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## Tomboy as Protective Identity

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**Abstract:** The tomboy in contemporary U.S. culture is a complex identity, providing meaning to many girls and women. In this paper, we argue tomboy as a gendered social identity also provides temporary “protections” to girls and women in three main ways. First, tomboy identity can excuse masculine typed behavior in girls and women and, in doing so, protect women from presumptions about sexual reputation and sexual orientation. Second, tomboy identities can provide some protection for lesbian girls and women who prefer to not divulge their sexual orientation. And, third, tomboy identity can gain women limited privilege to spaces for which masculinity is an unspoken requirement. The temporary nature of the protections provided to tomboys undermines the ability of tomboys to truly transcend the binary gender system.

### Tomboy as Protective Identity

Tomboy as an identity can be explored from a variety of perspectives. In this paper, we explore the use of that identity label in terms of the ways in which tomboy protects the individual, families, and patriarchal culture. We argue tomboy as used by specific populations provides groups of girls/women with limited protections. These protections include: 1) sexual reputation protection for heterosexual girls and women; 2) protection for lesbians who are closeted; and 3) protected access to male privileged spaces, activities, and conversations. The limited nature of these protections in terms of time and context and the costs of such protections to individual tomboys results in the overall resilience of the binary patriarchal system. This paper explores the existing literature which supports our framing of tomboy identity use as protective as it occurs in contemporary US culture. Following the literature review of tomboy, the larger impact of these protections and the limits of that protection are examined.

#### **Parameters of Tomboy Identity:** *Embracing Masculinity and/or Distancing Femininity*

Harris describes the tomboy identity as one that protects the self from negative aspects of what it means to be female in our society (143). Carr using life history narratives found tomboy is described as an agentic identity that allows girls and women action and access to space beyond the prescribed feminine gender role (548). Hall cautions against reducing the tomboy to a simple gender identity in her article using literary, linguistic, scientific sources and examining conversations with girls and women. Rather the tomboy identity must be understood as multifaceted and created in a social, cultural, and political environment that shapes the definition and use of tomboy (563). This paper articulates how tomboy identity is

used across a variety of populations and contexts to provide limited protection from negative implications of violating societal gender expectations.

Some women define themselves from childhood through adulthood as tomboys and experience this identity as central to their sense of self. For some girls and women, tomboy may be used to broadly define one's personality, activities, and gender identity. For others, tomboy is a gender identity divorced from activity, sexuality, or other identity components. Plumb and Cowan's empirical examination of activity preference found that tomboys did not necessarily see feminine activities as aversive but rather enjoyed a less restrictive gender-role (711). The complexity of tomboy as a gender expression is evident as girls and women can use it to embrace masculinity and/or distance femininity.

Tomboys have also been described as girls and women who eschew femininity or who have masculine interests or activities that occur in stark relief to some underlying femininity. Tomboy is often used to convey not only a generic masculinity but a particular masculinity focused on skills or competencies rather than appearance. While tomboys may indeed dress in ways that are thought to be more masculine, the choice of attire may have more to do with function than form—wearing jeans affords one the freedom to engage in activities that would be made difficult by heels and a skirt. The use of tomboy is not only for those who choose to enact masculinity, but also those who choose to dismiss femininity (Carr 121). A girl or a woman may not reject heels and skirts because they are barriers to play or movement, but because they are symbols of femininity and, as such, are reminders of gender inequality. By rejecting feminine-typed clothing, girls and women may be attempting to deflect negative stereotypes including the notion that women are weaker and less competent than men. On the other hand,

girls may actually believe that women are the weaker sex and therefore may try to distance themselves from femininity. One woman, cited by Penelope (6), described why she rejected feminine clothes: "I couldn't accept the weakness, passivity, and powerlessness that such 'femaleness' required." Finally, girls who grow up in households where brothers and fathers receive more attention and praise than mothers and sisters may reject femininity in favor of masculinity in pursuit of attention and praise (Harris "Gender as Soft Assembly").

A tomboy identity leaves room for a person to articulate an identity that does not conform strictly to a binary gender construction. In an exploratory study of London school children, Paechter and Clark (345) found that the tomboy label is not always an all or nothing definition; some girls label themselves or others as being a "bit" tomboy, but not entirely. Girls may enjoy certain aspects of masculine-typed behavior (e.g., sports) but may also enjoy aspects of femininity (e.g., being friends with other girls). Indeed the more fluid definition used by children in Paechter and Clark's work reflects how many tomboys live out their identities. Many girls and women lay claim to some of the masculinity associated with tomboys without embracing the full tomboy identity. We now turn to the ways in which the tomboy label and identity provides girls and women with limited protections.

### **Protecting Sexual Reputations**

Double standards rely on the binary gender system to narrow the range of possibilities available for women and girls (see Crawford and Popp for a review). The double standard around sexual behavior derogates girls who like many boys or women who have multiple partners or sexual encounters as "slut" or "nymphomaniac" among other negative terms (Crawford and Popp 23). Similarly behaving boys and men are often lauded for their perceived

sexual prowess. Further, a girl or woman who has not engaged in heterosexual endeavors is viewed as plain, homely, prudish, or even a lesbian. The tomboy identity protects girls and women who spend significant time with men from such characterizations. This is the case because tomboy girls are not viewed as being sexually interested in male friends – instead, they are viewed as simply enjoying the same kinds of activities that boys engage in. However, girls who are not tomboys and who spend time with boys risk being seen as sexually promiscuous. Tomboys may manage to navigate the double standard by using the tomboy label (or by others using the label) to allow them access to situations where they may be one of few or the only girl present with boys without calling into question their sexual activity. Tomboy can be used to protect a female's sexual reputation even as she engages in behaviors that for another female might lead to questions about keeping company with males or having many male friends.

### **Protecting Sexual Orientation**

The tomboy identity also serves to protect girls and women from assumptions or questions about their sexual orientation as they can effectively keep questions about sexual orientation at bay by using a tomboy identity to explain masculine appearances and activity preferences. Tomboys, like most females, walk a fine line between what is and is not acceptable gendered behavior. It is socially acceptable for a heterosexual tomboy to be masculine as long as she eventually grows out of it and exhibits some signs of femininity. It is also acceptable for her to be somewhat feminine as long as she is also masculine enough to succeed in traditionally male-dominated activities – otherwise, she fails at being a tomboy. The tomboy athlete may be a special case in which the limits of tomboy as a protective identity become clear.

### *Protecting Tomboy Athletes*

Tomboy identity may explain away a set of behaviors that stand out in contrast to other girls and women. However, girls or women who play on an athletic team comprised of many tomboys (playing the sport may be enough to earn the label) may have any behavior read as masculine above and beyond that engaged in by other team members lead to questions about sexual orientation. In other words, people use the following logic: “The whole team is comprised of tomboys, but only that particular female athlete is masculine in these particular ways; perhaps she isn’t heterosexual.”

Women in sporting contexts often engage in apologetic behavior in response to pressure to re-assert femininity to compensate for engaging in masculine activities (Festle 284). Festle indicates that lesbians were presumed to be masculine and any woman who was not feminine must therefore be masculine and lesbian (283). Pennsylvania State University’s basketball coach Rene Portland retired after being sued by Jennifer Harris, a player who was removed from the team for violating the coach’s “no drugs, no drinking, no lesbians” rule (Newhall and Buzuvis 349). According to Coach Portland, she employed these rules during her 23 year career to protect women’s sports from the “stigma of lesbianism”.

Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin found female athletes rejected certain aspects of femininity while engaged in sports, but were often encouraged by others to engage in femininity outside of athletics to avoid being perceived as lesbians (25). The expression of tomboy activity as being active, sweaty, and competitive was accepted as long as femininity was maintained to ensure athletes were “heterosexy” (23). Female athletes acknowledged how other women increased femininity through certain behaviors (e.g., wearing make-up, hair

ribbons, or the color pink, and yelling cheers at games) but rejected such behavior themselves (23). Female athletes in Adams et al.'s study required their teammates to be dedicated, serious, tough, confident, independent, assertive, and competitive. Displays of femininity were acceptable as long as a teammate was good at her sport (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin 27). Halberstam found female boxers frequently followed positive statements about boxing or their own athleticism with comments that reinforced their femininity. For example, one boxer who said, "I love romance and flower dresses, too..." was able to portray herself in more complex ways and avoid being seen as simply masculine (270).

Both heterosexual and lesbian athletes attempt to balance the masculinity of sports participation with pressures to acknowledge that they are not in fact men. This is distinct from the pressure female athletes feel to acknowledge that they are indeed women. Though both pressures exist, the first upholds a patriarchal view of "tomboys aren't real men" and the second highlights the subordinate status of women and their athleticism by encouraging displays of femininity. Neither pressure leaves room for some middle ground in which a person could be neither or both masculine and feminine in the same moment. However, the tomboy identity momentarily suspends the pressure.

#### *Protecting the Closet and Excluding the Femmes*

Tomboy does not necessarily mean one is butch, lesbian, or a dyke (Carr 119). As such, tomboy is a safe identity for lesbians who may not be out. Halberstam discusses tomboy identity as one that does not create fear in parents about sexual orientation (5). However, the conflation of gender and sexuality can lead to presumptions that if one deviates from

proscribed gender norms, one's sexuality is also likely to be outside of the heterosexual norm (Phelan 775).

Masculine lesbian women who may choose not to be out can use the tomboy label to explain any masculine behavior that would otherwise be read as an indicator of sexual orientation; they can simply state, "I have always been a tomboy." This may be particularly useful for lesbian women who live or work in spaces that are highly gendered or intolerant of non-heterosexual orientations. It not only "comforts" the members of that group, but also allows the woman to exist without attempting to alter her gender expression even while still being closeted with regard to sexual orientation.

In some cultures, tomboy is used as a clear indicator of sexual orientation. For example, it is a word used to describe the more masculine partner in a lesbian couple in China (Chen and Chen 120). Similarly, Tong indicates tomboy is synonymous with being a lesbian in Hong Kong (117). In the United States, research conducted by Craig used 21 categories along a masculine/feminine continuum of lesbian gender identities ("Don't Ask, Don't Tell"). While the research was conducted only with lesbian women, the choice of a gender identity label by these women need not be seen as an indicator of sexual orientation. The label "tomboy femme" was used on the continuum and was neighbored by the midpoint of the scale "androgynous" and "butchy femme". This placement implies more about eschewing femininity than embracing masculinity. Compare this to the other similar (though distinct) identity of "tomboi" which appeared on the scale much closer to the masculine endpoint and was neighbored by "butch" and "sporty dyke". The reappropriating of the phonology of tomboy, but subversion of the spelling "tomboi" indicates that even this way of claiming a masculine identity in lesbian



communities is not equivalent with a tomboy identity claimed in the larger societal context.

While tomboy in its most common usage in the United States does not necessarily imply sexual orientation, it is important to note when it is used to imply sexual orientation and when it is used to describe gendered social identity.

The tomboy identity in its most popular form likely serves a dual purpose with regard to sexual orientation. The label of "tomboy" may allow for a palatable explanation of masculine behaviors for lesbians who do not disclose their sexual orientation. In addition, understanding one's childhood experiences as being those of a tomboy allows some lesbian women to create identity continuity from childhood through adulthood. By acknowledging they were tomboys, women can demonstrate that they did not "become" lesbian but rather always had tendencies in contrast to the hegemonic understanding of gender and sexuality as a choice. For example, Carr discussed lesbian/bisexual participants who felt their masculinity or being a tomboy was more consonant with their sexual desires for females ("Tomboyism vs. Lesbianism" 127). On the other hand, Hall found some tomboy lesbians who felt being lesbian and tomboy were present but separate identities in their childhoods rather than mutually indicative identities (560).

Two other populations are affected by the presumed connection between tomboy and sexual orientation. First are the many heterosexual women who were tomboys as children and see this gendered social identity as distinct from their sexual orientation (Hall 563). Second are femme lesbians whose childhood femininity is thought to be more congruent with heterosexuality rather than a viable lesbian gender expression present since childhood. Thus femme lesbians may find accessing lesbian space or community challenging because they appear to embrace a heteronormative gender identity and are perceived as heterosexual

(Craig, "Femme (In)visible" 124). Such women may find tomboy behavior or claiming a childhood tomboy identity allows them access to the lesbian community.

Stories of tomboy escapades may allow for a continuity of gender expression and sexual orientation that works quite well for butch women. Indeed, some women in Carr's study reported that rejecting femininity was also a way for them to reject heterosexuality ("Tomboyism or Lesbianism" 128). However, femme lesbians without tomboy childhoods face others' presumptions that they were "late bloomers" with regard to their sexual orientation (Heisser 88). Such presumptions reveal how femininity is not frequently understood in the mainstream as a non-heterosexual gender expression. When choosing to divulge sexual orientation to family, friends, or others a history of tomboy behavior can be seen as "good evidence" that the professed homosexuality is valid. However, femme lesbians who lack this masculine evidence (i.e., were not tomboys) are more likely to find their declarations as "lesbian" to be questioned. While there is some common understanding that not all tomboys are lesbians, there is less understanding of possessing a feminine gender identity that is distinct from a heterosexual orientation.

### **Gaining Protected Access**

Tomboy identity gives girls and women protected access to spaces typically denied to females in our gender segregated world. Tomboys, regardless of sexual orientation, are likely to be welcomed into masculine spaces even if the majority of others present are lesbian. Tomboys can parlay their tomboy identity, activities, or experiences into access to masculine contexts that may otherwise be male-only or male dominated spaces (e.g., boys night out, poker night, workplaces, conversation, etc.). While there are benefits associated with access, there are also

costs: acknowledging one's own masculinity may lead women to be seen as "one of the guys" and subject to misogynistic assumptions, sexism, objectification of other women, or other discourse that would not occur in "mixed sex" company. Showfety (43) interviewed a tomboy (age 31) who described playing "real or fake" at Hooters with her male friends regarding the waitress's breasts. Being a tomboy may allow women to feel as if they are protected from objectification and sexism but, in turn, they may be expected to objectify others in order to fit in and "be one of the guys." Tomboys allowed access to masculinized spaces are presumed to be immune to sexism and therefore subjected to blatant and hostile examples of such sexism; dominant group members do not self censor in such spaces, regardless of tomboy participation.

Gaining access to these spaces by claiming a tomboy identity is not an all-access pass. Access is typically temporary and comes with conditions of membership. Restrictions on masculinity are no less harsh than those on femininity and being "one of the guys" requires one to play by a different set of rules that govern boys and men.

### *Childhood Access*

Girls can be tomboys, and access boy space and activity, as long as it is made clear that they are just playing at being boys. Girls who act like or resemble boys, may often be met with chastisement that they are not "real" boys--they are only tomboys, a special sort of masculinity that comes with advantages over being a girl, but without quite all of the privileges of being a boy. By some accounts the tomboy privilege is limited to pre-pubescent females (Halberstam 256). It is acceptable for females to enact masculinity, mostly easily under the constraints of childhood. Adult tomboys do not presume the privileges of men but the more limited privileges afforded to boys. While girl tomboys are allowed access to boy activities and space, Zevy (1999)

notes girl tomboys leave the safety and security of socially expected behavior and enter a creative but potentially dangerous play space, a “warning zone” whereby girls can create themselves as long as they are wary of approaching the dangerous boundaries designated as “all male territory.” (Zevy 146).

Burn, O’Neil, and Nederend’s research with college students determined that tomboy behavior ended around the age of 13 (424). Yet these childhood experiences may provide access into spaces even as tomboys enter adulthood. Using past tomboy behaviors or endeavors to gain access to conversations or activities may allow women to extend these tomboy experiences into their adult lives in meaningful ways. Because tomboy women are constrained in this identity – they must not presume the privileges of adult men but rather those associated with boys. As such, the privileges of being a “tomboy” are limited because women’s access is overshadowed by patriarchy.

### **Tomboy Protections Reinforce the Patriarchal Gender Binary**

As the literature reveals, tomboy identity provides girls and women with limited protection. The provision of protection is extended to girls and women in a condescending way, reinforcing the idea that women and girls are in need of protection. Protecting sexual reputations and creating stigma around non-heterosexual orientations keeps the patriarchal heteronormative binary gender system in place. In addition, the limits of these protections further serve to undermine any real or lasting access to masculinity or masculine domains that would be accepted as authentic and allowed to truly subvert the existing gender norms.

*Tomboy masculinity is not real masculinity*

Women are still only allowed to “play” at being men; however, some women report receiving male acknowledgement of their masculinity such as the comment, "She's more of a man than I am." Heterosexual and lesbian women also report being told by men that they are "one of the guys" or "different from other women"—such statements are meant as compliments and serve to include these women with the privileged group of men. In both cases the message conveyed is inclusive of the masculinity of these women, but simultaneously communicates that to be female is to be under privileged or excluded. In the very inclusion of tomboy women in the masculine sphere is the misogynistic message that women are to be generally excluded with exceptions made for relatively masculine women. Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin found that adolescent female athletes identified the highest compliments they received was that they "played like a dude" (29). By contrast, doing anything "like a girl" is an insult for boys and girls (and adults) (MacNevin “You Throw Like A Girl”).

Tomboy identities and behaviors momentarily destabilize the patriarchal gender binary. This destabilization is quickly met with two forces to return to equilibrium. First is the recognition that this particular tomboy is an exception to an otherwise reasonable and stable set of expectations. Women who use tomboy identities to access masculine domains are expected to go along with all of the rules of the game rather than to gain access and change how everyone plays the game. Change from within a system is frequently slow work and the temporary access granted to tomboys does not provide sufficient time for change to occur. Second, the dominant group must recognize that this tomboy is competent and is also representative of other girls and women who could be similarly talented. Both seeing the

tomboy as “one of the guys” and as a singular exception to an otherwise reasonable set of standards prevent tomboys from being able to truly disrupt patriarchal gender binary systems. This temporary destabilization and the requirement that tomboys provided with access collude with the grantors of access ultimately upholds the very system the tomboy identity at first blush may appear to subvert. While it is clear that limiting the protections of tomboy identities is useful for protecting gender binary systems, the protections are also limited by costs.

### **Protections are limited**

It is socially acceptable for females, particularly pre-pubescent girls, to engage in historically masculine endeavors. At puberty, tomboys are encouraged to feminize their appearance or to disengage from more masculine pursuits (Halberstam 6). Simply having the childhood experience can allow a woman who no longer claims the identity to call upon it when it will allow access or provide some privilege or protection. Quoted from an interview by Hall in 2008 of a 40-year-old female heterosexual (Hall 562):

Let me lift it, I can handle it; I was a tomboy. Yeah I wrestled down my son a few days ago and he was shocked I am that strong. I guess I still am a tomboy or whatever. Oh yeah, I think it is that I don't care. I mean if you are not doing your job and it means I have to take up the slack, I am gonna say something. I am not afraid. Because I don't care. I don't care what people think. That's it. It's just who I am.

This tomboy alludes to a former identity, but also concludes the identity still holds. The report that her son was shocked also illustrates that this behavior is not within the normal realm of expectations people have for women or, in this case, for one's mother. As the temporary protection of tomboy as used in childhood fades with age, the identity itself may remain but

now contends with other pressures faced by women to fulfill certain gendered roles. Ultimately some of the benefits have endured, but the cost is continually paid as claiming the identity as an adult, in this case, seems incongruent other identities closely tied to femininity such as mother.

*Protection Limited by Pressure to Conform*

Tomboys are often required to "play" or "perform" femininity in order to conform to a normative gender role in specific situations so that in other situations the tomboy identity will be supported or allowed. Frequently this sort of feminine gender conformity is discussed as being forced upon the girl to conform to a more feminine role. However, the normative femininity to which conformity is expected is equivalent to a white feminine ideal (Greene 243). In the case of *Harris v. Portland* attention was focused exclusively on sexual orientation and gender conformity, without any discussion of the racial discrimination claims that were also included in the complaint (Newhall and Buzuvis 345).

Portland thought Harris should be more feminine and "stop wearing cornrows" (Newhall and Buzuvis 350). This comment demonstrates Harris' racialization of femininity -- to be more feminine she also needed to be less black. Non-white femininity is not widely recognized as social accepted gender expression in the context of females but rather as an expression of racial identity (Glen 13). Tomboy protection that allows white women to deviate from the strictest version of a feminine role is disallowed because displays of non-white femininities are not read as sufficiently apologetic (Morris 510). Tomboy protections may allow girls and women to deviate from the feminine gender role as long as they are not too different from the normative white feminine role.

Carr suggests that women make choices about when to embrace masculinity and reject femininity and such choices can be understood from a point of agency ("Tomboy Resistance" 530). Embracing the tomboy identity and rejecting the pressure to conform comes with significant costs and loss of some of the protections that may be initially provided. Indeed Jennifer Harris' tomboy identity as lived provided her with opportunities to develop athletic skills and be successful on the court. Ironically, this success and the opportunities afforded to her by virtue of her tomboy identity led to the request that she hide any remnant of masculinity that allowed her to compete at the collegiate level. The pressure to passively conform to a gender role must be seen as distinct from making an active agentic choice to express one's gendered social identity. Jennifer Harris was not simply pressured to passively conform, but rather threatened and ultimately forced off the team for failing to conform (Newell and Buzuvis 345).

Girls and women experiencing strong pressures to conform respond by defending their tomboy identities as genuine self expression as Jennifer Harris did when she told Rene Portland, "I'm not ashamed of who I am" (Blatt and Harris, 97). One response to placate those exerting pressure is to resign oneself to a particular or temporary feminine display (e.g., wearing a dress to a wedding, or wearing hair bows while playing soccer). This is congruent with Butler's understanding of gender as performative (331). Gender expression is not necessarily indicative of self-understanding or internalizing gender.

Girls and women who have the privilege of choosing rather than being strongly pressured to conform to gender norms have a different view of gender. Rather than feeling a need to defend one's tomboy masculinity or resign oneself to feminine display, it becomes a



tool that can be used to navigate interactions with others. In a People magazine interview in 2006, Pink was cited in an article interview entitled "I enjoy being a girl: They were textbook tomboys" as saying:

Men have an easier time dealing with a woman if she appears to be in the feminine role. If I walk into a meeting in Dickies and a T-shirt coming off a dirt bike, people will have a harder time talking to me...I'm a woman and I like to be cute. I love to wear dresses. But I'm still a tomboy. I like to go dirt-bike riding. I was an athlete growing up, a gymnast, and I grew up climbing trees with my brother. I like being comfortable, and I like getting dirty. It's who I am. I'm both a tomboy and a woman. ("I enjoy being a girl" 180)

Pink's statement is an acknowledgement that she is in control of how to express her tomboy and woman identity. By contrast, an interview with Avril Lavigne in the same article implies that one outgrows tomboy identity; Lavigne's link to tomboyhood is relegated to the past as she plans to marry soon ("I enjoy being a girl" 181):

I feel like a kid when I wear a T-shirt and baggy pants now...I used to be naturally athletic when I was younger, but now I'm 21, I know I need to start working out. I've been eating really healthy and consciously working out and keeping active. I've got to get in shape for a certain event coming up!

As a woman Lavigne no longer engages in masculine dress and behavior. Likewise, Lavigne's understanding of her body begins to shift; she moves from seeing herself as athletic to seeing her body in need of exercise to meet beauty ideals. From this interview, it appears Lavigne sees tomboyhood as incongruent with her expression of womanhood, whereas Pink maintains

tomboy and woman as compatible identities. It is easy to construe that Pink has a "choice" and that Lavigne has passively aged out of her tomboy identity or is conforming to a more feminine identity. It is more challenging to view both women as agentic and as having a choice about their gender expression. However, it is the agency that comes along with a tomboy identity that is most beneficial to girls and women (Morgan, 1998).

### **Benefits of Tomboy Identities**

Research points to several benefits that come from the limited protections of being a tomboy. Girls who are tomboys are allowed to experiment with gender in a way that boys of the same age are not (Martin 737). Tomboys who are good at sports may earn status, respect, and popularity, and are less likely to have eating disorders (Showfety 44). Jones reports that interviews with parents of girls wanted their children to be tomboys as it was associated with a healthy outdoor life (126). Halberstam discusses the ways in which conventional femininity may have negative health consequences. Femininity as associated with passivity and inactivity and also fashion accoutrement (i.e., high heels) is dangerous to one's physical health (268). Many of these benefits are largely tied to valuing competence, skill, and function over aesthetics or form.

Crawley, a butch woman, compares her traditional wedding photographs to images of herself drinking beer and engaged in water sports (79). The comparison leads her to the conclusion that while the wedding photograph is aesthetically pleasing she does not see herself in the photo. In contrast, Crawley sees herself not only as authentic but also as healthy in images of herself engaged in sport (79). In the midst of the feminine gender performance, Crawley self-objectifies, but when given the opportunity for a more masculine expression she

views the image as a “real” portrayal of self. The benefits of being a tomboy may be largely about identifying as a person who acts upon the world rather than as an object to be viewed and subjected to the world.

Tomboy can be a protective identity used to circumvent questions about sexual reputation and sexual orientation. Lesbian women in some cases see tomboy behaviors as evidence of a lifelong sexual orientation trajectory, while other women see sexual orientation and gender expression as completely separate. Tomboy identities can also be used to gain access to spaces that are typically reserved for boys and men. Acceptance of tomboys into masculine domains is to make an exception to gender binary rules but ultimately allow the binary gender system to remain intact. The protections provided by tomboy identity are clearly limited, but the benefits of existing even for a brief period outside of the feminine gender role do provide benefits that in some cases may outlast the identity itself.

### **Future Directions**

This paper lays out protections that tomboy identities provide; it is unclear whether tomboys are aware of such protections. Despite the growing literature on tomboys which define and explain tomboy experiences, many questions remain. Is tomboy a strategy that women knowingly use to gain access when in male dominated situations? How can tomboys engage as feminists after gaining access? Is the struggle of the tomboy as a “special admittance” to the group different than feminist men who have a bodily right of access to male domains? How can the benefits of agency and body competence be exported to non-tomboy populations? What are the intersections of this identity with racial and ethnic identities? What role does class play in determining tomboy experience?

Empirical work from a social cognition perspective could determine how impressions of tomboys are formed and compared to impressions of similar others who are gender conforming. Are tomboys seen as more competent when engaged in masculine tasks or is there a double privilege for tomboys? Perhaps by virtue of tomboy identity masculine competencies are presumed and because tomboys are female feminine competencies are also expected. In addition, it would be possible to ascertain whether the tomboy identity and its protections are extended only when a person knows or cares about the tomboy and feels the need to protect them. For example, is someone more likely to invoke a tomboy protection for someone they know and care about, but not attempt to protect an unknown person who is being subjected to similar inquiries about sexual reputation or orientation?

The limited protections afforded to tomboys from concerns about sexual reputation, orientation, and the privileged access to masculine domains presents a view of tomboy identity that moves away from definitional, historical, and developmental concerns to a broader question of how this identity functions and to what end. Understanding the tomboy experience is important because many girls and women embrace and perform it. The tomboy experience is also important because it highlights the ways in which female experience is shaped by a binary gender system that tomboys manage to subvert, if only for brief moments. It is in these glimpses of subversion that the pervasive nature of the binary gender system becomes clearest. In these brief moments when the binary gender system is destabilized we must remember to focus not only on what has changed, but also all that remains unmoved.

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