

‘This was my hell’: the violence experienced by gender non-conforming youth in US high schools

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This paper explores the experiences of harassment and violence endured by seven gender non-conforming youth in US high schools. Based on a larger research project, it opens an inquiry into the school-based lives of gender-variant teens, a group heretofore ignored by most academics and educators. Breaking violence down into two main types (physical and sexual), this work uses informants’ voices, along with ‘doing gender’ theory, to analyze the experiences of butch lesbian girls, trans teenagers, and genderqueer youth. The author also examines the impact of this violence on their self-esteem, academic achievement, substance use and sexual lives. This paper points out the similarities and differences between gender identity groups and suggests specific areas for school-based and cultural reform that would protect such teens.

High schools are institutions that provide a location for dynamics among various groups to play themselves out, and adolescence in the USA is a period in life when many teens become increasingly aware of the differences between them (Eckert, 1989). Consequently, this time is a difficult one for many teenagers, who find themselves confronting social challenges that were unknown in elementary school. While most young people face some difficulty, youth who belong to one or more minority populations often face additional risks. Because images of homosexuality since the 1980s have become so much more prevalent in the USA than in previous decades, teenagers are now able to associate themselves with ‘alternative’ sexual and gender categories at younger and younger ages (Burgess, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Wilchins, 2002). As a result, some youth are beginning their high school years already having claimed a lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgender, or queer¹ (LGBTQ) identity (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

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Unfortunately, because of their peers' hatred—a hatred that mirrors the prejudices present in adult culture (Eckert, 1989)—out-of-the-closet teens often confront situations in which they are not safe (Mallon, 1999a). The few statistics available on the experiences of LGB adolescents offer a bleak picture. While only 9% of heterosexual youth report enduring violence at school (Friend, 1993), gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers are not so fortunate. At least 50% of these young people lose friends upon coming out, and most face constant harassment from their peers, ranging from being called 'faggot' or 'dyke' to beatings, rape and, occasionally, murder (Friend, 1993; Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995, 1996; Califia, 1997; Burgess, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2001). Meanwhile, many teachers and school staff refuse to intervene, sometimes claiming that queer teens bring this harassment on themselves (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 2001). As a result, many LGBTQ students spend their time in school not learning but quite literally trying to survive (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1996; Human Rights Watch, 2001).

The gravity of this situation is compounded by the fact that queer teens' experiences in school have a deep impact on their self-worth (Burgess, 1999). LGBTQ youth commonly report feelings of shame, fear and self-consciousness as a direct result of the harassment that they face (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995). Consequently, these high schoolers are at disproportionate risk for self-destructive behaviors such as declining grades, cutting classes, skipping school, dropping out, unsafe sex, drug and alcohol abuse, depression and suicide.²

Among those queer young people who may have the most difficulty are trans and genderqueer youth. Their relationships with their peers are fraught not only with the usual adolescent tensions but also with the dynamics introduced when 'alternative' gender identities come face to face with the homophobia and transphobia that are rampant in almost all schools (Burgess, 1999). For example, gender-variant teenagers are confronted by difficulties that stem from the increasingly stringent gender rules to which teens are subject at and after puberty. This dynamic is especially relevant to teenaged biological females (Devor, 1997; Carr, 1998; Burgess, 1999). On reaching puberty, girls are no longer supposed to be friends with genetic males, are expected to date heterosexually, and are supposed to conform to heterosexual norms of beauty (Eder *et al.*, 1995). These changes can be quite painful for tomboyish girls and for female-to-male (FTM) young people.

For their part, male-to-female (MTF) teens confront other complications. We in the USA live in a society that attempts to eradicate feminine characteristics in boys and men. As a result, genetically male teenagers who are gender non-conforming often face adverse consequences when expressing their femininity (Moore, 1994; Swann & Herbert, 1999). For example, many transgirls who have tried cross-dressing in high school have been ridiculed, ostracized or physically assaulted by their peers. When compared with more traditionally gendered LGB youth, these issues frequently make the coming out process of trans and genderqueer teenagers more complex.

Literature review

To a great extent, transpeople in academic research have been relegated to the sidelines, appearing most often in clinical literature that constructs them as ‘patients’ who need a ‘cure’ for their ‘disorder’ (e.g. Strassberg *et al.*, 1979; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Many of these writings concentrate on those transsexuals for whom being trans is a problem, while ignoring transpeople who have smoothly incorporated a gender-variant identity into their lives (Cromwell, 1999). Included among such works are journal articles that focus on how to convince trans teenagers that they are ‘normal’ (read, not trans) (e.g. Money, 1994). Most of these essays and books are written by non-trans ‘experts’ who attempt to mediate between their transsexual ‘subjects’ and their ‘normal’ readers (Califa, 1997, p.2).³ Rarely does such research consider its relevance to the everyday lives of people who are themselves trans (Namaste, 2000).

Furthermore, there is almost no non-psychiatric, academic writing that focuses exclusively on trans youth (Burgess, 1999; Mallon, 1999a; Pazos, 1999). I have only found two such works. First, Jeffrey Williamson (1999, p.13) characterizes ‘Mark,’ a cross-dressing MTF high school student, as someone who needs to be ‘humor[ed];’ she is a person for whom her school’s employees clearly have no respect or understanding. In contrast, Gerald Mallon’s edited volume (1999b) is a compassionate look at how social workers should treat trans youth, and it offers insight into the lives of these teenagers from a social services perspective. Unfortunately, there are no other non-medicalized studies solely of trans adolescents and, aside from one essay in Mallon’s book (Pazos, 1999) and a recent article in the popular press (Denizet-Lewis, 2002), none focuses specifically on FTM teens. As a partial result of this blind spot in many disciplines, trans adults—to say nothing of youth—have been largely deprived of their own voices in the academy.

‘Doing gender’

Feminist sociology has much to contribute to the study of queer identities. One area that offers critical insight is ‘doing gender’ theory, which was inspired by Erving Goffman (1959). His work details how people present themselves to others to avoid being embarrassed, facing hostility or feeling shame. According to Goffman (1959), a person will examine others’ actions and appearances and will then use stereotypes to fit those others into certain culturally recognizable categories. Equally importantly, he posits that people often consciously use such assumptions to foster an image of themselves that may be in direct opposition to who they ‘really’ are.

Goffman’s focus on micro-level interactions continued in *Stigma* (1963), which explores the interaction techniques of individuals with various forms of social stigma. Goffman distinguishes between people who are ‘discreditable’ (i.e. have a stigma that they hide but that may be discovered at any time) and those who are ‘discredited’ (i.e. have a stigma that others either automatically see or about which they are told). People in the former group, he says (1963), must control the information that others

acquire about them, while people who fall into the latter category must deal with how to manage the tensions that arise when ‘normals’ interact with stigmatized individuals.

The first to use the phrase ‘doing gender,’ Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978) suggest that most of the work in gender attribution is done not by those who display gender but by those who interpret it. In this paradigm, a person has to ‘prove’ ze [*sic*] is a woman or a man only once: after a new acquaintance makes an initial gender attribution, that person holds the other’s gender constant and feeds all interactions with hir [*sic*] through the lens of that supposedly ‘natural’ femaleness or maleness. In this way, the authors focus on our cultural assumptions about the dichotomous and unchanging nature of gender and highlight the role of what Goffman (1959) would term ‘the audience’ in the process of ‘doing gender.’

Two decades later, Patricia Gagné and her colleagues (1997) examined the coming out process of transsexuals who, according to their data, most often cling to the standards of the binary sex/gender system in order to have their gender identities and expressions be understandable. Like Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), these authors see gender as something that is achieved in interaction with others, but they place ‘doing gender’ theory squarely in a transsexual context. Insightful though such studies are, however, gender non-conforming teenagers have played little to no role in sociology up to the present time.

The project and its significance

This paper is based on a larger qualitative project that explored the experiences of 24 out-of-the-closet trans and genderqueer high schoolers throughout the USA. That study, which culminated in my master’s thesis, details how these teens expressed their gender identities in order to balance the desire to be true to themselves with the need to avoid violence and minimize conflict.⁴ While my thesis focuses on the broader topic of the relationships between my informants and their straight peers, this paper concentrates on the school-based violence experienced by seven of the young people who participated in my project.

This work is significant on several fronts. First, because there are very few studies that focus specifically on the situation of trans youth and virtually no data on genderqueers of any age, it breaks new ground, uncovering the conditions under which these young people endure high school. Unlike much previous writing on transgender, it begins with the everyday lives of gender-variant teenagers and attempts both to present and to analyze their experiences (Namaste 2000). Moreover, my research is among the few works to look at the lives of gender non-conforming youth who are neither in psychiatric hospitals nor on the streets, and it is one of only two (with Eyler & Wright, 1997) to discuss the existence of self-identified genderqueer adolescents. Consequently, it makes a substantial contribution to academics’, activists’ and educators’ knowledge of such young people’s lives.

Methods

Study overview and sample demographics

I limited participation in this study to those people who went to school in the USA, were born no earlier than 1965,⁵ and were out as trans or genderqueer to at least one other person during their ninth- to twelfth-grade years. All who took part in this project signed an informed consent form, and a parent or guardian of those under 18 years of age signed it as well.⁶ While my informants' gender identities in high school were quite varied and their diversity in other demographic categories is notable, all but two of them are white.

Much of the racial homogeneity of my sample comes from my use of the Internet to find informants. Despite contacting every organization geared toward students of color that i⁷ could find at the universities to which i wrote, tertiary education in the USA is still disproportionately white and middle or upper class. Relatedly, only those who are able to afford computers, Internet service provider fees and modems or high-speed data lines have access to the World Wide Web in their homes. And while many public libraries in the USA now offer free Internet access, that access is sometimes limited by filtering software, and the library is not always a place where people feel safe visiting queer-related sites. Furthermore, by the time i was ready to notify publications and groups targeting people of color or younger queers about my project, i had already received over four dozen responses. Because of time and resource constraints, i could not start mining non-university, minority-specific sources for a rush of inquiries from other potential participants.⁸

I conducted face-to-face interviews with five participants and emailed questionnaires to 19 (see Appendix). As with Holly Devor's study (1997), my interview transcripts are about twice as long as the questionnaire responses. This difference in length is largely due to the ability to probe much more easily for full answers in interview settings; the time-lag involved in sending follow-up questions via email, as well as the comparative ease of speaking versus typing, undoubtedly shortened the responses of my questionnaire participants. The other major difference between interviews and email questionnaires stems from distance. For my interviews, i was sitting in a room with each informant, and our communication centered not on typed words but on eye contact, my responses to hir answers, and non-verbal communication. All of this human interaction was lacking for my email questionnaires, making it more difficult to establish rapport and trust; abolishing the possibility of 'real-time,' conversational give and take; and eliminating the ability of my informants and me to see each other in the context of a subject that centers at least partially around issues of embodiment.

After the data collection process was complete, i gave each interviewed informant the opportunity to review hir transcribed interview. All participants had the chance to critique a draft of the thesis before i finalized it, and i sent a bound copy of the final document to each informant in order to ask for feedback and in gratitude for hir participation (Devor, 1997; Cromwell, 1999). While none of the four who wanted to comment on an interview transcript or a thesis draft sent any

input, most of my informants have praised the completed thesis and none has offered any serious criticism. Finally, I continue to keep all of them updated on my ongoing use of their stories.

Definitions and writing style

Before introducing the experiences of the seven informants profiled here, i would like to offer a few definitions. First, following the lead of Feinberg (1998), ‘ze’ and ‘hir’ (pronounced ‘here’) are my default, gender-neutral, third-person subject and object pronouns. These terms are visually and aurally distinct from the more commonly used ‘s/he,’ ‘he/she,’ and ‘him/her,’ and they help to open the way for conceptualizing non-traditional gender identities and expressions.

Generally in this paper, i use the term ‘trans’ broadly to include anyone who does not easily fit the label associated with hir birth sex, be ze a drag queen or king, a cross-dresser, a transsexual, or someone who places hirself between those ends of the trans spectrum. ‘Transgendered’ is a more specific adjective encompassing those who experience a disconnect between their birth body and gender identity but who may neither have nor wish to have complete sex reassignment surgery, while i reserve ‘transsexual’ for people who undergo or want to have those surgeries. While ‘transgendered’ is often employed for transsexual men and women, as well as for transgendered people, employing the term ‘trans’ as the overarching word concretizes the distinction between transgender and transsexual experiences and self-concepts (Namaste, 2000).

Next, i use the relatively new term ‘genderqueer’ for anyone who identifies as such or who visualizes hirself as neither man nor woman or neither masculine nor feminine. It also applies to anyone who sees hirself as having some combination of all those traits or as having a gender that is unidentifiable in US culture. Being trans and being genderqueer are not mutually exclusive, and there are people who identify as both. In this project, however, i separate them in order to highlight the differences between these identity labels.⁹

‘Queer’ includes anyone who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, genderqueer or who is otherwise considered not ‘normal’ in regards to body, sexuality or gender identity in the USA. ‘Transboy’ refers to my FTM-spectrum informants, and ‘transgirl’ designates those teenagers who fell into the MTF-spectrum. ‘Butch’ i reserve for my informants who self-identified as such in high school, even if they later came out as trans or genderqueer.

Broadly, ‘gender non-conforming’ and ‘gender-variant’ encompass all transpeople, genderqueers, females who are masculine, males who are feminine, and people who in some other way defy the norms associated with their birth sex. In contrast, ‘biological’ boys and girls are those youth who feel comfortable with the gender label that they were given at birth, while the word ‘genetic’ refers to a person’s birth body and the gender associated with it in the USA, regardless of how that person self-identifies. ‘Gender identity’ is one’s inner experience of genderedness, and ‘gender expression’ is how one outwardly displays that gender identity, whether or not an individual is

trans. Finally, ‘binary sex/gender system,’ my own expansion on Gayle Rubin’s ‘sex/gender system’ (1975), designates the common assumptions that there are only two sexes, only two genders, and that sex automatically determines a person’s gender.

Writing style has also been a significant issue in this project. Because it is important for people to name themselves, i acknowledged my informants’ right to self-identify as trans or genderqueer, and i use the gender labels and pronouns with which each most closely identifies.¹⁰ Almost all of these young people chose pronouns that are associated with their gender identity—‘she’ and ‘her’ for MTF-spectrum informants and for females who continue to identify as butch, and ‘he’ and ‘him’ for FTM-identified ones. However, two in this paper made less traditional choices. Alluvion, one of my informants, uses ‘sie’ for a subject pronoun and ‘hir’ for an object pronoun. Another informant prefers the pronouns associated with his gender identity when i talk about him in his current life and his birth sex pronouns when discussing him as an adolescent. Hence, Taylor becomes ‘she’ and ‘her’ in high school, and ‘he’ and ‘him’ as an adult. It is then possible to have sentences such as the following: ‘For his part, Taylor discussed feeling threatened [by] boys at her school ...’ (page 717). Here, ‘he’ refers to Taylor in his current persona, speaking to me as interviewer, while ‘she’ refers to Taylor’s butch girl identity as a teen.

Because this paper is based on qualitative data, i have taken steps to maintain the integrity of my informants’ voices.¹¹ In general, their interview or questionnaire quotes include most grammatical mistakes, the use of the fillers ‘like’ and ‘ummm,’ and, especially relevant for email questionnaires, lowercase letters at the beginning of sentences and spelling ‘mistakes’ that are intentional (e.g. ‘sorda,’ ‘cuz’). Any deletions of my informants’ words are marked with bracketed ellipses, and unbracketed ellipses represent a questionnaire respondent’s decisions to leave a thought unfinished.

High school violence: just another day...

The incidence of harassment and violence experienced by LGBTQ youth is disturbingly high and often daily or systematic (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995). Such harassment can, in the context of many adolescents’ growing emphasis on admiration from peers (Eckert, 1989; Devor, 1997), be painful for both teenagers’ bodies and their emotional well-being. Those trans and genderqueer youth who refuse to conform to the gender pressures that they face are likely to experience isolation and are at very high risk for assault (Burgess, 1999; Swann & Herbert, 1999). For some, like Alluvion, this violence is so severe that they must change schools (Swann & Herbert, 1999). The situation for most gender-variant adolescents, however, is compounded by the fact that they are rarely given a choice about going to a particular school (or, indeed, about attending school at all), leaving them compelled to enter an environment where they may be assaulted on a daily basis.

My informants’ experiences bear out these sad generalizations. Twenty-three of 24 people in my study were victimized to some degree in high school, although the frequency and severity of what they encountered varied from person to person. In

order to better explore their experiences, i have divided the remainder of this paper into two main sections: incidents of violence and reactions to violence. The further categorization of violence into physical versus sexual is one that i imposed on my research for conceptual purposes, not a division that my informants necessarily made themselves (Eckert, 1989; Namaste, 2000).¹² The purpose of this separation is not to suggest that each kind of violence is easily distinguishable from the others (Human Rights Watch, 2001); indeed, rarely were the lines unambiguous, and rarely did my informants have experiences in only one category. Nor is it meant to imply that one type of violence is inherently worse than the other, for such a ranking would obscure the similarities while highlighting the differences between experiences. Even so, this division is a useful organizational and analytic tool.

Incidents of violence

Once one of my informants had come out as trans or genderqueer, ze moved from being discreditable to being discredited: hir stigma was now known, and these youth often found their gender identity used as an excuse for the treatment meted out by their peers (Goffman, 1963). Facing almost no race-based violence, my informants' honesty about their gender came face to face with fellow students' anti-gay and anti-trans bigotry, producing a volatile situation that often played itself out on the bodies of the teenagers profiled here.

*Physical violence: 'Full-contact hallways'*¹³

First, 11 informants from my total sample, including 6 in this paper, were shoved, pushed, smacked, punched and/or kicked by others in school. Alluvion, for instance, was shoved in the hallways. Katie was accosted one day after Math class and 'got beaten up once b/c [because] i was wearing a skirt.' Jeremy 'was shoved and pushed down stairs [...].' Falon got attacked on one occasion while she and some other students were high. Other times, her 'friends' either watched impassively when she was being assaulted by other students or sided with her assailants, once even holding her down while someone else kicked her. And for his part, Kyle 'was punched [and tripped] a few times while walking in the halls. why? again most likely because I was "different".' Kyle, along with several others in this project, knew that refusing to conform was sometimes a cause for attack.¹⁴

A few assaults were more serious. Below, Taylor describes and analyzes a brutal attack that was perpetrated by a wrestler and two other boys at a party:

[...] I had these three guys that didn't like me and I'm not totally sure why they didn't. But I think a lot of it had to do with my gender expression and my sexuality and just basically who I was. [...T]hey beat my ass on my [fifteenth] birthday [with a leather belt.... T]he guy that I was with [...] just sat back and watched while they did this to me. [...]t was just like, 'Okay, this is our chance to get Taylor.' [...] I cried and screamed and they still laughed and did it. And ya' know, like I was on my back with my legs [curled up to my face...]. But you'd know without [me] tellin' you, you know where else it [the belt] hit me.

This story reinforces the point that each form of violence in this paper is not easily separable from the others for Taylor was physically attacked in an area of the body that is sexually valenced. Indeed, he has since renamed this experience ‘a form of sexual assault.’

Two other informants also reported dangerous incidents. Both Falon’s and Katie’s arms were burned in school. Katie describes her experience: ‘once someone set my arm on fire after shop class. it was cos i was a “fag.”’ Falon had both of her arms burned but, similar to Kyle above, she wrote, ‘I think it was more a result of just being different than strictly trans.’ These two young people sustained serious physical injuries that could potentially have been life-threatening.

When i asked my informants about any other forms of violence that they might have encountered, four talked about being threatened. While Katie did not elaborate on her experience, the threats that Alluvion received were quite direct:

I was like followed a lot and threatened [...]. I would receive notes in my locker at the first school that were like, ya’ know, ‘We’re watching you,’ and ‘Don’t go out alone,’ and ‘We know where you live’ [...]. Yeah, there was the anonymous notes in my locker that were pretty fucked up ‘cause [...] they knew my address at my dad’s house, which wasn’t in the neighborhood. [...] And I didn’t live with my dad. [...] I was like, ‘This is deliberate, ya’ know? They want me to know they didn’t get this out of [the...] attendance office.’ And so that was pretty scary shit. And there was also like a series of very graphic notes about what people wanted to do to me, which were sort of scary.

For his part, Taylor discussed feeling threatened when boys at her school ‘would want me to have a threesome with them and their girlfriend. [...] I felt like that was really disrespectful. I mean, I know it is now. But I didn’t know how to like respond to it then.’ At other times, she was explicitly threatened by ‘guys who wanted to have sex with me and [... tried] to force themselves on me.’ In this way, the specter of being sexually exploited hung over Taylor’s school life, while Alluvion dealt with the fear of physical assault.

Sexual violence: ‘That one took me a while to get over’¹⁵

Six of my informants reported surviving sexual assault or rape in high school. Kyle writes about his experiences: ‘I was grabbed a lot. Usually while it was happening they would say something along the lines of ‘see you have tits ... not a dick.’ Yeah fun fun.... Fuckers [... A] lot of the guys had a thing with trying to poke me with pens and such in between my legs. [My uniform] skirt [was] often lifted up.’ Hence, Kyle had to cope with his peers’ frequent invasions of his personal space and their attempts to hurt him in areas of the body that are ideally used only for pleasurable and consensual sexual encounters.

Unfortunately, he was not the only young person in my study to have sexual contact forced upon him. Alluvion was among my other informants who talked about being assaulted:

[The boys would] drag me into the bathroom and like humiliate me and try to find out what I was. [...] I was totally like sexually assaulted by them [...]. People talk about how they were harassed in high school. And what they mean is they got raped. There’s like a

really big difference between these things! It's like, okay, [getting] harassed is [...] serious, ya' know? But [...] I want people to know that this language gets used to cover over some really painful forms of harassment that are [...] majors traumas in someone's life, ya' know? And it's, it is bad to have things yelled at you because what that carries with it is the *threat* of something happening to you that's worse, you know? And it *is* humiliating to get yelled at and looked at and stared at and spit at. *All* of these are things that happened to me at that school. But, you know, being *assaulted* [is not the same thing].

These repeated incidents of sexual assault had a major impact on Alluvion's life. Moreover, sie feels strongly that making a distinction between assault and other forms of harassment is extremely important, while sie also acknowledges a continuum of different types of violence.

For their part, Crystal, Jeremy, Katie and Taylor all came out as survivors of rape. While Jeremy and Katie did not offer any details about their experiences, the others were more forthcoming.¹⁶ Crystal was raped 'twice. Once by a girl who drugged me, and I'm not sure why she did it. The second time was by a guy who said that I was a monster, and that I had better enjoy what he was doing to me, because it was the only way anyone would ever touch me ... that one took me a while to get over.' Crystal's experiences demonstrate that, while reported rapes are often confined to 'boy = perpetrator/girl = survivor' scenarios, this assumption does not always hold true, for Crystal is genetically male, and one of her rapists was biologically female.

Taylor's experience was also slightly anomalous in that it became a public event. In addition to the sexual assault described in the previous section, Taylor talks about her high school rape below:

[W]hen I was fourteen, this guy who was my eighth grade best friend's brother [raped me.... T]hat was a bad experience 'cause it happened [...] at a club above this party. And I was drunk. And I had been tellin' him, 'No,' for like a year before that. [...W]hile it was happening, somebody opened the door and started laughing and then, then told the whole party. And so I got up and I cried and I left [...].

Hence, not only did Taylor have to deal with being raped, but she had to face the fact that this violation occurred while other people watched: public ridicule seems to have followed her as a regular part of the sexual violence that she faced.

The impact of violence on the trans and genderqueer self

Enduring such violence, regardless of its type, can be highly detrimental to one's bodily, emotional and mental health. These experiences, especially when coupled with a belief that one's oppression is justified (Mallon, 1999b), often lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, rage, social withdrawal and depression, as well as to self-destructive behaviors like hitting or slashing one's body, the abuse of prescription or illegal drugs, dropping out of school, unsafe sex and suicide (Devor, 1997; Burgess, 1999; Pazos, 1999; Swann & Herbert, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2001). Most of the youth in this study exhibited responses such as these.

For Alluvion, Taylor, and many other informants, fear was either highly pervasive or common enough to be a regular part of life. Jeremy, for instance, described being

out to everyone at his school as very frightening: 'I just walked around the world really, really afraid [...], jus' feelin' like, "Someone's gonna' kill me.'" Some, like Taylor, reported that a sense of dread, along with the violence itself, led them to feel powerless: '[It] made me feel like I didn't really have a lotta' control over my situation, ya' know?' In addition to constant anxiety, violence had other emotional consequences. Taylor commented that what she encountered 'beat me down but at the same time made me harder.' Others said that they felt (in Kyle's words) very 'angry' at their peers. For some, the abuse had an intellectual impact. Among them was Katie, whose experiences were directly related to her failing grades. Like Alluvion, Falon, Jeremy, Kyle, and two others in this study, Katie dropped out of high school because of the violence that she endured.

Self-esteem was also impacted. Many of the youth in this project reported that the violence and the fear thereof 'made me feel like shit, like I was worthless' (Kyle). Katie commented that the harassment she experienced made her 'sick' and 'hurt my self-esteem more than i admitted.' The violence caused Jeremy to be 'ashamed.' And Alluvion writes that, as a result of hir victimization, sie felt:

... like i deserved all of it because i wasn't normal, like i was sick, bad, wrong, diseased ... and also, something i can't explain further than to say it made me feel like i was somehow a perpetrator—because i knew that the nature of what was 'wrong' with me was sexual/about my sex¹⁷, i felt like i was criminal in some way, or i was perpetrating unwholesomeness on all of the normal people around me, just by being there.

Hence, even though Alluvion realized that hir peers were being 'stupid' about hir gender identity and expression, sie could not escape the feeling that sie was somehow to blame. Hir self-esteem, and that of many others in this work, suffered greatly as a result.

Highly correlated with low self-esteem, depression was reported by many of my informants, including Alluvion and Taylor (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Unfortunately, violence and the resulting depression can be so severe that up to 50% of trans youth and adults attempt suicide (Moore, 1994).¹⁸ In this study, Falon, Taylor and one other informant mentioned being suicidal. Falon's self-concept was so degraded from her peers' treatment that she did not feel there was 'any reason to go on.' She was traumatized to such an extent that she 'thought I was better off dead anyway. It [the violence] wasn't fun. But I didn't really think it was causing any harm.' For her part, Taylor went as far as trying to commit suicide because she was struggling to come to terms with her sexual orientation in the context of the abuse that she encountered. Unfortunately, the forgoing accounts make it clear that physical and sexual assault were common methods of terrorizing these gender-variant students and of punishing them for their 'deviance.'

Actions against and reactions to anti-trans violence: avoidance, retaliation and survival

Despite the myriad negative consequences of violence, each youth in this study developed strategies for dealing with the hatred that ze confronted. These coping mecha-

nisms ranged from predicting and preventing attacks to fighting back when assaulted. Many of these tactics can be analyzed under the rubric of 'doing gender' theory because, regardless of the level of violence that they encountered, these teens produced their gender knowing that others were watching (West & Zimmerman, 1987). For them, doing gender was an inherently social process: it involved not only acting *as* a certain gender but acting *toward* others as a member of that very gender category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Consequently, my informants utilized the genderedness of their self-presentations to augment the degree to which they were protected from violence and to shape how they reacted to attack.

Trying to escape being targeted: doing avoidance, doing gender

First, my informants attempted to prevent attacks from ever happening. The most common approach, reported by Falon, Jeremy, Katie, and others, was to try to avoid the students who were prone to assaulting them. Relatedly, in the hopes that staying with peers would deter violence, youth like Alluvion, Katie and Taylor hung out with people at school whom they considered either trustworthy or, at a minimum, not especially dangerous. When being with other students was either undesirable or impossible, some informants employed different avoidance tactics. Alluvion, for instance, 'hid during lunch and recess, [and] got into drama class and stayed in there during free periods to "rehearse".' Others attempted to spend as little time as possible in the school building. Jeremy utilized this strategy when he came to school late and departed early, and Alluvion 'left campus with [the] druggies and ended up joining them in their activities.' Additionally, Alluvion, Jeremy and Taylor sometimes skipped school entirely because they worried about being attacked.

Displaying a specifically gendered image also helped some teens in this project. One common method of preventing attacks involved informants feigning that they were physically stronger than they actually were (Goffman, 1963). Many addressed the situation in a manner similar to Katie, who utilized the punk grrrl aspects of her identity to act 'tough.' Taylor, for example, explains her approach: 'I pretended like I was really powerful and like I would, ya' know, kick somebody's ass if I had to. But I hadn't been in a physical fight with anybody since I was in like fourth grade. [...] But [pretending ...] made me, uhhh, less approachable, ya' know, like less, less vulnerable [...].' As a result of Taylor's butch, punk self-presentation, 'other people didn't mess with me in high school' because 'with my leather jacket on, I always kinda' made myself seem like I was a badass [...] I had a lotta' people in high school tell me that before they knew me, they thought I was a mean person.' In this way, getting a reputation and displaying fearlessness through both clothing and attitude were successful strategies of self-protection for Taylor, Katie and several other informants.

In addition to the work involved in presenting themselves as tough, both Katie and Taylor were, in fact, prepared to fight should another student have decided to test their displays of strength. Taylor went to school equipped to handle any physical confrontations that arose by wearing an everyday item that she could employ as a

weapon: '[...] I always felt more secure having like my chain [connecting my wallet to my belt loop] on and like other things like that because it was like I had something with me.' Similarly, Katie would 'wear my steel toes and be prepared to kick some fuckin' ass.' While Taylor, particularly, was aware of the incongruity between her internal sense of self and her external 'doing badass,' she and Katie were equally as cognizant of the need for such a self-presentation and made sure that they were ready to bolster their portraits of self with action if needed.

Other informants did gender by accurately representing their strength. Jeremy, for example, utilized his body to his advantage. He got in several fights at school and 'would work out in the weight room a lot so that I got real strong. [...] It's like when you know you're physically strong, [...] you walk around feeling a lot safer.' Those facts, coupled with his fatness¹⁹ and overall butch gender expression, kept some of the other students in Jeremy's school away from him because 'it made them scared of me. [...] I was like more masculine than them and bigger and whatever and, umm, they couldn't fuck with me a much.' In this way, cultivating a sense of fear in one's schoolmates through a butch or punk gender presentation, especially when informants could and had already backed it up with persuasive physical self-defense, was often an effective means of staving off attacks.

Because they knew that preventing violence was not always possible, however, these teens attempted to remain ever vigilant of the people around them. Rarely knowing into which gender, sex or sexual orientation categories their peers were placing them, these youth needed to be constantly aware of the behavior and reactions of their fellow students (Goffman, 1963). As a result, my informants came up with numerous ways of predicting that they were about to be attacked. Signs of impending violence included getting looked at threateningly or receiving threatening notes (Jeremy); overhearing either talking (Falon, Taylor) or direct verbal threats (Alluvion, Jeremy); being surrounded by groups of people (Kyle); and being aware of what a particular person had said about the possibility of an attack either to an informant's friends (Jeremy, Katie) or to strangers (Alluvion). In this way, a high level of vigilance often helped informants to predict assaults that their gender presentations alone were unsuccessful in deterring.

Confronting unavoidable violence: doing retaliation

When faced with violence that they could not avoid, Jeremy, Kyle, Taylor and many other young people in this study tried to overlook it. If ignoring their harassers did not work, however, several informants chose to retaliate in the form of profanity. Jeremy, Katie, Kyle and Taylor all reported cursing at their harassers: '[I'd] just mainly cuss at them. It'd be like, "Fuck you! [...] You don't know me. How can you [...] say this to me?"' (Taylor). For these youth, the more pressure to conform that they felt, the more determined they were to dress and act as they desired.

Some teens went further, threatening their peers with counter-attacks. Jeremy, for example, intimidated his attackers with the possibility of public humiliation:

[...] I used to threaten like the other people on the wrestling team. I was like, 'If you don't stop harassing me and my friends, I am gonna' tell everyone on your wrestling team that I beat the shit out of you when you were twelve years old and that's gonna' be embarrassing because I'm a girl! Ha ha ha!'

Aiming at his assailants' pride, Jeremy was able to manipulate his peers' insecure masculinities and his own supposed girlhood to cow other students into leaving him alone.²⁰

While most of the youth in this project kept their self-defense on a purely verbal level, a few fought back physically when they felt pushed too far. Katie saved herself once when she 'kicked someone in the shins w/my [with my] boots [...].' Jeremy commented, 'I was a fighter. Like I would, if someone [...] said something that pissed me off, I would throw somethin' at them. [...] Or throw a punch. Like I wasn't about to jus' sit there and let it happen.'²¹ In such ways, these young people used both physical and verbal means to manage strategically the violence confronting their lives.

Post-trauma coping mechanisms: doing gender, doing survival

Once they had endured an attack, my informants had to choose how to face its aftermath. Many remained silent. Falon, for instance, 'kept inside' of herself and 'tried not to deal with it.' Jeremy was 'ashamed about either the kinda' violence that had been or the role I had played in it or jus' [...] being the way I was, like somehow that I was asking for it.' Other rationales for not disclosing the violence centered on relationships with peers. Jeremy 'didn't wanna' be a complainer,' and Taylor felt that she had 'to deal with this on my own.' Both of these butches believed that their friends could not understand the violence that they experienced, and both had friends tell them, 'That's life,' when they shared what was going on. My informants' disbelief that anyone could understand the brutality that confronted them was a result of the rampant homophobia and transphobia that they encountered. Unfortunately, their understandable unwillingness to confide in students, teachers or school staff further separated them from others, helping to create a vicious cycle of assault, isolation and low self-esteem.

A few of these youth responded to the violence by attempting to go back into the closet: they put on an intentionally false 'front' of looking and acting like the gender associated with their birth sex (Goffman, 1959, 1963; Cromwell, 1999). Although being in the closet is often derided in the larger queer community, these teens became 'highly accomplished liar[s]' and were able to manipulate social assumptions about sex, gender and sexual orientation in order to project a particular image of themselves to others (Garfinkel, 1967, p.174).²²

Falon, for example, was among the genetic males in my project who acted masculinely because of the violence associated with being labeled 'queer.' She noted that, in order to fit in, 'I had to try to be male as hard as I could.' To accomplish the goal of being masculine, most of the closeted transgirls in this study focused on public displays of 'boy-ness.' Crystal, for instance, 'tried getting myself interested in sports and physical activities (I even tried out for the wrestling team my sophomore year [...]).'²³ She also attempted to become engaged in 'guy television shows and movies'

like 'car chases and gore for gore's sake and bad plot and stupid, scantily dressed women.' In this way, adhering to strict rules about how to express themselves and what activities were 'appropriate' became extremely important (Goffman, 1959).

Like Crystal and Falon, my informants could look to the behavior of others in their birth sex category to see the standards that they needed to follow in order to present a solid front of 'normality' to an audience of their peers (Goffman, 1959, p. 81). Alluvion, for example, endeavored to combine clothes and actions to be taken as a heterosexual girl:

People perceived me as female. So I really tried to be female and like a straight girl. Like I really fucking tried. This was ninth grade. And I did everything right, ya' know? Like I was the most feminine, hyper-straight girl you ever saw in your entire life, except for some reason, ummm, oh, boys would drag me into the men's bathroom and be like, 'Don't you belong in here, little faggot?,' and all kindsa' stuff.

Alluvion tried to use taken-for-granted assumptions about what girls look like—'hyper-straight' and 'feminine'—to achieve a modicum of physical and emotional security (Garfinkel, 1967). For hir, as for many others, utilizing the social meanings already attached to certain gendered actions was a way of gaining (or trying to gain) some amount of safety in school.

Those informants who remained silent by attempting to act 'normal' and/or by not confiding in others were likely to internalize the violence and turn it on themselves. Kyle, for instance, directly attributes his self-injurious behavior to the anger arising from what he faced: 'I was self-destructive from an early age. I hated myself, life and everyone else. I was a cutter.²⁴ I cut some in grade school and middle school, but i started cutting non-stop in high school. for a while there it was an every day thing ... i was also a heavy drug user.' For Kyle, as well as for Alluvion and Taylor, using drugs and alcohol became a way of numbing both the emotional pain of being a gender-variant or sexual minority youth and the physical pain of being the brunt of their peers' constant attacks.

Other informants responded to the violence that they endured by engaging in unsafe sex. Taylor discusses the fallout that she felt from being raped in high school:

I didn't respect myself anymore after I was raped. And it was like, 'Okay, whatever. I can be with these guys.' And it didn't mean anything to me. Like I would often wear my shirt while it [sex] was goin' on. Ya' know, just like pretend like it wasn't happening. [...] I hated every experience 'cause like I'd been with eleven guys by the time I was fourteen or fifteen years old. [...] I kept pretending like it was okay, and that was what was gonna' make it work for me was jus' by doing it. [...] But it *didn't* work. [...] My freshman and sophomore year I think were the hardest years of my life.

As Taylor's and others' stories demonstrate, in the lives of gender non-conforming teens, incidents of physical and sexual violence can quite possibly lead to substance abuse or suicidality as well as to feelings of loneliness, fear, self-consciousness and depression (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995, 1996). Nonetheless, my informants exhibited choice and agency in their attempts both to prevent and to deal with the assaults perpetrated by other students. Far from mere victims, the young people in this project strategically analyzed the situations confronting them and

gendered themselves in ways that balanced their need to be true to self with their need for physical and sexual safety (Carr, 1998).

Conclusion: moving from ‘I have no protection here’²⁵ to celebrating everyone

While starting from trans lives is important, it is equally important to move beyond people’s quotidian experiences in order to look at a society’s larger structures (Namaste, 2000). In a broader sense, then, my informants are not alone in facing the experiences that they did. Additionally, the hostility that they encountered points to specific areas for change both in schools, which are unfortunately designed to perpetuate a society’s divisions and hierarchies (Eckert, 1989), and in our larger culture (Namaste, 2000).

First, the incidents discussed here highlight the desperate need for comprehensive, age-appropriate sensitivity training of all educational staff and students in the USA. Second, gender-variant people’s lives must permeate all classrooms, and school libraries should be fully stocked with up-to-date writings on transgender, gender-queer, gayness, lesbianism and bisexuality. Third, suicide prevention and anti-bullying programs in schools must deal with the issues faced by LGBTQ young people. Relatedly, school psychologists need to be trained to deal sensitively and knowledgeably with gender non-conforming teens (Namaste, 2000). Finally, on an institutional level, school boards must pass non-discrimination policies that would make it a violation of school conduct codes to harass, assault or discriminate against students and staff on the basis of actual or perceived gender identity or expression. In such ways, adults can take responsibility for their role in how teens of all gender identities treat each other, for young people study more in school than just their academic subjects; they also learn what is socially acceptable from observing the behaviors that a school overtly condones, passively ignores or actively condemns (Eckert, 1989).²⁶

My findings and the theoretical framework of ‘doing gender’ also indicate areas for broader cultural change. Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, most of us continue to assume that there are only two sexes and that each sex has a gender with which it is inexorably associated (West & Zimmerman, 1987). How do such misconceptions limit the diversity that we can see and appreciate in each other? The pain through which many young people go as a result of the supposedly innate connection between sex, gender identity and gender expression has become clear in this work. In response, I am calling for a radical revisioning of gender, including the eradication of the binary sex/gender system, a move away from the assumption that there are only two sexes and two genders (Devor, 1997; Wilchins, 2002), and the elimination of all gender hierarchies and other forms of injustice (Califia, 1997).

Attaining such an end will require much political, cultural, economic, legal and religious work on the part of gender radicals and our allies for generations to come. In setting out to accomplish these goals, however, we can begin to make our schools—and our society—safe for *all* youth (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995). Not only will trans and genderqueer young people then

be able to learn in school instead of just trying to survive, but LGB-identified youth, sissy-acting straight boys, butch-looking heterosexual girls and teens who in other ways defy the strict gender standards of our culture will feel more secure in their own lives and will find education a much less traumatic experience.

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Shannon E. Wyss graduated in 2001 with a Master's degree in Women's Studies and a concentration in Sociology from George Washington University. Wyss's political and academic interests include LGBTQ youth, feminism, transgender, gender-queer, and intersexuality.

Notes

1. See 'Definitions and writing style,' below, for a list of subject-specific definitions, including 'trans,' 'transgendered,' 'ze,' 'hir,' 'queer,' 'transgirl,' and 'transboy.'
2. For the statistical prevalence of these risk-behaviors, see Burgess (1999); Califia (1997); Friend (1993); Human Rights Watch (2001); Mallon (1999a); Moore (1994); Pazos (1999); Safe Schools Coalition of Washington (1995, 1996); Swann & Herbert (1999).
3. See also Namaste (2000). One break in this medical tradition is Eyler & Wright (1997), whose article calls for doctors to recognize the specific identities and needs of female-bodied trans youth who are 'other-gendered.' Another recent exception to this rule is Nestle *et al.* (2002), a valuable non-academic contribution that offers first-person accounts written by transsexuals, genderqueers and other transpeople.
4. Because this project is qualitative and relies on a combination of Internet solicitations, convenience sampling and snowball sampling, its findings are not generalizable.
5. This (1965) is the year on or around which many social scientists chart the beginnings of Generation X (see, e.g., Epstein, 1998).
6. The inclusion of youth under 18 has been integral to the success of this project. It allowed me to communicate with those who were experiencing high school life at the time of the study and who had not yet been influenced on an adult level by gender structures in our society (Devor, 1997; Carr, 1998). Unfortunately, as a result of the informed consent requirement, i lost at least two potential teenaged participants. Consequently, out of a total sample of 24, only 3 of my informants were under 18.
7. When not at the beginning of a sentence, i leave my first person subject pronouns lowercase. The fact that, in English, we only capitalize the pronoun 'I' seems indicative of the self-centeredness of much of Western culture. Consequently, my use of 'i' signals a rejection of egocentric cultural norms.
8. See Appendix A for details of the informants in this paper. Future publications will explore in greater depth the factors that contributed to or detracted from my sample's diversity.
9. For an alternative, broader use of the term 'genderqueer,' see Nestle *et al.* (2002). The editors of this book use the word to refer not to a specific identity but to any non-traditional gender expression.

10. This approach has been adopted by numerous other researchers, including Carr (1998). While a lack of standardized categories makes comparisons more difficult (Carr, 1998), honoring each person's self-identification acknowledges the fact that many trans and genderqueer people do not fit into society's boxes (Cromwell, 1999).
11. See Eckert (1989) for methods very like my own.
12. My thesis contains two other forms of violence, emotional and social, which have been deleted here owing to space considerations.
13. Crystal. In the context of this research, incidents of physical violence encompassed any altercation between two or more people that involved non-sexual contact between bodies or between bodies and other objects. This category includes spitting, hitting, pushing, shoving, kicking and beatings (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 2001).
14. See also Mallon (1999b) for the connection between gender non-conformity and victimization.
15. Sexual violence includes all relevant incidents reported by my informants and involves everything from sexually harassing language to pulling a student's clothes off to rape (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 2001). I have also intentionally used the phrase 'reported' rape or sexual assault because of the sensitivity of this topic and the widespread underreporting of this type of violence.
16. Jeremy's lack of elaboration on this topic was perhaps because, while he was talking with me in person, the others were writing their responses to a questionnaire, which may have made it easier to delve into such personal and painful experiences (Devor, 1997).
17. Alluvion describes hir body as 'sexqueer' and commented that, both in high school and in hir adult life, it is neither very masculine nor very feminine.
18. See also Burgess (1999); Devor (1997); Swann & Herbert (1999).
19. I use 'fat' in honor of the fat rights movement. This nascent group of activists refuses to use 'overweight' since that word implies that there is an ideal human size in comparison with which one can be 'over-' or 'underweight.'
20. See also Eder *et al.* (1995) on the importance of outsiders learning to insult those who are insulting them.
21. Eder *et al.* (1995) speculate that the ability to fight back raises boys' status among other boys, a dynamic that may have worked for informants willing to physically confront their harassers.
22. See also Carr (1998).
23. See also Eder *et al.* (1995) on the assumption made by many boys that masculinity can only be displayed through mistreating others. These authors (1995) point out that football and wrestling are considered by many boys to be more inherently masculine than sports such as baseball. Crystal was clearly aware of the association between wrestling and masculinity and used it to help make her safer in school.
24. Cutting is the act of using sharp objects to cause oneself to bleed in order to attain physical relaxation or emotional relief from a powerful internal chaos of feelings and psychic noise.
25. Alluvion.
26. See Human Rights Watch (2001) for many suggestions similar to my own.

Appendix A: Demographics

	Alluvion*	Crystal	David*	Dylan	Falon	Jeremy*	Katie	Kyle	Taylor*
Pronouns (subject/object)	she/hir	she/her	he/him	he/him	she/her	he/him	she/her	he/him	she/her for past; he/him for present
Gender Identity in High School	I didn't identify myself if I could help it.	Guy, male, transsexual	Gay transsexual man or gay FTM	FTM	Female	Butch dyke, female, woman, gril, tomboy	Grrrl, transgender-ed, femme, transsexual, dyke, queer, punk, goth, freak, nerd	FTM	Butch dyke
Sexual Orientation in High School	Queer, trans-sensual	Straight, with a fair deal of curiosity about women.	Gay man	Gay boy	I didn't label myself or act on my attractions to both sexes.	Butch dyke	Queer	Bisexual	Queer
Race/Ethnicity	White	European American	White Jewish	White	White	Eastern European Jew	Scotch-Irish	White	Irish American, White
Class Status	Working class	Lower class to upper middle class	Upper middle class	Upper middle class	Middle class	Working class to middle class	Working class	Working class	Working class
High School Info (E=East, W=West, S=South, MW=Mid-west, NS= Non-Sectarian, A/B=1st/2nd school attended)	A: Suburban W. Coast, Public, Coed, NS B: Urban W. Coast, Public, Coed, NS	Suburban E. Coast, Public, Coed, NS	Suburban E. Coast, Public, Coed, NS	Urban S., Public, Coed, NS	Suburban MW., Public, Coed, NS	A: Rural E. Coast, Private, Coed, affiliated with a religious cult B: Public Rural E. Coast, Coed, NS	Suburban MW., Public, Coed, NS	Suburban E. Coast, Private, Coed, Roman Catholic	Suburban MW., Public, Coed, NS
Year Left/ Graduated	Dropped out, 1996	Graduated, 1998	Graduated, 1998	Graduated, 2000	Dropped out, 11th Grade	Dropped out, 1997	Dropped out, 1999	Dropped out, 1997	Graduated, 1998

* = Pseudonym

Appendix B: Selected interview questions

(Most sub-questions/probes, skip patterns, definitions and all narration to introduce questions and to transition between sections have been cut here for space considerations. Present-tense verbs were used for those informants still in high school.)

Coming out

I. Could you tell me your coming-out-at-school story?

Friendship/acceptance

- I. Did you have any straight peers or friends at school who were really supportive of your gender identity or gender expression?
- II. Did you feel like you were able to be ‘fully yourself’ around your straight friends in school?
 - A. Did you ever lose a friendship as a result of your coming out?
 - B. Were you out to all your straight peers or just to some?
 - C. At that time, were you glad you came out to the people you did?

Violence/harassment

- I. I. Did anyone ever tell you or imply that you shouldn’t dress or act the way you did?
- II. Did you ever experience any of the following from your straight peers because of your gender expression in high school? (If so, can you tell me about the incident?):
 - A. Were you ever stared at?
 - B. Were you ever called names?
 - C. Were you ever put down or teased?
 - D. Did you ever have rumors spread about you?
 - E. Were you ever outed?
 - F. Were you ever asked to leave a specific location in school by your straight peers?
 - G. Were you ever not invited or uninvited to events or parties?
 - H. Were you ever shoved or pushed?
 - I. Were you ever hit, smacked, punched, or kicked?
 - J. Were you ever raped or otherwise sexually assaulted?
 - K. Were you ever stabbed, shot, or otherwise seriously injured?
 - L. Did you experience any other forms of violence or harassment from your straight peers in school that i haven’t mentioned here?
- III. If you felt like someone in school was going to harass you or attack you, what did you do to try to minimize the chances of that happening?

- IV. Do you know anyone else in your school who ever experienced any anti-trans violence or harassment? If so, did it affect how you dressed or acted at school?

Demographics

- I. [Most questions here cut for space considerations.]
 II. Do you have any preferences for the way i spell any words when transcribing your interview?
 III. What pronouns (for example, he/him, she/her, ze/hir) do you prefer that i use when referring to you in my paper?

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