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**'TO WHAT EXTENT IS "SEX" A CONSTRAINED PRODUCTION, A FORCIBLE  
EFFECT, ONE WHICH SETS THE LIMITS TO WHAT WILL QUALIFY AS A  
BODY?' (BUTLER, 1993: pg. 23)  
AN EMBODIED INQUIRY INTO FEMININE PERFORMANCE IN 2016 WITH A  
FOCUS ON THE FEMALE BODY AS RESISTANCE.**

**KATE READER**

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*Dedicated to my family: Mum, Dad, Joel and Ruby. You have continued to stand by me and your unfaltering love and support holds me steady and inspires me every day. I love you with all that I am and all that I have, thank you.*

*To women across the world:  
Here's to us.*

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## ABSTRACT

Judith Butler argued that gender performance and gendered ways of being were strategies of survival, which became so normalised, through everyday habits and habitual performances, that men and women became 'entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness' (1988: pg. 522). Butler further supposed that, in order to discern the conditions of oppression that certain gendered performances receive, we must examine the daily reproduction of gendered identities that maintain the distinct and fixed categories of man and woman: masculine and feminine. This dissertation aims to investigate and challenge the embodied social and historical constructions of femininity, in an attempt to discover how far they contribute to women's continuing subordination in British society.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2017, thousands of women in Britain took to the streets of London to speak out against the appointment of Donald Trump as the President of the United States of America. Among their protests was the celebration of how far women had come, but louder still were the shouts of how far we have yet to go. Despite progressions towards equality in the last century, I argue that we have stalled and, in recent years, regressed. Abortion rights are still denied, women don't receive equal pay for equal work, and are still being harassed in public places and in the workplace. Stigma surrounding menstruation and female body hair, I argue, is more prevalent than ever, and eating disorders continue to claim the lives of young women in Britain. This dissertation contends that female bodies, and the ways in which they are required to perform on a daily basis, are regulated and controlled to such an extent, that they perpetuate and sustain the inequalities faced by women in Great Britain.

From January to June 2016 I identified and resisted five cultural behaviours that were regular features of women's embodied performances of femininity in Britain in 2016; dieting, shaving, wearing makeup and appropriately feminine clothes, and using sanitary products during menstruation. I discovered that women are not afforded the choice to act and

perform as they please without fear of retribution. I found that certain women my age felt obliged to shave their bodies in order to feel more sexually attractive, and that dieting was a way of life for many. I ascertained that women's bodies are often judged and altered to fit a feminine stereotype that renders women in unequal opposition to their male counterparts and that, today, young women are required to be "beautiful" before anything else is asked of them.

Contrary to expectation however, my analysis of feminine performance uncovered the importance of certain daily habits to a number of women, and that to do away with these performances would not in fact result in the equality many women are fighting for.

Through an investigation into the development of feminist performance theory in the last century, an analysis of the increasing problem of gender inequality in Great Britain in 2016, and an evaluation of the practical methodology employed to realise my aim, this dissertation argues that it is to a great extent that "sex" is a constrained production, a forcible effect, one which sets the limits to what will qualify as a body' (Butler, 1993: pg. 23). I conclude by proposing that, rather than a complete eradication and subversion of embodied performances of femininity, as Butler had previously suggested, we can be open to an expansion of the very category. By providing women and men with alternative ways in which to embody their femininity and masculinity on a daily basis, and allowing ourselves to be open to an array of gendered performances, I reason that we can go some way to altering the inequalities that many women in Britain continue to face.

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## INTRODUCTION

I said to her, all that feminism you went in for! ... equal this and equal that ... Frankly I never saw what was 'feminine' about it. It's just another word for girls keeping dirty habits (Medea, 2015).

This practice as research inquiry was inspired by, and responds to, a production of Rachel Cusk's *Medea* at the Almeida Theatre on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 2015. Medea's character, Margherita Laera (2012) argues, has 'seduced and disorientated theatre-makers, writers and audiences for centuries owing to her multiplicity and complexity', and here she was again, adapted for a contemporary audience, challenging our assumptions of societal norms with her words and actions. Cusk had adapted Euripides' ancient drama, not for the first time on a contemporary stage, but in such a way that she effectively and definitively criticised performances of femininity that continued to constitute women's inequality in Britain in 2015. I am reminded therefore of Susannah Clapp's argument (2015), in a review of the same production, that writers increasingly turn to the ancients for echoes of our current torments.

This dissertation examines whether "sex" is still a constrained production, and how such a production is performed on and through a specifically female body. It will analyse the extent to which certain embodied feminine performances create and maintain female subordination throughout British society in the years 2015-2017<sup>1</sup>. It will then examine the practical methods by which I endeavoured to investigate the above questions and my resistance of certain daily, embodied feminine performances (shaving, dieting, wearing makeup, wearing feminine clothes and wearing sanitary products during menstruation), before making the argument that it is to a great extent that sex is a constrained production, one which is placed on both male and female bodies to qualify them as masculine or feminine, but with a specific relationship to the oppression and subordination of certain women throughout British society.

*Chapter One: A body limited: A historical contextualisation of gender in the twenty-first century* begins by defining the words sex, gender, femininity and

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<sup>1</sup> The years in which the investigation was completed.



masculinity as I have come to understand and use them. It then provides a historical overview of the development of feminist performance theory in the past century, identifying literature that already contributes to this field of research. It further examines potential reasons for the increasing concern regarding gender inequality in Great Britain today, and how such concern can be linked to our contemporary performances of femininity.

*Chapter Two: A Body In Protest* outlines the practical nature of my study and the importance of practice as research in the discovery and development of new knowledge. It will analyse the practical means by which I achieved my intentions, the methodology employed, participant and audience response, and final evaluation, all the while examining the effect of my durational, embodied, and experiential practice upon my current embodied performance of femininity.

*Conclusion: A limitless body* discusses the final conclusions made as a result of my embodied experiment and the ways in which I now move through the world as a feminine subject, suggesting potential ways in which others can play with their own embodied masculine and feminine performances.

### **The influence of Medea today**

In her publication, *Gender In History: Global Perspectives* Merry Weisner-Hanks (2011) stated that men and women have been thinking and writing about the female 'since the beginning of recorded history, trying to determine what makes them different from men and creating ideas for feminine behaviour and appearance' (2011: pg. 90). It was men, almost exclusively however, who defined the identity of woman and her role as a feminine subject within the realms of passivity (Cameron and Kuhrt, 1983: pg. 110):

To the man belongs the right of rule, derived from the fact [of] his physical and intellectual superiority, and to the woman, on account of her sense for order and beauty ... belongs both the authority and duty to execute the laws set down by the man.

(Hawley and Levick, 1995: pg. 75).

In ancient Athenian society the character of Medea symbolised an active resistance against the above ideas of feminine embodiment and performance.

She re-invented herself and defied convention as she refused to remain the silent feminine subject; modest in her actions and pure in her intentions<sup>2</sup>. Her speech throughout the ancient source indicated that she in fact possessed the agency to speak, which was not permitted at the time. The action of murdering her children destroyed the ultimate feminine role she was required to perform: that of producer, mother and carer. Medea demanded to be heard and valued, creating her identity not in the domain of men, but through her own defiance, performing through difference and ultimately resistance, perhaps 'to articulate a disruption and complete breakdown of the boundaries of gender, the city-state and social order as a whole'<sup>3</sup> (Gabriel, 2016: pg. 3).

The experience of playing Medea in 2015 prompted Kate Fleetwood to describe Cusk's piece as a comment upon 'cultural norms ... projected on you' (Hewis, 2015). Throughout the play the male figures attempted to deny her autonomy and laid blame at her door for the tragedies that befell her family; it was suggested that Medea's dwindling beauty, increased aggression and lack of moral standing were the causes of her husband's infidelity. 'I don't suppose you're on top of the physical side of things yourself. Divorce is very ageing you know' (Medea, 2016). Medea then chose to leave her children in the care of their father and live for herself, and when the children then attempted to take their own lives she was blamed. As a result Medea was cast out, mothers cradling babies at the school gates chastised her choices, '[s]he isn't exactly what you'd call a normal mother' (Medea, 2016). In Cusk's adaptation Medea remained the outsider who defied expectation and created her autonomous self through a

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<sup>2</sup> Euripides' ancient text told the story of a mother and wife betrayed by her husband who leaves her for a younger princess. Throughout the play Medea refuses to accept her husband's decision to leave and will not tolerate his betrayal of their love. She continuously portrays qualities unlike that required of an Athenian feminine subject by speaking out, protesting and taking definitive action. Finally, as an act of revenge, Medea commits what was seen as the ultimate crime as a mother and murders their two sons. She is not punished however and the play concludes as she is carried from the earth on a chariot of fire, her dead sons held in her arms.

<sup>3</sup> The ancient Greeks took their entertainment very seriously and playwrights often used drama (specifically tragedy) to investigate and frequently challenge the society in which they lived. Due to their belief in the female's capacity for emotion, women were also often used to explore that aspect of human nature that men were often taught not to exhibit.

resistance of the laws that govern many women today and dictate the performance of their femininity.

Such a powerful argument for the potential freedom gained from lives lived differently resonated with interpretations of my own female identity and that of young women I knew. Why were many of us accepting prescribed feminine roles in the ways that we spoke, acted and presented our bodies? I found that not only had I been performing in ways that ensured my acceptance as a feminine subject in wider society, but when I was not (putting on weight, expressing opinions, displaying assertive behaviour, not shaving and refusing to wear makeup), I was punished (dubbed as bossy, ugly, fat, domineering, bitchy, loud) and so I would punish myself (excessive diet and exercise, waxing and plucking, wearing clothes appropriate for my size, keeping quiet or at least apologising before speaking and including a derogatory statement e.g. 'I could be wrong but ...').

Cusk's Medea, however, did not punish herself despite being punished by others when she resisted predetermined feminine categories. This ancient character continues to be relevant because gender identity continues to be problematic. I found resonance with Cusk's adaptation in my own daily performances and questioned what would happen should I choose to investigate them further, and resist them without punishing myself. How would I feel, and more significantly, how would I be received by wider society? Is gender still performative and if so could there be a way to embody a resistance of feminine identity (through a subversion of daily acts) in an investigation of how gender can in fact be performed differently?

In view of the fact that I am a biological female who identifies as a female and was developing research centred on my own embodiment, my study investigated the embodiment of a diverse range of biological females who identify and project as female, thus it is on these individuals that this dissertation focuses<sup>4</sup>. There are those for whom this binary category does not fit, however it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to focus on gender performance in regards to transsex/transgender or intersex individuals.

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Migdalek (2014) also argues that these 'constructed gender normative categories' (2014: pg. 6) are 'the dominant' (2014: pg. 6) within society.

I ultimately set out to identify the ways in which certain<sup>5</sup> young women in Britain embody and perform their femininity through daily acts, from where these performances could potentially originate, the significance that history therefore has placed upon the ways in which we move through the world, and how we can perhaps subvert such embodied performances, as Cusk's Medea did, in order to challenge the inequalities perpetuated by them.

### **New knowledge**

Research regarding our daily performances of gender has covered both the theoretical and practical realms of interrogation/inquiry. Simone De Beauvoir (1949) revealed the ways in which women's bodies had been subordinated throughout history; Helene Cixous (1980), Julia Kristeva (1991) and Luce Irigaray (1985) developed the use of language within the subordination of women; Judith Butler (1990) suggested that gender was in fact performative and should be challenged; and writers such as Laura Bates (2014) and Emer O'Toole (2015), have argued that femininity can and should be open to personal interpretation. Over the last century practitioners and academics have debated how best to overcome the constructs of both femininity and masculinity through a variety of methods, but it was Butler who came to frame my inquiry.

Butler (1990) developed the theory that gender and its masculine and feminine categories were performative, by which she came to mean,

... the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (1990: pg. 33)

She described the performative as a discursive practice that is, by its very productive nature, not a given, but continually created as an illusion 'through

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<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the scope of this practice as research Masters and this dissertation to comment upon or represent all women or even a vast majority of women. My focus has been placed primarily upon young women of white-British nationality between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Several contributions to my research and participants within the practice however derive from women of other nationalities and ages and are equally valid experiences within the context of my inquiry. My research does offer an insight into the lives of young women of a variety of cultures and backgrounds but it cannot be universal and does not masquerade as such.

language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign' (1988: pg. 270). Performativity becomes a regularised and constrained repetition of norms. This repetition then enables and constitutes a subjects condition. Written over thirty years ago during the second wave feminist movements of the late twentieth century, was this still true of today? Was and is gender, more specifically femininity, still performative? And if so, how far did that performance perpetuate the inequalities certain women faced in contemporary British society?

Thus I began with the above inquiry and employed practice as research to determine how far "sex" was a constrained production, one that set certain controlled limits and norms that, if performed correctly, would qualify a biologically female body as culturally and historically feminine.

My study and its inquiry however, sought to venture further than Butler and those who preceded and followed her in the development of gender performance theory. I intended to understand, through both experience and research, both sides of the experiment; the way that embodied femininity and a resistance of its habits would make me feel *and* the ways in which people would receive me and therefore react. Through an application of both practice and theory, and by becoming both research and researcher, I was able to experientially interrogate embodied femininity and the significance of habitual performances in the everyday lives of certain young women. In order to articulate theories, the process necessitated my having an embodied experience of them. Throughout my study I changed my habits and thus watched my body change, and personally experienced the lived responses to that change from both men and women over a period of time. In so doing I intended to gain a unique insight into the ways in which many young women perceived their femininity, how they expected themselves and others to perform it, and whether subverting said performances would truly set us free in today's culture and society.

### **Significance of the research:**

'As time travels we 'know' that we are evolving, but are we progressing' (Allegranti, 2015: pg. 211). Despite extensive research into the performance of gender, and thus the argument that femininity and masculinity are but historical and cultural constructs that can and should be altered, young women are

increasingly expected and encouraged to perform their femininity, through and on their bodies, in new and alarming ways that ensure their continuing subordination within society,

The way that the obsessive focus on girls' looks plays into the dialogue around what they can and can't do is particularly poisonous. It inserts the self-consciousness of the watched, objectified woman into girls' internal narratives before they would ever have noticed it themselves.

(Bates, 2014: 94).

Within her project *Everyday Sexism* (discussed further in chapter one) Bates goes on to reveal the following as evidence of her above claim.

Just 7 out of 38 Lord Justices of Appeal and 19 out of 106 High Court Judges are female; it's been more than 14 years since a female choreographer was commissioned to create a piece for the main stage at our Royal Opera House; in 2010 it was reported that the National Gallery's collection of some 2,300 works contained paintings by only ten women; our Royal Society has never had a female president and just 5% of the current Fellowship is made up of women ... women directed 5% of the 260 major films of 2011, down by nearly half from 9% in 1998; a Home Office Survey in 2009 showed that 20% of those polled thought it 'acceptable' in some circumstances 'for a man to hit or slap his wife or girlfriend in response to her being dressed in sexy or revealing clothes in public'; on average more than 2 women are killed every week by a current or former partner; there is a call to the police every minute about domestic violence; a woman is raped every 6 minutes – adding up to 85,000 rapes and 400,000 sexual assaults per year; 1 in 5 women is the victim of a sexual offence and 1 in 4 will experience domestic violence.

(2014: 14)

Bates has since claimed that these statistics do little to convince her that women have achieved equality and that the purpose of discovering and sharing these statistics is to raise awareness of the increasing *inequality* women in Britain are currently facing, despite progressions made in the past. O'Toole (2015) agreed, and argued that these inequalities exist for a variety of reasons but primarily as a result of the ways in which many women are required to

embody and perform their femininity on a daily basis. As certain women continue to move through the world, minding their weight, shaving and trimming their hair, presenting their bodies in aesthetically pleasing ways and thus focusing a significant amount of energy on these required performances, the embodied femininity that they cultivate remains within the realms of beauty, modesty, contrivance and passivity. They are often seen as, and therefore may believe themselves to be, incapable of performing in ways that assert their own autonomy, leading to the statistics Bates stated above. To perform femininity is not to act, but to be.

The importance of this research was to initially investigate and challenge these inherited assumptions of embodied femininity through a subversion of certain daily habits and then move towards a creation of new knowledge. As a result I have discovered that certain habits and habitual performances have become such an integral part of many young women's daily lives that, to do away with them, as Butler suggests, would not in fact result in the equality I am searching for.

I suggest that the road to equality for men and women could be paved through the art of play rather than complete subversion and eradication. Play by its very nature is subversive and important since I have discovered, through my study, that there is little space to be more playful with the existing signs of femininity and masculinity. I argue that the problem lies not in constructions of femininity, since I have discovered that many take comfort in embodying and performing several of them, but in the fact that they cannot be played with freely.

The boundaries that restrict and control behaviours of masculine and feminine bodies are not currently permitted expansion in certain places, and thus certain young women are not able to perform in ways that would ensure their equality. I advocate a greater acceptance of fluid gender differences and changing sexualities and genders as part of daily life. I argue that, were we able to freely expand and even break through these boundaries and allow men and women to perform in the ways in which they chose, we could potentially go some way to altering how young women are perceived and move towards creating a more equal society in which we can all live.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A BODY LIMITED: A HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALISATION OF GENDER IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This chapter addresses the increasing problem of gender inequality in Great Britain, drawing upon an analysis of feminist performance theory to address the key terms of my study - sex and gender - and their subsequent masculine and feminine categories. Situating my research in the context of 2016/17 Great Britain, with a focus on the experiences of certain biological females who identify and project as female, I argue that it is to a great extent that “sex” [is] a constrained production, a forcible effect, one which sets the limits to what will qualify as a body’ (Butler, 1993: 23).

#### **Sex, gender, masculinity and femininity**

The following are brief explanations of how I have come to interpret and thus define key terms identified within my study and used throughout this dissertation.

**Sex:** biological insignia dependent upon genitals and chromosomes<sup>6</sup> - the physical status of being male or female. (World Health Organisation, 2015)

**Gender:** shared cultural expectations associated with being male or female and constructed from the sex assigned at birth<sup>7</sup>. (Eliot, 2012)

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<sup>6</sup> There are many individuals born with both a penis and vagina (hermaphrodites), or intergender (The term *intergender* comes under the umbrella of the terms *non-binary* and *transgender* and describes those persons who have a gender identity that is in the middle of the binary genders of male and female. ) persons whose genitalia cannot be determined or who choose to be a mixture of both male and female. Further to this there are those who are born with a penis but XX chromosomes or a vagina but XY chromosomes and all the variations in between. It is beyond the scope of this thesis however to delve into the theoretical research pertaining to such cases and how they alter and complicate our definitions of sex and gender.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that sex is fixed by way that it is physically unchangeable. At the beginning of 2016 it was estimated that as many as 650,000 individuals in the UK (BBC News, 2016) expressed anxiety that their biological sex did not match the gender with which they identified. As a result, many take action to alter their biological sex by taking hormones or/and undergoing surgical procedures.



**Femininity and Masculinity:** derived from gender these categories group and control male and female bodies, providing specific rules and regulations for the ways in which men and women are expected to perform (World Health Organisation, 2015).

Within her work on the importance of gender in global politics Laura Shepherd (2010) observes that, '[i]n order to be recognisable to others and ourselves, our gender must be performed within particular cultural and historical boundaries' (2010: pg. 12). Shepherd analyses the 21<sup>st</sup> century desire to assign an individual to a particular sex (male or female), anchor them to a specific category within that sex (masculine or feminine) and subsequently interpret all that one does in light of that decision – we become 'recognisable' (2010: pg. 12) because of the ways in which we are performing our gender. We interpret the actions others conduct on a daily basis as belonging to either a masculine or feminine category – a category determined by your male or female sex, and therefore limited by it.

Shepherd postulated that such categories and their characteristics were potentially more pervasive in 2010 than they had been in the previous thirty years. She is supported in her claims by Lise Eliot (2012) who stated in the introduction to her publication, which discussed the neurological differences between boys and girls that 68% of expectant parents want to know the sex of their child before birth. Eliot argued that '[o]f all the characteristics a child brings into the world, being male or female still has the biggest impact' (2012: 1). The reason for and result of this being that boys and girls, men and women, are performing within certain boundaries, cultivated over time, in order to be 'recognisable' (2010: pg. 12) to wider society.

Eliot (2012) went on to discuss the evidenced neurological differences between boys and girls in an attempt to partly explain why this behaviour continues today. What she discovered, and subsequently discussed, is that certain exaggerated and poorly evidenced scientific studies conducted in recent years regarding the differences in the male and female brain have led to

the kind of stereotyping of masculinity and femininity that we see in the twenty-first Century<sup>8</sup>,

Girls brains are wired for communication and boys for aggression; ... they have different amounts of serotonin ... girls are right-brain dominant ... some [studies] are blatantly false ... others are cherry picked from single studies without any effort to critically evaluate all the data. (2012: pg. 8).

It is precisely these stereotypes, she argued, which lead to the anxiety many parents may feel when requesting to know the sex of their child. Whilst I cannot do justice here to the full extent of Eliot's research, she ultimately argued that many parents continue to fear that their child's sex will dictate their behaviour in life.

Two years later, in his book on the embodied performance of gender, Jack Migdalek (2014) maintained that gendered behaviours are learnt during childhood, stating that ' ... children are socialised into the patterns of culture necessary for survival and growth within the communities in which they are raised' (2014: pg. 12) and that certain embodied practices have a significant impact on how we develop. It is therefore perhaps understandable why expectant parents are still so concerned to know the sex of their child. Gender theorists however have been observing for years that sex and gender are two very different things. Eliot herself made clear distinctions as she explained her use of the word sex rather than gender:

I use the term sex instead of gender because it is more scientifically correct even if it is less politically so. Sex is a biological attribute, defined by chromosomes and anatomic characteristics. It is a binary either/or trait. Gender by contrast, is a social construct, the sum of all the attributes typically associated with one sex. It is not fixed and binary but a fluid spectrum between masculinity and femininity. (2012: pg. 3).

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<sup>8</sup> Following extensive and thorough research, Eliot found very little evidence of sex differences in children's brains. The only two facts she found to be reliable were that boys' brains were larger than girls by about 8% but that this is due to the greater height and size of males at birth. The other is that real, biological differences only materialize during puberty, when girls' brains finish growing one/two years before boys. (2012: pg. 5).

The World Health Organisation defines sex and gender as follows:

**"Sex"** refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women.

**"Gender"** refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women (World Health Organisation, 2015)

They then go on to reiterate that the terms '[m]ale' and '[f]emale' belong to the sex categories whereas '[m]asculinity' and '[f]emininity' belong to the category of gender<sup>9</sup>. Sociology too makes distinctions between the terms sex and gender, with sex being described as a set of biological traits that are used to assign individuals to the categories of male and female at birth, and gender being more fluid and used as a concept that determines and then manages sex categories. Sociology therefore considers masculinity as a term that determines what is or is not appropriate behaviour for a man to conduct every day, and femininity as the same principle for a woman. Additionally, during a recent documentary on the BBC (2017) transgender psychotherapist Hershel Russel put simply that '[g]ender is between your ears and sex is between your legs.' (Transgender Kids: Who Knows Best?, 2017). I too argue that sex is the biological insignia which categorises you at birth, and gender is a social category that is then imposed upon a sexed body in order to culturally qualify it as masculine or feminine.

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<sup>9</sup> WHO provides useful examples on their website of both sex and gender characteristics in order to further distinguish between the definitions of sex and gender as they stand in 2017:

'Some examples of sex characteristics: women menstruate while men do not; men have testicles while women do not; women have developed breasts that are usually capable of lactating, while men have not; men generally have more massive bones than women (World Health Organisation, 2015)

Some examples of gender characteristics: In the United States (and most other countries), women earn significantly less money than men for similar work; in Vietnam, many more men than women smoke, as female smoking has not traditionally been considered appropriate; in Saudi Arabia men are allowed to drive cars while women are not; in most of the world, women do more housework than men' (World Health Organisation, 2015).

Despite these contemporary definitions of sex and gender, the distinctions between them, and thus the theory that gender is in fact historically and culturally constituted, I argue that men and women are still embodying and performing their masculinity and femininity in ways that will ensure they continue to be 'recognisable' (Shepherd, 2010: pg. 12) to others and themselves. Not only do heated debates surrounding gender performativity continue as a result, but the arguments around gender equality and the subordination of women through such embodied gender performances persists today.

Lesa Lockford (2012), publishing in a book on the performance of femininity in the early Twenty-First Century, argued that 'femininity, with all its connotations of "niceness", "frivolity", and "contrivance", has been revealed to be a social construction perpetuating women's subordination' (2012: pg. 33). Lockford posited that not only is femininity a construction bearing historical and cultural characteristics e.g. "niceness, "frivolity" and "contrivance" (2014: pg. 33), but that these characteristics force women to continually perform in ways that are lesser to men. Her argument was repeated a year later by Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse, '[a]spects of gender are not just boundaries, they are inequalities.' (2014: pg. 6). This latest edition of their book, *Gender: In World Perspective*, not only discusses the tight boundaries that still pervade the embodied categories of masculinity and femininity, but the inequalities that are inscribed upon, and because of them. Connell and Pearse present the idea that femininity in particular becomes an internalised moral code, one that is learnt over time and comes to shape the ways in which young women move through the world. The current situation in Britain suggests little improvement or change.

Described by journalist Catherine Bennet (2017) as one of the worst years for women's liberation history, 2016 saw arguments and theories surrounding gender and gender equality become a constant topic of conversation in Great Britain; it became common knowledge that employers were demanding that women wear certain items of clothing, such as heels, to work (York, 2017); women at work were still being referred to as 'career women' and accused of being 'less feminine' if they chose to work rather than

have a family (Murray 2016); research announced at the world economic forum found that it would be 170 years before the pay gap was closed around the world (Treanor, 2016); abortion rights in Ireland were still denied, with one woman receiving a suspended sentence for taking abortion drugs (McDonald, 2016); in politics female voices were almost invisible in the Brexit debate and, despite gaining our first female Prime Minister since Margaret Thatcher, only 29% of parliament is made up of women<sup>10</sup> (49<sup>th</sup> in the world) (Bennet, 2017). Over the course of the year tabloids followed the retrial of footballer Ched Evans<sup>11</sup> and the trolling of feminist blogger and journalist Caroline Criado-Perez, who campaigned for more women to be included on British bank notes. In the United States of America the election of Donald Trump inspired hundreds of young women to run for office in fear of his potentially sexist attitudes and policies (Filipoivc, 2017), and social media expressed its outrage at the short sentence of convicted rapist Brock Turner<sup>12</sup>.

A sign at the recent Women's March in London (January, 2017) which read '[s]ame shit, different century'<sup>13</sup>, points to the argument that the vast majority of society are still not recognising the cultural and historical boundaries which are inscribed on the categories of masculinity and femininity and, as a result, are perpetuating the inequalities provided by them.

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<sup>10</sup> Laura Bates argued in 2014 that '[T]oo often women aren't being considered as capable leaders because our concept of what leadership is defined by our history rather than our future' (Bates, 2014: 58), further to this, discussion of female politicians' physical attributes often overshadows the discussions of their politics.

<sup>11</sup> International football player Ched Evans was convicted of the rape of a young girl in 2012 and had served two and a half years in prison before friends and family offered a £50,000 reward for information that may lead to his acquittal. In October of 2016 a Cardiff jury found Evans not guilty of rape. An earlier appeal court ruling, which allowed the complainant's sexual behaviour to be taken into account by the jury, was criticised by women's support groups and campaigners as the complainant was forced to reveal intimate details of her sex life before the court, thus suggesting that because of her sexual history, she could not have been raped.

<sup>12</sup> Stanford University student Brock Allen Turner was accused and convicted of three counts of sexual assault on March 30<sup>th</sup> 2016. The conviction carried a potential sentence of fourteen years in prison. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2016 however, Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Aaron Persky sentenced Turner to six months confinement in the Santa Clara County jail to be followed by three years probation, on the grounds that Turner had expressed sincere remorse for his crime and had no previous criminal history.

<sup>13</sup> An image of this sign circulated across media platforms such as Facebook, twitter and Instagram. My source is taken from <https://www.bustle.com/p/29-progressive-womens-march-signs-that-arent-just-about-donald-trump-32055>,

We are still discussing and debating gender because gender inequalities still exist, more so in the last thirty years. Eliot (2012) again observed that ‘university students today actually perceive *greater* differences between men and women than students did in the 1970s’<sup>14</sup> (2012: pg. 15). In Britain today a number of television programmes, books, magazines and films are exclusively dedicated to either boys or girls, men or women, rather than both. A recent documentary on channel four *The Secret Life of Five Year Olds* saw boys dressing as girls screaming ‘I’m a girl save me’ and girls dressing as their male peers exclaiming ‘we’re boys so we have to go first’ (The Secret Life of Five Year Olds, 2017). Gender and its masculine and feminine categories are still dictating the behaviours of girls and boys to the detriment, in my experience, of girls and women, and thus sex is still a ‘constrained production, a forcible effect’ (Butler, 1993: pg. 23).

### **Embodied performances**

The aim of my study was to investigate and challenge the embodied social and historical constructions of femininity, interrogate the ways in which they may have constituted women’s subordination throughout history and how such subordination could potentially be challenged through an embodied subversion/resistance of such constructions. This dissertation is therefore primarily concerned with embodied aspects of femininity.

I argue that gender and the characteristics of masculinity and femininity are indeed social structures and constructions that are learnt from infancy. In my experience, gained through theoretical research and practical experiment, I have found that these characteristics share a specific relationship with bodies. Migdalek argued that ‘the matter of the body ... is a prominent component of a performance that can impact on cultural notions of femininity and masculinity’ (2014: pg. 5). The body is a canvas onto which culture projects images of masculinity and femininity, as Beverly Skeggs observed of Butler (1990), ‘[t]o be feminine ... is a mode of enacting and re-

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<sup>14</sup> Based on the findings of sociologist Lloyd Lueptow at the University of Akron, US: Lueptow has been administering the same survey regarding sex roles to his classes for the last twenty years and has shared his findings over that time (Eliot, 2012).

enacting of received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh' (Skeggs, 1997: pg. 132).

It is my belief that the female body in particular is continually inscribed with feminine characteristics which render it in unequal opposition to men and the masculine body. O'Toole went on to suggest that by embodying and performing aspects of femininity correctly the individual is likely to receive benefits 'you might be considered more sexually attractive, or trustworthy, or loveable' (2015: pg. 260). Cultural norms of femininity govern women's bodies and therefore the meaning of women's oppressed social existence can be derived from these bodies.

By Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank's (2015) definition '[e]mbodiment refers to the experience of living in, perceiving and experiencing the world from the physical and material place of our bodies' (2015: pg. 150) and they argue that, as a result, the body is crucial to the study of social inequalities. Fahs and Swank (2015) believed the body to be both object and subject, physical and immaterial and therefore 'capable of genuine experience' (2015: pg. 150). Rather than a mere biological object with specific physical functions, the body 'serves as a fluid and permeable boundary between our individual selves and the outside world' (Fahs and Swank, 2015: pg. 150). As a result I will argue that male and female bodies gain meaning through the different ways in which we use them to make sense of the social world around us. Society dictates and controls our bodies and therefore our identities, experiences, relationships, desires and sexualities are dependent upon how we interpret this control and thus how we use our bodies every day. I argue that the subject of women's bodies, the ways in which they are controlled, and expected to look and behave, are to the detriment of women's place in society.

In her contribution to *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory* Sonia Kruks (2014) stated that

[p]eople with biologically female bodies are perceived in particular ways. Whether or not she wishes it, a woman is more strongly identified with her physical sex characteristics than a man (2014: pg. 79).

Kruks (2014) confirmed Lockford's (2012) previous argument that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century men remain the subject and women the object – women are always the ones to be gazed upon and men to always be the gazers. She argued that women are required to perform in ways which are appealing to the male gaze; to appear attractive, 'women's bodies are generally required to be small, delicate, attractive and slim ... the ideal feminine form "connotes powerlessness"' (2004: pg. 28). Kruks (2014) then went on to argue, '[w]omen's physiology would not constitute an oppression if it were not that men seek to reduce her to these bodily attributes' (2014: pg. 80). She suggested that the feminine subject would cease to be oppressed and denigrated if only society would cease to reduce women to the feminine performances of their bodies.

In the same year journalist Laura Bates observed that we are still encouraging young women to define themselves by their bodies and their physical performances of femininity. By heralding physical appearance above any other attribute a young girl may possess, Bates suggested that we are perpetuating the idea that young women are not capable of overcoming their feminine performances and moving past the inequalities preserved by them.

A year later O'Toole (2015) wrote

there are small innate biological differences between men and women's psychologies, which our treatment of people in male bodies and female bodies conditions into significant and oftentimes worrisome gaps (2015: pg. 3).

The reasons for such perceived differences between our embodied performances of masculinity and femininity, and the inequalities inscribed upon the feminine performance, are vast and far-reaching. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to analyse and discuss them all. I have, however, identified key theorists and contributions to the development of feminist performance theory and, in so doing, placed my study within the contexts of their work, specifically on feminine bodies and embodiment. Through an analysis of the progression of feminist performance theory over the past century, I have been able to determine key reasons as to why sex is still a



constrained production, a forcible effect, how feminine performance has subsequently developed and why we now find ourselves discussing it with increasing concern.

### **The development of feminist performance theory: a historical contextualisation**

I contend that all of the ways that we define masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and historically constituted, and it goes back as far as the ancient Athenians. Both Aristotle and Galens' theories posited that females were imperfect versions of men and that their genitals were men's genitals turned inside out; women were therefore lesser versions of men both physically and emotionally. Such ideas prevailed into the 18<sup>th</sup> Century where the emergence of femininity as a physical marker on the female body, Skeggs argues, was produced through textuality.

Through the development of the textually mediated feminine ideal the visual became the site where values were allocated to groups of women and the construction of appearance as a sign of value became established (1997: pg. 129).

Appearance and conduct in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries became markers of respectability and were almost exclusively important for femininity. Appearance became the means by which not only men but ultimately women felt that they could know and place other women. Being physically respectable was of paramount importance and theories developed by Sigmund Freud only served to reiterate this ideal.

Among the first to study and debate the categories of masculinity and femininity, Freud argued that patterns of behaviour (masculinity and femininity) were in fact developed over life course and not fixed from birth. Whilst this marked a significant change in gender theory, I suggest that Freud's work in particular still served only to perpetuate the initial theories of the ancients and the ideals of femininity which had been cultivated over time.

Feminist resistance to Freud's writings criticised his theory that femininity comes into being because of penis envy, and therefore places the

woman in a devalued relation to the male subject, who is dominant. Kathryn Blake perceived that '[t]he "normal" resolution of the Oedipus complex ... hinges on viewing the mother as a "castrated" and lesser being' (2009: pg. 17). Psychoanalysis became problematic for feminist theorists therefore as it reduced sexual difference to sexual oneness in a phallogentric society, where 'everything from language to women's sexuality is defined in relation to masculine ideals' (2009: pg. 17). Blake explains how Juliet Mitchell read Freud not as a prescription but as a description of how patriarchal culture and the feminine within it is produced. Freudian analysis names the feminine as the 'dark continent' (Blake, 2009: pg. 14) and one which Freud admitted he had little knowledge of. It can be argued therefore that it does not dictate the ways in which women should behave, merely points to how they got there in the first place, in other words, how femininity has been developed over time.

Whilst Freudian analysis did argue that femininity could not be purely biological and in fact included social and cultural aspects, its primary conclusion was that femininity was ultimately constructed as passive. As a result of her feelings of inferiority, the feminine subject was purely narcissistic, valuing her charms more highly due to her obvious sexual and physical inferiority: to be loved was a stronger motive than to love. Moreover, Blake contended that Freudian analysis failed to provide an idea of how women could 'cleave themselves from these patriarchal categories and rigid sexual roles' (2009: pg. ii). Despite this, Freudian analysis pervaded the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, maintaining the idea that to be feminine was to be physically and emotionally passive with a greater concern for the physical aesthetic of the female body.

For "normal" femininity to occur, the woman must accept her role as a passive being and will forever more be the passive being in relation to the activity of masculinity' (Blake, 2009: pg. 6).

During the 1950s however, anthropologists and sociologists began to debate gender roles once again, referring to the culturally determined behaviour of men and women.

Identifying herself as a socialist rather than a feminist (and yet contributing to the feminist theory of performance accordingly) Simone De Beauvoir (1949) developed her theory of women as 'other'<sup>15</sup>. De Beauvoir's primary doctrine in her most famous work of literature *The Second Sex* is described aptly by Josephine Donovan

[t]he notion that human beings are transformed into specifically gendered entities as a result of patriarchal requirements and that women in particular are categorised as deficient creatures incapable of matching the norm embodied by masculinity (2012: pg. 13).

To be female was to be other than man, to be feminine and embody and perform femininity correctly therefore, was to perform in ways other to men. Where men were intellectual, women were sensitive, men active and women passive, men concerned with the mind and women with the body (here we can draw parallels with the opposites of the ancient Athenians). De Beauvoir subsequently argued against the opinion that a women's primary objective was to charm a masculine heart. She spoke out against the fact that only beauty appeared to be asked of woman and argued that the male should no longer be her superior. Here she continued to focus on femininity as an embodied experience and that to be feminine means, first and foremost, to be physically attractive, expressing the idea that 'attention to her physical appearance can become a real obsession ... one must always be pretty in order to conquer love and happiness' (1949: pg. 316).

Challenging Freudian analysis directly, De Beauvoir instead posits that it is not through a feeling of inferiority born from an initial envy of man's anatomical features that a woman learns how to be a feminine subject, but

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<sup>15</sup> Published in 1949 *The Second Sex* introduced De Beauvoir's theory of women as other and influenced a plethora of feminist thought and activism since then. She argued that it is the differences in the female gender in which significance is invested and therefore what constitutes her otherness and consequently, her oppression. *The Second Sex* looks at the fundamental reasons why women occupy such a subordinate place in history, the explanations for which she turns to biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism. Throughout each chapter she moves through history to map the emergence of male superiority. She also moves from girlhood and youth into sexual initiation and motherhood and the issues that surround these labels.

'[t]hrough compliments and admonishments, through images and words' (1949: pg. 304). Her work was among the first to hold that through social practices, the feminine body is understood as different to the masculine and that the differences between them are invested in unequal significance to the detriment of women. Despite such a development in feminist performance theory and a move away from previous ideas posed by Freud, De Beauvoir still maintained that women who were now taking control of their lives and speaking for themselves, should still possess all their feminine traits such as physical beauty, a demure attitude and polite demeanor: despite developments and freedoms she believed that they must not lose their femininity.

Both Talcott Parsons (1955) and Robert Stoller (1968) countered De Beauvoir's suggestion that women begin to conceive of themselves as more than physical creatures other to men, but as autonomous beings capable of more than the feminine category had previously allowed. Parsons' theories perceived women as expressive and men as instrumental. Society therefore reacted to such categories accordingly. He treated the gender process as a consequence of a system's need for integration and stability; everyone had their place and to alter that would upset the balances of power and authority. Again femininity was confined to the category of passivity, encouraging women to be concerned primarily with the performance of their physical conduct in order to be of any worth to society.

Stoller further argued that genitalia were an incontrovertible fact; the differences between men and women were so fundamental to society that to ignore and even challenge them would be foolish and at worst detrimental to our way of life. Whilst his book *Sex and Gender* (1968) was one of the first to look at gender from a psychological and cultural standpoint, rather than a biological one, it argued against the tampering with and eradication of gender roles. Stoller posited that masculinity and femininity provided order and stability; it was the anchor. People decide what you are and then interpret almost everything you do in light of that decision (comparisons can be made here with Shepherd's statement). The categories of masculinity and femininity, and their different characteristics, provided balance in an already chaotic world and our embodied performances of them were crucial to the stability of society.

The seventies feminist movements in America however began to transform the meaning of the word gender and with it, prior notions of the categories of femininity and women's embodiment of it. The second wave of feminism was characterised by a desire to break down gender stereotypes and consequently change and develop feminine roles, in opposition to Stoller's suggestions, as it was officially recognized for the first time that the femininity De Beauvoir had previously encouraged women to retain, in fact played a part in subordinating them.

Where is she?  
Activity/Passivity  
Sun/Moon  
Culture/Nature  
Day/Night  
  
Father/Mother  
Head/Heart  
Intelligible/Sensitive  
Logos/Pathos  
  
Man  
Woman  
(Cixous, 1988: pg. 90).

Within these binary oppositions listed above, Cixous endorses De Beauvoir's concern that femininity is always thought of in opposition to masculinity, with the latter as the superior being. Cixous argued that the feminine is organized through a process of requirements and constraints which produce signs and relationships of power. It was during Cixous' time of writing that feminist performance theory developed an analysis of language and its place in the subordination of women throughout history. Binary oppositions promoted by patriarchal ideology associated femininity with powerlessness. Commenting on Cixous' theories of language, Donovan observed that it is through language that we learn that 'man is the universal, while woman is the contingent,

particular and deficient' (2012: pg. 24). Cixous further supported Beauvoir in her criticism of Freud with the argument that sexual difference, and thus gender performance, is not directly linked to, or determined by, anatomy as this still places the male as the superior, '[p]hallocentrism *is*. History has never produced, recorded anything but that. Which does not mean that this form is inevitable or natural' (1988: pg. 96).

Cixous however moved beyond De Beauvoir toward the need to change and broaden the definitions of both masculinity and femininity by amalgamating them, rather than suggesting women still retain the categories of femininity which, she argued, placed them as lesser beings.

Let us imagine a real liberation of sexuality, that is, a transformation of our relationship to our body ... Then "femininity, "masculinity", would inscribe their effects of difference, their economy, their relationships to expenditure, to deficit, to giving, quite differently. That which appears as "feminine" or "masculine" today would no longer amount to the same thing ... The difference would be a crowning display of new differences' (1988: pg. 97).

Here Cixous suggests an alternative organisation of feminine and masculine bodies, a liberation of the categories which bind them, and thus a change in what amounts to 'masculine' and 'feminine'. In doing so she moved feminist theory into the realm of action and encouraged women to write the body<sup>16</sup>. She called for women and girls to inscribe on their bodies their own definitions of femininity rather than those that had been previously dictated for them.

As a theatre practitioner, Cixous was in a position to suggest and make such transformations. Performance practitioner Beatrice Allegranti discussed Cixous' practical work saying,

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<sup>16</sup> Written in 1976 *The Laugh of Medusa* outlined Cixous' call to women to write their own bodies. She concurred with Judith Butler by arguing that there is no general or one typical woman. Her work comments on the importance of performance in rewriting the body.

[C]ixous shows an emotional and embodied connection. Writing from the body in whatever medium requires a constant corporeal awareness where the personal texts are fleshy texts. Not to be 'inscribed' on, but to be felt, seen and heard (2015: pg. 23).

Cixous saw theatre as a potential site for new representations of subjectivity, a 'restructuring of the authorial self' (Dobson, 1996: 23). In her writing on Cixous' work and her influences in the development of feminist performance theory, Julia Dobson went on to state that 'her [Cixous'] desire to reveal and represent the repression of the female subject informs her early theatre' (1996: pg. 28). A large proportion of Cixous' work expressed a critique of the representation of the feminine in the theatre and argued that the theatre itself was governed by patriarchal structures of voyeurism and exhibition. As a politically motivated engagement with the theatre, Cixous was able to utilise this practical medium in which dominant representations of the feminine could be challenged, reflecting an 'unremitting engagement with the representation of subjectivity and intersubjective relationships' (Blake, 1996: 21) In so doing the work '... can escape infernal repetition ... it writes itself where it dreams, where it invents new worlds' (Blake, 1996: 21).

French theorists Luce Irigaray (1985) and Julia Kristeva (1991) furthered Cixous' work by suggesting ways in which to potentially subvert existing definitions of femininity. Through works such as *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991)<sup>17</sup>, Kristeva developed feminist performance theory in her analysis of and return to language, which she too argued was inherent in our treatment of women and specifically in our definitions of femininity. Kristeva maintained Cixous' argument that the words we use to describe women e.g. beautiful, pretty, gorgeous, stunning etc. (as opposed to the words often used for men: brave, intelligent, assertive, strong etc.), teach them that to be a woman, to be feminine, means to be physically attractive. Irigaray published writings that Fahs and Swank stated,

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<sup>17</sup> *Strangers to Ourselves*, written in 1991, is concerned with the notion of the "stranger", the foreigner, an alien in another country or society which is not their own. It is about the notion of strangeness within the self – a person's deep sense of being and their conscious idea of self.

theorized the body and embodiment as a product of systems that promote capitalism, value masculinity and patriarchy and subject women to multiple intrusions and oppressions' (2015: pg. 153).

Irigaray saw the embodiment of femininity as opposite to that of masculinity and further examined those categories, and what they connoted in opposition to one another: "masculine" to connote "active" ... "feminine" to connote "passive" (1985: pg. 15). She argued that 'an earlier control of her [woman's] excretory functions, a greater, more lively intelligence, a better disposition toward the external world' (1985: pg. 21) were precious attributes of femininity that needed to change in order for women to occupy an equal place in society.

All such theorists were analysing and debating femininity and its embodiment. They perceived that the categories that had characterised femininity throughout history were in fact culturally and historically constituted. More than that, such characteristics were not only boundaries but inequalities and were contributing to the continuing oppression of women in society. Despite their suggestions and ideas about how to overcome and change such definitions of femininity, I argue that none came as close as gender theorist Judith Butler to developing key strategies for subverting gender in order to change our embodied performances of it, and so her inquiry forms the basis of my study<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> When speaking of "sex" as a 'constrained production' (Butler, 1993: 23) Butler theorized that it is made, manufactured over time and therefore often compelled or forced. By following a certain course of action you produce a feminine body. 'Production' is the provision of the male or female body for consideration and inspection. Once it has been deemed worthy of feminine or masculine status it can then be used in the world. By being constrained however, this production/presentation can severely restrict the scope, extent and activity of that body, confining it to a specific category of masculine or feminine, a category in which there are strict rules.

Forcible therefore refers to the creation of such a production by force. It produces a powerful effect which has significant bearing on the life of the individual. To force our bodies to perform in a certain way in order to qualify is to convince ourselves; to create irrefutable reasons as to why we are doing so, 'punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress' (Butler, 1988: 522). These so-called reasons then become so imbedded within our day-to-day living that they become irrefutable, natural, and are the very reason why they are so difficult to break from.

These irrefutable, natural, day-to-day practices for which we create reason pertaining to their existence become 'limits'. A limit by definition is a point or level beyond which something does not or may not extend or pass (Dictionary.com, 2016). Certain actions men and women impose upon their bodies each day (shaving or not,



The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between ... acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (Butler, 1988: pg. 520).

Butler continued to argue that gender was indeed constituted in and over time, and that the body in particular was an historical idea rather than a biological fact; bodies gain meaning through their constant expression in the world. She maintained that the various meanings gained often ensured continued gender inequality and the oppression of women, 'to be a woman is to have to *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of "woman", to induce the body to become a cultural sign' (Butler, 1988: pg. 522). Butler furthered the theory that femininity was in fact an historical idea and not a biological or natural fact, 'the category of women is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be an oppressed situation' (1988: pg. 530). She ventured further in her analysis as she argued that society so often routinely abuses those who do not embody and perform masculinity or femininity correctly.

[T]hat culture so readily punishes or marginalises those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated (Butler, 1988: 528).

In her development of feminist performance theory however, Butler (1988) impressed upon her readers the importance of an individual's ability to subvert the norms of femininity, altering ones embodied performance of it as the only way to overcome the inequalities subsumed by it, 'to offer alternative descriptions and prescriptions' (1988: pg. 530). In doing so Butler offered the

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wearing makeup or not, dieting or excessive exercise) ensure that men and women are not permitted beyond a certain point. These actions are limits; they restrict, curb, check and restrain male and female bodies to these masculine and feminine categories.

If produced/performed one's body will qualify as masculine or feminine and therefore be entitled to a particular benefit or privilege by fulfilling a necessary condition. This ensures that you are entitled to comfortable movement throughout the world without vindication or persecution.

necessary tools with which both men and women could subvert the categories of their gender and therefore free themselves from such oppression, 'what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts?' (1988: pg. 521). In asking such a question she analysed the positions and regulatory fictions by which femininity in particular had come to be known, in ways which allowed for their destabilisation and denaturalisation through a process of unfaithful or subversive repetitions that foregrounded the undeniable play of multiple definitions of femininity. Not only did she further prove that sex was in fact a constrained production, a forcible effect, but that by this very provocation, the limits which created and qualified feminine bodies could be toppled and altered, paving the way for the inequalities that resided within such limits to begin to be eradicated.

With these apparent solutions to the continuing problem of gender inequality, it could be argued that there should now be little need for a study such as mine. Post-feminist attitudes of the late eighties and early nineties debated such an argument. Butler and those before her had laid out clear and seemingly simple ways in which to subvert the characteristics of femininity and, in so doing, encouraged women to rewrite them to their own ends. Despite this however, Ireland is still able to deny women access to safe and legal abortion, women hold less than a quarter of seats in Parliament, write only a fifth of front-page newspaper articles, and direct only five percent of major films, and elderly women march in the streets with signs that read 'Same shit, different century'<sup>19</sup>.

Despite Butler's development of feminist performance theory and her furthering of the idea that gender, and more specifically femininity, was performative, the nineties saw a regression of such developments and a return to the ways in which women had been perceiving themselves thirty years previously. The nineties was an era of post-feminism where it was suggested that feminist activism was a thing of the past. Reforms surrounding issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave and equal pay had been passed; the 1967 Abortion Act, the 1969 Divorce Reform Act and the 1970 Equal

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<sup>19</sup> An image of this sign circulated across media platforms such as Facebook, twitter and Instagram. My source is taken from <https://www.bustle.com/p/29-progressive-womens-march-signs-that-arent-just-about-donald-trump-32055>,

Pay Act. The Women's Liberation Movement, who had been the driving force behind the passing of such reforms, became fragmented and a period of uncertainty was setting in (Griffin, 1995).

Within the introduction of their contribution to Gabriele Griffin's work (1995) *Feminist Activism in the 1990s*, Julie Bindel, Kate Cook and Liz Kelly argued that in the 1990s '[t]he impact of simplistic identity politics fuelled divisions among women, and created tension and mistrust' (1995: pg. 65). The sexual revolutions<sup>20</sup> of the second wave feminist movements did not have the effect of liberating women in the ways many had hoped<sup>21</sup>. In her essay on the beautification of the male body, Susan Bordo (1999) argued that despite the increase in voyeuristic images of men, the situation for women 'has changed very little' (1999: pg. 191), saying that men still act in these images even when we are invited to watch, and yet women still seem to just appear. The case was also made that many women in Britain felt as though the second wave's rejection of femininity had in fact robbed them of characteristics they had once enjoyed embodying and performing. As a result Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (2006) observed that '[i]t would appear ... that younger generations of women do not 'need' and/or prefer to disown and/or cannot identify with feminism' (2006: pg. 2).

Two years on Angela McRobbie (2008) posited in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism*<sup>22</sup> that there existed a post-feminist attitude in the 1990s, which I

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<sup>20</sup> The sexual revolutions of the 1960s sought to change the then cultural prohibitions on public discussions or displays of sexuality. Social and legal impediments to talking about or practicing sex were removed in the 1960s, promoting conversation, and the development of music, books, film and television to speak more openly and explicitly about sex and, in particular, the sexual experience of women. The introduction of the first contraceptive pill in 1960 only served to then encourage discussions of safe sex: men and women were openly speaking about having sex for pleasure for the first time and liberating women from the fear of unwanted pregnancy. Such developments and changes in law created an atmosphere where women felt able to be in control of and celebrate their sexuality without being seen as 'unfeminine' or 'unladylike' – a harlot or whore – as had previously been the case.

<sup>21</sup> Skeggs rightly argued in 1997 that being respectable was of paramount importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, if you weren't you were seen as a harlot or whore. This has now been reversed 'women took control of and expressed their sexuality and are now defined by it' (Skeggs, 1997: 131).

<sup>22</sup> *The Aftermath of Feminism*, published in 2009, enquires into the state of feminism, discussing arguments of post-feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. McRobbie interrogates the politics of sexual equality and in turn sets down a new theory for gender power. She

suggest still pervades today, that falsely sold the promise of female empowerment through sexual liberation. Such an attitude served only to fuel the belief that women were only powerful because of their sex appeal and, once again, their physical attractiveness.

Little attention was being paid to the complex ways in which women were being increasingly invited, by the forces of consumer culture that were now thoroughly tuned into and able to adopt a feminist voice, to pursue new freedoms including sexual pleasures as a kind of entitlement that was now being granted. (2008: pg. 4).

Feminists are often accused, via the Internet and social media, of being aggressive, man hating and ultimately unfeminine<sup>23</sup>. Femininity, it would seem, is still a pre-requisite for success: it is something which young women are required to possess in order to progress and yet is the very thing which appears to be holding them back and subordinating them.

Typically requirements for appropriate female embodiment are so rigidly dictated and enforced that failure to comply constitutes a breach of social norms.' (Lockford, 2012: pg. 29).

In the last five years our historically and culturally constructed gender has still been placing limits upon us in order to qualify our bodies as feminine, the characteristics of which have become more rigid than ever.

The Everyday Sexism project, an initiative that invites women to record everyday experiences of sexism, garnered over 25,000 entries and spread to 15 countries within a year. By 2015 the number of entries had reached over 100,000. Bates has recently described the response as overwhelming,

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challenges the assumptions that derive from post-feminism concerning the 'end of feminism'. In the end, following analysis on socio-cultural phenomena imbedded in contemporary women's lives, the result is a derisive critique of women's empowerment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>23</sup> In July of 2014 young women around the world took to social media to express their dislike of feminism with the tagline 'I don't need feminism because ...'. Reasons for their rejection of feminism took the form of statements such as, 'It has turned from a rights movement to a sexist, corrupt, hateful organization', 'I respect all humans, not just one gender' and that feminism victimizes women 'making us seem gullible and feeble minded, instead of the sensual, sexy, strong women some of us still are' (Warren, 2014).

[s]o many women become so accustomed to experiencing gender-based prejudice that they almost fail to even register it anymore, and the fact that men dominate political and economic spheres and a fifth of women suffer some form of sexual assault. (2014: pg. 15).

Writer Roxanne Gay postulated that little had changed in culture and society since the second wave feminist movements.

We have a comedian asking his fans to touch women lightly on their stomachs because ignoring personal boundaries is oh so funny ... we have all manner of music glorifying the degradation of women ... Movies ... tell the stories of men as if men's stories are the only stories that matter. (2014: pg. x).

She ventured further and argued that,

[t]he cultural climate is shifting, particularly for women as we contend with the retrenchment of reproductive freedom, the persistence of rape culture, and the flawed if not damaging representations of women we're consuming in music, movies and literature (2014: pg. x).

This does not however even begin to touch upon the victimisation women face through the continuing demonization of their bodies on a day to day basis and the mixed messages they receive as a result; mothers vilified for public breastfeeding, for example, and young women asked what they were wearing the night they were sexually assaulted. Whilst women are seemingly denigrated when they present their bodies in ways that are interpreted as unattractive and thus performing incorrectly (breastfeeding), they are also criticized when performing too well and are therefore often blamed if sexually assaulted.

In the same year of Gay's publication, statistics revealed that girls as young as four were worrying about their weight, 87% of teenage girls were unhappy with their body shape (Bates, 2014: pg. 80), and two years previously it was found that 90% of adult British women felt body-image anxiety (Wiseman,

2012). The correlation between the increase in plastic surgery operations<sup>24</sup> and diet, fashion and cosmetic industry growth and social expectations is, by my perception, difficult to deny; in my experience, to be feminine today still ultimately means to be physically attractive. As a result, women treat their bodies as 'things and commodities to be altered, poked, prodded and judged' (Kruks, 2014: pg. 86). Ultimately, Bates argued that 'femininity' must manifest itself [as] sexualised and submissive. The lines are stark and uncompromising. The instructions are clear. (2014: pg. 107).

Young women in university learning environments identical to those I have been studying and developing my work within are similarly affected. In 2009 the National Union of Students carried out a survey into the increasing development of 'Lad Culture'<sup>25</sup> and the damage it was doing to university life. They found that nearly a third of female university students had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their time as a student; with one female student commenting 'I don't know any girl at university who hasn't been touched or groped without her consent' (Bates, 2014: pg. 118). During Fresher's week<sup>26</sup> at my own institution, evening events titled *School Disco* echo the multitude of other events which take place at various UK universities; 'Tarts and Vicars, Pimps and Hoes, Geeks and Sluts, Rappers and Slappers, CEOs and Corporate

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<sup>24</sup> Women had 91% of all cosmetic procedures in 2015.

In order of popularity:

1. Breast augmentation: 9,642 – up 12% from last year
2. Blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery): 7,713 – up 12%
3. Face/Neck Lift: 7,047 – up 16%
4. Breast Reduction: 5,450 – up 13%
5. Liposuction: 4,965 – up 20%:
6. Rhinoplasty: 3,393 – up 14%:
7. Fat Transfer: 3,001 – up 3%
8. Abdominoplasty: 2,816 – up 8%
9. Browlift: 1,946 – up 6%
10. Otoplasty (ear correction): 553 – up 15% (The Private Clinic - Blog, 2016)

<sup>25</sup> Participants of the NUS survey defined Lad Culture, a popular phrase coined at universities across Great Britain, as 'a group or 'pack' mentality residing in activities such as sport and heavy alcohol consumption, and 'banter' which was often sexist, misogynist and homophobic' (<http://www.codecomputerlove.com/>, 2017)

<sup>26</sup> Fresher's week takes place at every university across the UK a week before teaching commences for the academic year. It is described as a chance for new students to settle in, get to know their fellow room/house mates, join various societies and immerse themselves in University life before studying begins.

Hoes' (Bates, 2014: pg. 133), where women are encouraged and even expected to dress provocatively.

This discrimination does not end with student social life. Through the Everyday Sexism Project, many university students reported direct experiences of sexism from their university professors and tutors, with one female student reporting that she had been told by her IT professor that she ought to stick with the IT guys as she may 'strike it rich' (Bates, 2014: pg. 133). Another reported an esteemed male scientist who had told the female students in his lecture that, in order to be a successful scientist, you had to possess 'male traits' such as competitiveness, confidence and impatience. It was also mentioned that the decision to have children may be problematic for women working in the sciences as they may have to ensure they find 'understanding husbands' (Bates, 2014: pg. 133). Boris Johnson's tweet in 2013 that suggested that the increase in women attending university in Malaysia was due to their desire to find a husband, was met with outrage across social media, and yet his initial post only serves to identify the deeply ingrained sexism within higher education attitudes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Evidence would suggest that women have to learn and succeed at the cost of sexism, harassment and sexual assault.

Embodied performances of femininity in 2017 are still being dictated by and within cultural and historical boundaries, those boundaries are still being inscribed on female bodies, thus enforcing the inequalities which place femininity and its female performers as lesser than their masculine counterparts. Through both practical and theoretical research, I have found that not only is "sex" still a constrained production, a forcible effect (Butler, 1993), but that young women in Britain still do not possess the freedom to act outside of the boundaries of feminine characteristics and still therefore exist and perform within and through an unequal society; as Elaine Aston argues.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that even the most privileged do not, as yet, inhabit a world in which violence, injustices and inequalities are no longer carried out in the name of identity categories (2006: pg. 3).

Be that as it may, I am resolved to contend, as Eliot (2012) rightly states that among our wonderful genetic gifts is the ability to change our environment so that our genetic inheritance can be expressed in unprecedented ways. Like Cixous, Irigaray and Butler before her, she observes that we have the ability to shift the ways in which we embody and perform our femininity in order to move towards altering the inequalities that are constituted by them. This shifting I have discovered need not be a complete subversion and/or eradication of feminine behaviours however.

In March of 2016 I conducted an interview with Roanna Mitchell<sup>27</sup> who discussed the theory of play within the context of my study. She argued that embodied social constructs, such as masculinity and femininity, are difficult to break from simply because we live in a world with others who abide by and communicate with each other through them. Further to this it can be argued that simply by performing in a different way does not stop it remaining a performance. What we can attempt to practice however is the art of play and of being more playful with the ways in which we embody the signs and systems determined by the feminine category. Play by its very nature is subversive and allows you to bend the rules. O'Toole rightly asserted that 'play is a tool that at once exposes the irrational underpinnings of our unequal culture, and allows us to imagine new possibilities into being' (2015: pg. 257). I therefore argue that it becomes a question of how much freedom exists to be able to do this. In certain social situations I have discovered that there is virtually no freedom or choice and certain women are conditioned, to their detriment, by their embodied performances. There are those however, including myself, who have been defined by them and built their identity around them. To eradicate such practices in the pursuit of equality therefore may have a more negative impact on the individual. I argue that it is better to respond to the wide variety of women's experiences, to reopen the boxes, to expand them, to present multiple definitions and bodies.

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<sup>27</sup> Mitchell's phd investigates the commercial performance industry and the conceptualisation of the cultural view of the body as a servant which encourages students studying the acting profession to accept and even expects discrimination concerning their performing bodies. Her work was of particular interest to my study as it examined the actors relationship to their embodied performances based upon cultural expectations of the masculine and feminine body.



This idea of 'gender-bending' primarily concerns the ability of women, and men, to explore and play with the embodied categories of masculinity and femininity in order to expand their boundaries. Following in the footsteps of Butler, O'Toole (2015) observes '[t]hinking of gender as a kind of performance – as a series of acts that can, with conscious intent, be rewritten – is an idea with revolutionary power' (2015: pg. 4). By giving young women the freedom to change these embodied performances and act outside of the gender role deemed appropriate to their biological sex, by allowing them the choice to shave and wear makeup or not, encompass a variety of body types, wear the clothes they choose and celebrate the bodies they inhabit, thus allowing them to be unbidden by the appearance of their bodies, we may be able to transform, in small ways, what it means to be feminine today and therefore challenge some of the inequalities young women still face, creating the kind of world we wish to see. Fahs (2014) argues that construction and deconstruction are powerful scenes of agency 'Never underestimate the difficulty of going against social norms' (2014: pg. 168), she then goes on to suggest that lived experiences are therefore critical and can allow certain young women to take control of their embodied experiences,

policy makers who work on body image and body politics should strive beyond merely imagining the body as "Othered" (or processing fears of fatness, old age, hairiness, and so on) and instead focus on lived experiences with the so-called disgusting body (2014: pg. 177).

From January to June 2016 I identified five cultural behaviours that were regular features of women's embodied performances of femininity in Britain in 2016; dieting, shaving, wearing makeup and appropriately feminine clothes and using sanitary products during menstruation, and resisted them. Over five months I strove to challenge my own embodied femininity through a lived experience of its subversion. In so doing I contend that I was able to present an alternative feminine body, reopening the boxes and expanding the definitions of femininity that we know today. This embodied and experiential practice, conducted through my body and its daily habits, culminated in a final

performance in front of a live audience, which sought to share my research and perhaps encourage other women to perform their femininity in ways that could potentially lead to their emancipation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A BODY IN PROTEST: AN ANALYSIS OF PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

In her publication *Undoing Gender*, Butler asked ‘what makes for a liveable world ... what makes my own life bearable ... what makes, or ought to make, the lives of others bearable?’ (2004: pg. 17). She suggested that we examine the ways in which gender is embodied and performed, and how it can be undone and embodied and performed differently in order to create a more liveable world, a more bearable life, first for ourselves and then for others. Commenting on Butler’s work in the introduction of her book over a decade later, Allegranti outlined her focus on how ‘gender can be re-done or ‘remade’ through the body in dance movement practice’ (2015: pg. 5). A focus on an embodied and experiential method of practice, and its ability to alter our everyday performances for the better, was therefore key to the investigation of my inquiry and forms the basis of this chapter.

Through an examination and resistance of the ways in which I had previously been embodying and performing social and historical constructions of femininity, I contend that I have been able to identify practical and creative methods of re-doing femininity on a daily basis. My work aims to recognise that, as human beings who have been constructed and influenced over time, it is not always feasible or even desirable to strip the body of all social practices. We can however, discover new ways to live and experiment with them, giving both men and women the ability to play with the embodied categories of masculinity and femininity, in turn, helping to create a fairer society in which to live.

#### **Practice as research: an embodied and experiential method of inquiry**

Migdalek described embodied performance as ‘performance that occurs on, with, through, around and via bodies’ (2014: pg. 5). His book *The Embodied Performance of Gender* referred to the everyday bodily practices and habits of biologically male and female bodies; embodiment<sup>28</sup> ‘that which is manifest

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<sup>28</sup> There are various topics of embodiment: the racialization of bodies, the aging body, the fat body, the disabled body and previous research has been conducted into

through the body and over which human beings have some form of corporeal government' (Migdalek, 2014: pg. 5). Viewing bodies as matter, Migdalek argued that through what they perform (habits and daily practices) and the ways in which they do it, the bodies of those who project as male and those who project as female can create and communicate masculinity and femininity.

Writing a year later Allegranti integrated creative practice and rigorous scholarship in her investigations into sexuality, gender and the body, demonstrating how connecting disciplines can develop knowledge. She posited that embodiment was a working definition, a '*process* and one that changes according to our lived experiences over time' (2015: pg. 2). Allegranti argued that by interrogating these 'lived experiences' (2015: pg. 2) through performance practice, we can attempt to undo and then re-do embodied performances of gender and perhaps move towards more ethical ways of doing life, as Butler had suggested.

Drama is an embodied practice and pursuing my inquiry through this medium was therefore paramount to my investigation into and challenge of the embodied social and historical constructions of femininity. Women have exploited theatre and performance art in the past to construct alternative sets of values and definitions for themselves, particularly during the feminist movements of the sixties and seventies.

In Britain, as in Europe and North America, the late 60s and early 70s were turbulent years, when issues of sexual and cultural politics were addressed in a variety of ways, in many different public spaces, from academic conferences to university demonstrations to street theatre protests. (Goodman and De Gay, 2002: pg. 195)

Developing from the fight for equal pay, education and jobs; free contraception and abortion on demand; financial and legal independence and an end to violence and sexual coercion, women recognised the power of performance as an

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embodied performances such as anorexia and eating disorders (Bordo 1993), cosmetic surgery (Hayes 2007), and breast feeding (Schmied and Lupton 2001).

ideal vehicle for expressing the complex issues which were emerging in feminist protest at the time<sup>29</sup>.

Performance artists in more recent years have continued to demonstrate an intrinsic understanding of culture and signification, applying their own lives to methods that subvert the systems they find oppressive in order to aid in the creation of a fairer world for women. Casey Jenkins' *Vaginal Knitting* in 2013 presented her body in a way that was not designed to be attractive and was described as downright seditious. Over twenty-eight days Jenkins sat in the room of a gallery knitting from a ball of wool that had been inserted into her vagina at the start of that day. She did not stop when menstruating and so sections of the work bore signs of this natural bodily process. Jenkins' intention was to put a stop to society dictating what women should do with their bodies.

Mare Trala's solo performance *Breaking Illusions* in 2014 was described as 'a direct response to my everyday reality as a woman' (Becker, K. and Knaup, B. 2014: pg. 63). Within this performance and her own day to day life, much like myself, she broke away from any normative gendered appearance, dressed in an unconventional way and considered herself as breaking norms and disregarding taboos.

Every day I found myself forced to perform a certain illusion of a woman, to appear in a certain way, to please men; not taken seriously, I felt unequal amongst my male colleagues. I began to hate my gender, thus I needed to break the illusion of that new woman' (Becker, K. and Knaup, B. 2014: 63).

Both Lizbeth Goodman and Jane De Gay (2002) argued that practice and performance can question existing conventions and begin to construct

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<sup>29</sup> Artists such as Karen Finley and Bonnie Sherk used performance art as a way of demonstrating the objectification of women. In her performance *Identity and the Self* Sherk 'chose an image of elegant "femininity" for deconstruction' (Forte, J. 1988: 219) and in so doing both accepted and rejected appearances for women as she described herself as helpless and immobile, 'a real woman caught in the cultural signification process that demands certain behaviours in order to be a woman.' (Forte, J. 1988: 219). Karen Finley described femininity as the ultimate curse of being a woman, 'The problem really was the way she [woman] projected her femininity. And if she wasn't passive, well she just didn't feel desirable. And if she wasn't desirable, she didn't feel female. And if she wasn't female, well, the whole world would cave in' (Schneider 1997: 101).

alternative sets of values and definitions for both masculinity and femininity. They posited that '[t]heatre and performance is still a place in which the concept of gender can be dismantled' (2002: pg. 14) through a development of a language of the body.

Gender and gendered ways of being (masculinity and femininity) are linguistic categories that Goodman and De Gay (2002) argue 'we can scarcely think beyond' (2002: pg. 6). Not dissimilar to the linguistic theories of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva before her, who argued that women were '[e]stranged from language' (Bakay, 2015: 142), Goodman and De Gay perceived that

language represents 'woman' as the desired other and thus fails to embody her.

Language becomes a tool that objectifies women and cannot convey their perspectives of experiences (2002: pg. 3).

Practical performative techniques however can hold traditional linguistic understandings of femininity up for inspection, and present women's own experiences and definitions of that femininity, 'the utilisation of the body in performance may ... provide an alternative order to the symbolic order of language itself' (Goodman and DeGay, 2002: pg. 6).

I subsequently developed a language of the body through a language of the theatre in an attempt to interrogate and challenge social and historical constructions of embodied femininity. As a result I developed a greater understanding of my body, its relationship to the social world and thus the ways in which it is often oppressed. By actively resisting certain embodied categories of femininity, I was able to experience and present an alternative image of that embodied femininity, one that revealed in the differences of our constantly changing and flawed forms and overcame certain linguistic definitions that I had previously been following (passive, pretty/beautiful, sexy etc.). I advocate that the practice that was developed over this period of time was therefore more powerful than any written work or presentation. As I created a language of the body, a language that exposed processes of feminine construction and the ways in which we become women, the practice was able to peel back those layers of construction in ways that could not have been done through writing alone.

Practice allowed me to build alternative sets of values that encompassed an array of different ways of being feminine.

The method of this practical research followed practitioner Robin Nelson's know-how methodology; learning through experience. Quoting female performance artist Marina Abramovic in his book *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies and Resistances*, Nelson refers to experiential research as integral to the discovery of new knowledge, 'knowledge comes from experience ... it is something that runs through our system' (2013: pg. 52). Further to this Kruks believed that experience alone was what needed explaining and therefore 'it ... follows that the nature of experiencing self, or 'subject', becomes what needs explaining' (2014: pg. 77).

Through a lived experience and documentation of my embodied self, I discovered the specific behaviours that often qualify certain biologically female bodies as feminine and thus frequently render them unequal, and in subordination to the masculine. This documentation took the form of a diary and an anonymous blog, written throughout the five months. Both diary and blog documented images, recordings, thoughts, feelings and responses regarding my embodied experience. This documentation provided key evidence of the ways in which I, and certain women, were performing femininity in Britain today, and the array of methods that are used by both men and women to ensure these daily performances are continued.

As a dynamic, dialogic and multi-dimensional process, this methodology, based upon Nelson's model, used aspects of all knowledge, from explicit to tacit<sup>30</sup>. It sought to establish an articulation of knowledge through experience and a shift through intersubjectivity into shared knowledge which then resonated with already established research contexts. It allowed for the creation of substantial new insights that tapped into the theories of Melissa Trimmingham, who argues, in her own model, that 'the aim as the research progresses is always to ask a better question' (2002: pg. 57), to move towards better ways of seeing and knowing, to establish new ways of moving through the world as a feminine

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<sup>30</sup> Nelson describes tacit knowledge as prior knowledge that is innate within human beings. Riding a bike, playing the piano, driving a car etc. – it encompasses beliefs, ideas, values and mental modes of being that are deeply ingrained in us and shapes the way we perceive the world and people moving within it.

subject. Practice not only developed a personal understanding of my own embodiment, but provided my study with a framework for an embodied performance that highlighted issues a few other young women faced every day; verbal and non-verbal, questions of language and visual representation. I became both research and researcher, using my own embodied experience to gain insight into the wider cultural experiences of certain women.

### **Habits and habitual performances**

From January to June 2016 I identified and then resisted five cultural behaviours of many women's every day performances of femininity; shaving, using sanitary products during menstruation, dieting, wearing makeup, and adorning appropriately feminine clothes. This resistance formed the practical process of my inquiry and is discussed below. The process then culminated in a final performance where not only did I share the new knowledge gained, but sought to decide for myself how I now wished to play with the embodied daily performances of my own femininity.

Everyday performances here refer to actions, habits, and practices e.g. sleeping, eating, exercising, speaking, shaving, wearing makeup, wearing particular clothes etc. They are embodied daily rituals performed on and through the female body, which I argue are dictated by the feminine category, rendering women unequal in society. These habits create habitual performances that become natural processes of everyday life, without which it may be difficult to function, as David T. Neal, et al. (2006) stated 'contemporary research in psychology shows that it is actually people's unthinking routines – or habits – that form the bedrock of everyday life' (2006: pg. 198). Donovan went further in her analysis as she argued that 'life consists, at all junctures, of concrete choices' (2012: pg. 11), suggesting that reality and existence are expressed by everyday action and engagement, making daily habits integral to our day-to-day living. It is my belief however, that embodiment of these daily habits presents little harm, where the problem lies is in the meaning invested in the reasons behind said habits, and the inequalities that meaning creates. Through a process of resistance I saw how unaware I was of my own habitual performances and how they had been limiting the possibilities open to me.



**Body hair: You are not permitted to shave, cut or pluck any and all hair that grows naturally from your body.**

‘There is nothing worse than a woman with body hair’ (Emer O’Toole Interview *This Morning*, 2012). From the age of eleven a sentiment much like this one was accepted as absolute among the adolescent women in my school. We grew up knowing that it was unacceptable for girls to retain hair under their arms and on their legs, a perception that continued into adulthood. Fahs (2014) believes that,

...the pervasiveness and normalisation of body hair removal has transitioned from an optional form of body modification to a relatively universal expectation placed upon women’ (2014: pg. 168).

As the hair on my legs and armpits grew during the months following January 2016, peers frequently used words such as ‘brave’, ‘crazy’, and ‘unfeminine’ to describe me. A few of the responses included, ‘let me see’, ‘I think my boyfriend would disown me if I let my pits get like that’, ‘I didn’t realise if you left it, it would get like a man’s armpit’.

These attitudes are preserved and spread throughout Great Britain. In June 2015 Cosmedics UK revealed that 73% of women felt pressure to remove hair from their bodies, with only 8% having not done so in the past twelve months<sup>31</sup> (CosmedicsUK, 2015). This was a stark contrast to the 58% of men aged 16-24 who expressed similar feelings of pressure to remove body hair (CosmedicsUK, 2015). Fahs and Swank further concurred, stating that, in America, ‘most men feel entitled to choose the degree to which they will remain hairy, while women do not feel entitled to similar levels of choice’ (2015: pg.157). A current British advertising campaign by Gillette Venus, featuring television presenter Emma Willis, uses the following phrase, ‘because gorgeous, smooth skin is a perfect match for everything’ (Emma Willis Venus Razors Advert: The Perfect Match | Gillette Venus UK, 2015). They then go on to offer a mini razor for use when on excursions.

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<sup>31</sup> Legs 82%, underarms 78%, pubic region 57%, arms 15%, feet 7% (Regehr, 2017)

Several of my peers who watched my embodied experiment expressed their desire to remove body hair as a marker of femininity and respectability. One work colleague suggested that I would not be 'getting any' over the next five months. As I faced continuing appraisals of myself as 'manly, unattractive and gross' (Fahs and Swank, 2015: pg. 157), I became aware of how important the removal of my body hair was to my sexual attractiveness. With the pubic region as the third most popular area for hair removal, this fact became increasingly obvious. In the past certain women have provided reasons for pubic grooming that include 'it makes me feel attractive', 'men prefer it' and 'I feel more feminine' (Fahs, 2014).

Fahs has written extensively on the subject of female body hair, and in 2014 she conducted a practical study involving two groups of women (one who continued to shave, the other didn't) and documented their experiences. Fahs argued that '[t]oday, both mainstream films and advertisements, as well as pornography, generally promote women's hairlessness as an absolute default' (2014: pg. 168), and that hairy women were seen as less friendly, aggressive, unsociable and dominant. Before Fahs' study took place fifteen out of twenty of the women taking part said that removing female body hair was a choice. Once the study was complete, one participant changed her mind.

I feel like women are trained to oppress themselves, that we are brainwashed ... even when we question, there is still something inside us which recoils from that questioning (Fahs, 2014: pg.175).

For the first two to three months of growing my hair I feared retribution and would cover up when I could, lacking the confidence to bare my legs and armpits, feeling ultimately unfeminine due to the aforementioned pressure to conform to the feminine ideal of a hairless body. The practice of removing my body hair had become so normalised that ceasing to do so felt unnatural and even dirty. Early on in my process it became transparent how great an emphasis I was placing on my physical appearance and certain women's constant concern for their sexual attractiveness, making it clear that body hair was certainly not a part of that.

As time progressed however and the months grew warmer not only did it become more difficult to hide but I began to think that I should not have to. Shaving, plucking and waxing was a painful experience and one that I had been freed from. More importantly however, I refused to feel horror and shame for a part of my body that was doing no harm. I found myself rejecting notions of 'proper femininity' that had forced me to feel shame for my body and alter its appearance to fit in. This active resistance became a political act that changed the way others saw me and the way I saw myself, giving me the freedom to value my body in the way I chose. Fahs argues that

[f]or activists, body hair can serve as an in-your-face gendered revolt that calls forth notions of "proper femininity"; using your body hair to challenge notions of acceptable bodies has deep ties to other silences and shamed bodily events (2014, pg. 77).

Using my own body hair to challenge notions of femininity was a powerful tool that had wider ramifications on my sense of self and self-worth.

**Menstruation: During the weeks of your menstruation you are not permitted to wear any form of sanitary product.**

Wearing sanitary products during menstruation is arguably not a cultural or historical construction of femininity; tampons, moon cups, sanitary pads and other products are primarily used by many women for comfort and to avoid soiling clothes. The shame, embarrassment and fear attached to menstruation however, *is* socially constructed and has been, and still is, used to control women's bodies throughout the world.

Kristeva (1982) argued that the abject can be found in material areas such as food, signs of sexual difference, and waste. In the development of her theories concerning the feminine, Kristeva went on to identify the female body as abject and consequently marked menstruation as a social taboo, 'polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm ... although they belong to the borders of the body, have any polluting value' (1982: pg. 71). Almost thirty years later Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan Chrisler described menstruation as 'a benign process essential to the production

of human life [that] evokes fear, disgust and comparison to toxic waste' (2011: pg. 1) – they too argued that menstruation was to be located in the abject.

Throughout history and around the world the majority of women are socialised to be ashamed of and embarrassed by their monthly bleed, '[c]ontainment of menstruation, hiding menstrual products, and managing menstrual odours are all imposed upon women' (Fahs and Swank, 2015: pg. 156). Certain hygiene practices imply that menstrual blood is shameful and disgusting. Should a woman leak onto her clothes, Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2011) believe her femininity will be tainted because 'through the proper choice of products she should have kept the evidence of her menses out of sight' (2011: pg. 2).

For five months I did not wear any product to keep the evidence of my menstruation out of sight. I became increasingly aware of my own paranoia and the fear of publicising my monthly bleed. I recognised advertisements for the products I had stopped buying and their emphasis on secrecy, avoidance of embarrassment and freshness 'nothing, not even a period should get in a woman's way ... as a woman I can step aside or I can step up the game' (Always Ultra Sanitary Pads with DJ Phoebe D'Abo, 2016). Not only are women encouraged to hide their bodily functions each month but, should they choose not to, they are told that they will be unable to complete daily tasks – 'with the invention of panty-liners, advertisers begin to tell women to use their products every day so that they can feel "confident"' (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2011: pg. 3).

Refusing to wear sanitary products was uncomfortable and often embarrassing, my confidence decreased and I became preoccupied during the weeks of my menstruation, checking my clothes and the seats I had just vacated. I have not continued this practice for these very reasons. Although this decision was made for reasons of comfort and security, it has revealed the negative consequences that the stigma surrounding menstruation has on my health, well-being, and social status. The self-policing I continue to employ unfortunately distances me from my embodied self as I attempt to retain my dignity.

Despite this physical continuity I am now increasingly open about the discussion of periods and encourage others to celebrate them on a daily basis

rather than be ashamed and hide away. I argue that positive developments in our attitudes towards menstruation (seeing it as a natural process of which we should never be ashamed or feel compelled to hide) can move towards altering even more dangerous attitudes around the world. The 28<sup>th</sup> May is menstrual hygiene day, a day to celebrate women, talk about periods and ultimately raise awareness of the 1.25 billion women who have no access to sanitary items or facilities during their periods (Wateraid, 2017). Around the world, the attitudes towards menstruation have severe and life-threatening consequences.

In Kenya girls cut pieces of mattress or use leaves and twigs as sanitary pads, risking severe infection; until 2005 when it was outlawed, girls in Nepal were banished to dark rooms when menstruating; '[t]he shame surrounding getting your period is so pervasive in Malawi that parents simply don't talk to their kids about it' (Goldberg, 2015); over 70% of girls in East Asia know nothing about menstruation when they hit puberty; and in parts of India and Japan women are kept from the kitchen and told that they could contaminate the food.

In 2015 a London marathon runner, Kiran Ghandi, faced vilification on social media when she chose to run without any sanitary products during that month's period, '[a] woman ran a marathon without a tampon to make a stand against period shaming. That's not feminism, that's just being unhygienic.', 'I think she is vulgar capital V', '[d]oes she not realise she is running in a civilised country where we do not display such vulgar acts?' (Barns, 2015). Such attitudes permeated into the recent tampon tax debate when a politician trying to enforce the 5% tax was prompted by a female politician to say the word 'tampon' in his speech. All of the young women I interviewed during this process shared experiences of male peers in school who had teased them relentlessly about their monthly bleed. The shame and fear surrounding menstruation continues to be pervasive and effect women's everyday thoughts and feelings regarding their bodies.

### **Dieting: You are not permitted to participate in any form of diet.**

Over thirty years ago Suzie Orbach brought the issue of diet into the realm of feminist theory, arguing that 'without a body that girls feel all right about, nothing much in their life feels OK' (1978: pg. vii). Thirty-four years later

Lockford stated '[m]y body is rendered abjectly by the dominant cultural script that generally pressures women to conform to an ideal of feminine body size' (2012: pg. 13). Commenting on the work of Orbach, Lockford suggested that 'the most important and compelling standard for female embodiment is being slim' (2004: pg. 29) and therefore that 'large and or overweight women somehow reside outside the cultural meanings of femininity' (2004: pg. 28).

In 2012 a UK All Party Parliamentary Report revealed that '[b]y the age of 14 half of girls [in the UK] have been on a diet to change their shape' (Bates, 2014: pg. 80). The diet industry in the UK itself is worth £2 billion, with 65% of British women (as opposed to 44% of males) trying to lose weight in 2014 alone (Elkin, 2014). Within her contribution to the 2014 *Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Imelda Whelehan highlighted the popular, culturally constructed feminine body in Western society that may contribute to women's obsession with food and diet, 'what does not change is the focus on the female body and the use of the young, slim, white body to suggest the ideal feminine' (2014: pg. 246). Connell said on gender performance, '[a] large number of adolescent girls and young women go in for dieting in an attempt to maintain their heterosexual attractiveness' (2014: pg. 98), which she argues often leads to severe eating disorders. In 2015 a Social Health and Economic Impacts report estimated that more than 725,000 people in the UK are affected by an eating disorder, with an estimated 89% of those individuals being women (beat, 2015).

As young women my friends and I swapped diet ideas and tried to cut out carbohydrates and fats. As we grew and our bodies developed we knew thinner was better, '[n]othing tastes as good as skinny feels' Kate Moss told us (Costello, 2009). January 2016 was the first time in over ten years that I actively stopped thinking and talking about what I was eating. The result was a significant increase in my weight and an initial drop in my self-esteem. Many individuals discipline and control their bodies through diet and exercise, and I contend that for women this discipline and control plays a significant role in our embodied performances of femininity.

I soon realised that the obsessive focus on and around my daily eating habits had derived from the shame of potentially increasing in size, since larger girls and women were often teased, vilified, excluded and seen as less sexually

attractive. By controlling what I ate through diet and restriction I could ensure that I never slipped into that category, and yet, despite this control, I was always failing.

As I relinquished strict control of my diet and began to eat as I pleased, I listened to what my body needed rather than focusing on what I desired it to look like. As I then began to put on weight and with the knowledge that I could no longer control that fact, I was forced to see past my embodied aesthetic and appreciate my body for its functions, its abilities and its natural form. My self-esteem and personal confidence in my looks dropped significantly and so I was forced to find it in other areas – actions, conversations with others, mental abilities and physical well-being. Whilst the five months themselves were challenging in this regard, I developed a greater respect for those aspects of my being I had once overlooked for the sake of my size.

**Makeup: You are not permitted to wear any form of makeup or cosmetic product on your body.**

Both men and women have used makeup for centuries; within religious rituals, for beauty, and to promote good health. In 2012 a survey conducted on behalf of the Renfrew Centre Foundation found that 58% of girls between the ages of eight and eighteen wear makeup, with 20% saying that they receive negative comments and feeling when they do not (Jamieson, 2016). In September of 2016 Sophie Jamieson published the results of another survey, completed earlier that year, asking 2000 employees how they felt their appearance was judged in the work place. 8% of women had been told by their bosses to wear more makeup so that they could enhance their features and “look prettier” (Jamieson, 2016). Today the cosmetics and perfume industry generate an estimated annual turnover of 170 billion dollars, marketing their products almost exclusively to girls and women.

Backlash against this apparent reliance on makeup has recently surfaced. The #nomakeupselfie cancer awareness campaign in 2015 generated £2million for cancer research worldwide, as thousands of women took to social media to promote natural beauty while raising awareness. In the same year the *Daretobare* campaign then saw celebrities get involved in an almost identical

venture. Alicia Keys (2016) revealed in an article that she had ceased wearing all makeup and would continue to do so as it was 'the strongest, most empowered, most free, and most honestly beautiful that I have ever felt'. (Keys, 2016).

My friends and I have been wearing makeup since we were eleven or twelve, some even younger. Today we wear it almost every day and can spend up to £200 per month on it, sometimes forsaking food to afford it. It is an intrinsic part of our daily ritual, can take between fifteen minutes to an hour to put on and is something most of us cannot do without for confidence reasons, whether we have good skin or not – perfection is the key to this particular feminine sign/cultural behavior. Going barefaced for five months bore similar (if not as significant) challenges to that of ceasing to diet. Wearing makeup had always been a form of expression, a device to state my identity. Ultimately however I soon realized that it had chiefly been a tool to enhance my embodied aesthetic, to increase my sexual attractiveness and thus raise my self-esteem. Once I had ceased wearing it I noticed a further drop in my confidence – not only was I gaining weight but I could no longer compensate by enhancing my features.

Initially individuals responded by asking if I were tired or sometimes unwell. Others told me that I no longer looked like myself and I became aware that I was fading into the background, no longer visually standing out. My identity began to fragment in ways I had not expected. As a result I was again forced to find value in alternative embodied experiences, as discussed above, as opposed to purely aesthetic ones. As the five months came to an end I did return to wearing makeup however ceased to place the importance upon it that I once had. My identity is no longer wrapped up within it and thus I am able to leave the house without wearing it if I choose.

It can be argued that the practice of putting on makeup each day is a trivial act that need harbor no concern. During my resistance of this habitual performance I was asked what I was hoping to achieve and often people demanded to know the point of it all, perhaps afraid that I was placing their comfortable habits in jeopardy by questioning them. Fahs (2014) argued however that



... by refusing to trivialize women's 'beauty' practices, then, we question the narrow definition of 'acceptable' feminine embodiment, which maintains – at the most 'mundane' and, hence, insidious level – the message that a woman's body is unacceptable if left unaltered (2014: pg. 169).

Through a resistance of this daily practice I was able to challenge the common perception that to be feminine is to be aesthetically pleasing/attractive, and that I can in fact embody femininity in other ways.

### **Fashion: For one month (March) you are only permitted to wear black**

As part of her research into the objectification of women through the media, Bates found that 'three out of four teenaged girls feel depressed, guilty and shameful after spending three minutes leafing through a fashion magazine' (2014: pg. 193). Vogue, Elle, Harper's Bazaar, and a multitude of varying fashion magazines dominate the shelves of newsagents and supermarkets in the UK, marketing themselves almost exclusively once again towards girls and women. Fashion, like makeup, is in fact a largely female dominated sphere, with 80% of all consumer purchases driven by women (Brennan, 2015).

I maintain that fashion should be a way for women to enhance their confidence, develop their individuality and ultimately express themselves in the ways in which they choose. It cannot be denied however that it is often used to control, exploit and discriminate against women. Appropriate feminine dress has all too often been another expected daily practice imposed upon female bodies to ensure that they are continually attractive to the male gaze.

Twenty-seven-year-old London receptionist Nicola Thorpe was sent home in May of 2016 when she refused to wear heels, and was laughed at for asking whether a man would be expected to wear them doing the same job. Since then she has gained over 10,000 signatures in a petition to change the law that requires women to wear certain items of clothing or footwear at work. Angela Merkel is often criticised for her 'silly pageboy haircut ... and her mismatched, ill-fitting suits' (Forbes, 2017), despite having been referred to as 'the most powerful woman in the world' (Forbes, 2017). Actors and female musicians are

also calling out interviewers who ask them who they're wearing instead of quizzing them on their latest work as they do the men (Goldstein, 2015).

Emma Watson was criticised recently for appearing in a *Vanity Fair* cover wearing what was described as 'revealing clothing' (Saner, 2017). Watson has previously argued that feminism is about choice and, in this sense, the choice to wear what she chose. Yet she was accused of being anti-feminist and a hypocrite. It is not surprising to witness such backlash against a young woman actively choosing to express femininity in her own right. While women are constantly sexualised in fashion magazines<sup>32</sup> and encouraged by the fashion industries to wear certain items of clothing, they are also advised to think about what they are wearing in order to lessen their chances of sexual assault<sup>33</sup>. Female fashion is intrinsically linked to constructions of femininity; we receive advice on how to appear more feminine in our dress, and boys' and girls' clothing is constantly separated on the high street by colour and style. Fashion is still a gendered industry.

By choosing to wear all black for one month I intended to discover the extent to which I had been expressing my femininity through my clothes and whether my identity would be altered by wearing neutral outfits for an extended period of time. Again my identity was altered dramatically. At one point I scoured the high street to find a black dress that would be large enough, hide my hairy legs and armpits and detract from the fact that I wasn't wearing any makeup. Unfortunately I was unsuccessful.

It was at this point that I felt that my embodied identity was in jeopardy; I was resisting all aspects of my femininity that made me who I was and yet, at the same time, realising how significantly they were contributing to my inequality. I defined my being and my self-worth by these daily practices and my correct embodiment of them, as Migdalek stated 'ones bodily performance of gender is a

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<sup>32</sup> In 1995 *Vanity Fair* launched a cover with famous actors including Uma Thurman, Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock who were all dressed in underwear; in 2006 Keira Knightly and Scarlet Johansson were shot naked next to a fully clothed fashion designer, producer and director Tom Ford.

<sup>33</sup> Journalist Angela Epstein appeared on *This Morning* in January 2017 arguing that women should 'think about the place you're in, what you wear and how much you drink' (Mills, 2017) to avoid rape or sexual assault. This attitude permeates throughout society with women often being blamed for dressing and behaving too provocatively and thus to blame if sexually assaulted.

primary form of physical capital that can forcefully affect ones social and cultural standing at any given time' (2014: pg. 15). In my experience I have found that certain women do not appreciate their bodies for their ability and function but for their aesthetic, which is a bearer of our value in society. By placing an obsessive amount of focus on embodied femininity, which is almost exclusively concerned with the aesthetic, we are limiting the possibilities open to us in life. This I discovered through my embodied practice and through an investigation of my body's relationship to the social performances of femininity.

### **Performance: shared knowledge**

Performance was described by Jill Dolan as

a place for people to come together, embodied and passionate – to share experiences of meaning-making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting imaginations of a better world' (2005: pg. 2).

My final performance, *It's A Girl! And Then You're F\*\*\*\*d*, took place on the 6th of June 2016 and marked the end of the aforementioned five month process, and my challenge to the embodied categories of femininity. It was my intention to share my research with a wider audience, targeted initially at young, British, biological females, who identify as female, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five (the age range from which my personal experiences were being drawn). I hoped to provide ways in which I, and a few of these women, could live our lives differently so as to free ourselves from categories and constraints that may otherwise limit us. The purpose of this performance was to bring an end to my embodied experiment, share the experiential knowledge I had gained, communicate my argument that sex is still a constrained production that enforces women's unequal position in society, and ultimately share and suggest new ways in which to embody and perform femininity.

Responses from the audience would indicate that the performance went some way to achieving such an end; 'it made me think about why I do some of the things I do, and whether they are done for the right reasons' (Anonymous 3<sup>i</sup>,

2016), 'I came away from the performance feeling indignant at the pressures and injustices faced by women' (Anonymous 1<sup>ii</sup>, 2016).

The title of the performance, *It's A Girl! And Then You're F\*\*\*\*d*, was derived from Emer O'Toole's (2015) argument and encompassed the essence of the piece and my intentions for it.

From the second the doctor shouts 'It's a girl' our bodies are used to define us, to dictate which of our behaviours are acceptable, and how it is acceptable for others to treat us  
(2015: pg. 12)

I endeavoured to demonstrate what I had been doing over the past five months and how I had discovered, through my embodied resistance, the ways in which cultural constructions of femininity were still rendering female bodies as unequal in British society at the time. The aim was not only to suggest that, through such a label given at birth, we ensure women's choices in life are limited, but that, by choosing not to be defined by such a label and embody and perform femininity through our own definitions, our choices and options can be limitless. The key in the communication of these intentions was to allow the audience to feel the research, to experience it and to engage all of their senses.

The performance itself took place in a black box space with warm lighting to create an intimate, inviting atmosphere, and a single bulb suspended above the action to direct focus. In the centre of the space stood a bath, in which I sat, naked, surrounded by screwed up magazine pages. The purpose of the bath was to portray a rebirth, the creation of something new; new habits and behaviours – different ways of embodying and performing my femininity on my terms.

### **A word on nudity in performance**

The majority of the piece was performed in the nude, a choice that derived from the embodied language I had developed during the process of my study. The ethics of this decision was sensitive to negotiate. Female performance artists in the past have used their own naked bodies as tools for the enrichment and exploration of women; by liberating the female body from its context of male objectification I argue that you can encourage the audience to engage in its

celebration – a key intention for my performance. Further to this Matthew Jones supposed nudity to represent

... a threat to the established order because it denies the naturalization of that order and reveals the potential for alternatives that become visible when social bureaucracies are “stripped off” (2010: pg. 256).

It was my intention to present the audience with an alternative feminine body; one that was not slim or hairless, one that had undergone a complete transformation in its embodied performance. I do not believe that this could have been communicated as effectively and completely via a clothed body.

Nudity in performance however has been widely criticised. Jones argued that

... this disenchantment has to do with perceptions of [women’s] appearances, especially with regards to age and weight ... through the promotion of body idealism in media, industries ranging from fitness to clothing and cosmetics cultivate a beauty ideal which simultaneously inhibits public nudity through shame (2010: pg. 256).

Karl Eric Toepfer however argued that the use of nudity in performance could present the audience with an intimacy that they weren’t prepared for and thus place them in the position of the voyeur. He believed that the danger nudity posed related to sex, ‘[n]udity in performance refers to the exposure of the most erotically exciting and excitable sexual identifiers of the body’ (1996: pg. 66). To evoke such associations was not my intention. Since I was performing in a bath it was practical for me to be naked, as I feared that by wearing clothes, underwear or a costume and thus covering up those parts of myself that may be construed as erotic, I would only encourage voyeurism in the gaze of the audience. Barbara Smith greeted each audience member as a friend within her nude performance *Feed Me* (1973). In so doing Jeanie Forte argued that ‘her obvious ease with her own sexuality and unabashed exploration of new possibilities’ (Forte 1998: pg. 261) encouraged comfort in the audience and avoided the risks discussed above.

In order to combat the above risks for my audience I displayed notices making them aware that the performance contained nudity. They were also given a glass of wine, engaging their taste buds and offering them a chance to relax and feel comfortable, and a small pink bath bomb for touch and smell prior to entering the space. The bath bomb gave each audience member permission to get closer to the action should they choose, and yet free agency to hold on to it and stay where they were, again, if they chose to. As they then entered the space, I too tried to greet my audience with a smile and a welcoming 'hello', which a few responded to. Engaging their sense of smell and in an attempt to create a warm and comforting atmosphere the bath had been filled with hot water and lavender scented soap, emitting a sweet, pleasant smell around the space.

The resulting response was largely positive; one audience member stated that they never felt uncomfortable at all, with another admitting that, while they did upon entering, they soon overcame that and felt warm and comfortable in the room. Written feedback echoed similar sentiments, 'I was slightly surprised ... [t]his quickly dissipated though as no one else seemed shocked or outwardly uncomfortable' (Anonymous 1<sup>iii</sup>, 2016).

What impressed me most was that even though the content was at times quite hard-hitting and exposing, the performance space itself came to feel like a safe haven that encouraged a sense of familiarity even between complete strangers (Anonymous 1<sup>iv</sup>: 2016).

Consequently I argue that I was able to use my naked body in protest as previous performers have done to great effect, establishing Ma Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza's confidence in the performers ability to 'take control of their bodies and deploy them as a tool to publicly declare what they think is right' (2014: pg. 254).

### **Content**

This 'hard-hitting and exposing' content the above audience member spoke of was split into three sections; childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood; the three stages of my life thus far and the stages during which I

suggest most change has hitherto occurred and the majority of habits have been learnt. Before the content of the performance commenced, the audience initially entered the space to be greeted by myself reading a magazine and occasionally ripping pages from it, screwing them up and throwing them to the already large pile trailing from underneath the left-hand-side of the bath. Situated on the right-hand-side were several other magazines arranged in a pile. The purpose of this was to create an image of me having been sat here for hours, flipping through magazine after magazine, ripping out pages and creating the pile of rubbish to my left. The rationale behind this large pile of rubbish was later revealed as the performance concluded, and is discussed on page 62.

### **Childhood:**

Childhood, Migdalek argued, is when significant practices are learnt and developed, '[e]mbodied practices and body training that we learn in our social upbringing as girls and boys ... will impact on how we develop' (2014: pg. 12). Once I had placed the magazine on the ground, an interview with my mother began to play overhead. Within it she described me as 'very girly' during childhood and that I liked everything.

Girly ... you liked pretty shoes and you like flowery things, you liked pink things ... you liked painting your nails ... any chance to wear high-heels you would put them on ... all of that you really loved (Reader. R, 2016).

Yet she also said that I was taught to be 'very strong willed ... you didn't let people push you around or tell you you couldn't do something ... you were very strong minded and stubborn' (Reader. R, 2016). During childhood my embodied processes were not having a negative effect on the ways in which I was learning to behave. Yet teachers and friends often labeled this strong-mindedness that my mother described as bossy and dominant. I soon became aware as I grew up that these were unattractive qualities in a young girl, whereas in my younger brother they were encouraged. A recording of the above interview played once the audience had entered the space, introducing them to the first short section.

## **Adolescence:**

The performance then moved into adolescence and I scrubbed several pieces of underwear, which had been hanging from the sides of the bath, in the soapy water. The underwear was soiled with blood from my previous month's menstruation and I was attempting to clean them as best I could. On occasion I would spit on the underwear and use the back of my hand to scrub and wash parts of my body with the dirty garments. These actions surrounding menstruation were a marker of this adolescent section (arguably one of the most significant changes to a young woman's body during puberty). They also represented my resistance to wearing sanitary products over five months, and the physical result. As I continued to perform in such a way and remain in the dirty bathwater for the majority of the performance, I intended to communicate my belief that women should not feel shame for, nor be forced to keep quiet, during/concerning menstruation, and should in fact be free to act and behave as they choose.

Whilst this took place a number of recordings from interviews taken throughout the process (at this point regarding male and female experiences of menstruation during puberty) played overhead. These interviews were conducted during the five months of my resistant practice and were designed to represent the experiences and opinions of a handful of men and women regarding the five cultural behaviours of embodied feminine performance that I had attempted to resist. Both men and women of an array of ages, the youngest being twelve and the oldest sixty, were asked about their experiences of menstruation; their thoughts on makeup; women who do or do not shave; their relationship to food and clothes, and any general comments that they had on growing up as either a man or a woman.

In order to protect the identity of the participants, since many of the questions I had asked revealed personal information, I voiced the interviews for the purposes of the performance. Audience members were then engaging both the auditory and visual senses as they watched the body before them scrubbing soiled underwear and listened to men and women speak about menstruation. The purpose of the interviews was to provide the audience with a number of voices and opinions other than my own, moving the performance away from self-



therapy towards a sharing of knowledge in which the audience could potentially identify similar experiences of their own and question them for themselves.

This section also saw me cutting up one of the black garments I had worn during March, demonstrating the difficulty I had experienced with clothes as discussed previously. Cutting the garment into strips possessed a further meaning as a representation of pubic hair. Recordings of men and women's thoughts on and experiences with the shaving, waxing, and plucking of female pubic hair played overhead and I discussed the memory of my first pubic hair.

Spontaneity was the key for these verbal interactions, which took place throughout the performance. Initially I had experimented with and developed a script during rehearsals that involved a conversation between my body as an external entity and myself. This became surreal and self-indulgent however, hindering the performance's ability to share and create new knowledge. Furthermore by treating my body as a separate entity I was failing to communicate the new awareness I had of it and the ways in which it was now embodying cultural signs. The audience was already in a live and intimate environment, experiencing the research as I had. Meyer describes this kind of live, real engagement as dangerous. The audience feels the fear of 'something going wrong, the risk of missing something' (Meyer-Dinkgräfe, D., 2015: pg. 3) and so possesses a heightened sense of awareness. The verbal communication between each action was therefore created from the responses of the audience in that moment. No script was used, no lines fashioned and no speeches pre-empted. This allowed for a flexible and spontaneous sharing of knowledge and experiences together.

Following the section on pubic hair I explained my own relationship to food as a teenage girl. The audience then listened to testimonies of other individuals' relationships to food and dieting. During this section of the performance I consumed an entire jar of Nutella chocolate spread and a large Victoria sponge cake. The Nutella was consumed using my fingers, causing it to run down my chin and cover my hands, whilst the cake was dipped into the dirty bathwater before being placed into my mouth. In so doing I again attempted to portray a grotesque image, one not usually associated with femininity, and be unashamed by it. By gorging myself on both these items in such an unattractive

way I further intended to communicate my own history with food, the difficulties I had encountered during the time in which I had not been permitted to diet, and ultimately the knowledge that so many young women fall victim to obsessive diets and eating disorders as a result of the perpetuating image of the slender body as the desired feminine body.

To mark the conclusion of this section another recording taken from the same interview with my mother relayed the 'growing self-consciousness' that she had identified in me as a teenager, 'an awareness of your physical self ... which you were told by others wasn't nice ... that started quite early on' (Reader. R, 2016). The embodied performances I had cultivated as a child were now impacting on my behaviours as a young woman. A survey done by *Bliss* magazine in 2004, a year before I entered secondary school, found that '87% of teenage girls are unhappy with their body shape'. During my GCSEs in 2010, YouGov found that '1 in 3 girls aged 16 to 18 have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school' (Bates, 2014: 80).

These statistics were not unfamiliar to me as my friends and I were continually sexualised during our teens. Wearing our school uniforms we were catcalled from passing vans and picked on by peers if we were overweight or spotty. Boys in the years above me freely made comments about my breasts and felt entitled to touch them. We expected it and were taught to accept it, even at times being blamed as I once heard an elderly woman remark on a friend's school uniform, '[w]ith a skirt that short how are the boys in her school meant to control themselves?'. My mother described those adolescent years as the ones that 'did the damage ... about the way that you felt about yourself ... that came from what ... people were expected to look like ... you weren't accepted' (Reader. R, 2016).

### **Young adulthood:**

Continuing on through adolescence and into young adulthood, I put on makeup and shaved for the first time as the audience then listened to more recordings regarding these cultural behaviours. During these sections I explained my reasons for placing such behaviours back onto my body, and that the decision to do so belonged to me and my own interpretation of embodied femininity.

The performance then concluded as I stepped out of the bath, dressed, and summarized what I had discovered, and how I believed we could now move forward. The theme of young adulthood for this section derived once again from the interview with my mother who described me as 'a really strong and independent woman who still has confidence issues'. She told me that I could still be very vulnerable and sensitive perhaps due to the experiences in my past and what I had learnt through them. Despite this knowledge however she explained her belief that I 'will be successful because you've got such drive' (Reader. R, 2016). It was this drive that prompted me to include this section within the performance. A section in which I illustrated my ultimate discovery that the cultural behaviours and characteristics of femininity can and should be whatever women choose them to be, taking inspiration from Emer O'Toole; 'girls can change the world in the ways they choose to be girls' (2015: pg. 263).

I had discovered, hence my choice to shave and put makeup on again, that it is difficult to rid yourself of social constructs and practices. What I proposed however, was an expansion of the categories of masculinity and femininity, and an ability for men and women to perform in the ways in which they chose, regardless of sex – I argue that only then can we move away from the fact that sex is a constrained production.

Written feedback following the performance however, stated that viewers were eager for me to make an even clearer stand at the end as to my own thoughts and opinions regarding my research. What were my final thoughts? What concrete conclusions had I drawn and how would I be living my life now? How much had I changed and what needed to be done to change others?

It is beyond the scope of my limited experience to instruct others and provide definitive parameters for overcoming embodied categories of femininity that still limit women today. I was not able to change the entire world or its beliefs. What I did do however was change the ways in which I embodied my own femininity and moved through the world as a female. The shame I once felt for my embodied aesthetic has been greatly reduced and I am quick to call out those who would seek to shame other women for theirs. I question the ways in which many women are portrayed in the media and speak out against the teaching of young girls to keep quiet and not voice their opinions as I was once

taught. My identity as a young woman has been greatly altered; the value that I place upon my intelligence, relationships, actions, and words is far greater than that which I place upon my embodied aesthetic. I speak up, voice my opinions, and refuse to be silenced. Whilst these discoveries and changes are personal, I do suggest that through not only the shared performance on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2016, but also during the five months of my lived, experiential practice (in which I was continuously interacting with others) I was able to alter, if only in small ways and perhaps even just for the length of the performance, other individuals' perceptions of what embodied femininity should or could be.

Once I had then vacated the space the audience were left alone in the room and invited to explore and rummage beneath the magazine pages (discussed on page 57) that spilled out from underneath the bath, making a trail across the room. Dana Densmore (2000) believes Western women are bombarded with advertising that constantly encourages them to be a beautiful object, and argued that this obsession with beauty 'is used extensively in advertising, particularly in advertising directed at women: be like this, they are saying, use our product' (2000: pg. 388). During rehearsals however, it was suggested that my proposal to litter the floor with magazine pages could be construed as a cliché. I was advised to convey a more profound knowledge of the reasons behind certain embodied feminine performances. It was suggested that women were intelligent enough to understand that the advertising I was rejecting within these magazines (as I screwed up certain images) was superficial. Densmore (2000) however argues that

... we may be sophisticated enough (or bitter enough) to reject specific advertising campaigns, but we cannot purge the image from us ... suppose we *could* get the look they promise from their products and the look they all sell in their advertising? Ah, how few could resist!' (2000: pg. 388).

Throughout my process I have been able to discover deep-seated attitudes and perceptions that surround women's embodied performances of femininity, yet I maintain that many of these perceptions originate from and are perpetuated by the advertising that thousands of young women are consuming in magazines.

I perceive that the images I was rejecting aid in the creation of the statistics, facts, and testimonies that the audience found as they rummaged beneath them once the performance was complete; '[i]f you don't have a thigh gap you NEED to get a thigh gap' (fourteen year old interviewee) (Bates, 2014: pg. 79); '[a]fter experiencing workplace sexual harassment only 27% of women reported in to someone senior' (Bates, 2014: pg. 21); '[i]n the city of London the pay gap rises to 33%' (Bates, 2014: pg. 213); '84% of front-page articles are dominated by male subjects or experts' (Bates, 2014: pg. 14). Statistics and testimonies similar to these plastered the floor underneath the screwed up pages, portraying my belief that underneath the superficial images many young women are bombarded with each day, lies the subservience I argue they perpetuate.

Alongside this information I had also placed diary entries, blog posts, and image documentation from the previous five months of resistance. The intention was to once again allow the audience to feel the research, engaging through touch as they moved aside the rubbish and revealed images, words, and experiences that I had undergone. I intended to afford them a personal insight into my embodied, experiential process, to ensure that they went some way to understanding what I had been through since January and all that I had subsequently discovered.

### **Audience response**

From audience feedback it was clear that the piece affected a number of people, male and female, young and old, and from various different cultures, races and classes. One audience member wrote, '[i]t really got me thinking about how society has made women, myself included, feel like beauty and self-worth is something that is bought' (Anonymous 3<sup>v</sup>, 2016). One audience member however was concerned regarding my target audience, originally aimed at young women my age and with similar experiences.

I did wonder how much the presence of your family and best friend, and the dialogue with them, was integral to the performance, and what it would be like without them. At times it felt as though we, the others, were witnessing these familiar interactions from a

distance. Which made me wonder: who is it for? You yourself? Your family? Or all of us?

(Anonymous 3<sup>vi</sup>, 2016).

It could have been made clearer therefore who the performance was for and why I felt it still carried relevance in a contemporary setting. Despite this, a young woman who had been in the audience described how she had related quite intimately with the performance and the research that was shared.

I do remember conversing with others on how much we were able to relate to a lot of the topics mentioned; especially as females. An example of the most prominent aspect of the performance for me, had to be when you were recalling childhood memories of your mums friend (or your mum, I can't 100% remember) not shaving and the embarrassment you felt. This sticks out in my mind because it highlights the way in which the expectations of society, dictates our thought processes from such a young age.

(Anonymous 3<sup>vii</sup>, 2016).

The piece achieved its intentions for several individuals and encouraged them to think about the ways in which they perform their femininity and how that may potentially be limiting them with one commenting, 'I shave less ... I use it as a reference in my activities, when I find myself doing something for the sheer reason of "girls shouldn't do that", I catch myself mid thought and think - why the fucking hell not!' (Anonymous 4<sup>viii</sup>, 2016). Another audience member told me a few weeks following the performance that I am with them in the shower as they hesitate to reach for the razor; 'it's really quite odd that you affect me in those most intimate of moments' they said. Another wrote, 'it inspired me to adopt a similar attitude when it comes to my appearance, to just be glad of being fit and healthy and keeping a sense of perspective on everything else' (Anonymous 1<sup>ix</sup>, 2016).

I am positive therefore that we can expand these categories of masculinity and femininity, and come to define them in the ways in which we choose, free of limitations and stereotypes, and so free from discrimination and unequal treatment as the result of what resides between our legs. By acknowledging that Judith Butler was correct, understanding that it is to a great extent that "sex" is historically constructed and realising that, if femininity is performed, it can be

embodied in a variety of different ways, 'using your body and behaviours to destabilise the social constructions of masculinity and femininity that so many of us have accepted as inevitable, is a crucial political and ethical gesture' (O'Toole, 2015: 263).

## **CONCLUSION: A LIMITLESS BODY**

Judith Butler argued that “sex” is a ‘constrained production, a forcible effect, one which sets the limits to what will qualify as a body’ (1993: pg. 23). This constrained production has the power to forcibly produce and differentiate the bodies that it governs, and control the ways in which those bodies are perceived. From this production the embodied categories of masculinity and femininity are born, and their cultural and historical traditions ensure that the feminine body almost always comes in second to masculinity. Lockford argued that this oppressive condition is perpetuated by the ‘naturalness’ with which it is performed, ‘women are induced to perform their womanhood in stereotypically feminine ways (i.e. to strive toward becoming, decorative, passive and petite)’ (2014: pg. 7). If we perform outside of the gendered categories deemed appropriate for our assigned sex, Butler correctly maintained that society will readily punish and marginalize you.

Through my embodied and experiential study, I have come to understand that certain women feel compelled to shave, diet, wear makeup, keep quiet regarding menstruation, and adorn themselves in appropriate clothing, in order to perform their femininity correctly. Butler further contended that these daily habits and performances are not singular acts but ritualised productions, rituals reiterated under and through the constraints of society ensuring that, for many women, the aesthetic precedes the active. Over the past two years I have discovered that increasing numbers of women are growing up in a society where the correct performance of femininity is absolute, echoing Harris and Aston’s reflections on Butler over twenty years after she had been writing, ‘taking up the normative sexed/gendered positions remains ... one of the conditions that “qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility”’ (2006: pgs. 8-9).

In 2016/17 Great Britain I recognise that femininity and masculinity are still constrained productions, performed with such forcible effect that they have become more inherent in our everyday practices than they were in previous years; shaving, dieting, dressing, wearing makeup, and remaining silent regarding menstruation are just a few of the feminine practices that qualify the



biologically female body as feminine. This feminine status continues to reduce women to the appearance of their bodies and thus perpetuate their inequality with increasing concern.

Following her performance at the half time show of the 2017 Superbowl, pop artist Lady Gaga received multiple comments on social media site Twitter regarding her weight. 'All of #LadyGaga's female dancers were fat. Pretty sure it's to make her look thinner! #Can'tHideFat'; 'she looked like a #sumowrestler' (Kramer, 2017). On Tuesday the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, 2017 the *Daily Mail* printed a front page article entitled 'Never Mind Brexit, who won legs-it! – Sarah Vine's light-hearted verdict on the big showdown', exhibiting an image of Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May in mid-length skirts and court shoes as they entered discussions about Brexit, and the possibility of another Scottish referendum (Vine, 2017). On the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2017, Stanton College was criticised for posters exhibited around the institution that dictated what was and wasn't appropriate dress code for female attendees to their upcoming prom; images of low cut tops and skirts with slits in the side were frowned upon, whereas 'GOOD GIRL' could be found below an image of a floor length, high neck dress (BBC, 2017). Audi's recent advertising campaign #DriveProgress, which promoted equality between men and women, received 25,000 dislikes compared to 2,000 likes on YouTube, receiving comments such as '[t]ell your daughter to find a real man to marry and avoid the mistake that her mother made' (Hafford, 2017).

Not only are young women being reduced to the performances of their bodies, but the ways in which they are expected to embody and perform their femininity is also deemed as lesser. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2017 I was working in a high-street clothes and accessories retail store, when a father and his young daughter came to the till to make a purchase. As he was buying his daughter a pink notebook covered in glitter, the father said '[i]f any glitter goes in my van and people see it they'll think I'm a wuss'. Even as they are encouraged to enjoy and prefer feminine objects and activities, many girls receive messages that such things are lesser – to be a girl is less significant than being a boy; you fight like a girl, don't be such a girl, don't cry like a girl etc. All are negative expressions and often used to insult. In her compelling TED talk, *Vagina Monologues* author Eve

Enslar stated that 'to be a boy means not to be a girl' (TED, 2010) and that, as a result of society's efforts to demean what it means to be a girl

... we silence them [girls], we make them feel bad for being smart, we get them to behave, to tone it down, not to be too intense ... we are so accustomed to robbing girls of the subject of being the subjects of their lives that we have now actually objectified them and turned them into commodities (TED, 2010).

In an effort to overcome this and alter the embodied categories of masculinity and femininity, Butler incites rebellion through a subversion of their constructs and posits that only by doing so can we overcome the limits that regulate and qualify our bodies as masculine or feminine.

[I]t is the ... possibilities for rematerialisation ... the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that can call into question the hegemonic force of that regulatory law' (Goodman and De Gay, 2002: 283).

Projects such as *Everyday Sexism*, *HeforShe*, *Women of the World*, *Anybody UK* and *One Billion and Rising* are currently campaigning for similar change in existing perceptions of masculinity and femininity. In a speech addressed to the United Nations, Emma Watson stated

[b]oth men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong. It is time that we perceive gender on a spectrum, instead of two sets of opposing ideals (Emma Watson at the HeForShe Campaign 2014 - Official UN Video, 2014).

Since then, 1.1million people around the world have pledged their support for this solidarity movement. Watson recognises what I have come to understand through my study and what I therefore stated within the concluding lines of my performance on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2017;

it's about changing perceptions about how we think about people and the way that we speak to boys and girls, the way that we speak to ourselves, so that we can see

how we limit ourselves so that we can hopefully go some way to setting ourselves free ... no one's going to make my friends feel bad for wearing makeup ... and equally no one's going to make me feel bad for not shaving. (*It's A Girl, And Then You're F\*\*\*\*d*, 2016).

Amidst the challenges of my study, the fragmentation of my identity, the discussions with my peers, and the responses I received, it became clear that many young women, including myself, enjoyed performing certain aspects of our embodied femininity. They have indeed become such a part of our everyday habits and habitual performances that to do away with them invites a fragmentation of the people we are, which is no longer desirable to the need for change.

Certain embodied performances of femininity are difficult to justify. O'Toole agreed in her observations on the importance of daily performances, '[t]he actions we perform over time create our characters, our sense of worth and our happiness' (2015: pg. 6). For example, when a woman shaves her pubic hair purely because her boyfriend finds her more attractive in that state, or when a young girl wears makeup because she is afraid she will be scrutinized for the pimples on her face. To me it is not right that an adolescent woman is taught to feel shame for her menstrual cycle, or that that same young woman is expected to curb her eating habits to fit an idealised version of herself. Lockford however made an insightful observation in her work of literature, arguing that

... while acts of femininity may continue to be problematic performances, ... how we fathom the nuances of meaning in those performances is more important than arriving at conclusive interpretations. We must take a considered look and then look again. There is no stable, all-inclusive feminism or one singular accounting for all acts of femininity.' (2014: pg. 154).

In my opinion, it is the reasons behind why we embody and perform certain aspects of femininity that need to be questioned, interrogated, and ultimately challenged, rather than the acts themselves. Why do we shave - is it for our personal comfort or is there something deeper that forces us to unwillingly alter our natural selves in order to please others? Do we in fact feel

shame for our bodies, or are our eating habits dictated by the fact that we are expected to? Is makeup an expression of identity, or is it so wrapped up within that identity that not to wear it would be devastating? To recognize that these embodied feminine performances are not in fact as natural as some women may have once believed, is to open up the possibility that we can perform in the ways we choose, free from the constraint or force Butler spoke of.

Rather than subverting and eradicating acts of embodied femininity I suggest a willingness to expand the very category. I argue that femininity and masculinity can embody a multitude of things; its categories could be vast and wide reaching, encompassing an array of different ideas and performances and men and women can be allowed to consider that it is in fact possible to act differently if they wish to. I subscribe to O'Toole's belief that there exists a multitude of methods to disrupt and play with the system,

... whether it's examining your performative gender identity and its relationship with your biological sex; whether it's challenging taboos on the female body or by finding revolutionary ways to be beautiful (2015: pg. 263).

Or whether it is simply remaining the same and continuing to embody your femininity/masculinity as you have been doing, but recognising and embracing the ways in which other individuals may choose to play with theirs.

Through my research I have found that both men and women should be free to wear makeup, shave or not, choose what shape and size their bodies should be, and how much attention they choose pay to the aesthetic or the active. Both men and women should be free to access maternity provision, equal pay, and have successful careers. Both men and women should, and could, be free to exhibit qualities of femininity and masculinity, and perform in the ways that they choose. Currently I argue that we cannot. Currently I contend that certain men and women do not have the freedom to choose to perform as they wish, and so the performances they are often forced to produce continue to enforce women's subordination in particular. I contend therefore, that it is time to cease thinking of these two historical constructs on opposing sides, but to embrace what they

can offer both male and female bodies. Perhaps we can then move some way towards altering the inequalities certain women in Britain continue to face.

My study does not have the power to change societal perceptions, nor create far-reaching conclusions as to why certain women exist in a world in which they are unequal. It does not claim to provide definitive methods of eliminating this inequality, only to offer ways in which we can perhaps liberate certain individuals from the embodied performances that perpetuate their discrimination within certain societies.

The research conducted for my study did however serve to develop a practice that encouraged certain individuals to perceive femininity and masculinity in a variety of ways. I ultimately intended to promote choice and the potential freedom to perform in our own ways without persecution. The aims of my research were not dissimilar from those of Allegranti, who described her practice as an effort to

re-present both practice and theory ... in performance and on the shelf, in order to guide readers/viewers towards certain meanings of sexuality and gender, without in any way proposing that these meanings are fixed (2015: pg. 211).

By way of a personal embodied experience, I have endeavored to create a study that offers both theoretical and practical insights into the ways in which we can potentially alter and play with our own embodied gender performances; to 'bring fresh perspectives to bear on old questions and ask questions about ourselves and the social worlds within which we interact' (Allegranti, 2015: pg. 208). I therefore strove to offer the young women I came into contact with ways in which to move through the world on their own terms, embodying the categories of femininity they choose, for their own empowerment and happiness, echoing Butler's belief that 'the personal becomes an expansive category, one which accommodates, if only implicitly, political structures, usually viewed as public' (1988: pg. 523).

If my study and this dissertation can evoke a response from you much like this audience member, it will have achieved its purpose:

It was definitely an inspiration to me and still serves as one when I question my moral standing as a woman. I look back at it, and the boldness that was displayed and I realise that I owe it to myself to be free. (Anonymous 4x, 2016).

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<sup>ii</sup> Anonymous 1 (2016), Unpublished interview conducted by Kate Reader, 03/05/17.

<sup>iii</sup> Anonymous 1 (2016), Unpublished interview conducted by Kate Reader, 03/05/17.

<sup>iv</sup> Anonymous 1 (2016), Unpublished interview conducted by Kate Reader, 03/05/17.

<sup>v</sup> Anonymous 3 (2016), Unpublished interview conducted by Kate Reader, 03/05/17.

<sup>vi</sup> Anonymous 3 (2016), Unpublished interview conducted by Kate Reader, 03/05/17.

<sup>vii</sup> Anonymous 3 (2016), Unpublished interview conducted by Kate Reader, 03/05/17.

<sup>viii</sup> Anonymous 4 (2016), Unpublished interview conducted by Kate Reader, 03/05/17.

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