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Naming the Nameless: An Exploration of Queer Poetry and Empowerment

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Naming the Nameless:

An Exploration of Queer Poetry and Empowerment

University of New Mexico

Honors Interdisciplinary Liberal Arts

Thesis

Jesse Yelvington

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Introduction

What is "empowerment?" While intricately concerned with answering this question, at its core, this interdisciplinary research project was about more than defining a term; it was designed to empower the people and communities who took part in it. Directly engaging individuals and the LGBTQ+ poetry community in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the project grappled with questions of identity, self-representation, group membership, queer intellectualism and academia, poetry, interdisciplinarity, and intersectionality.

In working to conceptualize the word "empowerment," I developed definitions for three kinds of empowerment (personal, community, and public). These types were used as my hypotheses, explored through interviewing and photographing ten poets who identify on the spectrum of gender and sexuality diversity (hereafter referred to with the acronym "LGBTQ+"[1], or umbrella term "queer"[2] or "queer and trans"[3]).

Through this process, I developed a broader understanding of the term "empowerment" by comparing the information provided in interviews with the three definitions, endorsing two of them and building a few more basic tenants into the conceptualization. Throughout the project, interdisciplinarity and methodology were key, from the literature review to the combination of sociology, photography, poetry, and psychology used throughout the process. This essay is only part of the complete thesis. In its entirety, the complete thesis should be looked at as emphasizing process, rather than simply outcome. The thesis is comprised of: the development and interview processes, this essay, a series of triptychs (photographic portraits, interview quotes, and poems), a showcase and reception with live poetry, and a website.

For additional information about this thesis project, visit the **Naming the Nameless** website.

[1] LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Asexual, Pansexual, Gender Nonconforming, Nonbinary, and many other identities outside of hetero and cisnormativity.

[2] There are some LGBT people who reject the term "queer" as a slur. Every person should be referred to as they identify and desire. The term "queer" has been reclaimed by LGBTQ+ individuals and movements for more than four decades (Oxford University Press), and has many benefits as an umbrella term. Some of these will be addressed in this paper but a full exploration of the term should be sought elsewhere.

[3] "Queer" can act as an umbrella term for the whole LGBTQ+ community. In other circumstances, it might be useful to distinguish between diversity in sexuality and diversity in gender, in which case "queer and trans" might be used.