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The Refashioning of Gender Binaries within the Constructed Identity of Tomboy in Girlhood and  
Beyond

As more and more feminist scholars and activists begin theorizing, writing about, and working with girls in the midst of their girlhood, the idea of girl as central to feminism begins to expand. Within existing Girlhood Studies literature, theorists work to dissect the constructed image of “girl” we see in the media: one who is hyper-feminine, heterosexual, engaged in stereotypical “female” activities such as playing house and shopping, and generally behaving aggressively than boys. Girls are fragile and soft, boys are rough and harsh, establishing the gender binary from the moment a child is gendered. In the white supremacist, hegemonic heterosexual and patriarchal society pervasive in the United States, girls and women are expected to perform this fragile, soft persona through her hyper-femininity, which is seen as inherent to women/girls. The patriarchal structures in place are then able to reinforce the gender binary and keep women/girls in the role of “submissive,” through the essentialist binary view of gender.

In this paper, I write about the girl who, for a short period of time, exists outside of the realm of acceptable girlhood and femininity by donning the, either self-identified or put-upon, label of “tomboy.” “Tomboy” as defined by most academics and society as a whole, are “girls behaving like boys” or girls taking on the behaviors typically associated with boyhood, such as playing sports, wearing boys’ clothes, and showing more aggressive attributes (Morgan 1998).

By taking on these attitudes and behaviors typically associated with boyhood, these “tomboys,” or girls behaving outside of acceptable femininity, are directly combating the idea that femininity inherently belongs to girls/women, and masculinity inherently belongs to boys/men. The very existence of these “tomboys” deconstruct the notion that femininity, and all things labeled feminine, are essential parts of being female, thus disrupting gender essentialism and acting as a type of gender intervention. However, identities (and the ways they are constructed) and societal perceptions of those identities do not exist inside of a vacuum, and the “identity” of tomboy engages within the existing social structures that reinforce gender every day. I argue in this paper that the concepts of gender intervention embedded within “tomboyism” works to deconstruct the gender binary, while the social construction of “tomboys” as a label put-upon girls existing outside of acceptable girlhood actually reinforces the gender binary that constructs women as submissive, thereby reinforcing misogyny. I argue that, as a society and as academics, we need to step back from the concept of the “tomboy” and of the girl acting as either a “boy” or a “girl” and towards the objective of girls acting as they are, free of any notion of “gender” and the perceived behaviors and attributes attached to it.

As stated above, the new field of Girlhood Studies is primarily focused on the ways femininity is forced upon girls as a way to indoctrinate them into the social system of woman/girl as submissive and man/boy as dominant. In her work, Sarah Projansky is concerned with the binary of the “at-risk” and the “can-do” girl, which states that girls are either independent and empowered (can-do) or lack self-esteem and “[engage] in risky behavior” (at-risk) (Projansky 2014). However, this analysis does not go in-depth with gender performance, the ways femininity is forced upon girl, or any examples of girls fighting back against these perceived

notions of essentialist girlhood. While conducting research for this paper, I often discovered authors, theorists and researchers falling back onto language that reinforced the gender binary in their writings centered on girls. J. Michael Bailey, Kathleen T. Bechtold and Sheri A. Berenbaum refer to tomboys as “girls behaving like boys” and do not clearly state that sex and gender are two separate concepts, or that gender is a constructed notion that has been naturalized into our society. This was a common theme I found among my research. This led me to redefine my idea of what a ‘girl doing tomboy’ might mean in regards to gender, and what ways any notion of gender, even in ways that could be perceived as liberating, could inadvertently reinforce the gender binary.

Instead of using “tomboy” as an identity for the girls I write about in this paper, I use the phrase “girls doing tomboy” found in Emma Renold’s paper *Queering Masculinity: Re-Theorizing Contemporary Tomboyism in the Schizoid Space of Innocent/Young Femininities*. I use this phrase as a way to center the girls and the ways in which they perform gender, and to indicate that the girls who do tomboy are aware of the ways gender affects their personal lives, and the social world they exist inside. Instead of seeing gender and gender expression as a static identity, I see gender as a performance and social construction that moves and shifts according to context. Through repeated and intrusive gender socialization, gender appears as fixed, static, and binary. While I still attest that the language of “tomboy” fits within the hegemonic heterosexual construction of gender, the act of girls “doing tomboy” understands gender as an ever moving and changing performance. Masculinity in girls, or any rejection of constructed femininity within girls, is a behavior that allows girls to express themselves outside of traditionally assumed gender binaries and does work to deconstruct the prevailing ideology that gender is real.

However, because the dominant culture works within this ideology and femininity is inherent to women, I discuss the ways girls and women are pressured and forced back into stereotypical behaviors of femininity once they reach a certain age of maturity.

Within the field of Gender and Women's Studies, scholars and theorists make a clear distinction between sex and gender. Gender is theorized as a social construction, which states that gender categories of 'man' and 'woman' are constructed identities that work to keep women in the subordinate role to men. Within the United States, gender and sex are seen as inherently linked, and certain attributes and behaviors are attached to each gender. Men are constructed as masculine, and women are constructed as feminine, and each gender category comes with its own behaviors, physical features, and traits attached (West and Zimmerman). Femininity, I argue, is used as a way to force women and girls into submissive roles within the heterosexual patriarchy. The construction of femininity is weak, submissive, and forces women to be sexually appealing to men at all times, and is implanted as a source of control. Because of gender-essentialism, all women and girls are assumed to be feminine because of their gender. Girls who do tomboy, for a short time during their girlhood, act as an intervention against this gender essentialist theory.

From a young age, children are introduced to these constructed gender categories and are expected to perform their gender in the ways prescribed by society. However, not all children strictly adhere to these constructed identity groups. Girl's youth, in particular, disrupts gender-essentialism because their enjoyment of "boys" activities and "boys" clothing starts from a young age, which intervenes on the idea that gender, and its behaviors, arise directly from birth. This allows girls, for a short time, to live outside of the prescribed femininities associated with

women/girls. However, what space is there for children, particularly girls who are expected to perform femininity so they can take on their role as the “submissive” woman later in life, to subvert and challenge these gender-essential notions? Renolds’s argues that the space of tween girlhood is “a significant ‘middle’ and a space for some radical disruptions of normative modes of doing and being ‘girl’” (Renold 2012, 133). This notion of girls having critical agency to challenge and disrupt gender essentialism is often ignored. Agency and social awareness is not something we ascribe to girls. Instead, girls are constructed as passive, weak, and unable to understand the ways society influences their lives.

However, girls doing tomboy, and even “girly girls” are often aware of the ways gender is forced upon them and, as they age out of their younger years and into their tween and teens, become increasingly aware of the consequences or rewards of performing gender in a certain way. In their youth, girls doing tomboys will often call themselves boys, or insist on being “honorary boys” when they play with their male friends (Renolds 2012). Girls doing tomboy often refuse to wear skirts or dresses when they enter their tweens and teens, do not wear makeup like their other female friends, and avoid talking about the attention of boys (Carr 2005). This refusal to enter into the feminine heterosexual matrix disrupts the gender-essentialist binary.

Additionally, girls doing tomboy often express positive consequences and feelings of self-confidence while engaged in their “tomboy” behavior (Morgan 1998). The act of doing tomboy allows girls to express themselves as they truly are before gender socialization becomes heavily embedded within their social lives, the media they consume, and the gender policing they encounter from their family and peers. However, it is theorized that girls are “allowed” to do tomboy for a brief moment of time in their life because it is “believed that girls will eventually

stop the behavior” and fold themselves in femininity when they hit a certain age (Morgan 1998, 790). The “acceptance” of girls doing tomboy is typically seen among younger girls, before they age into sexual maturity and are expected to engage within the heterosexuality. Girls doing tomboys are then forced out of their “boyish” behaviors and into femininity as a way of reinforcing the gender binary on bodies that will soon engage in compulsory heterosexual behaviors. Girls/women, then, who do not engage in femininity and engage in behaviors/traits/performances that are more aligned with masculinity are seen as dangerous and as a threat to the power of men and are thus intimidated back into femininity in various ways.

I argue that young girls, who are seen as “sexed” in the ways of assumed heterosexuality and assumed potential motherhood, are not yet “sexed” bodies expected to engage in sexual rituals or relationships with boys. Girls’ play and toys, such as playing house and playing with dolls, are expected to prepare them for eventual motherhood and for assuming the role of the “submissive” woman to the “dominant” man in a heterosexual relationship. However, since children, especially girls, are constructed as passive and weak, they are not “sexed” in the same ways women and teenage girls are. This is demonstrated in the “can-do” and “at risk” girl, where the “can-do” girl is preparing for her role of feminine mother but not yet engaged in sexual activity due to her young age (Projansky 2014). This gap between the potential “sexed” body of the girl and the enforced “sexed” body of the tween/teen girl allows for girls doing tomboy to exist. They are seen as children and assumed to be innocent and thus not engaged in (hetero)sexual activity. Girls doing tomboy can exist within this gap because it is assumed they will leave this innocence once they enter into their (hetero)sexuality. This assumption is then forced upon girls doing tomboy through media, their peers, and their family. Girls are expected

to perform femininity to engage in heterosexual rituals and to make themselves physically appealing to boys. If they do not, girls doing tomboy are often teased, harassed and targeted (Renolds 2012).

Additionally, if girls doing tomboy do not discard their unfeminine traits as they age into “sexed” bodies, they are often labeled as lesbians or trans-boys (Carr 2005). It is often assumed that “noncompliance with gender norms signifies homosexuality” (Carr 2005). This gender and sexuality conflation assumes that femininity for women is the norm, and anything outside of that must be “other.” Since homosexuality is viewed as the deviant and “other” in society and heterosexuality is viewed as the standard, girls doing tomboy and lesbianism become linked. Then, because all children are assumed to be heterosexual, girls are forced back into femininity as a way to make sure they are sexually available for men and adhere to the assumed “correct” sexuality. Girls doing tomboy often cite female friends gender policing them so they will appeal to male classmates, and family members intimidating them back into femininity (Legge 2012). Additionally, girls look to the physical maturation of their breasts and hips, saying it felt “natural” for them to leave their “tomboyism” once they matured physically (Carr 2007). These girls doing tomboy see their “boyish” behavior as obsolete once they enter into sexual maturation, which indicates they are aware of their bodies becoming “sexed” and begin to attempt to fit themselves into respectable modes of femininity.

As illustrated above, the concepts of gender intervention embedded within girls doing tomboy allows for a performance of their gender outside of the arena of respectable femininity. However, as girls age into their “sexed” bodies and are expected to engage in heterosexual rituals, girls doing tomboy are then forced back into femininity to reinforce the gender-



essentialist binary. This femininity is then constructed as “submissive” to the man’s “dominant” and used to subordinate women. However, while girls doing tomboy could play an important role in questioning gender-essentialism and deconstructing gender, there has been a surge of popular culture coopting the ideas of gender invention embedded within “tomboyism” and reconstructing it to reinforce femininity, and thus submissiveness, onto girls/women.

The emergence of the “tomboy chic” on fashion runways acts as a way to “intervene into female masculinity” (Skerski 2011). Skerski argues that fashion is coopting the tomboy identity as a way to suggest that “tomboyism” is delayed maturation into normalized and assumed naturalized femininity. Within popular culture, there has been a recent push for the “tomboy style” which often involves boyfriend jeans (loose fitting jeans), sneakers, t-shirts, and an assumed desire to wear “easier clothing.” However, this style is advertised as allowing girls to be “pretty tomboys” which immediately sets up the assumption that tomboys are not pretty (or worthwhile) because they do not exhibit hyper-femininity or appeal to men (Meltzer 2015). These advertisements show girls wearing loose fitting clothing but still donning a face full of makeup. They typically have long hair. This cooptation of ‘tomboyism’ gives the allusion of destabilizing concepts of femininity, but actually reframes femininity for women with all the same assumptions of submissiveness attached.

This is also evident within popular culture depictions of girls doing tomboy. The superhero America Chavez, a Latinx lesbian superhero in Marvel comic books, is depicted as “tomboy chic” in the newest edition of her comic book series, the first where she will be the main character (Rivera 2017). While she is strong, stronger than most men, has large muscle mass, is loud and brash and unapologetic about her feelings or opinions, she is still depicted

wearing a full face of makeup, and wears clothes that are tight to her skin, and show off her body. While she has a non-normative sexual orientation, I argue that her physical depiction of “tomboy chic” is used as a way to still cater to the male gaze and to make sure she's not “too butch,” “too gay,” or “too masculine.” Tomboy chic is used as a ploy within media to enforce constructed femininity, and thus tell women they are ultimately submissive to men. While it might seem as if women have more agency within their self-presentation, tomboy chic devalues the gender intervention potential of the girl doing tomboy and rescripts it into the heteronormative patriarchy.

While the act of girl doing tomboy—engaging in activities outside of respectable femininity, dressing more “masculinely” and taking more risks—acts as a gender intervention, the socially constructed label of tomboy, and the ways girls interact with that label, actually reinforce the gender binary. In the current literature on the trend of girls exhibiting behaviors more aligned with the constructed gender of “boy,” the label “tomboy” is often used. Tomboys are often described as opposite of “girly girls,” and as girls who do more “boyish” things and are more interested in “boyish” activities. However, this language relies on constructed ideas of gender and what Emma Renold calls “gender dualism,” which “keep “masculinity” and “femininity” in their place, each locked into their unequal relationship of power and powerlessness” (Renold 2012). The language of “tomboy” continues the idea that certain sets of behaviors, likes and dislikes, and attitudes are attributed to maleness and masculinity, while another set of behaviors are attributed to womanhood and femininity. The phrasing “tomboys” reinforces the idea that gender is inherently real and not a social construction manufactured to keep women and men in boxes designed to create and sustain gender hierarchies, with men at the

top and women at the bottom. Instead of allowing girls to act as they naturally are, and engage in behaviors and attitudes that express their likes and dislikes, the term “tomboy” has been constructed, and then placed onto these girls, as an identifier that signals these girls are acting like boys, and not girls, in their childhood. This label takes away the agency of girls doing tomboy, and instead constructs them as girls who are attempting to be “something else,” and not just girls enjoying their girlhood. As constructing them as “not-girls” this takes away their powers as girls to challenge gender essentialism, which ultimately stripes them of their potential intervention powers.

As I mentioned throughout this paper, girls are often aware of the gender binaries forced upon them from a young age. Girls who do tomboy often see themselves in contrast with girly girls and knowingly reject femininity, feminine role models, and anything that might be assumed to be “girly” (Leggae). Through this rejection, Legge argues that girls are critically analyzing the way gender is constructed around them. As they see their brothers or male classmates allowed more freedom, more verbal and physical expression, and are taken more seriously, girls reject femininity, often renouncing the notion of “girlhood” as a means to gain power within the system of patriarchy (Legge 2012). Girls are aware of the unequal power dynamics between men and women, and, because the patriarchy constructs the female body as weak, submissive and subordinate to men, girls doing tomboy are attempting some sort of agency and dominance within their own life. However, in the process of their attempt of grabbing personal agency and control, girls doing tomboy often reject that they are “female” because they give into the ideology that women/girls are inherently submissive to men, and thus less valued, less significant, and their lives/emotions/experiences irrelevant to society as a whole. This erases

women's stories and the specific lives and hardships they face because of their womanhood, and all the forced attributes attached. This reinforces the gender hierarchy and states that women, who must engage in femininity, are subordinate to men or any of those who grab masculinity as power.

While I have demonstrated that there has been research showing girls doing tomboy reaping positive benefits from their performance of traits typically associated with the construction of maleness, the very nature of the word tomboy "is derogatory, implying that the girl has deviated from her appropriate gender role" (Legge 2012, 46). The patriarchal system, dependent on the unequal power dynamics between boys/men and girls/women, confronts the idea of female masculinity and girls acting out of their "submissive" roles by attaching an identity to a group of girls who intervene into the gender-essentialist beliefs that keeps this very system in place. I argue that the construction of tomboy does more harm to girls than good, and forces girls to see themselves as somehow "other" from their female peers, which then causes gender policing, internalized sexism, and competition between girl. Girls doing tomboy often view other girls and their feminine attributes as frivolous, weak and less desirable than the attitudes and behaviors associated with men (Legge 2012). Since girls doing tomboy are taking on the label of "boy" and rejecting the label of "girl," they are inadvertently reinforcing the misogynist gender-essentialist binary.

Since women/girls are constructed as vapid, submissive, and somehow "lesser than" men, which is reinforced through their femininity, this trend of girls identifying outside of the label "girl" as a way to counteract that stereotype is present beyond the simple label of "tomboy." In the book *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change Across the Americas* feminist scholar

and writer Jessica Taft discusses the ways girl activists are afraid to use the label girl to describe themselves because they do not want to align themselves with the narrative of girlhood that presents girls as vapid, self-obsessed children only concerned with material objects. Instead, these girl activists often construct themselves as “youth activists” or girls who do not “act like other girls” (Taft 2010). The girl activists detailed in this text, while attempting to demonstrate their ability to effect change to the adults around them, often focus on broad activism and less on girl/woman centered activism because they want to be taken seriously (Taft 2010). This shows that these girls are inadvertently giving into the social ideology that girls/women are not effective leaders, cannot make positive change, and that their lives and issues are not worth listening to. However when girl activists refuse to label themselves as girls fighting for other girls in fear they will be not taken seriously, or when tomboys do not want to be associated with their female classmates, a gender binary is again reinforced, with the idea that femininity is unwanted and weak on one side, and masculinity is sought after and prized on the other.

This gender reinforcement can also lead to girls doing tomboy believing their behaviors, physical appearance, and desires are actually signs alerting them that they might actually be men or want to use trans as an identifier. This is detailed in the story of Amber, a college aged woman who self-identifies as a lesbian in the chapter “Out: Online and IRL” in the book *Girls and Sex*, who begins questioning her gender identity once she begins presenting more masculinely. Because of the rigid definitions of gender (masculine equating maleness and femininity equating womanhood) the masculine presenting Amber felt the need to quantify her gender within gender stereotypes. Her reasoning for her possible identification as trans stemmed from her “dominance in bed, standing up for herself, planning to pursue a career in business, and hating to

cook” (Orenstein 2016, 163). Amber, a butch lesbian just beginning to understand her own sexuality, used the internet to explore the ways in which she could express herself. However, surrounded by gender-binary reinforcements, she felt that the identity of trans had to make sense, though the label made her uncomfortable. In *Girls and Sex*, Orenstein discusses the ways butch (which is a word within the lesbian community that represents a lesbian women presenting and behaving in typical fashions associated with men) is now seen as a “waiting room” for an eventual identification as a trans-man. She then asks “When we’ve defined femininity for their generation so narrowly, in such a sexualized, commercialized, heteroeroticized way, where is the space, the vision, the celebration of other ways to be a girl?” (Orenstein 2016, 146). I argue that our gender-obsessed culture, within both activists circles seeking change and groups stuck within the status quo, must let go of our hold on gender as a means of moving towards liberation.

This vision and celebration of girlhood that Orenstein discusses is not through donning the socially constructed label of ‘tomboy.’ The label ‘tomboy,’ within its core socially constructed meaning and connotations, identifies a girl as behaving “like a boy” and not like herself, a child free of any notions of gender. Within that label, there are still assumptions about sexual orientation, desire, and even gender identity. Sexuality and gender performance are often conflated, with the label or identifier of tomboy often associated with eventual lesbianism (Carr 2007). This ideology assumes sexual desire, and forces girls to see themselves as “other” without the proper time to understand the nuances of sexual orientation. This is also true with gender identity, and the way ‘tomboys’ or butch women are assumed to be trans before they are seen to be non-feminine girls/women. It seems that as we as a society, in an attempt to become more inclusive, also begin reinforcing the gender binary. When a baby boy reaches for a pink blanket

at five months old, or wants to play princess with his sisters, he is often assumed to be trans or gay before he has the critical verbal ability to express gender or sexual orientation (Orenstein 2016, 163). If a young girl doing tomboy wears ‘masculine-typed clothes’ or engages in ‘masculine-type play’ she is assumed to either be a young lesbian or a trans boy, completely stripping her of any personal agency she develops as she ages and beings to negotiate her specific place in the word. Within the construction of man and woman, masculinity and femininity, there is no room for children to grow and express their gender free from any constructed notions of what gender should be. Even within the constructed categories of man and woman, there are additional constructions that are formulated to keep the normative gender-essentialist binary that keeps women locked into their submissive roles. Women are constructed to be inherently feminine and thus inherently submissive, so any girls/women who deviate from that norm must have a label attached to them to account for these inconsistencies. A young girl showing confidence, self-reliance, and enjoying sports must be, by the standard construction of girlhood, wanting to behave or be a boy instead of expressing her internal desires. A teenage girl doing tomboy must be a butch lesbian or a trans-man, and is given no space to express herself free of gender binaries or gender expression/sexual orientation conflation.

I have argued throughout this paper that the fundamentals of gender intervention embedded within girls doing tomboy can be an essential tool in combating gender-essentialism that reinforces the gender binary and unequal power between genders. However, the construction of tomboy as a girl attempting to be a boy, is actually a reinforcement of those same unequal gendered powers. I include this critique of “tomboy” and “girls doing tomboy” not leveled at the girls themselves, but leveled against the pervasive and all-encompassing construction of gender

based on unequal power dynamics. I argue that scholars and academics need to create a new word for “tomboys” as this, in an attempt to study an important subset of girls in their girlhood, continues the myth that gender is inherently real. This myth restricts girls, *and* boys, from expressing themselves as they truly are and desire to be. If children, and we as a society, were free from the notion of gender, and free from the attributes and behaviors attached to these genders, girls could grow up as they are. They would not be forced into submissive femininity, nor would they feel as if they must take on the constructed mask of masculinity. Instead, girls could simply enjoy their girlhood as girls should.



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