was to really like... try to get us to think about just how... well, most of us were able to identify ourselves as part of the gender binary, either male or female, and um... it was trying to get us to realize how we take that for granted, like the fact that a lot of us could identify as either one or the other, and how often gender is essentialized and how much it affects our interactions with people and the things that we do... like, there was a whole unit on, like, bathrooms. We watched a whole movie on bathrooms and it was basically a bunch of interviews of people’s experiences using bathrooms that they weren’t welcomed in (Ashley 11/15/2009).

In cases like this, Oberlin, as an academic institution, is purposefully promoting certain scholarly ideas about gender. These ideas of gender are not only taught in the Gender and Women’s Studies department (now known as Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies), but in other social science departments as well. As I was doing research for this thesis, I decided to look through a book I had been assigned in a sociology class on gender stratification. In the margins I found notes I had written to myself when I first encountered specific passages that told me that sex and gender are separate and mean different things. This helps to support my argument that the Oberlin conception of gender

is strongly influenced by, if not directly born of, academic research and literature done in the social sciences.

Conclusion

In this section I have described the Oberlin conception of gender in greater detail and placed it within the context of the campus environment. Through data I collected in interviews and as well as my own participant observation of Oberlin, I depicted the student body's unusual relationship with gendered appearance and behavior, and illustrated the many channels through which the Oberlin conception of gender reaches students—particularly that of academics. With the Oberlin context now clarified, I turn my attention to my informants' lives prior to Oberlin, and show that their experiences with and ideas about gender ranged from the traditional (with ideas of gender as fixed, biological, and rooted in sexual dimorphism), to the untraditional (with similarities to the Oberlin conception of gender).

Section II: Prior to Oberlin

In this thesis I have created a distinction between two different perspectives on gender, one being the traditional conception of gender and the other being the Oberlin conception of gender. The traditional conception of gender is defined by the beliefs that gender is fixed to the body and rooted in sexual dimorphism, while the Oberlin conception of gender disregards biology in favor of fluidity, the impact of society and culture, and one's own choice. Throughout my interviews informants described their experiences with gender prior to attending Oberlin College, and I see these experiences as tending to reflect either one or the other of these two conceptions of gender.

In this section I illustrate that my informants come from varied backgrounds and that not all of them were familiar with the ideas associated with the Oberlin conception of gender before they encountered it here. Providing these descriptions is important because, as will be shown in section four, the more similar my informants' previous experiences with gender were to the Oberlin conception of gender, the more likely they are to accept and embrace it once here. First I present the experiences of informants that were exposed to ideas of gender that fit my traditional conception of gender—backgrounds that are quite different from the Oberlin environment. I then describe the experiences of informants that come from non-traditional backgrounds that supported ideas of gender that are very similar to the Oberlin conception of gender.

Environments Reflecting the Traditional Conception of Gender

Many of my informants come from environments where gender is thought of as fixed to the body, biological in nature, and rooted in sexual dimorphism, and where male and female are the only socially acceptable, recognized genders. Men and women have

very defined gender roles and are expected to look, speak, think, and behave in particular ways. This is not because this is the “proper” way that men and women should *choose* to act, but because each gender is seen as inherently different and hard-wired to perform particular tasks.

These informants were not exposed to very much diversity in terms of gender or sexuality prior to Oberlin. Many of them had never met a transgender person let alone known what transgender is. Playing with gendered appearance or behavior was certainly not a common pastime of members of these informants’ communities. As Kyle mentioned,

I never saw people who were openly cross-dressing in my hometown [... we had] liberal politics but conservative lifestyles, I suppose. And I went to a really accepting church, a Unitarian church, but really didn’t know of too many... gender issues (Kyle 11/15/2009).

Alex described how diversity was frequently discussed in his schools before Oberlin, but that they “didn’t actually have diversity so [he] didn’t actually grasp it at all” and that in middle school he had not been exposed to the concept of gender roles and so he was not aware of “alternative theories to the traditional male-female separate spheres” (Alex 11/15/2009). This emphasis on separate spheres for men and women is the normal arrangement for these informants. Men and women are expected to behave in particular ways in accordance with their genders—as Charlotte explains, “I guess when I think of gender roles I think of the things that are expected of someone as a man or as a woman, um... and kind of the characteristics that are attributed to men and women” (Stephanie 11/18/2009). When asked to describe masculinity, my informants commonly mentioned qualities including control, dominance, independence, aggression, and a lack of emotional expressivity. Femininity was often described in opposition to masculinity, with

gentleness, emotional expressivity, nurturance, weakness, and passivity being frequently mentioned. Many of my informants, both male and female (and from all backgrounds), became somewhat uncomfortable when describing their ideas of femininity because they knew that they were going to use terms which clearly show that the feminine is understood as being subordinate and catering to the masculine—as put by Jack, “how to characterize femininity without sounding sexist?” (Jack 12/05/2009). Men are supposed to be masculine and physically strong and athletic, whereas women are supposed to be feminine, and care deeply about being attractive to men. Jack’s hometown is certainly this way.

Within the cultural situation I grew up in [...] I would want to say something about location... not because the South has some specific way of understanding gender, but I think there definitely is this idea of traditional gender roles in the South insofar as women should make themselves up, present themselves as pretty, um, in a way that I think perhaps in the north and especially not in Oberlin is not, you know, really the case. Um... so... it’s not to say that I grew up in a really traditional area ‘cause I lived in the suburbs and you have a lot of variety in the suburbs [...] but I do think there was, because I lived in a strongly Christian area—Baptist specifically—and because it was the South, I think I definitely saw femininity along certain traditional lines in that respect (Jack 12/05/2009).

Charlotte’s high school is also very much this way. She noticed that she and her peers actively strove to fit into masculine and feminine gender roles, and she described the contrast between the way gender roles worked at home and how they work here at Oberlin.

The high school I went to was very conservative and um... very... just, like, very preppy... and all the guys there played sports, and the girls—the girls played sports too, but it was just like... this dynamic of... like, the guys were very masculine and macho and the girls just loved getting attention from them, and I would say they were all very, like, feminine kind of, in the way that they thrived for the guys’ attention and I dunno, I feel like here at Oberlin people are just kind of like... they don’t need that.

But I feel like at my old school they needed the approval of each other. Like, they needed to know that they thought each other was attractive and... um... they just needed that in their life. And, I mean, obviously there are some people like that here at Oberlin, but [...] I just feel like here people... don't need that necessarily (Charlotte 10/28/2009).

While I would disagree that students on Oberlin's campus do not try to seek the approval of other students, I would agree that the process of garnering approval is complicated here by students' attempts to move away from traditionally gendered roles of behavior. Although students still care about gaining the approval of the other students that they are attracted to, this is not as frequently accomplished by acting traditionally masculine or feminine.

These strict gender roles are also especially important in the family sphere of these informants' hometowns. Husbands and wives are each delegated different tasks, with the wife in charge of the home and the children, and the husband responsible for working outside the home and supporting the family financially. As Alex's following words suggest, seeing their parents play these different parts impacted the way he and my other informants developed their own gender expectations.

I have some very traditional gender expectations in some ways, you know, my dad has always been the primary earner in the family. My mom does work outside the home but um... not as much and mostly part time for most of my childhood. Um... and I've told my girlfriend I will be very upset if she proposes to me because that's just not how it works [...] I understand that there's nothing inherently wrong with a woman proposing to a man, it's just that I personally... I dunno, I feel like that's something that I want to initiate, and I couldn't honestly tell you how much that is me personally and how much that is me thinking of myself as a man (Alex 11/15/2009).

In this quotation, Alex illustrates that his experiences with gender within his family have directly impacted some of his beliefs about, and preferences for, particular types of gendered behavior—in this case, proposing marriage—and he is certainly not the only

informant to express this. David also feels that watching his parents interact in gendered ways has left lasting impressions on his perceptions of gender roles.

Some of my gender roles have definitely been molded from the actions of my parents... my dad always drives, my mom very rarely drives [...] I think that you learn how to behave from your parents, and you learn how to interact with the opposite sex, you know, based on how you see your parents interacting sometimes [...] I think mom is scary, dad is much scarier (David 11/04/2009).

For David, after watching his parents he has come to associate traits like independence, strength, and dominance with maleness, and passivity with femaleness.

Nicole also grew up watching her parents interact in ways that upheld the idea of gender as being rooted in sexual dimorphism, with men and women treated differently.

Interestingly, Nicole's parents would never admit that they are doing so. As Nicole explained,

What my parents say and what they actually live are very different things. Um... they say like, 'oh, we have an equal marriage... your dad makes the money because that's where his education is and he loves his job, and my focus is with you kids,' and that was pretty believable until my dad told my mom that she had to go back to work at the new company he was starting and then it got to the point where both of them were working twelve or fourteen hours a day but my mom still was, like, in charge of cooking and doing dishes and... um... my dad still chipped in nothing around the house. My mom hates her job but she does it because my dad says she has to (Nicole 10/28/2009).

Just as it did for Alex, for Nicole to see her parents interacting this way had a direct impact on her ideas about gender, and men's and women's roles.

I very much from the time that I was playing with Barbie dolls to... when I got to Oberlin was... a big believer in practicality, and that even though women can do just as much as men, there are differences in sexuality and how women interact with men. You know, my mom cooked dinner every night and my dad never helped, and that was normal (Nicole 10/28/2009).

However, even though Nicole has internalized some aspects of her parents' gender roles, she also hopes not to reproduce them in their entirety in her own life. She has noticed that she tends to pursue committed relationships with men who are not overbearingly masculine, and she thinks this is because she "will never end up like [her] parents." She explained,

I feel sorry for my mom, and my dad and I just don't like each other. I mean, we like each other on a surface level but we don't talk about serious shit. So, I'm not gonna be that, but I can understand that that's how it is for them (Nicole 10/28/2009).

In families and communities like these where men and women are confined to separate spheres, traditional gender roles and heterosexuality are valued and untraditional roles and sexualities are uncommon. Since traditional femininity is largely defined by being attractive to men, traditional masculinity involves being attracted to women. Any behavior that is seen as promoting or even vaguely mimicking homosexuality is avoided or associated with feelings of discomfort. Even, as David mentioned, affectionate gestures between male family members.

I know for a fact that my dad, from a very young age, stopped kissing me. You know, like, I haven't kissed my dad in awhile. My dad and I do not kiss. You know, that's just like... it's just something that doesn't happen. I've never kissed my dad. I can't remember the last time I kissed him... I was little little little. But... you know, I have a feeling that some other peoples' dads and sons kiss a lot more. My dad is like me, or I'm like my dad, definitely more... staunch kind of... more serious? Serious is not the right word... more... regimented kind of person. And you know, that I noticed but I'm perfectly fine with, you know, perfectly fine with it because it's conditioned in me that, yeah, it's kinda weird two guys, dad and son, kissing when you're twenty, yeah, that's a little... that's a little weird (David 11/04/2009).

Charlotte is another of my informants who grew up surrounded by negative perceptions of homosexuality. Her sister is gay, and it is common for their disapproving father to make disparaging comments about homosexuality in their presence.

My sister's gay and my dad is so against that, and I remember once he made a joke in the car which is really bad but um... she was talking—she went to an all women's college and a lot of people there are lesbians—and um... she was talking about some of her friends and saying how, like, 'so-and-so hooked up with blah blah blah and they did this,' and my dad's like, 'oh, are your friends into bestiality too?' And like... my sister flipped, like... he's just very, that's how he views it, it's on the same level kind of. And he doesn't like to talk about it with my sister because he just has... he's just very, like, old fashioned. You know? (Charlotte 10/28/2009)

In this way, Charlotte's father, like my other informants' parents, not only behaves in traditionally gendered ways, but he also negatively portrays alternative genders and sexualities as a means of discouraging his children's participation in them.

All of these quotations help to illustrate that a number of my informants' experiences with gender prior to attending Oberlin College fit into what I'm calling the traditional conception of gender. Values characteristic of socially conservative towns and families from whence my informants originated prescribe gender roles for men and women based on inherent bodily characteristics and biological categories, and that there are only two genders—male and female, men and women. This conception of gender supports particular definitions of masculinity and femininity as well as behaviors and characteristics considered proper for each gender.

Environments Reflecting the Oberlin Conception of Gender

In contrast to the informants who come from environments and families that support the traditional conception of gender, others' experiences with gender have been aligned with the Oberlin conception of gender. This is not to say that these informants

have not been exposed to or impacted by the traditional conception of gender—all of my informants grew up in American society and were exposed to media and other broader influences that reinforce traditional notions of gender—but that they were also exposed to non-traditional or Oberlin-like notions of gender as fluid, social and culturally constructed, and one's own choice. These informants come to Oberlin already familiar with some of the ideas about gender that permeate the campus. Many of these informants have been exposed to homosexuality and transgender issues since childhood, and this diversity is more or less accepted in their home communities. Fewer distinctions are made between 'male' and 'female' appropriate activities and traits because biology is not seen as determining the characteristics or behavior of each (all) gender/s. Most significantly, these informants have also been exposed to alternative familial configurations, with many informants' mothers working outside the home and fathers performing duties traditionally assigned to wives.

These informants experienced a wider range of diversity in terms of gender and sexuality than the informants from more traditional backgrounds. Homosexuality is far less taboo in their communities—some informants' are neighbors with openly gay couples and families, and some, like Sophia, have gay siblings who are accepted by their families. This familiarity and comfort with homosexuality is in stark contrast to the experiences of some of the informants from traditional backgrounds. As Sophia explained,

I guess stuff with my sister because she has a girlfriend, and like, my brother has a girlfriend and... one's homosexual, one's heterosexual, and that's just... I guess that kind of affected my choice of choosing Oberlin and... but it hasn't really changed, like, the way I view homosexuals or heterosexuals hasn't really changed since I came to Oberlin since it never seemed like something you should view differently, I guess? Because I

also grew up with a lot of friends who had two moms or two dads and that was just always kind of there, it wasn't something unusual for me (Sophia 11/19/2009).

Katie also knew gay people before coming to high school and she told me how her father had once shocked her by telling her that when one of his friends had come out as gay, he had been taken aback by it at first. Being so used to homosexuality in her hometown, Katie found this preposterous.

I went to a super liberal high school... um... [...] there were a couple of my classmates who were openly gay by high school. And I was talking to my dad, and he was like, 'you know, that's so wonderful that these kids at this school can be openly gay!' and all this stuff, and I was like, 'well yeah! Obviously! That's crazy talk!' like, 'why couldn't they be? [...] Of course there are gay people in high school! That's a crazy thing to say!' So I guess I did know about transgender and things like that because of my location and situation (Katie 11/03/2009).

Gender roles were also far less rigidly enforced for these informants. To various extents, men and women were allowed to explore interests that are stereotypically associated with the opposite gender, such as girls playing sports and guys playing with dolls. These informants' parents were more open about letting their children wear clothing and play with toys associated with the opposite gender. When I asked Sophia if she felt like her parents had directed her into gendered activities or roles, she said,

I don't think so, I mean, I've taken dance classes, I've played sports since I was in third grade, definitely had a tomboy phase and my mom didn't really mind—I looked at boys' shorts in Kohls or like Gap or something and that didn't bother her. They've always been big on being active and outdoors and healthy but never tried to steer us in one direction or the other (Sophia 11/19/2009).

Katie was presented with both boy-oriented and girl-oriented toys and when she was not particularly attracted to her girl-oriented toys, her family happily accommodated her 'boy-like' interests.

Well, I have two brothers... I'm sandwiched between an older and a younger brother so... for a very long time I was another boy in the family [...] and so for awhile there was this very strong dichotomy of things that I would do, because I was supplied with both Barbie dolls—I had a Barbie doll and I didn't really know what to do with her, so my grandmother made me a, like, she sewed a tiny Orioles sweat suit for my Barbie doll. Because I was like, 'I don't know what to do with this Barbie doll, you can't...throw... it... I don't know... what to really do?' And um... because of my brothers we played soccer and baseball and football and batman and power rangers and land before time dinosaurs and all those, like, little boy activities and um... and my father took us to baseball games [...] I definitely participated in lots of little boy activities with my brothers. And some of my girlfriends had like all the American Girl dolls and—I had Molly. But I got her and again I was like... 'I don't... what... change her clothes? What do I do with this?' But, so, I had my little Barbie in her Orioles uniform, and then they started making those Barbies whose limbs bend and they had like soccer player Barbie and gymnast Barbie, so I had those two in addition to my Orioles Barbie. Because they could move their limbs and play soccer, and I was obsessed with soccer (Katie 11/03/2009).

Lee was also given relatively free-reign in terms of gendered behavior and interests. He was outfitted in both 'boy's' and 'girl's' clothing as a child, and he told me that he, like Katie, also preferred to play with toys meant for both sexes. Though he did not acquire all of the girl-oriented toys he had wanted, he reminisced fondly about them in our interview.

Um... my parents were super chill and not like, 'give him trucks 'cause he's a boy' or anything like that. Um, when I was little my favorite pair of shoes was a pair of Mary Janes that my mom got for me at Goodwill because I really liked them! And ah... and my mom was always just like, 'this is what he wants to wear, it doesn't matter, it's pieces of cloth. There's no actual... there's no significance aside from what we give it, and if he likes 'em he likes 'em.' With my fairly limited understanding of issues of sex and gender in US society, when I was little I actually thought that... based on what I knew so far, it seemed to me unfair that girls got to wear skirts or pants but boys only got to wear pants. Um... and obviously there are parts missing from that perspective, but my mom was like, 'yeah, you can wear a skirt if you want to!' My grandparents, about the Mary Janes, were like, 'he shouldn't be wearing these, he's a boy!' and my mom was like, 'fuck you.' Uh... and like, I liked playing with dolls. What I really wanted was drum major skipper, one of Barbie's friends... I never

had her. Her hands spun and she had, like, a baton. The only Barbie I ever got was a hand-me-down from a friend of mine. All she had was a shiny jacket, those were her only clothes, and my dog chewed off her legs! (Lee 11/13/2009)

It is Lee's mother who has most actively sought to provide Lee with an environment with the least amount of gender-based pressure as possible.

By and large, it's my mom primarily that I think of as being so not, basically, oppressive regarding gender-slash-sex and their intersections. But my step dad and my dad, neither, like, I don't have as strong a like, 'yeah, they were super good about it too,' um, but neither of them ever did anything contrary to that either. It wasn't like they were like, 'oh no, you should act more traditionally manly' (Lee 11/13/2009).

To varying extents, the parents of these informants feel that the material things and activities associated with maleness and femaleness are not inherent, but ascribed to each gender by society. Being free to choose clothing, toys, and interests associated with the opposite gender is certainly fitting with the Oberlin conception of gender.

The structures of these informants' families also do not look the same as for the informants from traditional households. As opposed to following the husband-as-breadwinner, wife-as-homemaker model, the women in these families commonly work outside the home and both parents share chores and duties within the home. Sophia described her parents' roles within the home as equitable.

One thing I definitely noticed in high school just comparing my family time with my friends is that my parents didn't really split up household chores. They just shared everything, like they both cook, they both do laundry, like... they both take care of the cat. I guess my dad does computer stuff but that's because my mom has no patience for it. So that, and talking to my friends I was definitely very different. Their moms or their dads cooked and the moms usually did the cleaning and stuff (Sophia 11/19/2009).

In many of these families, female members of the household are strong, powerful figures in the eyes of my informants. Claire explained that seeing women in her family invest themselves in their careers strongly influences her own dreams and desires.

In the history of my family the women have always been powerful so I think that was very empowering to me and I think that's a lot of the reason why, honestly, I got into sports, like, I was a tomboy most of my life and I think that has a lot to do with the idea of women can be empowered, and educationally I... well, I used to be really stupid, but now I figured out the value of education, and I think that has a lot to do with seeing my mom and grandma succeed (Claire 12/02/2009).

Claire's parents also have an untraditional way of splitting up chores around the house and work outside the home, which she sees as having impacted her ideas about gender roles as well.

In my family my mom makes, like, a lot more than my dad and my dad cooks, cleans, and sews, my mom does the bills, it's like totally reversed so I dunno... that's always been something that's been with me (Claire 12/02/2009).

Lee's parental figures also do not act out the traditional gender roles ascribed by society.

He explained that his parents

don't make it a big part of their lives or themselves to fight or transgress traditional gender roles or anything like that, but they live, in my view, in nonsexist, non-gender discriminating ways, like, it's not like my mom does all the dishes and my step dad, you know, goes out and works, like, she's a professor, he's a technical writer, he does all the cooking because he cooks better, and like, he works from our apartment and she goes and teaches, she has a higher salary than he does. And like I said, they don't intentionally try to transgress gender roles, my mom wears skirts and he wears... not... skirts... but uh... my dad was, like, he presents himself as male but he cooks, cleans, things that are traditionally or have been traditionally considered feminine or at least female (Lee 11/13/2009).

Seeing their parents dividing chores evenly and having both parents pursue their careers provided these informants with very different concepts of gender roles from those informants who grew up in traditional environments and households. These informants

do not watch their mothers defer to their fathers for decision-making, or see their fathers bringing home the money and their mothers cleaning the house.

These informants' parents also tend to support liberal politics and causes related to issues of gender. Marisa's mother is an example of this. She is a feminist and throughout Marisa's childhood has endeavored to involve her in women's rights protests and rallies. Marisa talked about one event in particular that she sees as indicative of her mother's general feelings about gender equality.

Okay, so my mom and I went to the march for women's rights which is the pro-choice march and... I missed two tests in school that day and she got me up and was like, 'I don't care, this isn't optional,' because this was when the Bush administration was like... there was this big push to make abortion illegal, and there was that giant march [...] So my mom was like, 'this isn't optional, get your ass out of school, we're going right now.' And she brought my friend and her mom and it was this big deal and like... she's always doing things like that. She saw that as the single most important thing that we could possibly do that year, and I was in high school and I didn't see myself getting pregnant, like, I didn't care that much, so I was like, 'whatever, I have to do this quiz in physics' and she was like, 'I don't give a shit, like, this is so much more important!' And that's her... way of life (Marisa 10/12/2009).

Unlike informants from households and towns where traditional gender roles were upheld and men and women were expected to play particular parts in their families and communities, Marisa and other informants from backgrounds that challenged those stereotypical roles have been exposed to many deviations from such traditional norms.

These quotations all show that some of my informants' experiences with gender prior to attending Oberlin College fit with what I'm calling the Oberlin conception of gender. These informants' environments and families seem to regard gender as a socially and culturally constructed concept, and therefore gender roles are less strictly enforced. As children, informants were able to choose clothing, toys, and activities that are

generally considered only for men or women by more traditionally minded towns and families. Homosexuality and issues of gender equality are welcomed and championed in the experiences of these informants, rather than threatened as in the experiences of my other informants.

Conclusion

In this section I illustrated that the prior experiences my informants have had with gender and gender related issues can be roughly divided as fitting into each of the two conceptions of gender I present in this thesis—the traditional conception of gender (as fixed to the body, based in biology, and rooted in sexual dimorphism) and the Oberlin conception of gender (as fluid, socially and culturally constructed, and one's own choice). Of course, this separation is not absolute, and there is likely much variation in each informant's experiences of gender for their many years prior to attending Oberlin. However, in general their experiences can be used to support either one or the other of these conceptions, a fact that will be explored in greater detail in section four.

Section III: Integration

“I don’t know that I thought about it so much before” (Katie 11/03/2009).

In the last section I showed that my informants come from backgrounds that tend to reflect either the traditional conception of gender or the Oberlin conception of gender. This section shows that my informants do not subscribe to an Oberlin conception of gender or a traditional one alone, but instead tend to see gender and their own gender identities through both conceptions to varying extents. Because of this, when my informants are exposed to the Oberlin conception of gender, their reactions range from enthusiastic assimilation to wary uncertainty. All of my informants’ previous notions of gender are informed by the traditional conception of gender that permeates American culture, with some informants’ more strongly influenced by it than others (as shown in section two). As they spend more time on campus, my informants’ are confronted with the Oberlin conception of gender, and their previous notions of gender (traditional or non-traditional) begin to integrate with the Oberlin conception. Using interview data, I show that my informants’ experiences integrating their initial ideas about gender with the Oberlin conception of gender range from jarring collisions to graceful adaptations and everything in between. I also show that in discussing their ideas about gender my informants sometimes contradict themselves, which highlights the tension they feel and the difficulties they encounter in combining the two conceptions of gender. I will also use my informants’ reactions to all-gender bathrooms and Drag Ball as specific examples of how some informants embrace the Oberlin conception of gender with open arms, while others struggle with parts of it. These reactions are usually not black and white and

someone who loves the all-gender bathrooms might feel extremely uncomfortable at Drag Ball and vice versa. These nuances show that each informant's experience integrating his or her prior notions of gender with the Oberlin conception of gender can vary dramatically from the next informant's experience.

Graceful Adaptations

For some of my informants, the Oberlin conception of gender is easily embraced. These informants have come to accept or even reproduce parts of the Oberlin conception of gender, and largely speak positively of the way gender functions on campus. This is not to say that each of these informants felt this way from the very beginning, but in time all of these informants have come to feel comfortable with Oberlin's conception of gender and its manifestations on campus. As Ashley explained,

the high school I went to was pretty similar to Oberlin, actually... there wasn't much of a difference. But I think the biggest difference was in terms of how people talk about gender and um... so I remember during orientation the whole, 'I use female pronouns, I use male pronouns,' and I was surprised by that and everyone thought it was kind of funny, and I guess [...] I had never thought about gender neutral bathrooms and why they might exist, like, I just... didn't... it just never crossed my mind in high school, I guess. So maybe... the... the biggest thing that Oberlin has done in terms of gender is just, like, to normalize everything for me [...] Like, I think I could be more easily shocked in high school than I could be now and I guess that's a good thing. The thing is, I think at Oberlin everyone grows accustomed to different identities that aren't necessarily mainstream (Ashley 11/15/2009).

For Ashley, becoming accustomed to the ways that gender functions on campus took some time, but in the end she feels comfortable with it. Another informant, Steven, talked about how he was shocked at first when he came to Oberlin and saw students gender-bending in their dress and behavior, but that it wore off as time passed, and he now embraces it.

A lot of people on campus do it to be shocking. You know? To kind of... um... snub their noses at social norms and um... and so they want to get a kind of shocked reaction from the way they dress or the way they act. I dunno, I guess a lot of people do feel shocked by it when they first see it. But I've... like, that's why I said I was shocked when I got here and through more and more exposure I've just kind of seen, well... you know... guys can wear makeup! And girls can not shave their legs! It's... those things happen! It's not the end of the world! (Steven 10/26/2009)

Steven has come to think about gendered behavior very differently since attending Oberlin. He is beginning to see gender as more fluid and as a choice, which are both aspects of the Oberlin conception of gender.

There's a lot of people that dress very flamboyantly on campus, or a lot of transgender people, or, like, gender-bending people, and like, before I came here I hadn't had much experience with those people who just kind of like... through their physical appearance put on question what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman. And um... and in coming here and in experiencing all those things you realize that... who says that, you know, all girls have to do this, and who says, you know, who says that only girls can wear makeup? Who says that's just a girl thing? It's stereotypically a girl thing... you know? Or shaving your legs, why do girls have to shave their legs? And being really big and muscular, why is that a guy thing? That's just what our culture has assigned and over the years reinforced as sex typed behaviors, and a lot of people on campus have really opened my eyes to... it doesn't have to be that way, you know? Like, you can be whoever you wanna be! (Steven 10/26/2009)

Not only have Steven's thoughts about gender shifted since coming to Oberlin, but he has also begun to monitor his behavior. As mentioned in section one, academics heavily influence students' ideas of gender and Steven is no different.

In one of my anthropology classes I read the book, *Dude, You're a Fag*, and um, in *Dude, You're a Fag* they talked about masculinity in American high schools, and they took one in particular that the author studied, and she referenced one kind of... social interaction that I took for granted before I read this book. You know, a high school boy flirts with a high school girl by being aggressive and kind of, like, you know, it's playful but it's... when you look at it from an anthropological point of view it's very dominant-submissive play. But that's just seen as flirting but... from a gender context it seems a little bit more gender stereotyped [...] even, like, holding a girl upside down or tickling, those kinds of things that are

like... the boy asserts his physical superiority over women, and if you look at it from that point of view it's like, 'big strong man, like, I'm taking whatever... I'm showing my dominance over this woman' (Steven 10/26/2009).

Recognizing the ways that he acts out traditional masculinity has concretely affected Steven's interactions with women. Not only has Steven internalized some of the notions of gender floating around on Oberlin's campus, he has also altered his behavior to reflect the change in his conceptions. Oberlin has made him more aware of gender stereotypes and roles, and he is beginning to question and challenge them.

Lee is the strongest example of an informant who has embraced the Oberlin conception of gender wholeheartedly and he spoke in great detail about his views on gender. Not only does he conceive of gender as the Oberlin conception of gender dictates, his behavior also matches his commitment to its ideas. When I asked him how he conceives of the term gender, the first thing he said was,

I just want to start by saying that I don't think there are any qualities or traits that are actually inherent to any sex, gender, any of it, but for, like, what is traditionally associated with those things... I guess you have concepts in US society and a lot of western society of masculine and feminine (Lee 11/13/2009).

He went on to say,

I think everybody has both, which is why I see the two as just societal constructions and essentially false. Um... at least not that the concept of being male or female is false, but that the concept of those specifying or requiring or mandating specific forms of action (Lee 11/13/2009).

In these statements he asserts, in accordance with the Oberlin conception of gender, that gender is fluid and socially/culturally constructed. He resents the notion that men and women are constrained by their gender and therefore supposed to do certain things and not other things. He is aware of the traditional conception of gender and he disagrees with

it strongly—“if I get all giggly and giddy at, like, a romance movie—‘oh, right, most people would traditionally associate this with women or girls’ dot dot dot ‘that’s bullshit!’” (Lee 11/13/2009). Fitting with the Oberlin conception of gender, Lee also believes that everyone has a right to decide with which gender he or she (or ze) feels comfortable identifying, regardless of biological characteristics.

Basically I think that this is what people feel about themselves and who they are... I’m gonna trust that they know who they are a lot better than I can. Um... and so if somebody is male-bodied but they say, ‘I am female,’ then in my mind they are female. Period (Lee 11/13/2009).

After having been exposed to the various ways that Oberlin’s student body challenges traditional notions of gender, Lee has now adopted a number of practices that do so.

When I first got here and there would be meetings of student organizations and it would be like, ‘alright, check-ins: name, major, year, pronoun, and check-in question’ I was like... pronouns? What’s this? And at first I was always worried I was gonna do it wrong and say the wrong thing. I didn’t really know what I was doing. But ‘he, him, his’ is now normal and, like, at meetings where that hasn’t been included I’ve put it in anyway (Lee 11/13/2009).

As all of the above statements show, Lee is the informant who best exemplifies a graceful adaptation from his previous ideas about and experiences with gender to the Oberlin conception of gender. He shows little resistance to the new ideas he encountered here, and has happily integrated the Oberlin conception of gender into his own.

Ambivalent Blending

Many of my informants did not completely embrace or reject the Oberlin conception of gender but instead showed evidence of thinking about gender in a way that mixes both the Oberlin conception of gender and the traditional conception of gender. These informants say things that support notions of gender as fluid, socially and culturally constructed, and one’s own choice as well as notions of gender as fixed to the

body, biological, and rooted in sexual dimorphism. Many times these informants are able to describe gender in terms of Oberlin's conception, but they, as the following quotations show, also have reservations about them and do not necessarily completely agree with them. Nicole explained that she had a difficult time accepting Oberlin's stances on gender when she first came to campus.

It was a little bit of a struggle... the first time I typed out 'female-bodied person' on my computer I was like, 'this is ridiculous,' and, 'what percentage of the world is not falling into categories?' and that was pretty hard for me. But I like the idea of the openness to it so much that I think using the terminology and falling into this set of ways to think about sexuality is pretty amazing (Nicole 10/28/2009).

I asked her whether she feels like her notions of gender are integrated with the notions of gender she has encountered in class and on campus in general, and she explained,

um... I don't think I can separate my pc half from my the-way-I-thought-when-I-was-sixteen half anymore. But... I also know that I haven't always been totally pc about all of this stuff, and I don't agree entirely in being overly pc about this stuff... so... maybe I'm an open-to-sexuality realist? (Nicole 10/28/2009)

When I asked Alex to talk about his definition of gender he expressed a similar ambivalence about the Oberlin conception of gender.

I know that I'm supposed to think of gender as a social construct and I get that, and I get why, but you know... I... before coming to Oberlin, gender and sex were pretty much always interchangeable words (Alex 11/15/2009).

He is therefore able to explain what the Oberlin conception of gender is, but he is not entirely comfortable with it. In opposition to the Oberlin conception of gender, he also said, "I don't think that anyone could reasonably argue that gender is not informed by biology. Um... but I don't think that it's entirely defined by biology" (Alex 11/15/2009).

In this way, Alex uses elements from both the Oberlin conception of gender and the traditional conception of gender to make sense out of his own experiences with gender. He is certainly not the only of my informants whose ways of thinking and talking about gender seem to blend the two conceptions of gender. Marisa talked about how she is aware of the Oberlin conception of gender, and yet strongly associates gender with bodily characteristics.

When someone says ‘gender,’ especially here I guess, I think of, you know, whatever each individual chooses to associate with and that would be, like, maybe one of the biological sexes, and [...] maybe some mixture in-between thing. But if you just say ‘gender’ and like a snap, like, word association thing? I’m gonna say boobs [...] ‘cause that’s what my gender is, female, and so, like, the first thing I think of... the first thing I think of is boobs! I guess that’s because I think, ‘I’m a girl’ and when I think of girl I think of boobs (Marisa 10/12/2009).

Marisa’s statements about gender seem to move between an understanding of gender that dominantly utilizes the Oberlin conception of gender and one that dominantly utilizes the traditional conception of gender. At times she strove to make a distinct separation between a person’s bodily or biological characteristics and that person’s gender.

I don’t, like, envision the world in a gender binary system, so it’s not shocking to me when people are transgender, and it’s not shocking to me when they can’t decide and like... it’s not like it jars with anything. I do think that biologically there’s X chromosomes and there’s Y chromosomes and there’s XY and there’s... and I get that, but I also know... even on a deeper level than intellectual I know that’s completely separate from what gender you identify with. And so transgender doesn’t seem surprising at all to me. It’s just like, ‘oh yeah, that too.’ It doesn’t seem like a weird thing and it doesn’t make me uncomfortable at all. But it also isn’t fascinating to me. It’s just another thing that people are (Marisa 10/12/2009).

At others, she invoked the body. She spent some time during our interview discussing how she is very distrustful of men and sometimes harbors negative feelings toward them.

When I asked her to clarify whether she feels this way about male-bodied or male-identified people (or both) she said,

people that identify as male... and act male... whatever that means... which, there are tons of ways to do that, but they all fit into that, whatever, male category for me, which I guess is tied to the body... and also with men I think it's more tied to the body because they're so, like, hormonal and horny all the time (Marisa 10/12/2009).

Similarly, she explained,

people say, like, 'girl,' and I think boobs and ass, and people say 'oh, masculine,' and I think 'square jaw, athletic.' But I understand that that's not right... I guess... or I dunno if it's wrong but I feel like it's wrong (Marisa 10/12/2009).

These statements show that Marisa has conflicting notions of gender. She seems not to know what it is about 'men' that makes her uneasy and whether she sees it (whatever it is) as being based in biology, or society and culture. She sees gender as fluid and a choice and yet also talks about bodies and biology frequently as a way of identifying gender.

Like Marisa, Katie also talked about how she cannot help but see gender as tied to bodies and biology but that she also believes that children are socialized into gender roles from a very young age.

I mean, for me it's still very much based in those biological parts... um... just from where I am as someone who is biologically female and gender-ly female. Um... but it's very much based on that. But then it becomes... what we're taught as young people growing up, playing with toys that are considered for girls or for boys or... that sort of basic... you know, when you're little (Katie 11/03/2009).

Jack is another informant whose ideas about gender blend those of the Oberlin conception of gender and the traditional conception of gender. He sees the body and gender as being inherently tangled and interconnected.

It's hard for me to separate the two... I think they're bound up together insofar as the way you present yourself physically... I mean, it's not just a

question of, like, the biological composition of your body, but you present yourself physically with body language and gestures in ways that complement or perhaps are in tension with how you present yourself in speech, or experience yourself subjectively as existing within a certain gender. So I mean, I see it as certainly a mixture of both because I think someone you would describe as very masculine has perhaps a tendency to present his or her body in a certain fashion, perhaps with a certain swagger, that sort of thing where you carry your shoulders... uh... so those are ways in which I think your subjective or cultural determination of gender fits into the kind of bodily performance of one's gender (Jack 12/05/2009).

While this way of conceiving of gender's relationship to the body and biology is different from that of many of my other informants, Jack's ideas about gender still prevent him from completely accepting a conception of gender that attempts to separate the body from what gender is and how it is understood.

Jarring Collisions

In contrast with those of my informants who have adapted their conceptions of gender to include the notions of gender prevalent on Oberlin's campus, a few of my informants resist the Oberlin conception of gender, or at least have great difficulty assimilating it into their outlooks on gender. Charlotte illustrated how deeply connected her notions of gender are to the traditional conception when I asked her what first comes to mind for her when I say the word gender; "I just think of, like, an individual... a girl or a guy... I don't think of a sex, really" (Charlotte 10/28/2009). She was not aware that she was supporting an idea of gender as signifying only male or female. Clearly, biology is an important part of her concept of gender whether she is aware of it or not.

Similarly, Kyle argued that gender is reducible to biology and that males and females are inherently different—"there's no denying that chemically men and women are different... just, like, different hormones do different things for one's personality..."

(Kyle 11/15/2009). Connected to this is the discomfort many of my informants feel in regards to transgender or transsexual individuals, whose gender identities arguably best illustrate the Oberlin conception of gender. Because these informants see gender as being inherently tied to biology and dictating various personality traits and behavioral characteristics, the idea of a person wishing to change his or her body to match a gender that he or she feels internally is confusing and even disturbing to them. Alex explained that he finds the whole notion of transgender as odd.

I find the idea of being transgender kinda weird, I still don't get it, like, I get what it entails, I get why... but... I don't under—I just don't understand the mindset that leads to it. Transsexual I find *very* weird because that's sort of carrying transgender to the extreme of even altering your physical body, deciding not just that you want to be treated and act like a male, but you actually want to have a penis even though you weren't born with one. That really weirds me out (Alex 11/15/2009).

David also talked about how he finds the idea of transgender strange and difficult to understand.

In terms of like an academic notion of it, yeah, I understand the academics and some of the theory behind it, I dunno if you can call it theory—the origins, you know, why people feel that way, the explanation for it. But no, I can't... I don't know what it feels like to walk around—I truly don't know what it feels like to walk around in my own skin and be, you know, uncomfortable in that way. I mean, we can all relate to being slightly uncomfortable with the fact that you're you in a certain situation but, you know, this is not... it's never been because I'm a man. It's never been because I'm a man, or because I'm a straight man. So, in that realm, especially at Oberlin, I really can't... I can't pretend to say that I truly and fully, you know, can experience the same thing. That's impossible. I can understand to an extent and be mindful about it, but... and try to empathize with people, but no I can't really comprehend (David 11/04/2009).

As our conversation continued, David went on to speak with more detail about how transgender makes him very uncomfortable.

It's just... it's just outside of what... it's almost like this thing that is outside of what exists. It hyper-exists. It's weird. It's odd. It's... you're *one* or the *other*. That is the *way* you are *born*. That is how we reproduce, that is... you know, it's the way that humans are. So... it definitely... it's definitely weird at first to talk about it (David 11/04/2009).

For David, the concept of transgender is so far beyond what he knows and what he is used to in regards to gender that he has greatly struggled with facing it on Oberlin's campus. I believe that this is partly because it threatens his understanding of gender as being very much based in biology and having produced only two, distinctly formed, genders—male and female.

I do think there are some biological, you know... bases to the way we... that we act and the way that we interact with the opposite sex, I mean, that's pretty obvious. It's pretty hard to deny that. I don't think, I do not think that is... as far as you want to take the whole 'gender doesn't exist,' I think when you really break it down, I mean, obviously physically there are differences and I think that biologically there are differences in the way we work. I mean, I have an X and a Y chromosome, look at the genetic blueprints that make us up, and a female has two Xs. I mean, it's right in the blueprints. I don't think that's any justification for inequality or anything like that, but you know... and I'm not propagating a separate but equal type of thing, but I really don't know if you can really say we are *exactly* the same. You know? That every human is exactly the same. There are quite a few differences between the two genders... and I don't think... I really don't think that that is such a revolutionary idea! I think it's a pretty mainstream idea that people believe! I think only at Oberlin is that idea really and truly challenged, and I don't know how successfully people can take that... I don't... there might just be at the end of the day, differences between the two. You know? (David 11/04/2009)

However, the ways that David talked about gender during our interview were not fully confined within the boundaries of the traditional conception of gender—the conception with which he was raised—and he often contradicts himself. I see these contradictions as highlighting the severe tension that he has experienced while his prior notions of gender have been tested and challenged by the Oberlin conception of gender. So, while he asserts that men and women are biologically inherently different and that this difference is the

root of gender, he also says things like, “gender is just a human classification, you know, sexual dimorphism is a biological extension of human classification... gender is a social thing” (David 11/04/2009) and,

inherently I think gender is blown up as this thing that should make us different that doesn't necessarily make us different. It has a lot to do with conditioning and where we stand in society, and our roles, what's acceptable, what isn't acceptable, but I think if you took that away you would see that there's a much wider spectrum and it doesn't necessarily play out into male female so... yeah (David 11/04/2009).

This tendency to verbalize support of both the traditional conception of gender and the Oberlin conception of gender shows just how jarring a collision David has experienced when his prior notions of and experiences with gender butted up against the ways that Oberlin College and the Oberlin student body discuss and depict gender. As the following statement from Charlotte's interview shows, some of my informants find Oberlin's portrayal of gender to be frustrating, and they “feel like people here try so hard to be okay with everything that it just pushes it over the top a little bit” (Charlotte 10/28/2009). For these students, integrating the Oberlin conception of gender into their prior conception of gender is no easy task, and sometimes never fully happens.

All-Gender (or Gender Neutral) Bathrooms

One way that Oberlin College endeavors to make transgender and genderqueer students and staff members feel comfortable on campus is the existence of all-gender or gender neutral bathrooms. These bathrooms can be used by anyone, no matter what gender the person identifies with, and are essentially like unisex bathrooms except multi-stall and not meant only for biological males and biological females. All-gender bathrooms are present throughout the campus with some proportion of bathrooms in all dorms being all-gender, as well as some bathrooms in communal spaces like Wilder, the

student union. Beginning sometime around Fall 2002, each year residents of every dorm have voted on how many all-gender and male/female bathrooms will exist in their dorm, with the stipulation that at least one all-gender, one male, and one female bathroom be present in each dorm (Tyson, email to author, March 21, 2010). As of yet, there is no published policy on all-gender bathrooms, but during Spring 2010 a number of students met with residential education staff to begin a discussion about documenting and publishing the existing informal policy (Tyson, email to author, March 21, 2010). All-gender bathrooms are unusual in comparison to sexed bathrooms because they not only acknowledge the existence of transgender and genderqueer individuals and provide a safe space for them to use the restroom, but also, by making it standard for men and women and all other genders to use the same restroom, challenge the notion that men and women are so inherently different that they require separate spaces to use the bathroom. Encouraging men and women who are used to having what are generally considered to be very personal spaces to utilize a single, integrated space can be shocking or uncomfortable at first for some informants. My informants' reactions to these bathrooms upon coming to Oberlin—as well as after time has passed—serve as examples of how some of my informants embrace the Oberlin conception of gender with open arms, while others struggle with it.

When I mentioned the presence of all-gender bathrooms on campus, some of my informants smiled from ear to ear and gushed about how much they appreciated them and how comfortable they felt with them. Marisa was certainly this way, and she also talked about how it bothers her that she is not supposed to mention them when she leads campus tours for the admissions office.

I love the all-gender bathrooms! [...] I dunno, it just seems normal to me! Maybe it's because I have brothers and sisters and we just share bathrooms and that's just whatever I'm used to, and like... I don't see the big deal at all. I go in men's bathrooms in public places too, so... maybe I don't count! [...] And like, when I'm giving tours and I have to, like, not mention the all-gender bathrooms [...] I get pissed off when we walk past them [...] because it freaks out parents. I used to be like, 'that's stupid, no one's gonna get freaked out!' and then on a couple tours I did trial runs and mentioned them and you get these adults who get, like, stony faced for the rest of the tour because you said 'transgender' or you said 'gender neutral bathroom' [...] and that's bad because you're ruining it for their kids because their kids might not be like that and they still wanna come here (Marisa 10/12/2009).

In this quotation Marisa shows not only that she is very supportive of all-gender bathrooms, but also that even though she and other of my informants react positively to them, many other people (both in the college community and outside of it) do not feel the same way and are made uncomfortable by them and what they represent. Nevertheless, many of my informants felt comfortable with all-gender bathrooms from the beginning and think they are a positive addition to the campus. Claire said, "I think all-gender bathrooms are fine [...] I dunno, I wasn't shocked by them, I was just like, 'oh, that's kinda cool' but I wasn't, like, shocked by them or nervous about them" (Claire 12/02/2009). Stephanie explained that she thinks it makes male students more mature about women's bodily functions.

All-gender bathrooms haven't bothered me. I feel like it makes boys more mature about girls using the bathroom and that I can appreciate [...] because, like, I don't know if you experienced this but there were always jokes in high school about how 'girls don't poop,' like, 'girls don't pee' but like that's... not... true! And also about girls having periods... and I think that's something that used to freak guys out a lot and I don't know if it still does but I think it does less now. It's probably just getting older and more mature also (Stephanie 11/18/2009).

Other informants talked about how the notion of using the bathroom near a person of another sex or gender was uncomfortable. Some of these informants, like Alex, told me that that it was a bit unnerving at first but that they eventually became used to the idea.

All-gender... I mean... that was... it was kind of weird and unsettling for two days... and then I remembered reading as a very small child, *Everybody Poops* and I was like, 'okay! I'm over it!' (Alex 11/15/2009)

Lee had a similar reaction.

All-gender bathrooms are not that big a deal, I was just like, this is a new thing to get used to, not a shocking, it's bad, or anything like that. I was like, 'oh my gosh, girls are gonna hear me go to the bathroom!' but it wasn't anything terrible, like, it's not that big a deal (Lee 11/13/2009).

Sophia, who had never shared a bathroom with anyone prior to attending Oberlin, talked about how at first it was strange for her, but that she has grown accustomed to them over time, and has even found it odd that other schools *do not* have all-gender bathrooms.

The thing that shocked me when I first got to campus, I wasn't sure how I'd deal with the all-gender bathrooms, but it just, it makes sense. I went to visit my friend at Cornell and there's single sex bathrooms only, and I was like, 'well... what about people who don't identify as [one or the other]...?' and she was like, 'I dunno...' and it just... it makes so much more sense that if you're gonna be at a college and in a world where you accept these people, you have to accept them in every way, not just say you do and then not act on that. [... In the beginning] it was just weird 'cause I have my own bathroom at my house so sharing a bathroom with people at all is always a little strange. But eventually I was just like, 'it's a bathroom. I'm living with these people, why is everyone making a big deal out of it? It doesn't really matter' (Sophia 11/19/2009).

Katie, another informant who came to campus feeling uncomfortable with the all-gender bathrooms, has now come to embrace them wholeheartedly because they are important to the transgender and genderqueer communities, and cisgender people too.

I was definitely freaked out by the gender neutral bathrooms at first. I was like, 'what the hell? Boys in the bathroom?' you know? Um... 'I don't wanna share a bathroom with anyone, especially not the boys,' um [...] gender neutral bathrooms are important. I think gender neutral bathrooms

are great, um, it's also incredibly convenient and I just don't understand how the world survives without them in general life now 'cause I'm like, 'I need a bathroom right now, not when I get down the hall!' so I think that's wonderful (Katie 11/03/2009).

Ashley told me that the all-gender bathrooms were not a shocking part of campus life for her.

I don't think I really thought too much about them... I think I just kind of, like, I mean, it didn't even take as much energy accepting that that was something that just went on here and that that's just like it was, so I didn't have a problem with any of it (Ashley 11/15/2009).

However, she also acknowledged that they make some students on campus uncomfortable, and she even mentioned that when Ed Helms (the famous actor and Oberlin graduate) came to campus as a convocation speaker, he spent a lot of time joking about what he sees as the awkward nature of our all-gender bathrooms—he described how he had envisioned beautiful naked women showering next to him but that it turned out to be far less arousing than he had hoped.

Even Ed Helms when he came to speak talked about the all-gender bathrooms and like, he thought it was gonna be hot, and 'then I realized there's nothing more disturbing than hearing the girl you like take a shit!' And just like... that kind of thing makes people uncomfortable sometimes (Ashley 11/15/2009).

Some of my informants expressed a lot of discomfort with the all-gender bathrooms, particularly stemming from a sense of embarrassment or modesty they feel around the gender or sex of persons to whom they are attracted. They fear that being seen in the bathroom environment by men or women they are interested in will render them undesirable as a romantic partner.

The all-gender bathroom's weird. Um... I was, like, really open to it when I got here. I was like, 'oh, well, you know, it's Oberlin, it's gonna have to happen' and I was like, 'I guess there's not really any difference between male and female,' but it's kinda weird, like, pooping in front of girls. Like,

I'm not gonna lie, sometimes I'll just hold it if there's a girl in there! I dunno, it's just uh... like, the fact that I'm like trying to... I'm heterosexual so like, I want girls to think I'm not repulsive! (Steven 10/26/2009)

Charlotte is also very unhappy about using the all-gender bathrooms on campus and, in fact, she avoids them at all costs.

Especially with the gender bathrooms—'cause last year I really wanted to live on an all-girls floor, like, I requested to because I... just the thought for me of having, like, sharing bathrooms with a guy was just... disgusting for me? I don't... or not disgusting, just really awkward, like, I didn't wanna have a guy hear me poop! Or... I didn't wanna run into, like, naked with a guy—which happened to me yesterday morning! 'Cause now I live on a floor, an all neutral bathroom or whatever, and like at first I didn't use the bathroom and my roommate still doesn't shower in that bathroom, she goes upstairs to shower in the all girls bathroom. And I just like... that's a little too... like, I'm okay with it and that's awesome if you can do that, if you can share a bathroom with a guy—and you know what, I'm doing it, but I'm not comfortable with it (Charlotte 10/28/2009).

The all-gender bathrooms, like many of the manifestations of Oberlin's conception of gender that students encounter on a daily basis, can be challenging and unnerving for some, and perfectly comfortable for others.

Drag Ball

One of Oberlin College's most infamous events, Drag Ball, is when students come together to party and celebrate gender's varied forms and meanings. It is Oberlin's largest school-sponsored social gathering, and takes place each April. Students dress as the opposite gender (or as extreme manifestations of the gender with which they already identify) and flock to Wilder, the student union, for the wildest party of the year. Well-known drag queens and drag kings take to the stage to entertain the manic crowd, and a costume contest highlights the best drag outfits. It began in 1990 as the small final event of transgender awareness week and was held in a dorm on campus, Talcott (Kaplan

2004). Over the last twenty years it has grown into a huge, colorful, and outrageous gathering attended by hundreds of people. Although it is one of best-attended events of the school year, it is also arguably the most controversial. It is historically extremely expensive to run and, because of problems the administration identified as a lack of resources and support, was canceled for Spring 2010² in lieu of a number of smaller drag events and other workshops during Oberlin's transgender awareness week. Like the all-gender or gender neutral bathrooms, Drag Ball is a perfect example of how the Oberlin conception of gender manifests itself on campus, and my informants' reactions to it are quite varied. None of my informants expressed vicious disapproval of the event, and in fact, all informants seem to accept and enjoy it to varying extents, but certain aspects of Drag Ball (and other students' behavior surrounding Drag Ball) also makes some of my informants uncomfortable.

Those informants who enjoy Drag Ball were not shy about expressing it in our interviews—Marisa exclaimed, “I love Drag Ball!” as soon as I mentioned it (Marisa 10/12/2009). Nicole talked about how Drag Ball is a wonderful way for her to express herself and her sexuality and to continue to play with gender in ways she does already.

I think for me they've just been opportunities to expand and experience my ideas about sexuality [...] Drag Ball is just... I dunno, I've always been making guy friends dress up in my clothes! I like it! I think it's fun! So, Drag Ball is just another mass event where everybody's having the same fun that I've kind of always had (Nicole 10/28/2009).

To her, Drag Ball “is just a lot of men having an excuse to dress up as women and women dressing up as men and it being funny because we have those stereotypes” (Nicole 10/28/2009). These informants see Drag Ball as a unique way to express oneself

² All informant statements about Drag Ball in this thesis are in reference to prior Drag Ball celebrations.

and to have a good time. However, my informants mentioned that not all students believe that Drag Ball accomplishes what it means to because it is such a party atmosphere. Students disagree about the purpose of Drag Ball, and while some say is meant to show the fluidity of gender, allow all students to explore gender and sexuality differently, and to be exposed to a small slice of drag performance and culture, other students feel that Drag Ball should be a space for queer and transgender students only, and that cisgender students disrespect the event with their presence and lack the necessary understanding of, or identification with, drag culture and all that it represents. Nicole disagrees with this stance.

There are a lot of people I know who think Drag Ball is a farce and it's mocking gayness... and I think those people just... kind of need to relax a little bit about it, that nobody's forcing you to go to these events (Nicole 10/28/2009).

Ashley explained that at first she thought Drag Ball could never be a harmful or negative space, but that she has become more aware of some of these criticisms of the event.

Especially with Drag Ball, my initial reaction was, 'oh, cool, that sounds like a lot of fun!' but um... I hadn't thought about anything—other implications of Drag Ball that like... like, why there are all those forums and discussions before and after Drag Ball... um... about what's appropriate and what the space is created for, so that was kind of eye-opening I think. Because I would think of something like Drag Ball as being one hundred percent good, like, I would never think... I would never, um, have analyzed it enough to be like, 'oh, okay, there are some lines that shouldn't be crossed at Drag Ball' or whatever. Um... so I think that kind of analytical thought became more present at Oberlin (Ashley 11/15/2009).

Jack and Katie are both aware of the controversy surrounding Drag Ball and feel that it is not necessarily always the deeply gender-challenging event that it is meant to be or expected to be by some of the student body. Jack believes most students do not take it

seriously enough, and he thinks the school should host more parties so that Drag Ball could be treated with more respect and less like any other party

I do tend to think that Drag Ball is a more serious thing than most Oberlin students treat it as, and... I think there's some issues with Drag Ball... and again I have to add the caveat because I haven't had much experience with Drag Ball and I haven't seen the show so I don't know how this is done, nor do I know what a respectful 'drag show' would consist of, but... if the point is to demonstrate solidarity with people who are transgender, to show that, you know, to celebrate the fluidity of gender and crossing boundaries and something like that, I'd say it happens to an extent but for the majority of people who go, it does not happen, and it's a party. And... you know, you're there to get drunk and dressed up like whatever. And... this is tricky because, you know, we don't have—we have Safer Sex Night, um... and we have Drag Ball, and those are our parties. So you want probably the biggest party of the year, to go there and get trashed and, you know, have fun! And dance! Or whatever! But part of the issue is [...] if we're doing this to demonstrate solidarity or respect for transgender people, it should to an extent be a serious affair. We need to, like, acknowledge that, and I don't know if most people acknowledge that because it tends to be treated like a party. So... it's a little problematic... I dunno... it would maybe be better if we had another, like, outlet, another big party or dance or something [...] I think that would be very healthy for the Oberlin population because as it stands we have, you know, the party where you're supposed to dress in drag, and the party where you're supposed not to wear any clothing, and I would like a party where I can go and look like James Bond and not have to dress up like a woman or wear boxers! (Jack 12/05/2009)

Katie also sees it as just a gigantic party in a lot of ways.

I don't know that it's, like, the progressive party that it's meant to be... um... which I think in some ways is okay, like why can't the college host a big party? Um... everyone's gonna get drunk anyway, so have the college host it, go all out, make it a fun theme, everyone will go. [...] Drag Ball, I guess I've been twice... um... but it's so easy to dress up as a boy, with my wardrobe it's so easy, whatever... all my clothes are boys' clothes! Um... so... yeah. But I don't know that it's the progressive event that it used to be or that it's supposed to be, which is fine too! You know, the college should pay for more parties, we're paying a million dollars to go here. [...] I don't know if this is a result of it being a party but everyone gets drunk... I don't know if that's because they're uncomfortable... um... but... I mean... I'm wearing a boy's shirt right now and I'm not uncomfortable so I think, at least, a lot of it is the party atmosphere. Um... and I think the boys are much more uncomfortable because it's so much

easier to be a girl wearing boys' clothes than it is to be a boy wearing girls' clothes (Katie 11/03/2009).

Even though Katie conceptualizes Drag Ball as just a big party, her statement reveals that this is not so. She mentions that, in general, men seem to feel more uncomfortable than women do at Drag Ball. This is because dressing in drag is far less accepted for men in American society. Women grow up being tomboys—wearing boys' clothes and doing boy-related activities—whereas men are rarely ever given a socially acceptable space or means of expressing interest in clothing or activities associated with women. This is also related to the above statement by Jack in which he expresses frustration with feeling like there are few times on campus for him to celebrate his masculinity in a party setting. This highlights the ways that Oberlin's treatment of gender is very different from the traditional conception of gender—we have no homecoming dance or formal prom because they are so strongly tied to heterosexual relationships and traditional masculinity and femininity, and they do not fit in with the Oberlin conception of gender.

Students who attend Drag Ball wear everything from the clothing they wear on an everyday basis to outrageous interpretations of alternative gender categories. Many students also mix pieces of clothing and hair (or facial hair) styles from male and female gender norms to create an eclectic effect. Steven noticed that, most frequently, female-bodied female-identifying and male-bodied male-identifying students dress up as what they perceive to be the extreme 'opposite' of themselves.

One thing that I noticed about Drag Ball is that when the guys dressed up like girls they dressed up like hookers... like, huge heels and just, like, the most polar female sex stereotype you could possibly go... and when the girls dressed up, they dressed gangsta, like, sagged their pants and baggy t-shirts and fitted hats to the side and grills, but most girls don't dress like whores and like... most guys don't dress like Ludacris [a famous African American rapper] or whatever... that's what we consider, like, really

hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine, and people go to those extremes in their dress (Steven 10/26/2009).

I asked Steven to elaborate upon his understandings of drag—what it is, what it is not, and how it works. In response he talked great deal about the relationship between drag and mimicking the bodily characteristics of biological males and biological females.

If guys just talked in a higher voice but dressed exactly the same, that's not drag. Drag is taking on a persona. And the persona usually is pretty skewed to the opposite direction of that gender... and like... total transformation is, like, dressing that way, putting a wig on 'cause girls are stereotyped with longer hair, maybe putting makeup on, putting in fake boobs, and like, talking in a higher voice and maybe carrying a purse. And then with girls dressing up like guys, it was like, trying to remove breasts and wearing bigger clothes and putting on facial hair and talking in a deeper voice, and kind of acting like... getting broad shoulders and kind of puffing out and making yourself look macho. They're stereotypes, you know? (Steven 10/26/2009)

This observation has important implications for the way Drag Ball functions at Oberlin because it shows that the event can often re-emphasize the importance of bodies and biology for understanding and identifying with a gender, even though the Oberlin conception of gender attempts to completely remove those things from the gender equation. As will be shown in greater detail in section four, even though my informants often conceive of gender as being fluid, culturally constructed, and a choice, their own biology and bodily characteristics are important aspects of their own gender identities.

Steven discussed Drag Ball in great detail during our interview. He first talked about how much fun it was and distinguished between the feelings he and his friends had regarding dressing up and attending the event.

Drag Ball was wild honestly, like, that was really fun, um... it's nice to do for a day you know? It's just a fun thing but like, I know people who were like, 'fuck that, I'm not dressing up in drag,' like, 'I wouldn't be caught dead putting a wig on' or whatever and I was like, 'just do it, it's one night of the year man, and you're gonna seem weird if you don't dress up in

drag.’ [...] ‘Cause it’s like... we develop certain... certain... schemas about the world, certain, like... contexts that we kinda put everything in and um... when something just drastically alters our perception of those schemas it’s really... people that are more inflexible um... it can be really.... What’s the word I’m looking for? Like... extreme to them. Like, dressing up like a girl can seem like a very extreme thing to do because their whole social context and cultural context is like, ‘boys don’t dress up like girls.’ And if you are kind of... I wouldn’t say closed minded, but some people are less flexible to bend those schemas than others (Steven 10/26/2009).

However, he began to reveal that he had experienced his own conflicting feelings about attending Drag Ball.

I wasn’t even gonna dress up. I wasn’t even gonna go I don’t think... but then I was just like, ‘fuck it... whatever, I’ll put something on,’ and I put on a dress but I also wanted to carry my shit, and I didn’t have a purse or whatever, so I got a sport coat and put it on over the dress but everyone was like, ‘who the fuck are you? Like, that’s not even like... I can obviously tell, that’s a terrible costume.’ I dunno... I actually felt like... kind of uncomfortable in the fact that I wasn’t, that I didn’t have a good costume. Because everybody had these great costumes and I was like ‘wow’... like, it’s a costume party and if you have a shitty costume, then I felt like my costume was really bad. It was spur of the moment... and people were like ‘is that a... oh, that’s a dress. But you have a sports coat on, like, take that off!’ And I was like, ‘but I gotta carry my shit!’ (Steven 10/26/2009)

This elaborate explanation he provided me with to justify his behavior is best illuminated by another thing he said about Drag Ball—“it’s like, ‘get really drunk or you’ll feel uncomfortable!’ If you’re really drunk it doesn’t matter and it’s just a big party!” (Steven 10/26/2009). Steven was clearly nervous about attending Drag Ball and, like many students, he used alcohol to lower his inhibitions and to distance himself from any deeper meanings or consequences that might come of his experimenting with drag. Steven also spent some time explaining why Drag Ball can be so uncomfortable for students, especially male students, and it seemed to be related to sexuality and the sexual roles of men and women in heterosexual pairings.

Now the guy's dancing in front of the girl and it's like, a role reversal or like... you may even be dancing with someone of the same gender and you don't even know! And like... some people you just do double takes and you can't even tell whether they're men or women, and that's off-putting because we have this social, this schema of what women look like and what men look like, and when that's thrown off it like... it kinda shakes our foundation. [Me: How do you think Drag impacts people beyond the actual party?] I think it's good, I mean it's definitely more for some people than others but uh... the expression 'don't knock it 'til you try it' like... once you've tried it and had a great time you see that there are some people who just feel more comfortable that way, you know? They feel more comfortable dressing in drag and like... but there are also times when you're in drag and you feel really uncomfortable too, but like, at least you've experienced it, and like... and you know what it feels like (Steven 10/26/2009).

In the end, Steven had a good time at Drag Ball even though it made him feel uncomfortable to a certain extent, especially in regards to his interactions with, and reactions to, male and female students in attendance. Another informant, David, had a similar reaction to Drag Ball—even though he enjoyed it, it is clear from our interview that he felt uncomfortable about his own reactions to the other students in attendance.

I think it's fun, I mean, it's confusing! Very confusing! There's definitely some things that's confusing me, you know, from a physical perspective its... its... confusing... [...] especially if you're intoxicated there and think that, you know, a girl looks really good and all of a sudden you suddenly snap to and realize it's a dude... I mean... it's... it's confusing! It's just confusing! [me: What do those moments mean for you?] I think it just means that we're conditioned. It's not really anything spectacular for me. Yeah, okay, you got me, I've been conditioned. I mean, it's interesting, it's a fun thought experiment. I'm conditioned the way that I am and I'd like to stay there because I operate on a perfectly good level. And the people around me seem to be fine too... I just... Drag Ball is interesting, it's a fun thought experiment, it makes a point, it's a good point... that's all it's good for. It's not... I'm not suddenly going to become a crusader for... for, you know, demolishing all gender walls because... you know, I just, people can do what they want and that's fine, I don't... it's kinda just, you caught me. I've been conditioned. We've all been conditioned. What do you want me to do about it? It's kind of a... you've proved your point, let's go back to being normal now. Normal in my eyes, but, yeah no, I think it's good that the college supports people being civil to one another and as respectful as possible, and it's fine! I'm glad I've gained that

perspective and I'll be more mindful of it when I graduate. But do I really... do I wanna alter my universe personally, drastically because of what I've seen here? No. Not really (David 11/04/2009).

As he talked about the deeper implications of his Drag Ball experience, David became increasingly visibly agitated. He seemed to want to appear calm and unaffected by Drag Ball, but the more he insisted that it did not affect him outside of the context of the event itself, the less convinced of this argument I became. His story was fascinating because he seemed so truly ambivalent about it—he enjoyed himself but also experienced discomfort at the same time, and while he wants to be seen as accepting of people who are transgender or genderqueer, their existence is also clearly disturbing to him and, as Steven would say, shake his foundations.

Charlotte also had a similar experience with Drag Ball. She attended the event and dressed up but she did not attempt to look truly male or masculine, and she felt uncomfortable watching friends—male friends in particular—cross dress in more extreme ways, as the following lengthy quotation shows.

I thought it was fun! I really liked it. Yeah, I didn't think that was... it wasn't weird for me, I wasn't like, 'oh my god you're dressing up as a guy or you're dressing up as a girl, it's weird.' No, that was fun I thought [...] it was fun getting ready with my friends and um... I dunno, it was fun wearing guys' clothing, why not? [...] I wore, like, boxers and... a t-shirt and I think I... what else did I do? Oh, like a backwards baseball cap. It was, like, nothing but um... it was kinda fun. You know what, I did—I have a guy friend who dressed up as a woman and like I kind of see him... like he's very... not insecure, but wants to be, like, a macho guy? But then for Drag Ball he was, like, all for dressing up in my friend's little purple leather skirt and I was a little taken aback by that. 'Cause I'm just like... I guess I was just like, how can you be comfortable with that? I dunno... I guess I have this vision too... and this is so wrong, but it's like, and I recognize that it's wrong, but it's like... how are you comfortable with doing that? Like, I'm fine with them doing that but I'm like... if that were me... I would not feel comfortable with, like, dressing really girly. [Me: If you were a guy dressing up as a girl?] Yeah... 'cause I feel like it's different for guys. Maybe where I was, like, raised too, people would

make a lot of jokes like, ‘oh, you’re so gay,’ like... ‘what the fuck are you wearing, you’re so-’ you know? And so here I’m just like... huh... you know, I’m a little taken aback by it? [...] it’s just like, okay, more power to you if you feel comfortable doing that. Like, if I was in your shoes I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that but more power to you. I dunno (Charlotte 10/28/2009).

Drag Ball challenged Charlotte’s notions of how masculine men should behave and dress and seeing her male friend wearing feminine clothing was somewhat shocking for her. It is unsurprising that her own outfit for Drag Ball was quite tame in comparison to some of the other costumes students have been known to wear. She stayed within her comfort zone as best she could and participated in the festivities without pushing her own notions of gender too far.

Drag Ball seems to be one manifestation of the Oberlin conception of gender that most students on campus support and enjoy to varying extents. It gives students the freedom to dress up in extreme drag or to simply play with pieces of clothing that are traditionally associated with another gender. This is not to say, however, that all of my informants are invested in and excited about all aspects of the wild and intense experience that is attending Drag Ball. It challenges some of my informants’ ideas about gender and attractiveness, and for some, wearing clothing associated with another gender can disturb the inner peace they feel about their own gender identity and expression—a disruption they are often very reluctant to admit. For others, Drag Ball is an ideal time to shed their everyday gender presentation and try out clothes and behavior they usually feel pressured to avoid, and to witness and experience positive challenges to the traditional conception of gender.

Conclusion

In this section I showed that my informants do not subscribe to an Oberlin conception of gender or a traditional one alone, but instead tend to see gender and their own gender identities through both conceptions to varying extents. Because of this, when my informants are exposed to the Oberlin conception of gender, their reactions range from enthusiastic assimilation to wary uncertainty. As they spend more time on campus, their previous notions of gender begin to integrate with the Oberlin conception of gender. I showed that my informants' experiences integrating their initial ideas about gender with the Oberlin conception of gender range from graceful adaptations to jarring collisions and everything in between, and that when they contradict themselves it is because of the difficulties they encounter in combining the two conceptions of gender. Finally, I used my informants' reactions to all-gender bathrooms and Drag Ball as specific examples of how some informants embrace the Oberlin conception of gender with open arms, while others struggle with parts of it. Their reactions are usually not black and white and these nuances show that each informant's experience integrating his or her prior notions of gender with the Oberlin conception of gender is unique in a number of ways. However, in the next section I will show that my male informants and my female informants, in general, react to Oberlin's conception of gender in particular ways, stemming from their prior experiences with gender and their feelings about their own gender identities.

Section IV: The Influence of Traditional Masculinity and Femininity

In the last section I showed that my informants experience a process of integration in which their previous conceptions of gender (either traditional or non-traditional in nature) encounter the Oberlin conception, resulting in jarring collisions, graceful adaptations, and fusions of both. This section discusses the significant differences I found in my male and female informants' attitudes toward the Oberlin conception of gender. My male informants are inclined to embrace the traditional conception of gender while my female informants are inclined to embrace the Oberlin conception of gender. My male and female informants' experiences integrating of their previous conceptions of gender with the Oberlin conception have had distinct emotional and personal implications for each. These differences stem from my informants' initial identification or comfort with traditional concepts of gender and gender roles. As my informants are male-bodied male-identified, and female-bodied female-identified individuals, they are deeply affected by the traditional conception of gender's constructions of masculinity and femininity and related ideas of 'girl ways' and 'guy ways' of being. Living up to feminine or masculine expectations, and traversing the social constructions of what it is to be a man or a woman, have greatly impacted my informants' gendered conceptions of self, and their conceptions of the very nature of gender identity.

I will begin by exploring the extent to which my female and male informants identify with, or desire to identify with, traditionally defined femininity and masculinity, respectively. I will then show that whether my informants feel strongly attached to these concepts, and whether they gain more positive reinforcement by embracing these

concepts or by embracing the Oberlin conception of gender, supports or weakens their allegiance to the traditional conception of gender.

Female Informants and Femininity: Jekyll and Hyde

Throughout our interviews, my female informants tended to express an ambivalence regarding traditional femininity and their identification with, and feelings about, it. As discussed in section two, the traditional conception of gender upholds the idea of sexual dimorphism, with males expected to be masculine, and females expected to be feminine. The ideal feminine woman is supposed to be nurturing, passive, emotional, gentle, physically weak, and most importantly, attractive to men. Although it is socially acceptable and desirable for women to exhibit these feminine traits, they are devalued in comparison to masculine traits. As quoted earlier, Jack followed the remark, “how to characterize femininity without sounding sexist?” by explaining,

when I think of femininity I think of certain cultural ideals of domesticity, passivity in the sense of not only a familial situation where you're supposed to respond or subordinate yourself to what the husband says, but also a way of presenting yourself in the world that is perhaps less aggressive, um, more withdrawn from conflict in that respect. And I would also add... that most people conceive of femininity or it's culturally determined as more ah... associated with emotions than the western rationality of man, and those sorts of things (Jack 12/05/2009).

The traditional conception of gender assumes that women are biologically predetermined to be feminine, and because traditional femininity does not encompass any traits that are highly valued in our society, my female informants are inclined to embrace the Oberlin conception of gender instead. The Oberlin conception of gender allows women to break out of the gender roles expected of them under the traditional conception of gender.

My informants are all aware of the traits associated with femininity, and attempting to live up these standards while also questioning (and for many, resisting

them) is a complex and difficult process. For Charlotte, identifying profoundly with traditional femininity is a complicated and historically very painful thing. During our interview she defined femininity very similarly to the ways in which my other informants do, but she seemed particularly uncomfortable about doing so.

This is really bad and I don't want to say it but like, I dunno, like, being feminine almost like... you strive for the approval of a guy... or you do things for guys' attention. It's so bad, but I think that's how I feel (Charlotte 10/28/2009).

She then went on to describe the ways in which she is feminine.

It's really wrong, I recognize that, but... like, I think I'm feminine in terms of the way I dress, like, I like to wear girly clothing [...] I like to wear skirts, and dresses, and makeup, and I like to look nice, and I like to have my hair done and... sometimes I'm like 'I don't care, screw it,' but you know, I know I like to look good for guys, like when my boyfriend comes to town I always like to look good for him [...] I feel like I especially can just go in the flow of whatever the guy wants and I think that can be feminine... this is so messed up and I'm really realizing this while I'm saying this (Charlotte 10/28/2009).

Charlotte seemed very disturbed by her own discussion of femininity, so I tried to reassure her that there were no wrong answers to any of my questions, and that her responses were similar to the responses of my other informants. I was initially very confused about why she was reacting in such an uncomfortable way, but as the interview continued, a clearer picture began to crystallize. Charlotte explained that as a little girl, it was made very clear to her that her family desired for her to be feminine. From a young age she noticed that she gained more positive attention and affection for being attractive and well put-together than for being tomboyish.

I feel like both of my parents' families were very, um, just like you would get more attention if you were cute and pretty. And I just remember them always talking about... like, I had a cousin who was gorgeous and I remember them always talking about her so positively and I was so jealous because I wanted to be like that, and I feel like that affected me kind of

like, okay, 'the prettier you are the more people will like you, and mainly guys will like you.' So I feel like maybe they pushed me towards striving for a guy's approval in that way, if that makes sense? (Charlotte 10/28/2009)

At this point in the interview, Charlotte shocked me by confiding that she has been a victim of sexual abuse on multiple occasions. Suddenly, her earlier discomfort with defining femininity and her identification with it became clearer. She explained that she sees her own identification with this feeling of being compelled to please men, coupled with other feminine traits such as passivity, as having been extremely damaging to her innermost self.

I feel like I get, like, taken advantage of all the time because I'm, like, nicer. But maybe that's not necessarily because I'm a woman, or maybe it's because of that femininity thing, like, being weaker, and I feel like a guy has obviously taken advantage of me many times because of that. And um, I don't know, I feel like men in general just feel so much more empowered than women, and that really... like it kind of crushes... me... in a way. Or, it doesn't, like, crush me but it just kind of, like, suppresses me. You know? [...] I guess I always kind of think of guys as having an ulterior motive. I'm very untrusting... um... I dunno... I guess I always think they're kind of out to get me and that threatens me. It threatens me but I still feel like I need to appease them. It's like I need to like appease them so they won't... [hurt me]. It's like I need them to recognize that I'm a good person so they won't do a terrible thing to me. Does that make sense? (Charlotte 10/28/2009)

Charlotte's story is an extreme example of the experiences my female informants have had with femininity, and their feelings about it. My informants alternately strive to be seen as attractive and feminine because they, like all human beings, want to gain the love and approval of others, and enjoy the positive attention they can gain by living up to the standards of traditional femininity. However, this desire for, and identification with, traditional femininity also brings negative repercussions. Being an object of physical desire does not strengthen and develop the woman herself, but only pleases the people

around her. This emphasis on superficial beauty, coupled with traits like passivity and weakness, leaves women very vulnerable. My female informants made it very clear that they know femininity is less valued than masculinity and is based on pleasing men, and this knowledge has had strong repercussions on how my female informants relate to it. They described and exhibited varying love-hate relationships with traditional femininity and all of the things it represents. Many of my female informants feel very negatively about being perceived as too feminine, especially by men. Rather than feeling positively about identifying with femininity, these informants discussed purposefully acting in unfeminine ways. This is not just because they happen to dislike certain feminine traits, but also because, like Charlotte, they know such traits are socially devalued and it makes them uncomfortable to be associated with them. Marisa is one informant who felt this way, and she spoke about it very explicitly.

I'm pretty bitter about men and I have this really unfair notion that they're always, like, judging me about how girly I'm being. And judging me about what I'm doing all the time. But instead of making me self-conscious it just makes me, like, really pissed off at them automatically, so that when they talk I'm just, like, defensive. All the time. I can't help it [...] I'm always thinking 'oh, I'm going to complain about how I look fat now and this guy is gonna judge me for being really girly and so maybe I shouldn't complain about it... but I want to... but I shouldn't... but he's gonna judge me... but that means he sucks.' So I'm always like, 'so I can't do this thing that's girly because then they'll call me a girl' [...] when a guy says that to me it's a bad thing, it's like 'you're such a girl!' like, 'why are you being so wimpy and dumb?' (Marisa 10/12/2009)

Marisa also gave a specific example of a time when she changed her behavior because she felt so uncomfortable with being thought of as feminine and girly.

Like, the other day I had my white sneakers on and we were gonna walk through some mud and I was like, 'ew! It's gonna get on my shoes!' and then I [thought], 'fuck! That was so girly!' and my boyfriend was like, 'well do you want me to just carry you over the mud?' and I was like, 'yeah...' but then I felt so... I felt like I needed to justify myself somehow

in some way that was, like, that would make it so that it wasn't just because I was a girl that I was doing these things. So I had to be like, 'oh, it's just that my mom got these shoes for me so I can't get them dirty 'cause she'd be upset!' I had to, like, I like compulsively say things to justify what I'm doing so that it's not 'cause I'm a girl (Marisa 10/12/2009).

Interestingly, Marisa only experiences these thoughts when she is around men, and she was not the only female informant to express a sentiment like this. Ashley explained that she makes certain jokes and comments about being girly or feminine when she is around women, but not when she is around men.

I think my sense of humor changes with guys because... you know, I always thought it's really not fair because it's, like, so easy for guys to be funny because all they have to do is put on a dress and it's such an easy laugh. Or making fun of catty girl behavior is such an easy thing for guys to do that's, like, really funny. And um, I do that a lot with my housemates, like we kind of make fun of ourselves for being really typical girls. But, like, I wouldn't do that in front of a guy because, like, there's always a hint of truth in it, and I wouldn't wanna... like, point it out and magnify something that I do that's like a negative, typical girl thing (Ashley 11/15/2009).

Like Marisa and Ashley, Stephanie is also very aware of the negative ways that men often view feminine behavior. She explained that it makes her feel uncomfortable to be associated with traditionally feminine or girly traits.

A lot of the things that are attached to women bother me a lot. Um, kind of like women being dramatic or emotional or... I dunno, I just think a lot of things are stereotyped in a lot of ways and it's kind of hard to function within those boundaries. Because if those things are what is expected of you, then everything you... or for me I've always felt like everything I do has to disprove that [...] like, if I was sad about something that happened in a movie and I was with a group of guys, and maybe some of them are sad but won't say it because they're guys, then I sort of feel like I wouldn't say that I was sad about something because that makes me more of a woman in whatever they're saying (Stephanie 11/18/2009).

One of the main reasons Stephanie feels pressured to act so contrarily to gender norms is because of an ex-boyfriend who often made negative comments, thinly veiled in jest, about women.

I used to feel like that with my ex-boyfriend who didn't in any way, like, try to make me feel like less because I was a woman, but, like, had all these things that I guess he was taught or picked up as he went along about women being... not as good as men, I guess? And it would just come out in little comments and they would really bother me and I would, like, say something and he'd be like, 'oh I'm just kidding, don't be so sensitive' but like, not really kidding [...] he would just make comments like, 'don't worry, I can do that better' or I guess just degrading things, like 'oh don't worry, it's not your fault you can't do it' or just things like that that would like really bother me [...] and then he would also talk about how men are more powerful than women [...] I had to do all these things to, like, make it so that I wasn't that way (Stephanie 11/18/2009).

These stories and remarks shared by Charlotte, Marisa, Ashley, and Stephanie all help to illustrate that my informants are not blind to the fact that femininity and women in general are devalued in our society, or that women are often stereotyped with negative, feminine traits. They notice these realities and it negatively impacts their own personal feelings about femininity, as well as their own existence as women.

Paradoxically, these women also take part in girly activities and demonstrate feminine qualities. They even value some of these qualities and find many such activities to be enjoyable. All of the women I interviewed talked at some length or another about the feminine things that they do and that they enjoy doing, like getting dressed up, wearing makeup, and talking about their relationships with men. But these positive feelings and experiences are tangled up with the negative feelings I described above. For example, many of my female informants have spent much of their lives worrying about whether their bodies are appealing enough to the men around them, and this insecurity

can be very painful. Charlotte explained that she had always been concerned about her appearance and that she was particularly fixated on the size of her breasts.

Well, I was a very, like, shallow kid... well, not shallow but just very like, I wanted people to like me and I wanted to look good, and I feel like every kid's like that but I was definitely like that, and... I always wanted to have boobs really badly... I guess I really wanted to be more... just like... attractive and look like the people in the magazines, obviously (Charlotte 10/28/2009).

Living up to societal expectations of how women's bodies should be is also something Nicole has experienced. The following quotation echoes Charlotte's sentiments.

I didn't have boobs 'til college. Like, hooray for being a D cup now, but I came to Oberlin barely a B, and for most of high school was completely flat-chested, and... it was kind of awkward being that girl in middle school who was almost six feet tall and had no boobs and looked like a boy, when everyone else was curvaceous and boys were staring at their boobs [...] and I'd go to the beach with friends and like... look like a boy in a two-piece. So I definitely felt a lot of... at that stage in my life like... fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, a lot of insecurity about it but... I think maybe that's why it's such a key part of my life to have boys be attracted to me, and to be sexually desirable [...] I think I didn't feel like I was a girl enough (Nicole 10/28/2009).

Being physically attractive means that my female informants can gain the positive attention and approval of their male peers. Marisa talked about how she was treated entirely differently once her body developed more curves, and that she greatly enjoyed this change and the romantic turn her social life took.

In high school I had, like, the perfect body for a girl, and everyone noticed all of a sudden, and it was like... 'oh! Guess I can be this person now!' So that was a fun change... I definitely... uh... took advantage of that! (Marisa 10/12/2009)

In this way, Marisa's feminine appearance—and likely behavior as well—was rewarded through the treatment she received from the people around her. However, the positive reinforcement my female informants have received for being properly feminine does not

outweigh the negative repercussions of identifying with femininity. Claire is very aware of the uneven relationship between masculinity and femininity within the traditional conception of gender, and explained how complicated it can be.

I think that femininity is sort of like the master-slave theory. Femininity wouldn't exist without masculinity and vice versa, and a lot of women's ideas of femininity are just bounced off of, like, what they should be for men. So you wanna be like what you see in the swimsuit models and, like, Victoria's Secret fashion shows and you wanna be that specifically because guys think it's beautiful (Claire 12/02/2009).

Marisa also talked about this inner contradiction.

People generally associate loving to shop and needing to spend money on things as being feminine, and I definitely love shopping! But it, like, bothers me when I act too girly because I don't want to. Because I don't like men and I don't like giving them any material to, like, put me in a box [...] and I also love stupid TV shows like The O.C. that are pretty girly, and, like, romantic comedies and chick flicks. At a certain point you have to stop feeling guilty about them, though, because like... I obviously don't believe... I'm so conflicted because I know in my head that these things don't actually apply to gender roles but obviously that's not what you think about when you're six... now in my head, like, 'chick flicks are for girls and so is makeup... and so is shopping.' But you can't, like, stop yourself. Because that's stupid, because then you're just playing into it, like, even by doing the opposite of what you think you're supposed to do, that's just playing into it also [...] I mean, then you're just, like, rebelling—that's just giving it more legitimacy. That's just being like, 'oh well this is for girls, I'm not gonna do it at all,' and that's like, why are you gonna deprive yourself of something that you enjoy on the basis of gender? I dunno... either one is bad. Destructive (Marisa 10/12/2009).

While my female informants want desperately to distance themselves from certain traits associated with women (like weakness, passivity, and obsessing over their appearance), they also enjoy certain feminine things. It is hard for my female informants to embrace their womanhood when they know that most of the traits and characteristics associated with femininity in the traditional conception of gender are negative, superficial, or damaging. Charlotte's experiences are a deeply striking example of this

tension—in embodying the traditional feminine ideal she is faced with Jekyll and Hyde treatment by other people, particularly men. She must confront, like many of the girls I interviewed, a conflict between wanting to be desired and valued in the subordinate way that the feminine is valued, and yet also struggling with these ideals and attempting to exist outside of or beyond them. Her experiences and associations with femininity have very deep implications for how it functions not only in her own inner world, but also those of the other female Oberlin students I interviewed. Though her past is a unique and difficult one, she is not alone in experiencing inner conflict surrounding what it means to be feminine.

Claire and Marisa's above quotations show why my female informants are generally more comfortable with embracing the Oberlin conception of gender than with embracing the traditional conception of gender, due to the way femininity is constructed by the traditional conception of gender. Marisa argues that there is nothing inherent in her biology or body that causes her to like the femininely-associated things she likes, but that she was exposed to those things from a young age and was culturally influenced to like those things. Now, she claims, while she cannot help but to like, and be associated with, some feminine things, she is not inherently bound to them. This is a very liberating notion of gender for my female informants, because it means that biology is not dictating the way they should be or behave, and they have the ability and permission to like things associated with both masculinity and femininity. Ashley, Stephanie, Claire, Sophia, Nicole, Marisa, and Katie all expressed general comfort with, and appreciation of, the Oberlin conception of gender, and all of these informants' experiences integrating their previous conceptions of gender with the Oberlin conception of gender (and its

manifestations on campus) have primarily been graceful adaptations. The only female informant whose experience integrating her previous conception of gender with the Oberlin conception of gender has been difficult is Charlotte, and I argue that this is because she is so very invested in the positive reinforcements her peers and family at home give her when she behaves femininely. The following story supports this.

I remember at the dinner table a lot at home 'cause I wouldn't really talk that much, like, my sister always had the opinions and blah blah blah, and my sister and my dad would usually seriously always get into arguments about, like, gender. Like, dead serious, always about like... 'why do you think a woman has to do that, dad?' and I would actually always like, 'oh my god Karen,' like... I would always kinda stick with my dad on these things and... which is kinda bad 'cause I mean like... I dunno... I felt like I was there for my dad on something, you know? [...] But I feel like I did do that to get the approval of my dad a little bit... and I like how, in his family, it's very old school, how I'm like the favorite with my sister too because, you know, I sing, and I'm a little preppy, and they really recognize that and then my sister is more, like, artsy and um... just like... you know, out there kinda, and very set in her opinions and... I dunno, I just get more attention than she does for how I am, and I kinda like that (Charlotte 10/28/2009).

Being feminine and supporting traditional gender roles is what Charlotte is used to, and it has also made her feel good about herself. These are both reasons for why she largely embraces the traditional conception of gender. Of course, she also expresses unhappiness about the emotional pain she has endured as someone who strives to be traditionally feminine, and even admits that she wishes she could change—“[my sister] could care less about what a guy thinks about her, she really could, and... I respect that about her because I wish I could be like that but I can't... I care too much” (Charlotte 10/28/2009).

Although all of my female informants struggle with ambivalence regarding femininity, aside from Charlotte, these contradictory feelings cause most of them to lean away from the traditional conception of gender, and to lean toward the Oberlin

conception of gender. Because (unlike my male informants, as will be discussed shortly) participating in the masculine/feminine dichotomy set up by the traditional conception of gender does not bring my female informants deep, personal fulfillment, they are inclined to reject it. The Oberlin conception allows my female informants to feel a sense of control over their lives that the traditional conception of gender denies them.

Male Informants and Masculinity: Comfort and Privilege

Unlike my female informants, who feel ambivalent about their identification with traditional femininity, my male informants generally seem comfortable with the ways traditional masculinity functions in their lives. This is not to say that my male informants gushed about how much they love being masculine, but rather that they did not express as many negative thoughts or feelings about masculinity's role in their lives. Not only did my male informants seem more positively disposed toward masculinity than my female informants toward femininity, they also seemed less in touch with their own feelings about masculinity and the ways that they exude masculine traits. Lee explained that, as a male-bodied and male-identified person, thinking about issues of gender is something that he—and other men—rarely feels compelled to do. Instead, he tends only to think about gender when something about it is out of the ordinary or a gender role is being challenged or altered.

The times it comes up are times when people are not acting in accordance with the social norms regarding gender. I also have it kind of easy in that I'm male-bodied and male-identified, so there aren't really a whole lot of... our society functions such that my gender is not often brought up [...] I think we're socialized to perceive gender and sex in particular ways... and for people who [...] like in my case, are male-bodied, male-identified, don't really have... thinking about gender is not outwardly necessitated, like, there's no outside stimulus being like, 'you need to think about this right now,' in most of our life because of how our society functions. Like, most of our society works as here's things men do, here

are things women do, here are things both people do, but these are the categories, and if you fit in one of those then you're not often given, like I said, an outside stimulus making you consider them, and they kind of do become invisible (Lee 11/13/2009).

The lack of critical thought given to issues of gender by my male informants is also directly related to the fact that masculinity and maleness are valued in our society over femininity and femaleness. When asked to describe masculinity, my informants commonly mentioned qualities like control, dominance, independence, aggression, and a lack of emotion expressivity. Most of these are seen as important, positive, and useful traits for a person in our society to exhibit in order to be successful. Therefore, men acting in masculine ways are likely to be praised for their conduct, and they thusly move through life without needing to spend much time thinking analytically about the ways that traditional masculinity influences their behavior, values, and interests. In this way, while my female informants seem to gain more personal, emotional, and societal benefits in embracing the Oberlin conception of gender, my male informants experience the same with the traditional conception of gender.

I do not wish to imply that my male informants never criticize masculinity or contemplate issues of gender (in fact, Lee, Jack, and Steven all did so to varying extents during our interviews), but that it was certainly much less common than for my female informants with femininity. Jack has embraced parts of the Oberlin conception of gender, even though he also identifies with traditional masculinity and comes from a traditional environment.

I didn't know that [all-gender bathrooms] were gonna be here but when I came here I was like, 'oh, well that fits in with the kind of progressive mindset that was the reason I came to Oberlin,' um... And I think I applied to Oberlin because I think I saw it as a place that instituted some of those progressive ideas with respect, partially with respect to gender,

that I wanted to embrace. So it was certainly a big transition because [...] as I said, I come from a heavily Christian, often fundamentalist, area, that sees sexual deviancy as you know, sinful, and would certainly not approve of most of Oberlin's views on these issues, but I also detested that environment and so it was a welcome situation coming to Oberlin (Jack 12/05/2009).

Lee came from a non-traditional family environment (though a traditional community) and has grown up conceiving of gender in a very Oberlin-like way. As mentioned in section three, he is my male informant who is most comfortable with the Oberlin conception of gender.

I cannot fathom how hard it would have been to try and come out simply and say, like, 'I'm gay,' at my high school. [...] But to be like, 'I'm trans,' I don't think people would even have had the concept to understand what that meant at the high school I went to. Um... so...there wasn't much knowledge of that among the majority of people there to my knowledge. And yeah, the majority of like... I could not have said almost everything that I said in this interview so far before I got to Oberlin, not because, like, my beliefs have necessarily changed—I mean, like, my understanding has expanded—but like, because I wouldn't have had the words or understood the concepts to. If I had heard someone say that I would have been like, 'so what did all of that stuff just mean just now?' But... I guess my basic feelings about it are probably pretty similar, but now I have a more detailed way to talk about it. Like, basically people should be what they feel in their heart to be, whatever that is. [...] Um... so that basic concept I think might have become more detailed and precise since getting here, but I imagine... I think that it was the same basic idea even before I got here, but now I understand it more broadly and more deeply and more fully (Lee 11/13/2009).

Lee also feels very comfortable with his own gender identity and does not strive to be particularly masculine (or feminine). He likes what he likes and he feels comfortable identifying as male without feeling interested in being (or pressured to be) traditionally masculine, and he acknowledges that this is because of the support he received from his mother.

Like, I don't think, 'I am a man! That's awesome! I dig it! I wanna be a man!' But I also don't feel any kind of split from that, either... like, I

don't feel like the idea of being a man is counter to who I am or anything like that, like I don't... in large part for me personally I don't think that there is anything intrinsic in how I have to act, or think, or feel, or be that relates to my being a man. Like I said earlier, I get giggly and giddy at a romance movie or something like that, and I don't think that's in any way contrary to myself or anything like that... maybe it I did... like if I had been raised being told otherwise, like, 'stop smiling you girly boy,' or something like that, then I'd be like 'oh man, there's something wrong here,' or something like that (Lee 11/13/2009).

Aside from Lee and Jack (and Steven as well), most of my male informants as a whole did not seem as comfortable with having feminine interests and exhibiting feminine traits, and few tended to embrace the Oberlin conception of gender as freely as my female informants did.

Because traditional masculinity is valued in our society, embracing it has been a useful practice for my male informants. Jack and David have both emulated masculine traits in the face of personal hardships, and their stories illustrate how my male informants as a whole see masculinity as positive and useful. Although throughout his interview Jack expressed frustration with certain masculine ideals, he also discussed how, as a young person, he desperately wanted to be accepted as a masculine person.

I played basketball for a long time when I was a kid and up until the start of high school because I was really into it for awhile, but then didn't end up being that good near the end of my—point is, I didn't pursue it further into high school. But, um, part of that was that I had these friends that I had from late elementary school to middle school who were, you know, the athletes, were kind of the jock types who I was good friends with, and because I also played basketball with them and they presented the typical future frat boy guy mentality where, you know, you have to be really aggressive and make fun of other people, not be made fun of yourself, etc, and exhibit great athleticism on the basketball court I suppose, and I ended up kind of losing those friends because I wasn't really in the popular crowd and part of me felt like that was a good thing because I began to identify more with, like, intellectual pursuits, but at the same time I had this kind of irrational need to be among the popular crowd, especially during 8th grade, and part of it was, 'all these guys have these various attractive girls fawning all over them, so why can't I be like him and be

like the, you know, not dorky, athletic, strong type?’ So I tried to get in with the popular crowd [...] I started sitting at their lunch table for awhile [...] so that was an image that I felt like I needed to look up to for awhile in middle school. The distinction between high school and middle school was that in high school I started to revolt against that at lot more, find that image to be oppressive and generally stupid (Jack 12/05/2009).

Although Jack did not end up connecting with the jock icon of masculinity, he eventually came to identify with and act out other traditionally masculine traits. He loves karate and spends much of his time sculpting his body at the gym. He was a part of the debate team at his high school, and relished in dominating other teams with his impeccable memory, logic, and intellect. These days he still enjoys winning every argument he can, which is an example of the masculine characteristic of control, even if it does not relate directly to his physical strength. All of these activities are important for his self-esteem, self-definition, and success as a person. As a result of experiencing familial and personal struggles, Jack also came to identify with other masculine traits, because they helped him to deal with the hardships he was facing.

I have a strange relationship emotionally with certain aspects that one associates with masculinity, such as self-control, or not showing emotion, and these sorts of things. And I think for a long time, starting in high school mostly, responding to feeling demasculinized as a result of being nerdy and also as a result of certain, like, family issues. I mean, being confronted with issues like my mom’s alcoholism and her being out of control, having no self control in that respect, um, I definitely developed this kind of like unhealthy fixation on being in control of myself, not demonstrating emotion or affective connection with other people, and that became very central to my identity. But I didn’t associate it in my mind with the idea of masculinity, like, I wasn’t thinking of it as like, ‘oh, I have to do this because I have to be a man,’ it was like how I viewed, like, a fulfilled life... those were aspects of a fulfilled life for me (Jack 12/05/2009).

In this way, embodying certain aspects of masculinity has served as a coping mechanism for Jack. Doing so helped him to make sense of the destructive behavior he was exposed

to, and gave him a path to follow in what he perceived as opposition to that behavior.

Although exhibiting these traits can sometimes make sustaining close relationships more complex and difficult for Jack, he also sees having the ability to control his feelings as having made him a stronger and better person, and as having protected him from emotional harm.

David similarly embraces his masculinity as an effective strategy of self-preservation. He responded to his diagnosis with diabetes as me-versus-the-enemy, a very aggressively masculine way of viewing the situation, and a framework he embraces to this day. This reaction gives him the resilience he needs to face his illness.

Look, the fact of the matter is that when I was diagnosed, you know, with diabetes, I said, 'alright soldier, man up,' you know, 'pull yourself up, pull yourself together, let's fight through this thing,' I mean, and that to some people is probably, like, a very gendered reaction, a very militaristic and, you know, masculine way to react to something. You know? I didn't say, oh, I didn't say, you know, 'I'm going to find a harmony between myself and this new condition.' I said, 'No! I'm gonna beat the fucking shit out of this thing!' Like, 'I'm gonna knock this thing out, knock it dead,' and that worked. Splendidly. I mean, you do what you have to do. You have these reactions embedded in you whether or not you realize it or want it, and that's the way it is. And now I know that whatever happens next, that reaction is swimming around in my blood and that, you know, it works. It's effective. You do what works, you do what's effective, you do what you have to for survival. So on a very, like, primitive level, that's kind of what the issue is. That's why I don't feel the need to change anything about the way that I am. Because I know that in a crisis situation, when survival is key, that my reaction to it, gendered or non-gendered, masculine or feminine, whatever, it works (David 11/04/2009).

David is unapologetic about embracing masculine traits in the pursuit of his health and wellness, and just as with Jack, he and the rest of my male informants generally see enacting masculine traits as having positive affects on their lives. Masculinity is described with many active, strong traits, and—as has already been emphasized—these characteristics are highly valued in our society. As a whole, men are in positions of

dominance, and so traits and behaviors associated with men are more respected than those associated with women. This was reflected in my male informants' remarks, as they tended to speak negatively about femininity and female-associated traits without being particularly aware that they were doing so. In fact, Jack and David both explained that their reasons for embodying masculinity in the face of hardships was because they, like the rest of my informants, associate masculinity with forceful, powerful, and successful traits and characteristics. David mentioned explicitly that he did not choose to "find a harmony" with his diagnosis, a reaction that he believes to be feminine in nature and ineffective as a coping strategy. Jack remembers that he specifically chose to value and strive for personal and emotional self-control because it was different from the way his mother, a feminine figure, behaved. In doing so, my male informants illustrated very clearly that, had they embraced femininity instead, they feel it would have failed them in their time of need.

The fact that embracing masculinity generally has positive impacts on my male informants' lives explains why they so infrequently criticized masculinity, and instead tended to support it. Few of my male informants expressed deeply negative sentiments about masculinity. My male informants did mention one way that embracing traditional masculinity can harm men, which is that it causes men to struggle with maintaining close personal relationships. Jack mentioned that in the past he has had troubles with relationships as a result of his inability to express emotions. Though David also admitted to having similar problems, he shrugged them off and defended his choice to be masculine.

You don't make friends all the time being like that, but at the same time it's... you avoid people walking over you. You know, there are trade-offs

to acting a certain way. And I think that a lot of times these things get played off as gender, you know, 'he's so cocky, so fighting, he's a typical douche, typical bro,' well that type of thing might be the case on the surface, but on the inside there's far more of a strategic, and kind of tactical, reason for why I act the way that I do (David 11/04/2009).

Like David, my other male informants either mentioned positive aspects of masculinity or had very little to say about it. They claimed that they feel largely comfortable with masculinity. As David also explained,

physically you can be more intimidating, and... you know, it means you... I dunno, it's a very... my own kind of conception of it today is hard to verbalize, but I can say that I'm very comfortable being a boy. I wouldn't want to be anything else because this is all I know. You know, as kind of weird or nonsensical or as unsubstantiated as it sounds, I feel comfortable the way that I am. I like the way that I function, I like the way that I react to things (David 11/04/2009).

This is not to say that my male informants do not ever experience negative repercussions from being men or being masculine, just that such experiences did not often come up in our interviews. As I have already argued, this is because masculinity is dominant over femininity, and embodying it is therefore generally beneficial to men. It simply encompasses more empowering traits than disempowering ones, and, therefore, men who embrace masculine traits are likely to be positively affected. Another is that because manhood is such a difficult status to attain and retain, even mentioning negative aspects of masculinity in passing might feel threatening to a man's claim to it. In general, my male informants seemed somewhat content or comfortable with the understanding they have of traditional masculinity, as well as their association and identification with it. For example, David is very attached to his masculinity and the traditional conception of gender, and he downplays the Oberlin conception of gender in an attempt to avoid having his gendered behavior too deeply challenged.

I operate on a certain level that works well for me. Maybe all the gender stuff that's thrown into our faces really tests how you operate in the end, and how you function and... you know... what you might need to work out, personal beliefs, actions that maybe function better... for me, I feel satisfied knowing I know about the issues and can be respectful in the future, but I don't need to actually change any of the ways that, you know... and to an extent it's conditioned me too, you know, I'm always joking about [the concept of] heteronormative gender roles... it's kind of funny, it's extremely melodramatic and, you know, absurd almost anywhere else other than Oberlin (David 11/04/2009).

David expressed a lot of frustration and discomfort with the way gender functions at Oberlin and talked about how the strong connection he has with his traditional background has greatly affected his opinions of the Oberlin conception of gender.

It... wasn't even on my radar, you know, I got to Oberlin and all of a sudden, oh, we're having issues deciding what gender is this bathroom or is there even a gender at all because some people don't need a gender or don't choose to identify... I mean, to me that was just like... what the f-what the hell? Who the hell doesn't identify as a gender? I mean, just biologically speaking we are a sexually dimorphic species! (David 11/04/2009)

David also talked explicitly about how the Oberlin conception of gender (and its proponents on campus) makes him feel threatened and attacked.

It's more of like a... stop... stop pushing me type of reaction that I initially had and that I still have sometimes. It's fine, do whatever you want, I really don't care, more power to you, but just don't... don't try to push anything on me that I don't have an issue with. I'm happy the way that I am. I don't need... I don't need you to start questioning my beliefs about where I fit or stand. If I'm happy, that's all that matters, and I'm not looking for a change. So... you know, I'm not resistant to being more mindful or checking in and saying my gender, but I just don't... you know... sometimes the very, very small minority of voices can be very pushy, very aggressive (David 11/04/2009).

Because there is a power dynamic between masculinity and femininity, and our society sees masculinity as superior, men's relationships with masculinity differ greatly from women's relationships with femininity. By taking on masculine traits, men gain power

and prestige, and therefore the traditional conception of gender is appealing for most of my male informants. They are relatively comfortable with masculinity (or are at least reluctant to criticize it) because it is so important and valued in our society, and questioning gender and their role as men can feel very threatening. Integrating their previous conceptions of gender (especially for those informants from traditional backgrounds) with the Oberlin conception of gender can therefore be a struggle.

Conclusion

As these examples show, masculinity and femininity are perceived and experienced differently by my male and female informants. While both groups associate the same traits with femininity and masculinity, the ways in which my male informants experience masculinity and my female informants experience femininity differ significantly. My male informants expressed considerable comfort with masculinity, and even when they criticized specific components of masculine behavior, they generally discussed other ways that they assert and claim their own masculinity. This is because, overall, being masculine is a positive thing for men. It makes them strong and brave, and allows them to exercise control over their lives and to be independent and oriented to their own goals and wishes. My male informants are attached to traditional masculinity as supported in the traditional conception of gender, and they therefore resist the Oberlin conception of gender as threatening, unless their prior socialization (or personal beliefs) causes them to break away from traditional masculinity.

Women gain no such advantages by embracing femininity as men do when embracing masculinity. David and Jack both rejected what they saw as feminine coping strategies, a fact that supports my argument that embracing traditional femininity does

little to genuinely improve the lot of either men or women. Being feminine is not empowering for my informants because its essence is to cater to others, and not to advance one's own self. Having positive associations with particular aspects of femininity (such as related interests like shopping or chick flicks) does not mean that women embrace it on a deeper level because they are aware that doing so does them little personal good, and they are also painfully aware that it is seen as inferior to masculinity. Instead, they feel compelled to embody femininity because they have experienced heavy cultural and societal pressure to do so, and after having been encouraged to be feminine their entire lives, their inner identities and interests have, inevitably, become tangled up in traditional femininity. They want to be liked and desired, and to do so they believe they must be feminine. For these reasons, my female informants expressed feeling both attracted to, and repelled by, femininity. Because traditional femininity stems from the sexually dimorphic nature of the traditional conception of gender, my female informants tend to reject it, and to instead embrace the Oberlin conception of gender. Its view of gender as a fluid, culturally constructed, and a choice, is liberating for them.

Summary, Implications and Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that after attending Oberlin College, my informants do not subscribe only to what I call the Oberlin conception of gender (which sees gender as fluid, socially and culturally constructed, and one's own choice) or the traditional conception of gender (which sees gender as being tied to the body, biological, and rooted in sexual dimorphism) but rather see gender and their own gender identities through dual, competing conceptions of both. I have shown that my informants' experiences integrating such different conceptions of gender range from jarring collisions to graceful adaptations and everything in between, depending upon the extent of their initial familiarity with the ways gender is presented and discussed on campus. I have asserted that, overall, the Oberlin conception and the traditional conception of gender have differing implications for the ideological formation of my male and female informants as pertains to gender. My male informants tend to embrace the traditional conception of gender, and my female informants tend to embrace the Oberlin conception of gender.

I maintain that all of my informants (if not all Oberlin College students) have been affected by their exposure to Oberlin's ideas about gender, whether or not they embrace them wholeheartedly. Each of my informants illustrated or articulated at least one way in which he or she has been impacted by the way that gender functions on Oberlin's campus. Steven explained how encountering the Oberlin conception of gender for the first time can be a shocking experience for some students.

Developmental psych is fresh in my mind so... like, babies will um... they see certain characteristics in the world and develop certain schemas about them, like gravity. You develop a certain schema about things that you drop, you know, are gonna fall. If you show a baby something that defies the law of gravity, like, they'll show a video of a ball rolling off the end of a table and instead of falling when it gets to the end of the table it just

keeps going. And the baby will be, like, really fascinated by it and be really intrigued because it's like shocking to them, this whole schema they thought is like completely broken. And um... I feel like it's kind of the same way for adults [being exposed to the Oberlin conception of gender] but even more so! Because [the traditional conception of gender is] already so solidified in their minds like... to break that is like really extreme for them. And I don't think they're intolerant it's just like... it's not something that they would personally feel comfortable with. It's really far outside their comfort zone (Steven 10/26/2009).

Whether this process of integrating one's prior conception of gender with the Oberlin conception is effortless or difficult, each of my informants has been impacted by it, and I would argue that a number of sectors of Oberlin—particularly the social sciences academic departments, residential education, and portions of the student community—aim to influence students this way. I asked David what he feels the Oberlin community wants students to take away from the Oberlin conception of gender in terms of ideas and behavior, and he responded with words tinged by doubt and frustration.

That's the thing, I don't really understand what they're trying to get me to do, personally. Be more mindful? You know... do you want me to ask every single person I see on the street what gender, what pronouns they use? Is that... is that what you want me to... is that what you're trying to do? Are you trying to get me to, you know, on the next survey that I write up or draft say, 'male,' 'female,' or 'don't identify'? I mean, what exactly is your goal? What do you want me to do? (David 11/04/2009)

In view of the extensive research I have conducted, and my four years as a student on Oberlin's campus, I would argue that David essentially answered his own question. Yes, the manifestations of, and support for, the Oberlin conception of gender combine to nudge students toward particular ways of thinking about, and behaving in regards to, gender. The Oberlin conception of gender, by its very nature, challenges many of my informants to think about gender in an entirely new way, and contradicts the traditional conception of gender that most Americans live with on a daily basis. Even David, who

insists that he is doubtful of the lasting impact of Oberlin's conception of gender upon himself and other students, and who has had a very difficult time integrating his initial (and very traditional) notions of gender with the Oberlin conception of gender, revealed that he sees attending Oberlin as having directly impacted his ideas about gender and transgender issues, and as having caused him to feel less uncomfortable with thinking about and discussing them.

I've definitely gotten much better at talking about it. I really started with nothing... it just wasn't an issue. Of course we had discussions about why boys and girls should be equal since kindergarten but... this is really a more, uh, sweeping, kind of bigger picture discussion that happens here at Oberlin. And that's... that's good. I know this place likes to stir things up and I'm all for stirring things up [...] For all the things I don't like about Oberlin, for all the things I think this place gets totally wrong, I think that it definitely forces you, even though it's uncomfortable at first, to kind of come to terms with these things (David 11/04/2009).

Some informants, like Alex, claim that the ways that gender functions on Oberlin's campus are not relevant to their own lives, but even he admitted that Oberlin's conception of gender has impacted him and will continue to do so in the future.

Honestly, and this will maybe sound a little bad, how many transgender or transsexual people am I going to meet outside of Oberlin? My guess? Not very many. Because there simply aren't very many transgender people in the world! Um... so... I don't anticipate these sorts of issues coming up a lot. I'm sure I will meet gay and lesbian people outside of Oberlin, but that's something that I was pretty okay with and pretty understanding of before I came to college. Um... I do now get the difference between sex and gender so I will take that away at the very least, and I will be able to... understand... [and] use the terminology and understand what it means and talk about it should the need arise (Alex 11/15/2009).

Some informants are so impacted by the Oberlin conception of gender that they are actively attempting to change their behavior to reflect it. Lee spoke extensively of this.

I do think Oberlin has changed my perspective and I guess really broadened and deepened my level of knowledge and understanding of issues of gender and gender identity. [...] I've just been thinking about

what we're gonna do in the world outside, afterwards and during, like, during breaks and stuff with this knowledge. 'Cause like... once I'm graduated and I'm joining different groups and organizations and the introductory questions in the beginning of a meeting, and... I think it would be really good to make pronouns standard across the country and across the world as one of the introductory questions! Like... what's your name, where are you from, what's your job, what did you join this organization for, and what's your gender identity? 'Cause that's important to know! [...] I think it would be really solid to make that the standard. Because we should. It's about respecting people as who they are. That's important. And... there are a lot of things that at Oberlin we sort of take for granted day-to-day in terms of where other people are coming from, whether people are going to understand—or if not understand, at least accept—and outside of Oberlin that's not always the case, and a lot of people on different issues I've heard say, 'get ready for the real world, this isn't how it works, you're gonna get a rude awakening and you're gonna have to act like everybody else does when you leave here,' and I'm like, 'that's bullshit! No! We need to bring them in line with us, not because we need to impose on them, but because it's the right thing to do!' (Lee 11/13/2009)

Oberlin College students, particularly those who come from traditional backgrounds, and whose gender and sexuality are largely unquestioned in American society at large, leave with conceptions of gender that have been directly shaped by their campus experience over four years. Due to their ambivalent relationships with traditional femininity, my female informants are more inclined than my male informants to take away important or life-changing insights from the Oberlin conception of gender once they leave here. However, students like Lee and Steven, who have become vocal proponents of the Oberlin conception of gender, are the school's true successes. The following quotation from Marisa's interview goes straight to the core of the way the Oberlin conception of gender affects students, and is an ideal example of how the sectors of Oberlin I have mentioned in this thesis hope students will see gender once they have spent four years here.

This whole [gender] applying to everybody? That came with Oberlin. [...] I never thought it applied to me before I got here. So I always thought like, 'other people can have issues with gender' and like, 'I don't.' But now I guess that's not what I think anymore (Marisa 10/12/2009).

Although this thesis was not intended to be comparative in nature, there are certainly aspects of my work that could be meaningfully analyzed from a comparative standpoint. To begin with, the traditional conception of gender and the Oberlin conception of gender were constructed in part through the literature I reviewed in the introduction to this thesis. Beyond that, my work ties into other work done on gender in the United States and beyond. This thesis certainly relates to C.J. Pascoe's study of masculinity in *Dude, You're a Fag*, not only in terms of her subject matter, but also because Steven talked about her book in our interview. Having my informants talk about the same literature I used in researching this thesis solidifies my claim that the Oberlin conception of gender is constructed in large measures from that same literature. My work also relates to the research being done on the body and what it represents—all of my informants invoked the body to varying degrees in their discussions of gender, which re-emphasizes just how important the body is in constructing one's own sense of gender, as well as the ways we perceive and label the genders of others. Also, my work feeds into the growing literature on men and masculinity in anthropology, and ties into David Gilmore's argument about manhood being so difficult to attain and so easy to lose—I feel that my male informants are so threatened by the Oberlin conception of gender because it challenges their masculinity and thus their manhood, which makes it difficult for most of them to embrace it. It would be fascinating to follow up these male informants in ten years and see how they feel Oberlin's conception of gender has impacted them in the long run. Will they stay comfortably situated on the masculine end of the masculine-

feminine dichotomy and never feel compelled to analyze the deeper meanings attached to those terms, or will they, like Lee and Steven, choose to criticize it?

I believe that the anthropology of gender would benefit from more ethnographies focusing on issues of gender identity for cisgender individuals. While focusing on transgender and genderqueer populations certainly sheds light on the complicated nature of gender, normative populations should not be overlooked because they too struggle fiercely with issues of masculinity and femininity. Further research should explore women's identities in relation to traditional femininity and their feelings of self-worth, as compared to men's identities in relation to traditional masculinity. Institutions of higher learning like Oberlin College are of particular interest for study because it is here that the social science literature that rejects reified biological dualism is already being disseminated and absorbed by the students. In places like these, we can watch a population's previous conceptions of, and behavior regarding, gender being challenged on a daily basis. Future research should focus on how fluid notions of gender affect "normal," traditional, more conservative segments of the population because, as my thesis has shown, it is clear that gender is not a concrete entity for anyone, so long as individuals are encountering conceptions of gender that differ from their own.

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Appendix I: Relevant Terminology

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity is the same as the one they were assigned at birth. This term is preferable to “non-transgender” because it privileges neither experience of gender as more “normal” by making it the unmarked term (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Drag: When a person who identifies as a woman dresses in “masculine” or man-designated clothing, or when a person who identifies as a man dresses in “feminine” or woman-designated clothing (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Female Bodied/ Biological Female: A person whose assigned sex is female. Separate from gender, this term refers to the cluster of biological, chromosomal, and anatomical features associated with femaleness in the human body (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Female Identified: Refers to an individual’s innate sense of self as a woman. An individual does not have to be biologically female in order to be female identified (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Gender: A complicated set of socio-cultural practices whereby human bodies are transformed into “men” and “women.” Gender refers to that which a society deems “masculine” or “feminine.” Gender identity refers an individual’s self-identification as man, woman, transgender or other identity categories. Most contemporary definitions stress how gender is distinct from sex and socially and culturally constructed, as opposed to being a fixed, static, coherent essence (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Genderqueer: A term that refers to individuals or groups who queer or problematize the hegemonic notions of desire in a given society. Genderqueers possess identities that fall outside of the widely accepted sexual binary. Genderqueer may also refer to people who identify as both transgender AND queer, i.e. individuals who challenge both gender and sexuality regimes and see gender identity and sexual orientation as overlapping and interconnected (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Hegemony: the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group (Merriam-Webster Online, Hegemony).

Heteronormativity: A term for a set of lifestyle norms that hold that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (male and female) with natural roles in life. It also holds that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation, and states that sexual and marital relations are fitting only between a man and a woman. Consequently, a “heteronormative” view is one that promotes alignment of biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles to what became called “the gender binary” (Wikipedia, Heteronormativity).

Intersex: Individuals born with genitals that show characteristics of both sexes or differ from their genetic sex (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

LGBTQ: Stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer.”

Male Bodied/ Biological Male: A person whose assigned sex is male. Separate from gender, this term refers to the cluster of biological, chromosomal, and anatomical features associated with maleness in the human body (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Male Identified: Refers to an individual’s innate sense of self as a man. An individual does not have to be biologically male in order to be male identified (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Sex: Separate from gender, this term refers to the cluster of biological, chromosomal, and anatomical features associated with maleness and femaleness in the human body. Sexual dimorphism is often thought to be a concrete reality, whereas in reality the existence of intersex people points to multiplicity of sexes in the human population (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Third Gender/ Gender Neutral Pronouns: Any of the multiple sets of pronouns which create gendered space beyond the conventional he, him, and his and she, her, and hers. Some examples include ze, hir, and hirs; ey, em, eirs; ze, zir, and zirs. The pronouns an individual prefers do not necessarily conform with how they may identify (e.g. “he” does not necessarily indicate that an individual identifies as man). “They” may be used in situations where an individual’s preferred pronouns are unknown. Third gender pronouns are sometimes referred to as gender neutral pronouns, but many within the community prefer the term third gender as they do not consider themselves to have neutral genders (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Transgender: Of, relating to, or being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that differs from the one which corresponds to the person's sex at birth (Merriam-Webster Online, Transgender).

Transsexual: An individual who strongly dis-identifies with their birth sex and wishes to or chooses to utilize hormones and/or sex reassignment surgery (or gender confirmation surgery) as a way to align their physical body with their internal gender identity (Multicultural Resource Center, Common Trans Definitions and Terms).

Terms of my creation--

The Oberlin Conception of Gender: Gender and gender identity are seen as fixed to the body, biological, and rooted in sexual dimorphism.

The Traditional Conception of Gender: Gender and gender identity are seen as fluid, socially and culturally constructed, and one's own choice.

Appendix II: List of Informants

| Name | Year at Oberlin | Date of Interview | Length |
|-------------|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Alex | Senior | 11/15/2009 | 68 mins 2 secs |
| Alyssa | Senior | 12/03/2009 | 50 mins 36 secs |
| Ashley | Senior | 11/15/2009 | 77 mins 55 secs |
| Charlotte | Sophomore | 10/28/2009 | 72 mins 45 secs |
| Claire | Freshman | 12/02/2009 | 65 mins 52 secs |
| David | Senior | 11/04/2009 | 92 mins 47 secs |
| Jack | Senior | 12/05/2009 | 65 mins 7 secs |
| Katie | Senior | 11/03/2009 | 100 mins 58 secs |
| Kyle | Freshman | 11/15/2009 | 59 mins 2 secs |
| Lee | Senior | 11/13/2009 | 66 mins 36 secs |
| Marisa | Senior | 10/12/2009 | 73 mins 5 secs |
| Nicole | Junior | 10/28/2009 | 70 mins 36 secs |
| Sophia | Freshman | 11/19/2009 | 54 mins 4 secs |
| Stephanie | Freshman | 11/18/2009 | 58 mins 20 secs |
| Steven | Sophomore | 10/26/2009 | 65 mins 38 secs |

Appendix III: Interview Questions and Topics

1. What do the labels 'masculine' and 'feminine' mean to you? What terms do you associate with each? What makes a person 'feminine' or 'masculine'? Do they stir any particular images, concepts, or examples of particular individuals in your mind? Is it personality? Looks? Both? What are girls 'like'? What are guys 'like'?
2. Do you consider yourself to be a 'masculine' or 'feminine' person? Do you have any particular traits that you would consider to be one or the other? How much of your personality, speech, behavior, appearance, manner, and interests do you think are directly affected by ascribing to stereotypical concepts of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'? Do you feel any pressure to be more/less masculine/feminine? Are there any stereotypically defined 'feminine' or 'masculine' traits that you have strong feelings about, whether positive or negative? Do you have any particularly strong feelings or ideas about men or women? Are there any activities or behaviors that you would love to engage in if it weren't for their ascribed gender appropriateness? Or vice versa? How would you like to be seen in terms of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'? Do the opinions of others matter to you? How do you compare to other people on campus/your friends? Do you have any heroes/heroines you look up to? Describe them.
3. When did you first become aware of the concept of gender? Do you have any particular memories that you feel define or contradict your gender identity? Can you describe your childhood through the lens of gendered behavior (i.e. playing with dolls [feminine] versus playing with trucks [masculine])? Did you ever question gender norms as a child? Did your family/hometown influence your gendered behavior, and how? Were you encouraged to do any particular (gendered) things?
4. During middle school and puberty, did you ever struggle with gendered ideals? Did you identify more with people whose gender you aligned with, or did not align with? Did gender norms become more or less pronounced during that time? Did your attraction for the opposite sex affect your gendered behavior? How about crushes/relationships? Can you describe any particular moment(s) in your life when gender had a significant impact on you or on the circumstances of that moment?
5. Can you describe how you get ready for a normal/day of going out? What are your perceptions of Oberlin College in terms of gender/sexuality? What do you think of the guys/girls on campus? What are your feelings about the diversity of gender identities on campus? What have been your experiences with, and thoughts about, Drag Ball? All-gender bathrooms? Safer Sex Night? The GSF department? What do the people you know at Oberlin think about them? Do you feel that attending Oberlin has impacted your own gender identity or your ideas about the concept of gender in general? Can you talk about the people you know on campus in terms of their 'femininity' and 'masculinity'? What are guys/girls on campus like? How do they interact with each other? What kinds of people on campus are you attracted to? What are your thoughts about homosexuality? Do you have any friends that are gay or transgender? Do you engage in any activities that are gendered? (sports, your major, videogames, tv shows, etc.?) Do you notice that/if talk relating to topics of gender/sexuality changes in different contexts?
6. What has been your experience with/of sexism? Do you think sexism is prevalent on campus? Have you ever been around sexism on campus? Do you have specific memories from your childhood related to sexism that made an impact on you? What has been your experience with/of sexism on campus? What are your thoughts on ways of eliminating sexism in Oberlin and in the US as a whole? Do you feel that as a man/woman, you are judged differently?

Any striking stories?