TAKING ON THE 'TIPPING POINT': TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION ACROSS POPULAR AND DIGITAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

As more transgender images move from the shadows of intelligibility to mainstream media, the question of visibility remains critical. This dissertation explores examples of how transgender cultural production can highlight less visible transgender narratives already in circulation by examining the Amazon Prime television show, *Transparent*, and self-representations of transmasculinity across the Instagram hashtag #ftm and a 90-week Tumblr blog about gender transition entitled *Trans Canada (My Way)*. This dissertation illustrates how these examples both adhere to and resist dominant discourses about transness in an effort to move beyond discerning between good and bad representation and instead to lobby for more and different transgender representation. Using the frameworks of critical transgender studies, media studies, queer theory and creative nonfiction, this dissertation explores the process of *telling transness* and considers how individuals use self-respresentation to exact agency over how their transgender identities and bodies are spoken of and for. Through textual analyses of a popular media text, a social media hashtag, and an autoethnographic account, this project argues that *telling transness*—or speaking about one's understanding of their transgender identity—is a negotiated process that includes, but is not limited to, conversations about bodies, memories, other identities, and cis and transnormativity. In the wake of increased transgender visibility in popular culture that aims to educate cisgender audiences about transness, and with the knowledge that this type of visibility does not ensure more physical or political protection, this dissertation demonstrates how transgender cultural production, both online and offline, is widening the scope of what is possible and articulable for transgender becoming in the service of establishing a less essentialized understanding of the transgender community.

DEDICATION

For my father, Robert Ripley Jardine, who taught me to work hard and showed me what genuine happiness looked like.

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I started this dissertation as a twenty-nine-year-old woman who wanted to move closer to her family because her father had just been diagnosed with advanced Alzheimer's. I am finishing this dissertation as a thirty-four-year-old man without a father, and whose mother narrowly escaped death. Over the years it took to complete this dissertation, I learned a great deal about myself. I had patient teachers in this process and I would like to take the time to honour them here.

First—to my family: thank you for keeping me real. Whenever I have asked for your acceptance you have provided it without question or hesitation. I am better because of each of you. Your love has kept me safe enough to continue to think and write things down. Thank you for your ongoing generosity and gentleness.

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and it changed my life forever. At that time, I thought whoever put a collection like that into the world was brilliant and magical. Getting to work with you over the past few years has confirmed my initial suspicion. Thank you for supplying the unique insight I needed and for challenging me to push my work harder.

In 2019, I spent two fantastic months in Roskilde, Denmark, graciously sponsored by the SSHRC Michael Smith Foreign Study Supplement. Here, I had the privilege of being mentored by Dr. Tobias Raun, who read and edited the third essay in this dissertation. Early into my PhD, a friend told me to find scholars whose work I loved and get close to them. My travelling to Denmark was precisely about this. Dr. Raun: thank you for guiding me through the most rewarding and challenging essay in this dissertation. It was a gift to hear your thoughts about transgender studies and to feel seen by a person who gets it. Tak skal du have.

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CURRICULUM VITAE or *CV*

Introduction

In order to set the tone for this dissertation and establish my familiarity with the fields of study my research will contribute to, I begin this introduction by outlining a brief overview of the evolution and entanglement of queer theory and transgender studies as academic disciplines. I focus on the tensions and intersections of both fields that most directly pertain to my arguments in each article—discourses on embodiment and identity. After establishing a literature review of some of the major theoretical influences in queer theory, gender studies, and transgender studies, I move on to discuss important scholarly conversations in media studies about representation and in/visibility. This introduction also outlines my unique positionality as a transmasculine person and scholar, demonstrates the overall thematic cohesiveness of the articles, situates the objectives of my research, and further explains my decision to use autoethnography—specifically performative writing—as a method for the final article. Finally, this introduction also briefly describes each article of the dissertation.

It is with great pride that I take time to mention here that the first article in this dissertation, "'Feeling Seeing' in Transparent: Using the Mirror to Reflect Beyond In/Visibility," has been accepted for publication in volume 28 (2) (April 2022) of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. I intend to submit the second essay in this dissertation to *Social Media + Society* after condensing the front matter and removing the section on political selfies to meet the submission wordcount. My plan for the third article in this dissertation is two-fold. I intend to submit the article in its current format to Graywolf Press with the hope of turning it into a genre-defying nonfiction book that explores transmasculinity from a scholarly lens. Additionally, I intend to submit a version of this article to *TSQ (Transgender Studies*

Quarterly) during its next open call for articles. *TSQ* regularly accepts creative works, which I feel this hybrid form falls into. To meet *TSQ*'s submission guidelines, I intend to pitch only a condensed version of the section *On Being* section from this essay with a brief scholarly introduction adapted from the front matter as it currently stands in this dissertation.

Locating the Struggle: Queer Theory and Transgender Studies

While it is much easier to conjure the complementary components of both queer theory and transgender studies, an immediate difference registers at the site of the body—both physical bodies and narrative bodies of identity, as well as the body politic. In his critique of Judith Butler's seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Jay Prosser[1] (2013) highlights this tension, arguing that:

> There is much about transsexuality that must remain irreconcilable to queer: the specificity of transsexual experience; the importance of the flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender identity; the desire to pass as "real-ly-gendered" in the world without trouble; perhaps above all […] a particular experience of the body that can't simply transcend (or transubstantiate) the literal. (56)

Capturing the relationship and tensions between transgender studies and queer theory demands a patient eye during the process of respectful unbraiding. The metaphor of *unbraiding* suggests that both theoretical camps are in some way whole, unified bodies, which is simply not the case. Perhaps, I chose the metaphor of a braid because it reminds me of being a young girl and not knowing how to braid hair at sleepovers. This was just one of my immediately recognizable gender failures. The

[1] It is important to note Prosser's use of the word transsexual rather than transgender. While it signals a specific time the text was written it also accounts for the invaluable, although arguably inaccessible, contributions Prosser added to gender studies during the height of postmodern feminism and queer theory—a bold reminder of the importance of skin, flesh, and bodies to one's self-perception.

other girls seemed to get the hang of it. I could not keep the hairs in each section from poking out. If transgender studies and queer theory are, indeed, separate strands of intellectual thought, then they also each contain frays, or split ends, that will not cohere.

While the purpose of this literature review is not to exhaustively detail the histories that led to the conception of transgender theory, it would be remiss of me to fail to account for the fact that each limb of the academic family tree prior to trans studies—queer theory, gay and lesbian studies, and feminism in its many waves—was spawned from resistance. Each strand of intellectual thought emerged defiantly against those branches that tried to contain it or did not properly articulate its needs in language. Out of the feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, emerged gay and lesbian studies. From here, during the 1990s, queer theory attempted to rectify the fact that these knowledges predominately centered on white, gay, men (Valentine 2007, 58). Simultaneously, trans-focused theorists were exploring paths beyond the gender binary, not just to a third category of identity, but to a terrain of *both and/or neither*, but without using sexuality as the compass. All above-mentioned disciplines contain a root motivation to study the shape of power, and to determine the effects of knowledge production. Both queer theory and transgender studies, in my opinion, contain imaginative energy and habitable space for recognizing the reciprocal, if not entwined, relationship between thought and feeling/being.

Pass or Fail?

The phenomenon of *passing*, or being read as a cisgender man or woman, is a critical, contentious and lingering conversation in transgender theory. Before I delve

into the various theoretical discussions of passing, I would like to offer my own synoptic thoughts on the topic. I believe that passing is often, but not always, dependent on medical assistance and a relationship to time. Passing clings to history, and the historical presence and absence of passing discourses comment on transgender recognition and tolerance throughout time. Efforts in physical appearance are only one component of passing, which also involves gestures and speech. It is important to note that some trans individuals articulate an active desire *not* to pass. As well, some cisgender individuals do not necessarily pass. Therefore, I view passing as a tool for understanding the durability of gender norms and how the two-gender system of rule is repeated, more than offering any insight into a particular person. Despite the categorical possibilities for gender that passing is alleged to foreclose, passing is desirable for some and without it many transgender people end up dead, whether dying by irrational hatred of their otherness or out of a sense of internal strife caused by social exclusion or dysphoria or both. Finally, for those trans individuals who describe their gender identity as men or women, the label of passing may be an insult as it seems to suggest a mockup for the real thing.

Central to my own understanding of passing is the premise that gender identity is the *stylized repetition of acts* (Butler 1988, 519). By this definition, it is not only the transgender person who passes. Of these bodily acts, Butler (1988) says that time and repetition are central factors. With this knowledge, I find it compelling to consider not only how the phenomenon of passing continues to hold the idea of gender together, but also what it offers in terms of revisionist work (523). In the second article of this dissertation, which focuses on selfies and transmasculinity on Instagram, I argue that the phenomenon of passing is an example of how exclusionary practices, combined with the limits of language, might, in some

instances, encourage the expressivist discourse that is often critiqued by queer scholars. I explore the criticism of such expressiveness (Butler 1988) at length below, but for now I will explain that expressiveness includes the articulation of a *felt sense* of gender or sex. If a trans person is denied intelligibility as their gender, denied passing, then one could argue, as I do, that performance, at least in the normative gender sense, is also a privileged position. When Butler (1988) claims that, "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts" (523), she may also consider that certain bodies are denied gender intelligibility and thus, despite their performances, cannot become, but must simply *claim to be.*

In their historical account of transgender identities, Feinberg (1996) depicts passing as an indication of a recent political shift, what they term a new product of shame (88). From this perspective, passing poses an interesting threat to the political mobilization of trans people. As I will explore further when discussing transgender identity narratives, passing can (but does not always) participate in a particular type of transgender erasure in a cisnormative world, forcing individuals underground for survival and leaving a large number of the transgender population unaccounted for in the movement and unseen by dominant society. In the second article of this dissertation, I argue that the notion of passing is troubled through self-representation on Instagram, which can reveal the precarity of the term and the political potential within it.

Nevertheless, passing draws attention to the cultural obsession of categorizing gendered subjects. Even for Kate Bornstein (1994), who adamantly promotes the importance of gender *border dwellers* and the creation of identity spaces outside of the binary, passing is articulated as a base (however problematic and uncomfortable) to situate and articulate desire (39). In this way, transgender

studies reveals the limitations of language and how it becomes very difficult to express desire without grounding it in gender, which is perhaps why Halberstam (2005) encourages unhooking queerness from sexuality, making the former a way of life (1). I do not entirely agree with Halberstam here, as I think that keeping the fusion of queerness and sexuality may be pragmatic for creating affinity nodes that are useful for organizing and resisting in the physical world. One thing that remains clear is that to pass is to commit to some level of normative gender work that finds expression through and on the body.

In "The "Empire" Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto," Sandy Stone (1991), arguably the grandmother of transgender studies, celebrates the potential generated by the transsexual body as a site for expanding gender identity terrain and warns that passing may erase disruptive possibilities (12-13). While I am seduced by her view of passing-refusal as rich ground for exposing the damage of normative gender roles and categorical compulsions, in each article of this dissertation, I suggest that, much like Stone herself, many passing trans folks trouble the idea of passing in other ways beyond physical exteriors. For example, those who pass might also make public their transgender bodies and histories, as many users of #ftm demonstrated in the second article of this dissertation and as I specifically did on my blog, described in the third article. I argue that even in our hyper-visual world, passing, as a structural creation, continues after sight and into self-representation and identity articulation. In this way, self-representation, through a specific type of selective discourse, might challenge the essentialist claim of representation to "reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true" (Butler 1990, 2).

While I agree wholeheartedly with Stone (1991) that passing cannot and should not be a *necessity*, I would argue that passing is also a temporal and

negotiated relation for some, often destabilized through language, i.e. through the use of alternative pronouns such as 'they', by outwardly identifying as trans, or by recounting one's history and relationship to gender. These practices, in my mind, challenge passing by also questioning the identity it both represents and thus produces (Butler 1990, 3). That is to say, I do not see bodies as the only, or major, way to complicate normative understandings of binary gender. As Stryker (2006) explains in "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," when discussing the root of the word *monster* as meaning *to warn*, "Unlike the monster, we [trans people] often successfully cite the culture's visual norms of gendered embodiment. This citation becomes a subversive resistance when, through a provisional use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy" (247).

This was indeed the case during my own ongoing negotiation with passing, as I demonstrate in the third article of this dissertation, as well as the experience of some transgender individuals posting selfies to #ftm on Instagram. However, as a transgender theorist who intellectually understands how much energy has been spent in queer and transgender theories critiquing the harm caused by normative gender behavior, while also existing in a world where trans subjects are continually pathologized, I feel squeezed by the fact that I nevertheless perceive of the idea of normal as both inspirational and catastrophic (Dreger 2004; Foucault 1991; Halberstam 2005; Halperin 1997; Spade 2011; Warner 1999). I argue that passing reveals that just as gender is a set of power relations, so is *transgender*.

Passing should not only or always be viewed as a decision to relinquish or retain political leverage, but be seen, instead, as one of many sites for further critical exploration. I am motivated by the slew of new theory being generated about

passing, including passing as an agency related mechanism (Anderson et al. 2019); class relations and passing (Begun and Kattari 2016); the biopolitical view of passing and transgender healthcare (Grzanka et al. 2018); and passing and intersectional experiences with race and masculinity (Snorton 2017), to name a few. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that by studying passing as an ongoing negotiation, gender categories continue to become demystified and particular agency-related gender decisions become illuminated and can eclipse more essentialized understandings of transgender identity.

Body as a Wonderland

Since its beginnings in the early 1990s, queer theory has focused on freeing queer sex from its persistent and limited framework of gender. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick (1990) describes the tropes of gender through which queer sex has been understood: the gender inversion and gender separatist models. I find that the inversion model, wherein "a woman's soul trapped in a man's body—and vice versa" (87), is striking in its similarity to the wrong body metaphor that appears across the field of transgender studies as a point of critical examination. In this light, desire is a byproduct of gender affiliation. Whereas with gender separatism, Sedgwick (1990) describes a folding in of gender and sexuality, i.e. a woman-loving-woman (88). Nevertheless, despite efforts to resist this particular framework, queer theory constituted discourses around sex and gender that determined what merited inclusion and could come to be recognized as a queer identity when beginning its movement and establishing its history (Foucault 1978, 155-56).

Transgender studies reaches a heightened point of contention with queer theory at the site of the body and associated identity narratives. While I will explore

the relationship between body and narrative further below, I would first like to outline some of the paths of inquiry developed under transgender studies in relation to the body and embodiment. What I hope to offer transgender studies with each of my three articles in this dissertation is more evidence that the transgender body may be used to challenge the illusory idea that *doing* gender and *theorizing* gender are somehow separate acts. Bodies are popular tools for communicating gender and, as such, intelligibility is shaped by and through bodies that do and do not cohere to the naturalized categories of gender. In this way, trans bodies threaten the assumed correlation between sex and gender.

Transgender bodies also possess a unique relationship to choice that is often used against such bodies to undermine their identities, and may also be used to literally re-shape how a person experiences gender, i.e. surgery and hormone use, etc. Individual transition-related decisions pertaining to the body, which are likely shaped and determined by social relations, nevertheless function to foreground the heterogeneity of the trans community, keeping the category of identity mobile.

Going off what they call the gender map, Bobby Noble (2006) envisions a post-queer world where sex and gender do not automatically conjure each other up (79-80). Using the FTM (female-to-male) trans body as a paradox that highlights the limits of language in terms of self-identity, Noble (2006) argues that transgender incoherence may expose the fragility of essentialized bodies. Having begun testosterone and having received chest reconstruction surgery, Noble (2006) says that they appear male from the waist up, and from the waist down they claim to appear not-quite-male-or-female (79-80). I argue that if bodies demand self-representation, then outlaw bodies—whether privately understood like Noble's conception of

himself or publicly called for by scholars like Bornstein (1994) and Stone (2003)—reveal:

> a boundary not between men and women, male and female, or even transsexual and non, but between abject and intelligible. This distinction evidences the possibility that while most bodies, even transgendered bodies, fit neatly or fold back into the body politic as readable, comprehensible, and intelligible, some retain or reclaim a fleeting moment of social and cultural unintelligibility, inhabiting a queer space [...] outside, beyond, invisible to, and perhaps, as a result, in confrontation with the state. (Boyd 2006, 431)

Gender diverse people have existed and persisted throughout history. In the 1930s, Western endocrinologists made breakthrough discoveries that led to the acknowledgement and treatment of people called, at this time, *transsexuals*. In *Self-made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men*, Rubin (2003) describes how Harry Benjamin's research disturbed the positivist approach by exposing "paradoxical hormones" or a hermaphroditic model that revealed the *natural* containment of opposite-sex hormones in both males and females (42). During his research on early trans identities, Rubin (2003) also provided evidence for what would eventually be a critiqued and evolving element of some transgender theory—the idea of a reliance on a "gender-core" or an internalized or felt sense of gender. One example of this gender-core sensation that Rubin (2003) explores is *agnosia* (106), or a type of reverse "phantom limb," articulated in the accounts of some female-to-male (FTM) trans folks who do not relate to their breasts.

Trans bodies illuminate the many ways that sex and gender can be de-naturalized through the relationship between technology and the body. When writing about how transmasculine folks use testosterone to alter their genitalia, Halberstam (2005) cites Del LaGrace Volcano's creative photography project on *dick-lits* as holding productive potential and physical evidence that challenges an idea of 'natural' bodies. Dick-lits are described as FTM genitalia that appear as either

enlarged clitorises or micro-penises. Halberstam (2005) writes that the ambiguous genitals do grow 'naturally' on the body without surgical assistance and trans individuals relate to these formations in unique and interesting ways, including referring to their genitalia by a variety of diverse names that both relate to the gender binary and exist outside of it (114). The challenge in Halberstam's framing here is that I do not believe it is productive to spend theoretical energy deciding which form of transgender embodiment is more transgressive, as, in my opinion, being transgender is difficult enough in a cissexist world without trans people having to bear the responsibility of toppling the oppressive structure of the gender binary—a mission that will indeed inevitably be punished, in certain cases by death.

Looking onward from the 1950s, the advances of medical science provided transgender individuals with a name and a regime of treatment. However, the same advancements also introduced limiting and pathologizing effects for transgender identities and representational recognition that continues in various forms today. I will explore some of these limits when I review the impact of medicalization on narratives in the next section below. However, it is generally agreed that the harshest critics of transgender identity, and thus transgender studies, on this topic are Raymond (1979), Hausman (1995), and Billings and Urban (1982). While their critiques, often described as attacks, are unique, their theoretical agenda is similar "because their mediating principle is that body alteration is *always* a privatizing and depoliticizing response to gender role distress, they paint transsexuals as brainwashed victims who have failed to figure out they are only undermining a revolution that seeks to save them" (Spade 2006, 318).

Transgender studies reminds us that the transgender body is often written about as a recipient and conductor of violence. The body, especially the passing

body, has been deemed a tool of symbolic violence by critics like Raymond (1979) who consider these bodies as *raping* women-only spaces by withholding the "truth" of gender (Stryker 2008, 106). In his critique of Butler's writing on Venus in *Paris is Burning*, Prosser (2013) argues against this dangerous demand that transgender individuals should indeed bear the weight of gender antinormativity on their bodies and through the articulation of their identities, and he calls attention to the fact that the very thing that establishes Venus as a revolutionary figure from Butler's perspective, her body as a site of gender incoherence, is the same thing she is inevitably killed for (50). As I mentioned earlier, this reality illuminates how theoretical writing about transgender identity can dissolve the illusory difference or distance between theory and "real life." As further evidence, Salamon (2010) explains in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*:

> To theorize gender, to ask after the ways in which bodies inhabit different sexes and genders and what social structuring make those inhabitations possible, is not to suggest any of those categories are incidental or meaningless. How we embody gender *is* how we theorize gender and to suggest otherwise is to misunderstand both theorization and embodiment. (71-72)

Body Stories; Storied Bodies

Butler (1990) challenges Simone de Beauvoir's claim that one isn't "born a woman but becomes one," by aptly pointing out that, from the moment of birth, sex is already always synonymous with gender and that—under the heterosexual matrix—one is very much born a man or woman (151). Keeping in mind the fact that gender is more often than not assigned instead of self-selected, I argue that one of the many innovations of transgender studies is an attempt to understand the selection process of *unbecoming* or *redeploying* this nonconsensual gender assignment by listening to and reading transgender narratives.

Arguably, the most common narrative to emerge in relation to transgender identity is the "wrong body" metaphor, or an articulation of a *felt sense* of belonging in a body that contains the 'opposite' sex, and subsequent gender, from what was assigned at birth. The wrong body metaphor usually articulates that this misalignment is felt postpartum and repressed or negotiated until the time that a trans identity is affirmed and publicly verbalized. The wrong body metaphor brings to light many of the complex intricacies of identity politics, most prominently how the transgender hierarchy is created through the repetition of specific identity narratives and the resulting establishment of an authentic/inauthentic binary for conceptualizing of transgender experiences. A second recurring and powerful story for articulating trans identities is the fundamental change narrative, which I analyze further below. Finally, there is a general assumption that trans narratives share a special relationship to time. By this, I am referring to the presumed transsexual trajectory (Pinto and Molerio 2015) that is said to highlight expected physical and emotional changes during transition. Within this trajectory there seems to exist a common awareness that the popular way of framing transness is by separating the present transgender self, or 'new' self, from previous memories when narratively engaging with one's gender identity. This strategy is witnessed in dramatic before-and-after photo series displayed in popular culture. However, in the second and third articles of this dissertation, I argue that this separation of gender selves is often only a visual aesthetic practice that may then also be used as a narrative tool for discussing an awareness of the overlapping nature of identity, of which gender is only one, perhaps sometimes ambiguous, piece.

The wrong body narrative, while not the only narrative for articulating transgender becoming, is said to have emerged, according to Halberstam (1998),

over 60 years ago in conjunction with the medicalization of transness and it has gained popularity since (143). The wrong body narrative is said to explain how transgender people feel as though they have internal genders that are not expressed, and perhaps completely undermined, by their physical bodies. One thing to keep in mind about this *felt sense* is that it relies on an internal feeling. My opinion is that the internalness of this *felt sense* is, but should not be, conflated with ontology. That is, a person may use the wrong body metaphor, but it need not be situated as existing from birth. I believe that it is the "from birth" portion of the wrong body narrative that, as poststructuralists might argue, naturalizes a genitals-as-gender construction that works against a significant portion of postmodern feminist arguments. It is common knowledge to most that thoughts, and additionally feelings, although seemingly internal, are indeed shaped by environments. Felt sense, therefore, can be viewed as a construction like any other (Salamon 2010, 77). I believe that by focusing on the present tense in his theoretical additions to scholarly production on transgender embodiment, Prosser (1998) agrees that this sense of bodily entrapment arises from lived experience and gender relations, not necessarily from birth, when he writes in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*:

> My contention is that transsexuals continue to deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is simply what transsexuality *feels* like. If the goal of transsexual transition is to align the feeling of gendered embodiment with material body, body image—which we might be tempted to align with the imaginary—clearly already has a material force for transsexuals. The image of being trapped in the wrong body conveys this force. (69)(emphasis mine)

In an effort to create new possibilities for imagining bodies, in this case queer bodies, Browne et al. (2013) challenge ontology to open up rhetorical space for abject bodies that are denied intelligibility (277). By revealing the discourse of abject as totalizing and general, this position affords space for recognizing the productive

possibilities in the wrong body narrative for transness. I think the wrong body could be argued as arriving from a place that otherwise resides in a *domain of unthinkability* (Browne et al. 2013, 280). If the wrong body narrative began as a narrative for trans people to move from the margins of intelligibility, it is possible that something about its repetition and resignification can illuminate the process of gender normativity. If discourses lodge in bodies (Browne et al. 2013, 282), then I argue that the wrong body metaphor is the trans splinter that theorists need to examine more closely.

The metaphor of the wrong body might also be a narrative strategy to return gender identity to an internal or subjective experience in a world that fixates on outward appearances. In this vein, using Oliver Sacks' notion of proprioception, Prosser (1998) highlights the importance of feeling, rather than seeing, to the concept of body image (78-79). In perhaps his greatest charge against Butler, Prosser (2013) calls into question her conflation of ego with body. Completely counter to Butler, Prosser reads the same passage of Freud as claiming that material form is shaped from the bodily ego and *not* that the sexed body produces the imaginary (45-46). From this perspective, body image is not only what is visible, but also what can be imagined. Indeed, my own ambiguity toward, and negotiation with, the wrong body narrative, as explored in the third article of this dissertation, is complicated precisely by the combination of gender joy that I feel as a result of having been able to achieve *some* of my desired appearance combined with the persistent failure of my bodily surface to meet the demands of my imagination for it.

In order to receive medical treatment, even today, certain narratives are required from trans people. In addition to displaying heteronormative sexual object choices, the articulation of a core gendered self is also suggested of trans individuals.

Many medical professionals conducting sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) also expect trans individuals to detail SRS as the missing piece of their gender embodiment, or the alteration needed to conceive of themselves as whole (Kuper, Nussbaum and Mustanksi 2012, 245). For many trans individuals these narratives are familiar and viable, but they are not the only way to identify as trans or to live in a trans body.

The authenticity afforded to the wrong body narrative is challenged within queer theory and transgender studies for its role in facilitating other assumptions about trans people that existed in the 1960s and 1970s when SRS was becoming popular and persist today, i.e. that trans people hate their natal bodies and experience no sexual pleasure (Sullivan 2003, 102). Sandy Stone (1991), in particular, argues that the wrong body narrative is a byproduct of hegemonic discomfort with the idea of gender mixing (106), and in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler (1990) critiques the act of using the wrong body metaphor to legitimate gender transition when she writes:

> To what extent is "identity" a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the "coherence" and "continuity" of "the person" are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. (23)

Further, in her explanation of the *expressionist hypothesis*, or the idea that trans folks feel their bodies fail to communicate their "gender core," Butler argues that such a model assumes (falsely, in her mind) that some form of internal gender exists prior to the performance of gender (Rubin 2003, 149-150). This is another example where queer theory and transgender studies part ways at the point of lived experience. While Rubin (2003) agrees with Butler that how bodies do gender creates the cultural fiction of expressionism, and that locating an internal self is impossible, he

reminds readers that the idea of wrong embodiment has nevertheless prevailed and, for this reason alone, it deserves attention. Prosser (2013) also notes that echoes of expressionism exist today and are validated by medical discourse around trans bodies when gender reassignment surgery is spoken of in *reconstructive* terms, or as returning to what is already imagined to be there (83).

Whether or not the wrong body narrative plays into oppressive structural forces, it is held sacred for some trans individuals. I agree with Sullivan (2003) when they suggest that "rather than simply accusing transsexuals of being dupes or unthinking agents of heteronormativity, it may be more productive to think about the ways in which transsexuals, like everyone else, are both agents and effects of the world in which they live" (107). The theory I intend to generate around the wrong body narrative is to challenge the binary between conformity and transgression. In my third article, I explore what privileges exist in my own conformity and how the process of conformity, for me, provides some gender euphoria or pleasure at times while also inspiring me to look more deeply at my own understanding of my gender identity.

While self-identification is a term often used to empower trans individuals so that they might gain entrance into cisnormative spaces, the wrong body narrative is an example where self-identification may reveal the limits of language to express and untangle one's gender identity. The very term self-identification seems to ignore the stored power in words that gather meaning through previous uses (Salamon 2010, 82). Additionally, the options for gender self-identification often adhere to a binary that many trans people cannot relate to, as Spade (2006) describes:

> Most of the trans people I have talked to do not imagine themselves entering a realm of "real manness" or "real womanness," even if they pass as non-trans all the time, but rather recognize the absence of meaning in such terms and regard their transformations as freeing

> them to express more of themselves, and enabling more comfortable and exciting self understandings and images. (324)

In order to move away from the limits of language introduced with the wrong body narrative, Cromwell (2006) suggests breaking free of the medicalization of identity that institutionalized transness sets up with an authentic/inauthentic binary by using, instead, *transsituated discourses* which "are produced by transpeople whose identities, bodies, and sexual desires fall outside of the dominant discourses and even outside of the available lesbian and gay discourses" (519).

At the risk of looking like *dupes* of the gender binary, there are numerous reasons that a trans person may wish to repeat the trans narratives that came before them. Primarily, this re/production could be encouraged by the same motivation that drives all articulations of intelligible gender—a desire for community, visibility, and political potential and protection (Boyd 2006, 429). Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that however, and wherever, personal narrative is expressed, it is motivated by an agenda and filtered through ideologies and cultural norms (Spade 2006, 328).

In her polemic work, Kate Bornstein (1994) insists that the current gender system is not based on an informed consent model and she advocates for the creation of new metaphors to replace the wrong body narrative. Other possibilities for articulation that Bornstein (1994) suggests are 'the fool,' or jester, who constantly recreates herself and does not rely on community to structure her identity, and the shaman, whose performance ultimately becomes her truth (92-96). Across all three articles in this dissertation, I am particularly interested in the ways that performances create gender and influence one's relationship to one's gender identity—i.e. how one feels or understands their gender self, gender perception, and how one feels about how their gender is perceived and validated (or not). In the second article of this

dissertation, I highlight the productive space of social media, in particular #ftm on Instagram, for providing access to a broader scope of transgender identity narratives, or transsituated discourses (Cromwell 2006), that extend beyond, or modify, expected patterns and/or resist repeated metaphors. I argue that it is in these spaces where evidence exists that some, and definitely not all, trans identities may redeploy categories of gender in a way that, while obviously neither withdrawing nor refusing power, actively breaks the pattern of what Butler (1990) considers the *stylized repetition of acts* that affirm the illusion of a cohesive *gendered self* (191). I do not wish to declare these trans bodies and narratives as somehow *more* transgressive, but rather I wish to show how social media, particularly Instagram as a cultural space for transmasculine folks, is reworking what has long been considered *unthinkable* for gender. If, as Grosz (1995) claims, the author produces the body of text, in this case I argue the body *as* text, and that body operates as a hinge between interiority and exteriority, then I explore how these particular bodies are being used to discuss transmasculine identity on #ftm, and I consider how such displays and discussion in turn re/inscribe bodies.

It is seemingly impossible to talk about body narratives and gender transition without mentioning time. Time is a narrative structuring device and it is also the physical measure for capturing change. Another common method for claiming an authentic transgender identity is to deploy the fundamental change narrative, or feeling *like a new person*. Fundamental change narratives can be brought about by any major life change, but with transgender individuals there is also a political function driving the narrative. This transformational scaffolding reproduces and normalizes the idea that, upon successful transition, a trans person should conceal their trans identity (Billingsley 2015, 16-17). While it is true that attachment to

(often painful) histories might trigger negative experiences for some trans people, the pressure to erase trans histories is also fueled externally, as Jamison Green (2006) explains:

> We are supposed to pretend we never spent 15, 20, 30, 40 or more years in female bodies…In short, in order to be a good—or successful—transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. This puts a massive burden of secrecy on the transsexual individual: the most intimate and human aspects of our lives are constantly at risk of disclosure. (501)

Transgender studies may engage with erasure to reveal that the hegemony present in the gender binary also infiltrates dominant narratives about transness. From this light, the categories of male and female subsume trans people without accounting for how trans folks may also shape the binary. In the future, if trans studies wishes to open possibilities for the articulation of more and different identity narratives, it will need to remain continuously critical of the way such narratives are articulated and influenced (Rubin 2003, 125). Throughout the articles in this dissertation, I study the shape and, sometimes, the instability of gender stories. I take note of the many narratives of transgender being and becoming that are in circulation and their proximity to each other. By studying transgender narratives, I argue that we are able to achieve what Heather Love (2007) calls for when discussing queer theory: "an account of identity that allows us to think through its contradictions and to trace its effects" (44).

Representation and In/Visibility

As a central effort of my research project, I hope to use each article to highlight how the processes of looking at and being seen directly inform each other, particularly in the wake of digital culture with the rise of social media. In the context of visibility politics, I position myself in this ongoing dialogue at the delicate balance between

invisibility and hypervisibility (Phelan 2003) as it pertains to current trans representation. Since the tipping point has made a specific type of transgender representation hypervisible, I consider how it has made other representations invisible in the process, particularly: nonsurgical transition and transgender sexual agency and pleasure (which I explore in the first article), transmasculinity (which I explore in the second article), and nonbinary gender identity (which I explore in the third article).

One known function of the increased visibility of a specific type of trans representation, which forms the transgender hierarchy I have alluded to, in popular media is that it promotes a *promise of happiness* (Ahmed 2010) for those transgender people aptly depicted. Over time, repeated representations of specific trans images create impressions that then become familiar objects for orienting trans subjectivities. By displaying articulations and expressions of being transgender that fit this popular representation, certain transgender people, those who most closely resemble the popular image, are promised feelings of affinity or a sense of gender identity validation and protection. Transgender people who can or wish to align their story with this common representation are then encouraged to share their similar transgender identity narratives in the aim of ending stigma.

Much like the neoliberal discourse that emerged out of 1980s and 1990s in confessional forms of popular media, such as talk shows, the current docu-narrative structures of telling a specific type of transness in popular and online culture shapes representation at the height of this current tipping point and grants particular trans narratives authenticity, purity, and truth (Squire 1997, 110). The brand of neoliberalism I am referring to carries with it a notion of common decency or political correctness that insists that each individual has the power to heal their own

sorrow through telling and is therefore tasked with the responsibility to tell. The confessional impulse of such narrative structures can have the effect of shifting accountability and therefore seems to suggest that oppressed individuals can solve oppression by resisting it, rather than placing focus on the duty of oppressors not to oppress (McRobbie 2009, 37). I am particularly interested in further exploring how this type of neoliberalism reverberates through a looped system of re/telling a familiar form of transness, which then sets up and monitors borders, both within trans and cis populations, for what constitutes a normal, authentic, recognizable or acceptable narrative of transgender identity. I call this, predominately closed circuit, system of production the transgender hierarchy.

Under the transgender hierarchy, an ordering of otherness occurs wherein certain transgender narratives are valued and thus made more visible than others. The current hierarchy places wealthy, able-bodied, white, heterosexual, medically assisted, passing trans women in the position of greatest visibility. Across each article, I also consider the costs, not only the privileges, of such hypervisibility. There are dangers in being the most visible member of any community and, particularly in the first article, I use intersectional (Crenshaw 1991) feminist theory to look at how transmisogyny (Serano 2009) and the objectification of women inform the order of the trans hierarchy.

Stuart Hall (1997) argued that representation is built up by language that gives meaning to objects, people, and events (3). Keeping in mind that representation involves a communication process that is both culturally agreed upon, but perhaps not always understood in the same way by all members, and individually internalized, it is clear that one function of representation is to align values,

perceptions, and identities with the status quo. Another function is to use representation as a disruptive mechanism for challenging this very same structure.

By studying representation that involves, however minimally, a focus on the particular way that trans/gender identity can be stereotypical while also opening up other possibilities for interpretation, I hope to theorize the relationship between pleasure and trans/gender performativity and to move beyond the tendency to categorize transgender representation under a false binary of regressive/transgressive examples or, more simply, good/bad representation.

In a similar effort to move beyond the confines of such a representational project in media studies, Amy Villarejo (2014) explains the naivety of an idea of representational justice (42) for the queer community. Just because diverse and varied depictions of transgender characters might have transformative potential does not mean producers will heed pressure or be 'woke enough' to represent transgender characters in a 'positive' light. The first problem with this assumption is who gets to determine what 'positive' means? I agree with Villarejo when they explain that efforts are better spent acknowledging that what the *transgender tipping point*[2] has taught media consumers is that visibility, or being seen, does not guarantee protection. As transgender characters enter mainstream networks at increasing rates, so too does the murder toll of transgender people, predominately transgender women of colour, continue to rise. However, to say that I wish to move away from binaries like good/bad representation, does not mean that I wish to remain uncritical about the types of transgender representation in existence. I draw attention to the transgender hierarchy in my discussion of representation to echo sentiments from critical race

[2] In 2014, transgender actress, Laverne Cox, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Audiences were told that the transgender tipping point had arrived. Jumping forward only one year, Caitlyn Jenner gathered attention as a newly out trans woman on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

scholars like Che Gossett (2017) who writes: "One of the traps of trans visibility is that it is premised on invisibility: to bring a select few in view, others must disappear into the background, and this is always a political project that reinforces oppression" (183).

Indeed, the heart of this dissertation and guiding theme of all three articles is the idea that *more is more* when it comes to transgender representation. I hope that producers and viewers' first question when looking at transgender representation will be not whether it is good/bad but what possibilities and worlds it both creates and forecloses. This is why I find it important to mention here that while the texts I examined in this dissertation did create interesting theory about transgender embodiment they also reproduced some very powerful structures, including: whiteness, thinness, and able-bodied privilege. My choices to study a relatively mainstream text, a hashtag in its early days of use, and my own experience as evidence, produced a certain image of transgender life—an overwhelmingly white, predominately thin, and largely able-bodied experience. As a result, the theory generated herein is partial and the vantage point must continue to be further opened. One way of getting there, and a method I advocate for in the first article of this dissertation, is to defamiliarize transgender narratives by inviting more transgender cultural production and assuming a mix of transgender and cisgender audiences.

Finally, and with great energy, I consider the relationship between representation and emotion in all three articles of this dissertation in different ways. Representation works by exciting memories—recalling emotions and past relations with a symbol. Sense memory usually finds articulation through language, but visual recall can conjure unspeakable emotions that live in the body (Bennett 2003, 457). My research asks how transgender representation, in three different forms across

each article, works on and through emotions that are often unspeakable. In the first article, I write toward feeling through memory as it emerges through mirror imagery in *Transparent*. In the second and third articles, I explore what forms of transition-related feeling circulate online by considering how words and objects associated with trans representation, such as 'dysphoria,' 'top surgery,' 'hormones,' and 'bottom surgery,' as well as discourse around technologies used in transition, i.e. binders, packers, wigs, etc., carry emotions with them that create impressions (Ahmed 2014, 14) and inform identities.

Trans Subjectivity and Queer Futures

A major motivator of my research is to consider the tension or contradiction of having to delineate between identity and representation, while simultaneously highlighting their symbiosis and utter dependency. When representation and identity are taken in the same vein, the complex and fragmented nature of identity is often ignored. As Adrienne Shaw (2015) explains: "Good representation necessarily fails to encompass the totality of a group in a single body and recognizes its failure to do so" (31). As such, the demand of a visual culture invites bodies to stand in as absent presences, overlooking the parts of identity that are "unsayable, unseeable, and therefore resistant to representation" (Phelan 2003, 124).

If my research, and research like mine, is successful, then people will look in peripheral directions and find that the state of current popular trans representation is being shaped by, and holding room for, wider frames of being (Butler 2010) in the production of trans subjectivities. For it is in these liminal representational spaces, which are often neglected, that the term 'transgender' and the lives it corrals, become

reimagined, open, possible, unfixed, and even desirable, as a negotiated identity position for much more than the privileged few.

I believe that capturing the performances of this defamiliarized transness in precarious places, often beyond language, is important because it is a representational project of queer future-building in a world that was not meant for us (Muñoz 2009). In order not to repeat oppression by uncritically adopting the master's tools (Lorde 1983), the study of trans representation should avoid being seduced by the myth of representation, or, that is, the adoption of an ironic flattening out of identities. When transgender identity is essentialized in media representation, viewers and scholars must remain publicly critical of this and bring voice to the luxuries it affords and the people it forgets, or worse, erases. We must call it out. We must sit with what it provokes. We must find and focus on its nuance. One question that may serve us in challenging essentialism is: how is transgender cultural production creating space for trans people to speak their differences while retaining the vital, albeit often untangible, sense of community, unity, or affinity necessary to matter? I mean *matter* both in the sense of materializing and being seen and thus, also, in the manner of being afforded the rights and dignity that are integral to survival in the current, cissexist world (Butler 1993).

The cover of the June 9th, 2014 issue of *Time* magazine showed Laverne Cox, an actress from the hit Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*, holding her head high, wearing a royal blue dress. Next to her right shoulder, the word "transgender" sizzled in bold, red text. Perhaps as a move to make the exotic desirable, or as a warning to the general population to *get with the times*, the publication announced that the "transgender tipping point" had arrived in popular culture. With this, the term *transgender*, indicating a gender identity that does not align with an assigned

sex at birth, was further rooted in popular discourse. Jumping forward exactly one year to the day, Caitlyn Jenner revealed her female identity for the first time on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

Historically, trans people have been symbolically annihilated, underrepresented, hidden, or omitted from media and popular discourse (Feinberg 1996; Tuchman 1978). Each of the articles in this dissertation investigates the potential that popular and online texts offer for negotiating trans/gender identity and embodiment, and the impacts of producing multiple and varied trans narratives that may then join, intersect with, extend, and undermine other representations.

Like many new media scholars (Baym and boyd 2012; Cantey and Robinson 2015; Cavalcante 2016; Dame 2016; Jenzen and Karl 2014; Loza 2014; Mann 2014; Raun 2014; Shaw and Sender 2016) my research also aims to highlight the theoretical potential present in digital culture. Since trans representation is entering dominant discourse at a more substantial rate, now is the time to critically explore what trans narratives and images rise to the top and how they are treated in texts. More than this, it is important to recognize the impact of representation that exists in juxtaposition to these claims and how these narratives may also gain traction. To understand the magnitude of this phenomenon, and add scholarly insight, I turn my focus first to popular representation, then to niche online representation, and then within to self-representation, in order to explore the agitational potential contained across trans texts that are produced in the wake of the tipping point. I ask: what are the affective effects of telling transness and how does the transgender hierarchy mark trans narratives and trans bodies? In what ways does digital culture become an interventionist tool for those less represented trans narratives, as well as a more

intimate space for forming affinities or counterpublics (Warner 2005) with like-minded border-dwellers (Bornstein 1994)?

By adding to media research around in/visibility, I intend for the articles herein to uncover how popular and personal narratives write and rewrite each other, in a *dialogic* relationship, into and out of visibility (Bakhtin 1981). Furthering the common understanding across queer theory that silences and speech, in terms of identity politics and articulation, influence 'queer history' and 'queer futurity' (Cromwell 2006; Foucault 1978; Love 2007, Muñoz 2009; Spade 2006), my research will explore the engaged, relational, and refracting process of telling transgender narratives in present day by looking at articulations across personal and popular trans representation at the exact moment that this topic is occupying a greater share of public consciousness.

Research Questions

I have outlined specific research questions for each essay, but overall this research project is motivated by my obsession with the often messy spaces between categories, the performativity of transgender embodiment, and the desire (for some) to live and share lives online. The questions that guided my research include:

(1) How can digital counterpublics inform current scholarship on transgender embodiment, identity, and performativity?

(2) How can popular representations of transness hold space for both assimilation to, and resistance of, the presumed hierarchy of acceptable or familiar transness that they may impose?

(3) What role does transgender cultural production play in the in/visibility debate in media studies?

Discussion of the Articles

Article One: "'Feeling Seeing' in Transparent: Using the Mirror to Reflect Beyond In/Visibility"

The first article in this dissertation, "'Feeling Seeing' in *Transparent*: Using the Mirror to Reflect Beyond In/Visibility," explores how Jill Soloway uses mirror imagery in *Transparent* to facilitate their version of the female gaze, particularly the tenant of 'feeling seeing'. This article proposes that Soloway's creative mediamaking approach designates open, imaginative space for audiences (both cisgender and transgender alike) to witness how gender comes to matter for Maura, in both the sense of materializing in bodily form and in a manner of meaning, and how gender also comes to re-matter for her, but perhaps, also, for audiences watching her transformation.

In this article, I argue that *Transparent* is culturally important not for the way it constitutes 'good' or necessarily transgressive transgender representation but for how Maura's singular process of gender self-making highlights the simultaneous singularity of transgender identity and also encapsulates the shared experience of disobeying the fixed conceptualization of the gender binary. Soloway uses mirror scenes and their female gaze to show audiences a similar, and yet different, transgender narrative. Maura fits the transgender hierarchy of visibility in that she is white, feminine, and wealthy. She deviates from the norm, however, by the fact that she is an older woman and she cannot medically transition. Despite these physical and social realities, audiences are presented with various moments of deep trans/gender and bodily pleasure despite real or impending cisnormative judgement. Soloway's text is also unique for how they use mirror scenes to illuminate the

complex relationship between transgender identity and memory. Throughout *Transparent*, Maura conjures and relives memories of enforced cisgender life without allowing her present understanding of herself to be rewritten by the negative affective experiences of her unrealized transgender history.

Throughout this first article, I argue that Soloway's female gaze complicates transnormative scripts, and particularly calls into question the place of sympathy (Keegan 2013) in transgender representation. Soloway also uses mirror imagery as a strategy for remaining silent in the shadow of uncomplicated dysphoria (Keegan 2013; Prosser 1998). Additionally, I demonstrate how Soloway uses their strategy of feeling seeing to reflect an idea of transgender time, what I call the *transgender now*, that is multitemporal, often incoherent, and refuses easy articulation. Through these and other innovations, I argue that Soloway strikes up representational space where audiences see Maura without fully knowing her and that this strategy of defamiliarization serves to reach beyond the simple question of good/bad, transgressive/regressive representation in visibility scholarship.

Article Two: "Surfacing through Selfies: #FTM on Instagram"

In the second article of this dissertation, I argue that Instagram becomes a site where transmasculine people come together on social media to find community that is simultaneously invested, whether consciously or not, in troubling the homogenized representation of transness. In this article, I argue that selfies posted under the hashtag #ftm on Instagram form a subaltern counterpublic where users take back control over how their bodies and genders are made visible and discussed through stylized portrayals of transmasculinity. In doing so, I argue that selfies captured under the hashtag #ftm become queer acts of self-representation and Instagram thus

becomes one medium for these minority subjects to negotiate their masculine identities and embodiment.

Among its many affordances as a counterpublic, #ftm also serves as a digital archive of transmasculine expression, ripe with the potential for connection, in a world where transphobia is normalized and transgender folks face stigma when out. Additionally, I argue that #ftm also works as a tool that allows digital transmasculine representation to contrast the frequent cissexist misrecognition that happens when trans people physically show up to places and are assumed to be cisgender because they *pass* in an era when the default assumption is still that all people are cisgender. Due to these and other factors, transmasculine people cannot always find each other easily or safely in the physical world. I argue that by sharing three types of selfies (comparison photos, political selfies, and articulative selfies) via #ftm, transmasculine folks demonstrate that corporeal experiences are central to processing and shaping gender identity and vice versa. By posting selfies on #ftm, these users "smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and […] challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged" (Sedgwick 2013, 5).

With this essay, I hope to offer new media studies research about how transmasculine Instagram users use selfies to negotiate their relationship with masculinity. If masculinity is conceptualized as a "'taking up' of an enunciative position, the making up of a psychic complex, the assumption of a social gender, the supplementation of a historic sexuality, the apparatus of a cultural difference" (Bhabha 1995, 58), then when it becomes visible, in the way that it surfaces through selfies on #ftm, I argue it also becomes capable of being untangled from binary sex understandings and subsequently reassigned in innovative ways. In order to

rehabilitate the oppression caused by hegemonic masculinity, it is important to consider how it has been stacked against femininity to induce a position of opposite subjectivities. This is particularly interesting to my research wherein such 'opposite' subjectivities are often experienced in the same transgender body, and throughout a transgender history, which reimagines them as perhaps not so opposite after all, but indeed still integral to a shifting gender identity. This article is particularly important and timely given the fact that transmasculinity, much like masculinity proper, is often overlooked in popular culture and thus further naturalized and left undisturbed.

Article Three: "Telling Transness Online: Making Sense With My Many Selves"

While the first two articles came at transgender representation by way of textual analysis and virtual ethnography, respectively, or outside-looking-in methodological approaches, this final article takes an inside-looking-out approach to telling transness. Like the other articles in my dissertation, this article is anchored by a focus on transgender narrativity. I ask: what did it mean to tell my trans story online via a 90-week blog? How does gender re/surface in my layered narrative accounts? How do I consume others' stories with my body, and what does it mean to have my body and story marked by others?

Many scholars and writers (Finney Boylan 2003; Girshick 2008; Green 2006; Preciado 2013) have narrated their transition experiences through memoir writing, autoethnographic and ethnographic lenses, but none (that I have encountered) have used intertextual performative writing to consider how personal narratives of gender self-fashioning (Keegan 2016) influence, and are influenced by, the larger transgender discourses occurring in popular and academic cultures.

I divide the performative writing into three different thematic sections: On Telling, On Being, and On Feeling. By including present reflections alongside past memories and cultural and scholarly influences, I use performative writing to show how my yearning for a gender home in the past also creates a forward-leaning present wherein I am perhaps cruelly optimistic about the possibility of finding this gender home in the future. A surplus of meaning follows my narrative in this temporal negotiation wherein I long for a queerer future, while being ambivalent about the past, and living with absence in the present. Within this surplus of meaning, questions about what my gender means and does for me and others drives the narrative.

A Note on Positionality

Self-reflexivity is central to my research; throughout these articles, I make visible my initial intentions and attentions toward the topic, or where I started from, and where I inevitably ended up, and the gulf of decisions between these two points. Throughout the research process for each article, I remained aware of my unique position as both a researcher and transgender individual and indicated limitations, oversights, and construction zones in my theoretical arguments along the way. Such exercises in self-examination are particularly salient to my dissertation not only because of my standpoint epistemological approach via queer, trans, and feminist theories, but also because of my current, shifting, and liminal master identity status as a nonbinary, masculine looking, transgender person in a cissexist world (Serano 2009, 162).

For my research project, I approached both my autoethnographic writing and textual analysis as a qualitative researcher and transgender individual within an imagined transgender community. However, I recognize that this imagined

community is diverse and intersectional and held together only by the reality that gender identity assignment is almost exclusively nonconsensual and subsequently damaging for many people. With this understanding, I asked myself *why* a lot. Why did I end up decoding a text as such? Why might someone else have another interpretation? Why did viewing a text in this way overshadow other potential analyses? Why did I write about one topic over another? Throughout my research project, I remained aware of the vastness and diversity of the transgender community and how the intersections of my class privilege, white privilege, and precarious but evolving male privilege influenced my insider status and cultural experience of gender.

I am unique in that while I identify as nonbinary, I use hormone replacement therapy, testosterone specifically, to manifest the masculine gender expression I desire. Many nonbinary folks do not wish to undergo hormone replacement therapy. In order to contextualize my gender identity further, I will say that I was assigned female at birth, but when I began to learn about gender, I felt like both a boy and a girl and yet, as passionately, I felt like neither. This gender ambivalence persisted throughout my adolescence and persists throughout my adult years. On March 31st, 2015, I came out as transgender in a public, online, queer magazine and began testosterone on April 16, 2015. With each passing week of hormone replacement therapy, I began to feel more comfortable in my physical body because of the masculinizing effects of testosterone. When I look in the mirror now, on most days, I feel connected to the reflection and find varying levels of pleasure in my self-image.

While some trans people do *not* wish to be referred to as *trans* men or *trans* women because they feel that they are simply men and women and the additional qualifier is harmful, I feel an intimate connection to the word *trans*. Its definition

calls to life other synonyms for me, such as across, through, and beyond. *Trans* feels like the missing piece of my ambiguous gender identity. It is through the word trans that I also feel that I am able to use my masculinity to chip away at the iterative understanding of what being a white man entails in Western culture, which is a mission that is politically important to me as a feminist. I resonate a great deal with masculinity and feel most comfortable displaying an outwardly masculine exterior, but I do not believe masculinity belongs to cisgender men or exclusively male bodies (Halberstam 1998, 251; Noble 2006, 10). I also do not believe masculinity is superior to femininity, androgyny, or fluidity, or that masculinity should remain stereotypical and fixed.

Methods

I explain my methods for the first two articles in the opening sections of each article. And while I do spend some time contextualizing blogging and autoethnography in the third article, I would like to take this space to further clarify and argue for the form and content of the third article of this dissertation, which arguably does not fit a traditional thesis format.

Throughout the dissertation, I theorize the affective effects of *telling transness*. That is, what it means to narrate or articulate, and thus circulate, one's transgender identity in process. One method for telling transness is through representation in popular media. Here, transness takes form through fictitious characters in television shows and films or via nonfiction accounts in articles, news stories, or documentaries. However, in the wake of digital culture, every trans person with Internet access has the opportunity, should they want it, to tell their transness. I am fascinated with how these two imbricated approaches to telling transness

inevitably loop together, inform each other, and resist one and another, to reveal transgender cultural production in the re/making. I am also interested in better understanding how transgender people, like all marginalized groups, balance the benefits of community while also remaining critical of the drawbacks of unity, or the idea of a unified, essential transgender experience while navigating their desire to tell transness.

Autoethnographic writing is my desired method for unearthing the relationship between self-formation and community formation because it is "about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self" (Chang 2008, 48-49). From the moment I came out as transgender, I began posting weekly entries about my transition on a public Tumblr blog and associated webpage: www.transcanadamyway.com. I started this blog with the intention of helping other trans people by bringing to the surface some of the feelings and experiences I encountered as a newly out transgender person undergoing social and medical transition in a world where trans people were suddenly gaining a specific, albeit limited, type of visibility in popular media. I also wrote the blog for personal reasons. As a writer, I resonate deeply with Joan Didion's (1976) explanation for why she writes: "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear." This blog was a way for me to make sense of what feelings arose when making my transgender identity visible. I wrote the blog for 90 weeks because that is how long it took for me to unpack the newness of living a transgender identity in public. After this time, I felt as though I was no longer experiencing obvious 'firsts' with my transition and therefore did not feel compelled to continue writing.

My decision to blog was also consensually, knowingly a decision to offer myself up to an online audience of strangers in a performative way. I use autoethnographic writing as a method in this article to show that in telling transness, I am performing transgender culture while simultaneously creating it (Denzin 2003, ix). Throughout the article, I use performative writing to present how I displayed myself in process (Pollock 1998, 86-87) as a transgender person living with that label and the influences it had on my thoughts, feelings, memories, future imaginings, and sense of community with other trans people. In going back through the 90 weeks of blog content, I paid close attention to 'inclusions and omissions,' or the ways in which I strategically employed my personal narrative. That is: how did I bend, alter, forget, and indulge, aspects of my story in accordance to what I had come to understand as familiar and acceptable ways of telling transness? In this way, I use my own telling transness to listen for the stories that transgender people cannot yet tell and consider what these absences mean for queer futurity (Adams and Jones 2011).

I embarked on the analysis and theoretical framing portions of my blog content with a form of intertextual autoethnographic writing that became performative in nature. I was wholeheartedly inspired to do so after reading *The Argonauts* (Nelson 2015). In this text, Maggie Nelson weaves theory and memory into her present creative account through intertextuality. The words of others are thus drawn into her narrative body through italics with the authors' names clearly indicated in the margins. Performative writing was a perfect fit for my desire to visually render my preoccupation with narrative and bodily entanglement that actively displays thinking on and/or through the page. Autoethnography aligns with my research aims because it does not attempt to extract answers from the data, but,

rather, it is about forming answers or solutions through engagement with the data. I feel that Nelson's style of intertextual writing best captures my present dialogic encounter with my previous thoughts and words about telling transness while writing toward a world outside of myself.

In visual form and content, this article suffuses in betweenness. I deploy a deliberate misusage of the formal academic writing style while also overusing theory in a method that will pull users out of a strictly narrative experience. It is my desire that the resulting autoethnographic article forms a hybrid, multi-invitational, open, yet disruptive text. In doing so, I will add to a history of liminal-focused performance scholarship by playfully exhibiting how theoretical conversations about gender, sex, sexuality, bodies, and feelings, exist alongside and/or influence and/or are influenced by, my personal experience with telling transness and living the everyday experience of being trans *and*[3] (Denzin 2003, x-xi; McKenzie 1998, 218).

I felt compelled to write this article in such a fragmented and patchwork form because what has become abundantly clear to me throughout this academic/creative/personal pursuit of telling transness is that a key component to queer future building is sharing or showing in a language or way that crashes the walls between categories and creates and type of continued movement that lets more people in. Once inside the text, people need not relate or agree, but the very exposure to another way (and the possibility of infinite ways) of telling transness inspires hope. Autoethnography appeals to me in this sense because, as Butler reminds us: "the intersection of theory and everyday language is crucial to telling and re-

[3] Let this *and* move forward into an unclear future in order to indicate that transgender identity, while an important identity, is only one lens of personal experience that intersects with other identities for each person in a unique way.

imagining not only what we can say, but also who we can be" (as qtd. in Holman Jones 2016, 229).

This article does not solely glorify telling transness, it also remains critical of what other, deeply problematic, roles are taken up with telling. Some of these roles make me complicit in the service of racism, cisnormativity, and the very transgender hierarchy that I spend great energy critiquing throughout this dissertation. Through autoethnographic writing, I engage with my discomfort around the acknowledgement that my privileged telling may also cast shadows over the narratives of others. As a result of this discomfort, I consider how I have cultivated an *ethics of self-fashioning* (Heyes 2003, 1096) as a result of this reflective experience. Throughout my gender transition, and throughout my life before transitioning, I have tried to make sense of the facts and fictions of my body and gender identity as though these entities were separate, neighbouring pairs. As a gender outlaw, as a Trans Killjoy who cannot find their nonbinary transmasculine story reflected in popular media, I now realize that facts and fictions, bodies and stories, are knotted together. This third article is my attempt at revealing the importance of this entanglement because my "performed experiences are the sites where emotion, memory, desire, and understanding [also] come together" (Denzin 2003, 13).

Summary

When Muñoz (2009) says, "Queer theory has made one lesson explicitly clear: the set of behaviors and codes of conduct that we refer to as feminine or masculine are not slaves to the biological" (76), it makes me wonder: what is the one lesson that transgender studies provides?

Throughout this dissertation, I add to the ongoing theoretical investigation into the formations of silence and absence in transgender texts at the sites and intersections of narrative, identity, and embodiment. In each article, but more intentionally in the third, I hint after how doubt, in both its traditional and reclaimed forms, whispers through trans spaces and experiences. As in any context, doubt is not a well-received topic, although perhaps it should be. I think that doubt is an emergent knowledge transgender studies ought to dig further into. When performing gender as a transgender person, do you doubt yourself? What does this doubt do? How does doubt stick to conceptualizations of past or influence the ability to remain present? Do you doubt how to construct a viable future in a world where people like you are killed every thirty-six hours? What does it feel like to be doubted by others? How does doubt lodge itself as a discourse in the body?

The only thing about transgender theory that seems *explicitly clear* to me, obviously so, is the ongoing need to highlight the body as an integral component of gender identity. Of course, I am not only talking about biology or sex organs here, but the continuous negotiation of physical embodiment. Perhaps this return to the body, not even return, really, as it is difficult to argue that bodies are ever—even momentarily—left behind, makes postmodernists doubt the productivity of some transgender theory. Queer theory is correct to reveal that masculinity and femininity are not shackled to the biological, in that they do not need an either/or selection of binary sex to make appearances and to make those appearances make sense, but masculinity and femininity *do* require us to wear them, fuck with them (in more than one sense of the verb), and to mouth them or allow them to speak through us.

While I take pause at prophesizing about the future of transgender studies in general, since it is wildly heterogeneous, throughout these articles I explore how

various transnormative ideas, like the felt sense of being born in the "wrong body," can show a deviation from or disruption of biological sex while not necessarily signaling a migration from the body. Maybe that felt sense, in some instances, is simply an acknowledgement that you are *bodying* wrong if you cannot collect substance or intelligibility by locating masculinity or femininity across your body in order to *matter* in the same manner that "normal" humans do—via anatomical sex. Perhaps, transgender studies needs to keep the literal body at the centre so that it is anchored somewhere in a world that is constantly trying to disappear it for all its wrongness, trying to re-write it as lack or suggest its substancelessness, or attempting to smooth its edges until it coheres.

Seeing diverse images of trans people in popular and digital media is crucial. According to Hall's (1997) constructionist approach, representation is a collaborative and ongoing process where "neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don't *mean*: we construct meaning, using representational systems—concepts and signs" (25). In this way, ideologies are created and upheld through representation, which people use to make meaning about social and cultural situations. This process forms subject positions where individuals can speak these 'truths' as though they arrived at them through their own understanding (19).

I argue that while the visual field of representation may perpetuate stereotypes about transgender people or reduce transgender bodies to hyperbolized before-and-after-style objectification, *speaking sight* (Cheng 1999, 208) becomes one tool of disruption for those trans folks who are rendered hypervisual. Instead of choosing to disappear, the subject uses their visibility to introduce identity-based narratives that might not adhere to the common assumptions in circulation. In

Maura's story in *Transparent*, across Instagram selfies on #ftm, and in my own gender exploration—or rather excavation project—in the third article, narratives and voices surface in order to accompany, complicate, or directly undermine the straightforwardness or perceived stability of bodies and images according to cisnormative and transnormative expectations.

In the dissertation, I used three unique positions of looking—at a popular text, at an online counterpublic, and at myself—to argue that energy is better spent moving away from the question of whether media portrayals of trans people are good or bad. Instead, I argue that it is more important to operate from the understanding that representation of marginal groups is often rigid and prone to repetition. And by studying the repeated narrative, and the ways in which it's challenged, theorists can better understand how exclusionary harm operates through representation. In order to reap the benefits of normative power that these representational repetitions promise, identities are tweaked or foreclosed, desires are managed or ignored, bodies are altered, and languages unlearned. It is incredibly important to my dissertation to imagine space where embodiment is articulated in a way that captures the morphing of shapes of both/and between bodies and articulation. I think certain spaces and genres, such as #ftm and blogging (articles two and three of this dissertation), rub against the notion of private/public and provide ripe ground for marginal groups to call into question the repetitive strain of conjuring sex every time that gender is uttered in popular culture.

Across all three articles, I wish to draw attention to the fact that on one side there is the academic arena that, at times, castigates the trans body for failing postmodernism when it passes. On the other side, there is real, historically enshrined and protected, cisnormative world that ousts the trans body from opportunity—stops

fucking it, refuses it medical treatment, or even kills it—when it fails to pass. Transgender studies has retained a narrative focus because it is still in the early phases of development and ideas begin from the stories we tell ourselves and tell of ourselves. Ideas smolder in resistance to the limited loop of stories told about us. The ways in which trans people can and cannot talk about their bodies, name their organs, express their desire, and use technologies to inform their shapes interests me and indicates a destabilization of the gender binary and of the delusion of an essential category of transgender.

Although I do not believe that lived experience is always knowledge, I argue that it is evidence. Experience, having it and witnessing it, moves us somewhere. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that trans narratives—and thus trans bodies—may empower all gender narratives to keep revealing the incoherence of the gender binary through various strategies of defamiliarization. In doing so, the shape and strength of the gender binary is more clearly mapped, the harm within it is located, the margins around it are highlighted, the dangers without it are illuminated, and the power within it to influence our senses—sense of self, sense of security, sense of value—becomes magnified.

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ARTICLE ONE: 'FEELING SEEING' IN *TRANSPARENT:* USING THE MIRROR TO REFLECT BEYOND IN/VISIBILITY

Abstract

This article explores how Jill Soloway uses mirror imagery in *Transparent* to facilitate their version of the female gaze, particularly the tenant of *feeling seeing*. By doing so, this article aims to assist ongoing efforts in both transgender studies and media studies research to stretch beyond the in/visibility debate surrounding transgender representation in popular media. This article proposes that Soloway's creative process designates open, imaginative space for audiences (both cisgender and transgender alike) to witness how gender comes to matter for Maura, in both the sense of materializing in bodily form and in a manner of meaning, and how gender also comes to re-matter for her, but perhaps, also, for audiences watching her transformation.

Transgender In/Visibility: Viable? Valuable?

Since *Transparent* premiered on Amazon Prime Video in 2014, it has gained praise for its emotional range and unique characters. The show has secured significant and wide-reaching critical acclaim, taking home eight Emmy awards (*IMDb* 2019). Although Amazon Studios does not release ratings information, *Transparent* has received favorable ratings on other forums, including a 96% average rating on Rotten Tomatoes and a 90% on Metacritic in 2019. The series revolves around Maura Pfefferman's late-in-life gender transition, which serves as a narrative catalyst to invite her dysfunctional family members to embark upon their own metamorphoses. In addition to being transgender, Maura is also wealthy, white, Jewish, and highly educated. Early into the series, audiences learn that Maura is a retired professor, ex-spouse, and the parent of three adult children who live near her in California.

Transparent has been described as unapologetically queer, daring and refreshing by critics (Kornhaber 2015; Rooney 2016; Silverman 2017). As *Transparent* began garnering an edgy reputation, the charismatic executive director, Jill Soloway, emerged as a queer and feminist icon. Soloway, who uses the singular pronoun they, has been celebrated for creating representation that confronts the complicated and uncomfortable politics of identity. Viewers of *Transparent* are often left to question the likeability, but rarely the believability, of characters in the show (Levy 2015; Nussbaum 2016). Nevertheless, Soloway came under fire for their decision to hire a cisgender actor, Jeffrey Tambor, in the role of Maura. While some activists, critics, and scholars (Solomon and Kurtz-Costes 2018, 45) argue that having cisgender men play transgender women "perpetuates the negative stereotype that trans women are not 'really women'," the same study did not find that audience perception is negatively impacted by these portrayals. Regardless of potential audience influence, there is at least one pragmatic reason to hire transgender people in these roles—creating equal opportunity for this marginalized population to work in Hollywood (Talusan 2018).

In 2017, during the height of the #MeToo movement, Tambor not only confirmed suspicions that he did not understand the violence that many transgender women face, he positioned himself as an orchestrator of such cruelty when fellow *Transparent* actor Trace Lysette (Shea) and Tambor's production assistant, Van Barnes, both transgender women, accused him of sexual assault and harassment (Abramovitch 2017). After a period of inaction and mishandling the claims, Soloway eventually fired Tambor from the show. *Transparent* launched its fifth and final season in the form of a feature-length musical on September 27, 2019 without Tambor.

Media scholars and queer theorists have long asked what constitutes good representation and have argued about the effects of limited and stereotypical queer and trans representation in popular culture (Dyer 1984; Gross 1994; Halberstam 2005; Kennedy 1997). In an effort to move beyond the confines of this representational project in media studies, Amy Villarejo (2014, 42) calls into question the notion of representational justice for the queer community, or the false presumption that popular culture is indeed responsible for representing queer folks in a 'positive' light to inspire some grand socio-political transformation. In the wake of the *transgender tipping point*[4], now more than ever, it is clear that visibility does not guarantee safety. As transgender characters find their way into mainstream and fringe television shows and film at increasing rates, so too does the murder rate of transgender people, almost exclusively transgender women of colour, continue to climb.

While I take care here not to reproduce the very radical/assimilationist binary that I intend to chip away at with my writing, it would be irresponsible to bypass the consistent and overwhelming critique of *Transparent*: the centering of whiteness and portrayal of wealth in the text. These facts ensure that representation in *Transparent* is not necessarily or always transgressive. Maura's substantial race and class privileges complicate conversations around in/visibility from the outset. While one can look (as Soloway does) to the particular ways that Maura makes visible and hides her transgender identity, one must not ever forget that it is specifically Maura's whiteness that invariably authenticates her eventual claims to bodily agency, security, and integrity.

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[4] In 2014, transgender actress, Laverne Cox, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Audiences were told that the transgender tipping point had arrived. Jumping forward only one year, Caitlyn Jenner gathered attention from the cover of *Vanity Fair* as a newly out trans woman.

The ongoing centering of white transgender narratives in popular culture reproduces transness as whiteness and, as Che Gossett (2017, 183) reminds readers, reveals that "one of the traps of trans visibility is that it is premised on invisibility: to bring a select few in view, others must disappear into the background, and this is always a political project that reinforces oppression." As such, transgender visibility has the potential to enact what Eric A. Stanley (2017, 617) calls a *double bind* wherein being recognized, or seen, might also come at the cost of violence or extinction. In an effort to move beyond the concept of representational justice to more complicated questions at the intersection of representation and real lived experiences, this essay proposes that there is great value in exploring Stanley's (2017) critical question: "How can we be seen *without being known* and how can we be known without being hunted?" (emphasis mine) (618).

The heart of Stanley's question contains a hint at its solution: a strategy of defamiliarization[5]. At once, Maura's whiteness signals Skidmore's (2011) notion of the 'good transsexual'—particularly Maura's affection for domesticity. The fact that *Transparent* received acclaim with a white protagonist at the helm does further demonstrate "that such public narratives of transsexuality are not simply about gender but also about race, class, and sexuality" (Skidmore 2011, 271). However, there are other small ways that Maura problematizes the 'good transsexual' particularly in terms of her sexual desire and her unapologetic transness (in bathroom scenes, at the hospital, and while at the mall). Heather Love (2017, 211-214) comments on the practical application of this defamiliarization during her analysis of

[5] I am thinking here of the Russian formalist tradition of taking familiar objects and making them appear strange through inventive linguistics. Applying the strategy to visual representation, or the moving narrative, however, looks different. I argue that Soloway's gaze is an example of this approach.

Maggie Nelson's ground-breaking text, *The Argonauts*. Love (2017, 214) claims that what Nelson does well is critique the new normal of queerness that is accessible to some folks, indeed to Nelson herself, by summoning Sedgwick's instruction to "pluralize and specify." By making the familiar strange, with her intertextual-confessional form, Nelson multiplies perspectives and questions the stability of a singular, personal narrative. This article argues that Soloway's feeling seeing also enables viewers of the text to lean further into the idea that *more is more* when it comes to transgender representation. From this perspective, the conversation about representation moves away from considering what is good or bad, and asks: what else exists in addition to? Soloway's gaze becomes an aesthetic and creative exercise that abandons claims to realism in representational studies. *Transparent* is an example of transgender cultural production that employs trans people and uses their influences to allow audiences to see and feel a defamiliarized transgender narrative. Maura Pfefferman's story is a familiar trans narrative[6] but it is also somehow strange—bent, askew, and drifting. During dramatic mirror scenes when other canonical texts have used transnormative[7] scripts, Soloway uses contemplation and silence to imagine more trans/gender possibilities, as well as to ask difficult questions of their audiences.

[6] Consider how Caitlyn Jenner's famous coming out also mirrors the narrative of a white, wealthy, older transgender woman who undergoes hormone therapy.

[7] Austin H. Johnson (2016, 466-467) provides an accessible and thorough definition of transnormativity as: "As a regulatory normative ideology… understood alongside heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998; Ingraham 1994; Warner 1991) and homonormativity (Duggan 2003; Seidman 2002) as both an empowering and constraining ideology that deems some trans people's identifications, characteristics, and behaviors as legitimate and prescriptive (e.g., those that adhere to a medical model) while others' are marginalized, subordinated, or rendered invisible (e.g., those that do not adhere to a medical model) (Jackson 2006; Rich 1980)."

Gaze for Days

In their analysis of *Transparent,* Villarejo (2016, np) argues that Soloway's female gaze creates a canopy of protection from "the violence of hetero- and cis-normative visuality and power." This essay reveals how mirror scenes in the text demonstrate a more complex negotiation with power beyond straightforward protection. I disagree with Villarejo's claim that Maura is never "looked at with judgement" through the camera in the first season. Instead, I argue that Soloway deploys feeling seeing through the camera to specifically ask creators, Maura, and the audience, to account for and challenge the precise ways that they might contribute to looking for and *looking out for* gender normativity.

During a master class lecture at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016, Soloway discussed their desire to create a female gaze in television and film to serve as an alternative subject position to Laura Mulvey's male gaze, which was developed in the 1970s (*TIFF Live* 2016). Soloway describes their female gaze as different from Mulvey's in that it focuses less on the voyeuristic encounter of watching film in a dark theatre, and instead draws attention to the ways in which film has become a more central, intimate, bodily, and personal experience for viewers because of how media is accessed today. Soloway describes (*TIFF Live* 2016, 21:10) their female gaze as containing three parts: 1. The reclamation of the female body by using it as a tool on set to communicate a *feeling seeing* 2. Using the camera to relay how it feels to be the object of the gaze, or *the gazed gaze* and 3. Returning the gaze or saying: "I see you seeing me and saying that you don't want to be the object any longer." This third point is central to my disagreement with Villarejo's assessment because I believe it demonstrates Soloway's desire to show that Maura does indeed

feel judged or objectified by the camera in *Transparent* and her ability to return the gaze is, in fact, a specific and deliberate resistance strategy.

Soloway (*TIFF Live* 2016, 17:35) describes this active viewing as "a way of feeling seeing" or a *subjective camera* "that attempts to get inside the protagonist." Interestingly, and in contrast to a limited mind-body approach, Soloway demands that central to this penetrative and immersed female gaze, is the idea that feelings and bodies become one. Here, it must be noted that long before Soloway's provocative talk, numerous theorists have engaged with the idea of a 'female gaze,' some even using this specific terminology (Adamson, Glenn, Anna C. Chave, and Robert Cozzolino, 2013; Bowers 1990; Gamman and Marshment 1989; Schauer 2005; Taylor 2014). While the idea of a connective and negotiated approach to looking is not new, Soloway (*TIFF Live* 2016, 24:00) sets up specific expectations for their female gaze, particularly that it ought to exist as "a conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool" and thus become "a justice demanding type of art making." This essay is not concerned with the ethics of Soloway's claims, as they feed back into a false binary of good/bad representation, but rather attempts to show what Soloway accomplishes through their cinematic mechanics in an attempt to reach this desired end.

By illuminating a reflective, hybrid, often incoherent and yet intense, female gaze, Soloway implicates the viewers, bringing them face to face with both the objective reality (Maura in the mirror) and their subjective experience (what they know or think they know about trans/gender identity and perception). This networked form of looking is similar to hooks' (1999) oppositional gaze that she described when discussing how some black women resisted the dynamic that Mulvey's male gaze presented by refusing to identify with the available subject

positions—that of the perpetrator (the white man in charge of objectifying women) or victim (the objectified white woman). This gaze is also different than what hooks' describes because all transgender folks begin life presumed to be cisgender under a binary system where gender is not based on informed consent. Therefore, the relationship to the Other, in this instance, is fraught and familiar, perhaps even imagined. For transgender viewers of *Transparent*, Soloway's gaze may be about returning to a subject position that always already feels lost. This liminal viewing ground seems not like a refusal to look from the perspective of perpetrator and/or victim, but rather a demonstration of how the transgender viewer may occupy a double vision, seeing both as self and Other. Soloway's gaze creates a reflective space where looking, for a trans viewer, may confirm, revive, and transcribe some ingrained, cissexist[8] trauma while also putting control of the transgender image back in the hands of transgender media creators and viewers.

Nevertheless, the gaze facilitated by Soloway's mirror images and feeling seeing might mean something else for cisgender viewers. When the mirror appears for cisgender characters in *Transparent* it symbolizes narcissism and distraction or absence. As Raquel (Kathryn Hahn) explains to Maura's daughter, Ali (Gabby Hoffman), when they cover the mirrors at Ed's (Lawrence Pressman) shiva during the season one finale: "It's about being free from vanity. About being free from that extra layer of being seen. Just letting us be" ("Why Do We Cover the Mirrors"). When mirrors appear near cisgender characters they serve to draw attention to privilege, thus reifying gender normativity. For trans characters and viewers, the mirror matters, particularly in early phases of transition, because it reflects the

[8] This is a term coined by Julia Serano (n.d.) and is "the belief or assumption that cispeople's gender identities, expression, and embodiments are more natural and legitimate than that of trans people."

presumed pleasure and paranoia inherent when existing in an intense, and often precarious, relationship to your physical exterior. In this episode, for example, Maura and Davina, the only two trans characters present in the scene, do not hold the same luxury of being able to *just be* in the absence of mirrors. Instead, they spend the majority of the shiva talking about Maura's transition, citing familiar transgender experiences about being forced to line up with the boys on the schoolyard, in order to retain intelligibility and to control how Maura is seen as a visibly transgender woman.

The Mirror and Transnormativity

The mirror often acts as a trusted surveyor of the visual and corporeal economy of femininity in a patriarchal world where ocular systems of knowing prevail (Denzin 1995; Irigaray 1985; La Belle 1988). Trans women are not unique in looking to the mirror to validate femininity, but indeed the stakes are often higher for trans women when a failure to perform femininity results in a delegitimizing of their claims to womanhood. In the scenes described below, Soloway's feeling seeing invites audiences to watch Maura in a state of active resistance wherein she draws attention to a tenuous predicament of transnormativity—how it sets up an essentialized way of being transgender, which both privileges and oppresses trans folk, while also promising to make loss bearable through imagined community and shared identification.

The first time we see Maura before a mirror is during season one, early into her transition, at her new friend Davina's (Alexandra Billings) house. She discusses her anxiety about coming out to her son ("The Letting Go"). Davina is a trans woman who Maura meets at the LA LGBT Center and immediately befriends as a

type of transgender tutor. Throughout *Transparent*, one possible reading of Davina's character is that she stands in as a symbol for transnormativity by using her knowledge and experience to teach Maura the ins-and-outs of recognizable, and thus acceptable, feminine transgender life. To argue that Davina embodies some features of transnormativity—such as adhering to the medical model of transition and having a stereotypically feminine appearance—should not divert attention from her complex combination of identities. As the seasons progress, audiences learn that in addition to being person of colour in her early 50s, Davina is also HIV positive and a former sex worker.

In this first mirror scene, Maura asks permission to enter Davina's room, which is really an extension of the living room that they are in, but that remains separated by a partition with drapes. Once inside Davina's room, Maura moves to a standing clothing rack of about a dozen blouses where she caresses a long, blue chiffon blouse with a peacock design etched on the back before sitting at Davina's vanity. With a curious smirk, Maura lifts a perfume bottle and inhales the scent. The camera shoots Maura from behind so that audiences see her face-to-face with the vanity mirror. She does not look at herself in the mirror as Davina warns, from the other room: "You know, Sweetie, this is a really big journey that we're on. And you just started on it, so you got to learn to let go of everything that anybody thinks of you" ("The Letting Go"). As shown in figure 1, Maura reaches for sparkling sunglasses with dark blue lenses and slides them on, hiding her eyes, just as Davina describes how a trans friend once told her, early into her transition, that she would lose all of her family members. With this, Maura lifts her chin. The audience cannot see her looking at herself in the mirror; her eyes cannot be read for emotion because of the sunglasses shield she has chosen. Maura lowers her chin ever so slightly and

asks: “Was your friend right?” Davina responds with a simple: “Yep.” (“The Letting Go”).

Soloway’s decision to isolate Maura and position her directly in front of the mirror for this painful discussion has at least two potential readings. As a “justice demanding type of art making” (*TIFF Live* 2016), Soloway may have Maura sit alone in the mirror with her sunglasses on to indicate that she remains cut off from Davina’s trans familiarity and momentarily hidden from the gaze of the Other, who is positioned to inevitably judge her gender embodiment and presentation. As a resistance strategy, positioning Maura this way provides her with agency in the face of isolation and impending loss[9]. By positioning Maura in this way, Soloway may prevent the viewer and the Other—both subject positions available through the mirror—from seeing Maura’s initial reaction to loss as a way for Maura to reimagine and reclaim the loss as, instead, her creative beginning of a queer life.

[9] The loss I am referring to here is that best described by Muñoz (2009, 72-73) when he warns: “To accept loss is to accept the way in which one’s queerness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To accept loss is to accept queerness—or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement.”



Another possible, indeed diametric, interpretation of the scene may suggest that Maura is unready to accept the loss of her bountiful white and class privileges and, in this case, is unready to literally face herself in the context of this loss by staring into the mirror. This mode of analytical framing plays out more clearly in the problematic "Elizah" episode, at the beginning of season three, wherein Maura assumes the role of the white saviour. However, since Maura's sunglasses do not prevent her from seeing herself, but only prevent others from seeing Maura, and given the fact that her face is angled in a position that leads audiences to believe she is indeed looking at herself in the mirror, the first reading seems more likely.

When the mirror returns as a narrative trope two episodes later, it does so again alongside Davina, establishing itself as a normative tool of transition and an indication of the powerful visual regime of gender perception. Paired with Davina's authoritative insight, the mirror becomes a seemingly objective, evaluative tool of gender, measuring Maura's femininity against cissexist standards. The mirror also becomes a symbol of Maura's reflective process of exploring the physical

permutations of her appearance and how these changes influence her gender identity and perception. It is implied, through Davina's care and concern, that the ways in which Maura may be critiqued are not simply for her imminent rejection as a gender outlaw because of her transgender status but also for how, as a trans woman, she may be ridiculed for any failed expressions of femininity—a layered phenomenon that Julia Serano (2009, 14-15) termed *trans-misogyny*.

Trans-misogyny describes the intersectional experience that arises from widespread transphobia in combination with insistent and pervasive misogyny. As if to demonstrate the power of trans-misogyny, the camera inspects Maura closely in a particular scene that takes place in her new apartment at the Shangri-La ("Moppa"). Davina stands behind Maura, who is seated in a chair. She fusses with Maura's hair. As Maura reaches up to scratch her head at the site where Davina is altering a section of clip-in hair, the camera performs a close up on Maura's head. In this moment, Maura's chipped fingernail polish comes into clear view, which might signify a possible failure to uphold femininity. This type of watching is trans-specific. While the same circumstance may cause femininity to come into question for a cisgender woman, it is unlikely that her *femaleness* would be challenged as a result.

As the camera pans up, Maura grips a hand mirror high above her head, as shown in figure 2, smiling at first as she looks into it. This lesson in grooming could have easily taken place before a full-length mirror, but the choice of a hand mirror makes the scene more intimate. It also allows for feeling seeing wherein Maura watches her new unfolding gender expression while also taking power back from the spectator, symbolized through the mirror. Maura can literally guide the gaze with her hand in this moment. Davina evaluates her work with Maura's hair and says: "Now you look much more powerful, like a California Earth Mama" ("Moppa"). Notice the

use of the word *look*. It is not that Maura's physical changes in this moment completely alter her identity; her new hairstyle alone does not necessarily make her feel more powerful. The understanding is that Maura will be *perceived* as being more powerful if she *looks* the part, which will in turn make her more powerful.



The source of this power that Davina draws attention to is derived from an oppositional and essentialized understanding of gender. The utterance of the word *mama* reveals feminine roots, but it could also be used to provoke the image of aging sexual allure and agency, i.e. 'hot mama.' The term could also occasion maternal images that may cause spectators to imagine feminine reproduction alongside the private, domestic sphere. Whatever the intent, the nature of this noun offers Maura the opportunity to align her identity with the female side of the binary and with transnormativity. Instead, Maura responds: "Oh? Not a silver vixen?" ("Moppa"). With this statement, Maura playfully signals her awareness that her older age, and perhaps her trans status, erase the possibility of childbirth. Nevertheless, in her

moment of disidentification[10], Maura strokes her neck while looking into the hand mirror in a concerned way. This gesture might indicate that Maura fears her Adam's apple is still visible or that she feels her neck has begun sagging with age. The mirror, this time under Maura's control, again becomes the surveyor of cisnormative femininity and transnormativity. In the wake of this judgment, joy slips from Maura's face.

As the scene progresses, Davina jokes that Maura is more like a *silverback*, meaning a gorilla, rather than a silver vixen. Davina then pushes Maura's knees together, negating her suggested, yet invisible, phallus. At its most direct, Davina's gorilla reference invokes the specter of a beast-like masculinity and functions to dehumanize Maura. At the very least, the reference keeps the gender binary riding carefully along the conversation by drawing attention to the policing of feminine norms, i.e. women must sit cross-legged and take up minimal space. Davina says, mockingly: "The knees! Your male privilege is leaking all over the place and you don't have to slouch. Keep yourself up and owning it. It's called femininity" ("Moppa"). With this, Maura puts the hand mirror down on the coffee table, distancing herself from judgment and performative pressure. Davina's statement relocates femininity from a naturalizing or essentialist discourse to something you can possess; femininity becomes something one *does*, not something on *is*. During this gender theory in motion, the camera captures the *feeling seeing* position and active nature of the gaze by keeping the mirror close to Maura in this scene to indicate the ever-present possibility of gender surveillance that trans people (indeed-most people) live with an awareness of. The fact that the mirror remains in the scene

[10] By not identifying or counteridentifying with the term Davina presents, instead offering a new label, I see Maura as co-opting the sex-gender structure and working on or against it, thereby enacting what Muñoz (2003) calls disidentification.

also implicates the audience. To those spectators (cis and trans alike) who engage in a type of transmisogynist looking, hunting for glimpses of Maura's history of maleness on her body, Maura responds by showing, through her cautious and sometimes confident body language and verbal expressions, what it *feels* like to be watched in this way.

One example of Maura actively resisting this gaze is when Davina begs her: "Let me fix your walk." With this utterance, Maura's posture deflates. Her smile wears thin, and she becomes visibly exhausted and intimidated at the thought of having to perform, and most likely fail, femininity on the spot. At first, Maura uses her sore knee as an excuse to get out of this gender training, but Davina presses on. The camera faces Maura as she, without pause or preparation, takes a couple of natural strides. It is clear by the haste of her movements that this is *her* walk. This is a physical aspect of her personality that Maura does not wish to change for appearances. While wearing a new hairstyle brought pleasure to Maura's face before the mirror, it seems clear by her annoyance with the walk tutorial that she recognizes how this same system, that of reifying and privileging the visual primacy of gender, may entrap her (and everyone!). Davina clenches her fists in front of her waist, mocking Maura's rigid form. Davina continues: "Try to breathe and be in it" ("Moppa"). As she adjusts the waist of her hose underneath her dress, Maura mimics the refrain: "All right. Would you like me to breathe and be in it?" ("Moppa"). Maura's mirrored response calls attention to the performativity of gender, demonstrating how power is gained through citation (Butler 2013). The 'it' that Davina wants Maura to breathe and be in could be the discomfort of not knowing how her walk will be perceived by onlookers and the precarity that comes along with publicly violating cisnormativity. The irony is that Maura has been *in* this, although

perhaps feeling breathless, for her entire life. Audiences know that Maura was punished for behaving *like a girl* throughout her childhood and the nearby mirror acts a symbolic reminder of the possibility that this sense of ridicule and rejection may follow her now as she behaves *like a woman*. Another possible, contrasting, reading of this scene could be that the nearby mirror might also represent the possibility that her identity as a woman will be validated at last as perception is in the eye of the beholder.

As the scene continues, Maura strides right out the open front door, as shown in figure 3, while announcing: "This is stupid" ("Moppa"). With this utterance, she rejects the lesson in femininity. Maura literally turns her back on Davina's coaching and thus on transnormative standards. Maura also temporarily turns her back on the mirror as a metaphor for impending judgment and/or acceptance, which includes all who are watching and will watch her. As Maura moves past the open apartment door, the camera draws attention to a stack of boxes by the doorframe, one of which is clearly marked FRAGILE in bold lettering. Pairing the lesson in transnormativity alongside the word FRAGILE, intentionally or not, comments on the frailty of the gender binary—how it demands adherence, repetition, strict borders, and a refusal to mix gender(s) (Bornstein 1994; Stone 1992). For its success, the gender binary must ignore and foreclose the possibility that there are more than two gender categories, and/or that for some people gender identity itself may be abstract, unspeakable, and unfixed. Soloway may also use the symbol of fragility to allude to how perilous the process of gender embodiment can be for some transgender people. Maura can reject this lesson because her whiteness and affluence will likely protect her body. Other times, transgender bodies may be broken and erased under the weight of

cisnormativity, whether by suicide as a result of social rejection and structural oppression or by outright acts of violence, including murder.



Despite the fact that postmodern views of gender push for deconstructing and questioning the stability of the categories of man and woman, this scene may also demonstrate the relentless strength and grip of the gender binary, and its ongoing legacy of imposing fragility. Most people continue to watch for visual characteristics in order to categorize gender; and this watching, without *feeling seeing*, threatens trans and gender diverse people with erasure and violence. In her rejection of the lesson in femininity, Maura reveals the double bind that Serano (2009) says trans women face under this system of watching: "If they act feminine they are perceived as being a parody, but if they act masculine it is seen as a sign of their true male identity" (49). Throughout this mirror scene, Soloway's female gaze invites a mixture of objectivity and subjectivity. The mirror is used to create a vortex that spectators cannot easily abandon. In this dynamic, Maura's agency over her trans/gender pleasure exists alongside her acknowledgement that others will watch

for and watch out for binary gender adherence and cisnormative standards of femininity.

Plugging the Wrong Body with the Wanted Body

Arguably the most often-cited theory for considering how transgender characters are represented in popular media and received by audiences is Halberstam's (2005, 78) *transgender look*, which is founded on what he calls a divided nature that invites audiences to "look *with* the transgender character rather than *at* him" (emphasis mine). From this empathetic perspective, Halberstam (2005, 86) argues that for as long—and only as long—as audiences look at the transgender character, they can essentially feel the narrative as though they are transgender. While this might sound similar to what I am describing of Soloway's feeling seeing, due to the penetrative and transitory qualities, I argue that Halberstam's look relinquishes a very important function of the gaze that Soloway capitalizes on with mirror imagery in their text—that it is not enough to look *as*, audiences must also simultaneously look *at* themselves watching in order to understand why looking is significant in the first place when it comes to understanding gender. I agree with Cael Keegan's (2016) position that a critical limitation of Halberstam's theory is that "it does not theorize a transgender spectator" (29). The *prosthetic transgender gaze* described by Halberstam further essentializes a transgender experience that both limits representation and notions of trans subjectivity. Using Prosser's discussion of mirror images in autobiography, Keegan (2013) considers the implication of mirror scenes in television and film, arguing that they may function to create a *moving body* in modern transgender representation or "a body that journeys from negative to redemptive affect, from psychosis to mental health, from self-hatred to a celebration

of liberal individuality…" (3). In light of Keegan's analysis, I argue that another innovative function of Soloway's female gaze, set up through feeling seeing, is that this gaze is used to disrupt transnormative scripts at the site of the wrong body narrative.

Mirror scenes in *Transparent* often employ silence to bypass a hyper focus on gender dysphoria and negative affects often associated with the transgender body (Keegan 2013). When Maura partakes in seemingly ritual aspects of transition, such as changing her clothes and altering her physical features, she faces the mirror in silence rather than reiterating the familiar wrong body narrative as an origin story of her transness. By avoiding the wrong body narrative in these moments, Maura provides audiences with the opportunity to imagine her body as something other than a broken site of some tragic longing or discontent that must be healed. Silence opens the door for more complex interpretations of gender identity and embodiment. Audiences do not necessarily witness Maura "come home to her new body" (Keegan 2013, 9) but rather they watch as she comes into contact with her body in a new way that may feel inarticulable.

I argue that silence also signals that Soloway *does* imagine their audience to be both cisgender and transgender media consumers, thus answering Keegan's critique of Halberstam's limitation with the *transgender look*. Transnormative scripts are often used to educate cisgender audiences and humanize transgender characters. Soloway's mirror scenes set the audience (cis and trans alike) up to watch themselves watching and assessing Maura, thereby problematizing illusions that Maura has become fully humanized in these moments or that she has achieved some ideal form of normative gender. Instead, in these moments of silence, there exists the feeling that Maura's self-acceptance (Keegan 2013) is tempered and precarious at

best. What audiences witness is less about acceptance and more about agency. Rather than framing her bodily decisions and experiences with negative affects, narratives highlighting depression or compulsion, or a painful need to return to what has been lost, Maura enacts agency and becomes the producer of her own gender pleasure, however fleeting and cautious it may seem. Soloway's feeling seeing, in these moments, employs silence to reimagine or open up other possible narratives for trans identities—stories without clear or necessarily familiar beginnings or endings.

On the morning of her 70th birthday party, audiences see Maura first through an over-the-shoulder shot in the mirror of a salon as the hairstylist primps her playful bangs and whitish blond bob. Maura calls out to her partner Vicki (Anjelica Huston), who identifies as a cisgender lesbian and is thus qualified to validate the stylist's work and Maura's femininity, to leave the waiting area and come inspect her hairstyle. Vicki responds in awe and says into the mirror: "Who the fuck are you?" With this affirmation, achieved through misrecognition, joy suffuses Maura's reflection. Misrecognition is interesting here because Maura does not "come home" to her body, but she is afforded the opportunity to become again. The stylist, Maura, Vicki, the audience, and the infinite many others who will judge Maura's presentation as a woman, symbolized through the front-and-centre mirror, as shown in figure 4, are left to marvel at her newness, which makes her as an object of the gaze, but also something deeper as a subject being watched. Soloway has been accused of presenting Maura as a self-loathing transgender person who struggles to meet cisgender ideals (Funk and Funk 2016, 884), but I see Soloway's use of the mirror, in this instance, as highlighting a type of recognition or familiarity that is trans-specific, but not necessarily representative of *all* trans experiences. In seeing her made-over self in the mirror, Maura, for the first time, is able to study the bodily

manifestation of what Serano (2009, 210) calls her lifelong "self-knowing" that she is a woman.



The new image that Maura becomes is a product of her own doing and perhaps difficult choices. Therefore, this is less of a moment of self-knowing and more of a manifestation of self-wanting. Soloway's female gaze uses the mirror to reveal what Maura wants to see or, to borrow Prosser's (1998, 86) language, *imagines* for/of herself. While it is seductive to reduce Maura's gender experience to social constructivism because of physical beauty and binary gender pressures, doing so entrenches a hierarchy in transgender culture. Under this structure, the power of the gender binary is exchanged for another false binary of transgressive/regressive ways of being transgender that also isolate, erase, belittle, and foreclose gender intricacies and transgender experiences (Serano 2009, 348).

In the absence of Maura's verbal feedback in this moment, audiences cannot be certain whether her reflection does mark the embodiment of some internalized sense of being a woman for Maura, or a sense of her gender that she has, as Serano

suggests, always known of herself. What audiences may be certain of in this moment is that the mirror, Maura, and onlookers perceive of Maura as somehow transformed in light of her new visual cues, and that this outcome is pleasurable for her. By favoring the visual in this moment over the verbal, and by having Maura remain silent in the mirror, the female gaze is used to disrupt the repetition of the born in the wrong body narrative. As a result, Maura's transgender narrative, or rather non-narrative in this moment, challenges coherency and intelligibility (Butler 1990). While Maura does not, as Stryker (2006, 247) notes "verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy," she does, through silence and thus ambiguity in the face of gender surveillance, commit a subversive act by choosing contemplation over clear interpretation. In the mirror, Maura comes further into her unfolding trans body rather than coming home to a linear, cisnormative understanding of the gendered body.

In season two, episode two, Maura leaves behind a family dinner with her ex-wife Shelly and her children in order to go clubbing with her new trans family members—Davina and Shea. In this scene, audiences watch Maura dancing and appearing to enjoy herself while she is present in her body. Maura approaches a wall of mirrors adjacent the dancefloor and places both hands to the glass, as shown in figure 5, making a push up position, while staring at herself. In this scene, the mirror becomes part of a sensory, total body experience. Maura watches herself dancing in the mirror with the knowledge that others are also watching. The camera does an extreme close up and audiences watch Maura's hands touch her hands in the mirror and her eyes meet her gaze. It is as though Maura is not only *seeing* herself for the first time, but also *feeling* herself, both touching her materiality and living in her body, while watching her movements in the mirror.



In the background of this club scene, Sia's hit "Chandelier" plays, and audiences hear the repeated refrain: "I'm just holding on for tonight." This phrase mirrors Maura's imminent awareness that, in her new queer life, tomorrow brings a series of judgments and subsequent losses (Muñoz 2009) that will always be waiting for her because of the way gender is watched and watched out for in cisnormative society. She has not magically moved to a redemptive or humanized position without hardship because of changing her exterior. Tomorrow is also a time that contains the beauty, power, and perpetual haunting of yesterdays or memory. The mirror becomes Maura's way to experience the now not only as a fleeting moment, but also as a practice of engaging with the liminality and timelessness that informs her transgender identity. The mirror reveals to Maura that her transition is not a position to move through, but rather a space to reconnect and reimagine as.

Desire and the Transgender Now

Through their female gaze, Soloway opens the door for spectators to question if, when, how and for what reasons they may commit to a type of gender *watching* versus *seeing gender feeling*. Soloway's use of the mirror magnifies audience culpability in reifying the binary gender system through this type of gender surveillance. This awareness is important because otherwise, as Foucault (1978, 95) warns, our refusal to acknowledge the power, resulting oppression, and potential for resistance swirling within this system of looking will allow it to continue uninterrupted.

By using the mirror to explore the ways in which Maura's past cisgender and heterosexual identifications linger alongside her current embodiment and desires, Soloway seems to specifically invite transgender and queer audience members to reflect on their relationship to memory and the ways in which their identifications are also linked to shame, loss, and impossibility. Soloway's gaze, set up through the mirror, becomes a tool for looking, not only toward some imagined future coloured in with only hope or other utopic feelings, but for also looking backward in the way that Heather Love (2007, 163) imagined—toward the queer political potential of inhabiting a space where one can be backward, even look backward, without being subsumed with the same backward feelings that have ghosted queer ancestors. I call this liminal space—this looking forward, backward, and at—the *transgender now*. When one is cut off, as Maura indeed is, from some of the major pumps of power—in this case heteronormativity and cisnormativity—losses are inevitable. However, carving habitable identity space away from the centre means accessing other possibilities and resistances, and restructuring loss so that it may be understood as something else—an indication of transience, perhaps, or a reminder that Muñoz's

(2009, 71-72) singular collectivity, or community formed by unique individuals, is possible. The transgender now surfaces in the mirror for Maura as a form of queer temporality specifically at the site of intimate, sexual connection.

The first sex scene we encounter with Maura is between her and her ex-wife Shelly, early in season two ("Flicky-Flicky Thump-Thump"). The two are living together temporarily as Maura searches for an apartment after gifting her house to their eldest daughter. Maura and Shelly are in the bathroom as the scene unfolds. Maura stands before the mirror, assessing which bathing suit to wear for the upcoming pool party, while Shelly takes a bath. They speak back and forth comfortably and, in Shelly's case, respectfully, about Maura's gender expression as a woman. The conversation stretches on about Maura's breast size, skin tightness, and whether to wear her hair up or down, all the while Maura stares at herself in the bathroom mirror.

From the spectator's position, this exchange seems like a rather innocuous, yet important, conversation wherein two aging women bond over the tribulations and satisfactions of the feminine body in a patriarchal world. However, the conversation shifts when Shelly announces, from her naked, seated position in the tub: "We had some good times" ("Flicky-Flicky Thump-Thump"). With this utterance, Shelly beckons history and memory to slip into the room, influencing how Maura is seen by audiences and how she sees herself.

With the door of history flung open, Shelly flatters Maura by saying that nobody could give her digital sexual stimulation the way Maura could. Maura, having just retrieved bubble bath for Shelly, sits on the ledge of the tub. Shelly asks her to demonstrate whether she still has the moves. When Maura successfully motions the notorious hand movement into the air between them, this only makes

Shelly desire sex more. Maura begins rubbing Shelly's soapy feet and within five seconds, audiences hear Maura's hand splash beneath the water to find Shelly. With her eyes shut tight, Shelly moans to signal her enjoyment as Maura speeds up the pace. However, the motion seems mechanical for Maura. It is difficult to tell whether she enjoys this or not as her facial expression remains vacant, but her eyes do appear soft and she rests her gaze comfortably toward Shelly throughout. The use of silence and lack of emotional clarity again indicates Soloway's effort to resist more coherent transnormative scripts or negative affects.

After Shelly completes her orgasm, she clutches Maura's forearm and then falls back into the tub. Maura wipes the suds from her forearm into the tub and immediately moves across the bathroom to the mirror to look at herself, as shown in figure 6. As she studies her reflection, Maura ties the muted pink, silk nightgown firmly over the black bathing suit. She nervously touches her hair on both sides, near the back of her head. Maura appears to go to the mirror for confirmation that she is different, and affirmation that she is a woman, despite how memory has attempted to override her visible changes. The muscle memory of pleasuring Shelly, along with how Shelly presumably conceptualizes of Maura as her ex-husband in this moment, attempts to fix Maura to the past. However, the mirror reflects the transgender now, or a liminality that Shelly, and even Maura to some extent, cannot see because of memory and their shared history of immersion in straight time, or the coherent narrative of heterosexuality as including: "…early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—childrearing—retirement—death…" (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 182).

In this scene, I argue that the mirror becomes presence and presence becomes the promise and/or proof that while Maura might not be able to out-live the ever-stalking past, she *does* live with the past without it unraveling her current, evolving, public, lived experience as a transgender woman. With this, Soloway invites the



audience into the multi-temporal space of the transgender now. Here, viewers can imagine that while Maura has always been the same person, she has possessed various levels of in/visibility due to gender expression and perception. Again, by using the mirror and silence to fill narrative space that might otherwise be fraught with transnormative dialogue about *authentic* trans experiences, Soloway resists tidy or essentialized conclusions, opening up a wider affective repertoire for both knowing and unknowing viewers. The audience is not told explicitly that Maura's history of misidentification, and misrecognizing her own reflection as a trans woman, has had enduring emotional impacts; however, one may feel, due to the penetrative camera gaze in combination with the filter of their own experiences, the intensity Maura feels from engaging with her image in the now.

Although sex with Shelly in this moment might not have been particularly enjoyable for Maura, Soloway encourages audiences to consider how, by the end of the scene, Maura is still invested in the possibility of gender pleasure instead of, or at least alongside, potential gender dysphoria. As the bathroom scene draws to an end, Shelly offers to return the sexual favour, but Maura refuses the advance, exacting agency over her body despite, or perhaps exactly in spite of, the ease of their history together. Soloway ends this scene with the audience watching Maura before the mirror, interacting with Shelly. From her angle in the tub, Shelly sees Maura but not the bathroom mirror. Maura sees Shelly *and* she sees herself in the mirror. By illuminating the multiple perspectives through which one might watch and be watched, Soloway invites audiences to presume that Maura sees their history together and she now also sees her embodied gender reflection as a woman in the mirror. In setting the scene up this way, Soloway invites viewers to watch Maura in the process of *revisitation* (Keegan 2016). Showing Maura in the mirror in this scene does not necessarily inspire sympathy or a move toward self-acceptance or authenticity (Keegan 2013, 7), but rather reveals the complicated and often relentless, trans-specific tension wherein one may feel both familiarity and strangeness when seeing and learning about a self that has always been and yet has not physically manifested, or is, rather, continuously manifesting.

The next sex scene that focuses on Maura in the mirror happens much later in the series, toward the end of season three. After Maura and her lover, Vicki, part ways because of Vicki's inability to validate Maura's desire for gender confirming surgeries, Maura receives bad news from her doctor that she is unable to begin gender-confirming procedures due to her heart health. Upon learning that she will not be able to medically transition, including using hormone therapy, Maura tells

Davina that she wants to go out and get drunk ("Off the Grid"). During the subsequent scene at the Oxwood cocktail bar, audiences witness an interior shot of Maura and Davina on the dance floor. Maura is in a long black dress, perhaps to indicate that she is in mourning due to the recent bad medical news, but she appears to be having fun despite her situation. When Davina moves off screen to get a drink, Maura has a moment with the mirror where audiences watch her studying herself, as a singular person, in a social environment. She gazes at herself while an older, fit gentleman approaches her, introducing himself as Donald. They dance together as the scene ends.

In *Transparent* style, the scene cuts to peripheral family drama before returning to the climax between Maura and Donald. Aggressive electronic dance music plays while Maura and Donald make out furiously and move beyond a bathroom door. Inside, the bathroom is well lit, perhaps to disrupt any false public-private binary approach to physical space. Whereas it would be easy to keep the scene dark and dingy given the fact that it takes place in a bar, audiences are invited to become active participants in a very clear and vulnerable moment. Audiences see Donald and Maura in front of the camera, but also witness their reflections in the wall-size mirror above the sink. The mirror again creates a panopticon atmosphere, reminding the audiences there is no place to hide. The double vision provided by the mirror also suggests that desire presents more than one perspective for framing a situation. This fact is confirmed, moments later, when Donald tells Maura: "Oh, Maura, you are so beautiful. I want to taste that big clit" ("Off the Grid"). Carefully naming her body female, Donald affirms Maura's gender while orienting his sexuality by naming his desires. Maura is seated on the bathroom counter during this exchange. Donald stands between her legs. He kisses down the front of her dress

before moving to his knees, presumably readying himself to perform oral sex. At this point, the camera controls the gaze, drawing focus only on Maura now, from the neck up, obscuring the rest of the scene.

Audiences are presented with Maura's facial responses for indications of desire in this moment. As a result, *feeling seeing* is used to depart from a history of representation wherein transgender people have their genitals dramatically revealed on screen to evoke sympathy (Keegan 2013, 13). It is Maura's eyes, not her genitals, that are the object of focus. At first, her gaze expresses what might be considered concern, and perhaps even panic or devastation, but within seconds a hint of enjoyment spreads across her face as she closes her eyes. A slight smile then finds the corners of her lips, as shown in figure 7. Meanwhile, Donald growls with enthusiasm offscreen. In this moment, Maura is an object of desire, who also experiences desire without the intervention of cissexist judgment and categorization. With the mirror and clever cinematographic decisions, Soloway's female gaze counters stereotypes about transgender sexuality, affords transgender sexual agency, while also intelligently illuminating how memory, queer temporality, and embodiment may influence desire.

In this scene, Soloway's gaze thwarts the potential audience impulse toward gender surveillance by offering only Maura's emotional reaction, not her body, to translate desire. In this scene, Soloway's gaze not only denies a propensity toward sympathy, it also diverts any compulsion to align sex categories with cissexist ideas of normative/authentic gender at the site of genitals. In the wake of this visual reality, Maura's body becomes what boyd (2006) calls an 'outlaw body':

> ...a boundary not between men and women, male and female, or even transsexual and non, but between abject and intelligible. This distinction evidences the possibility that while most bodies, even transgendered bodies, fit neatly or fold back into the body politic as readable, comprehensible, and

> intelligible, some retain or reclaim a fleeting moment of social and cultural unintelligibility, inhabiting a queer space, I would argue, outside, beyond, invisible to, and perhaps, as a result, in confrontation with the state. (431)

Maura's outlaw body is reflected in the mirror to make spectators (cis and trans alike) question what Halberstam calls (1994, 226) "the strangeness of all gendered bodies" and the cultural fiction of wholeness, or the historical idea that all trans folks, or all women, share a common story, which creates a false sense of unity.



Soloway has said that they want their female gaze to represent the contradiction felt by many women— the feeling that one is too much and not enough at the same time. If scopophilia, under Mulvey's (2006, 348) male gaze, revolves around the phallus as creating either a voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze then by obscuring Maura's body in this scene, most specifically her phallus, instead focusing on the circular and unavoidable gaze of the mirror, Soloway provides Maura with another opportunity to create feeling seeing. Through the, at first, ambiguous expression on her face, Maura reveals how her trans body is made to feel like not enough, reflecting the cissexist idea that pre-operative trans people are somehow unfinished and, simultaneously, like her body is too much. The latter affect is captured in how Donald draws attention to the magnitude of Maura's genitals, calling them 'big.'

By looking at Maura from the neck up in this scene, Soloway's tableau also comments on how the ramifications of constant gender surveillance might pressure trans people to live in their heads. Soloway's gaze invites audiences to join Maura there. This experience captures something between pleasure and pain, and spectators are encouraged to feel the bittersweetness. Maura appears at once to be in her body and having her body treated and named in a way that aligns with her conception of herself while simultaneously she seems to be saddened by the foreclosure of a future bodily reality that has been stolen from her by medical authorities.

By not showing Maura's naked, lower half in this moment, Soloway seems to send a message specifically to cisgender spectators: that they are not yet to be trusted to *see* her body, but rather, given the climate of representation, it is more likely that they would instead *watch* her body and *watch out for* signs of cisnormative femininity[11]. To prevent a type of 'successful' gender policing in this scene, spectators are instead shown themselves in the mirror. Audiences are invited to see the intensity with which they may hunt for signs of gender on Maura's body and for uncomplicated emotion in her desire. As a result, Maura enacts a feeling seeing by making public her reality as the object of the gaze in a world where she is made to live from the neck up because her body does not body in a coherent or legible way under the confines of cisnormativity (Butler 1999).

[11] Another possible reading of this decision would suggest that showing an aroused penis on television would result in a certain form of censure for the text. I do not believe censure was the issue. Given one of the functions of their female gaze—to avoid fetishization—no evidence suggests Soloway had any desire or intention to show Maura's body during a sex scene at this moment. Soloway does go on to show Davina's penis in the first episode of season four during a mundane morning exchange with her boyfriend.

The Moving Mirror: Other Transparent Reflections

In season four, Soloway abandons mirror imagery but uses reflection as a function of their gaze in yet another way. During the opening flashback scene of episode five, audiences are transported to 1981, where Mort sits across from a therapist. As Mort rehearses a script for breaking up with Shelly by telling her that he is gay, the camera focuses on a magnifying glass on the desk. Unimpressed with Mort's half-hearted delivery, the therapist says: "Let's do that again with a little bit more conviction" ("Born Again"). By pairing the magnifying glass with the performance of the queer script and the idea of 'conviction,' Soloway reminds audiences that gender and sexual intelligibility rely on citationality and visual inspection. However, things get more interesting when this familiar pathologizing scene is disrupted with flashes of body surfacing.

As Mort explains that he does not feel attracted to men, the camera zooms in on Mort's reading glasses, as shown in figure 8, and audiences see Maura's reflection, posing as a young woman in a blue dress. The fact that Maura's reflection is on the *outside* of Mort's lenses is strange because it suggests that this image of Maura is available for others, including the therapist, to see. This decision offers audiences the chance to witness Mort's imagination of his body (Prosser 1998), or what Mort sees for/of himself, but it also makes audiences again culpable for not seeing, or rather feeling seeing, the Maura that is out there. This limitation is repaired, moments later, when audiences witness body surfacing as the scene continues. The gaze slides further into magic realism when the illusion of reflection (presented in the glasses) is removed and replaced by Maura's physical body, in her new womanly shape. She sits on the couch, wearing a blue dress. The perspective then snaps back to Mort, with his short hair and glasses. This re/surfacing between

Maura and Mort happens a total of three times before the scene ends with Mort looking distraught on the couch as the therapist warns: “Don’t you want to find peace?” Soloway uses this open and imaginative gaze to put into visual action what is best described by Kusalik (2010) as the fact that:

> Gender identity is often abstract and difficult to describe in language, particularly for those who do not identify with/within the traditional gender binary. With that being said, having others perceive your gender is an ongoing and familiar experience. This perception often overrides identity. (54)



In the same episode, only moments later, Mort stands outside a glass window looking at his newborn baby, Ali, as she rests in a hospital incubator. Mort sees himself alongside Maura, the woman he longs to let materialize full-time and take over his body. Mort bargains with God, saying he will stop the dressing up and hiding if Ali is granted good health. In this moment, the gaze shifts to the baby’s perspective, as shown in figure 9. Again, audiences see both Maura and Mort standing side-by-side in different, but mirrored clothes—both wearing the same brown and cream tones. Maura and Mort have matching, worried facial expressions as they look down at Ali. Unlike the therapist who cannot see Maura and Mort at the

same time, feeling seeing is used in this scene to suggest that Ali can see both embodiments of her parent. I argue that while this perspective requires a suspension of disbelief, it is successfully achieved because Ali is a newborn. She is not yet aware of gender—its pleasure and oppression, its language and shape-making, what it gives and takes. The irony is that Ali will eventually become the character most like Maura, the character who struggles with the cognitive gap between her gender perception and personal understanding of her gender identity.



The scene ends with a close up on Maura's face. A tear of sadness falls from her eye. Maura blinks and then slowly walks backward, removing herself from the picture, leaving Mort to watch over Ali. Mort also has tears in his eyes as he watches Maura, who symbolizes the potential harmony between his gender perception and gender identity, drift away. Mort could stay in this sadness, fitting the motif of the dysphoric trans character who is gutted at the thought of being trapped in the wrong body, but instead he looks down at his daughter and smiles. Maura is transgender, but she has other identities as well. Being a parent is one of the identities that gives

her the most purpose. At a time when transness did not figure into the popular imagination or come outfitted with a common language, she made the only decision she felt was possible. For trans audience members, this flashback may serve to legitimate and reanimate a familiar sense that Keegan (2018) describes as *couldness* or the "faith that other affects might come into perception. At the outset, we never know what will emerge. Inside the transitional space of cinema/cinematic space of transition, *we become subjunctive*—feeling in the dark toward what might happen, marking how we've become by touching back on our prior selves" (4).

Conclusion

Transparent does not fully avoid the expectations or limits of discussions surrounding good or bad transgender representation, but it does present a narrative that considers what else might be possible for a singular transgender life. Soloway uses mirror scenes and their female gaze to show audiences that what is possible is that an older transgender woman, who cannot medically transition, can still find moments of gender joy and bodily pleasure. Maura finds sexual agency and stares back at cisnormative judgement. She recalls, relives, or lives with, her cisgender memories without being undone by them.

Transparent would likely have looked different if it were created by middle class, heterosexual, white men and aired on a major television network rather than online. What Soloway and their team accomplish is a forward-leaning, open, adaptive, and fluid gaze that is made possible through the defamiliarization of the transgender narrative and by the show offering itself up for consumption by both cisgender and transgender audiences. Soloway hired transgender people to work in front of and behind the camera, including: Our Lady J, Silas Howard, Rhys Ernst,

Zackary Drucker, Hari Nef, and Ian Harvie, to name a few. By doing so, Soloway's gaze becomes a tributary for a much larger locus of power. Throughout this essay, I argue that Soloway's female gaze complicates transnormative scripts, and challenges the place of sympathy in transgender representation by remaining silent in the shadow of uncomplicated dysphoria. Additionally, I demonstrate how Soloway uses their feeling seeing to reflect an idea of transgender time, what I call the *transgender now*, that is multitemporal, often incoherent, and refuses easy articulation. In this way, I view *Transparent* as creating representational space beyond the double bind of visibility because Soloway allows audiences to see Maura without fully knowing her (Stanley 2017).

One thing that media theorists may now agree on is that in/visibility is not only or directly about safety. Regardless of whether it is 'good' or 'bad,' one function of transgender representation made available through Soloway's gaze is that it creates space to reflect on the reciprocal, or better yet entwined, collective and yet individual, process of knowing and unknowing, seeing and unseeing, feeling and unfeeling, one's gender for whatever ends are desired in the moment: sexual needs, personal growth, spirituality, pleasure, and perhaps still—in many cases—self-preservation.

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ARTICLE TWO: "SURFACING THROUGH SELFIES: #FTM ON INSTAGRAM"

Abstract

This article considers how transmasculine folks use #ftm on Instagram to post three specific forms of selfies that carve space for conversations about transness and transmasculinity. Users do so with the understanding that cisgender people, who may misrecognize them as cisgender on a daily basis, or worse enact violence against them because of their gender difference, could (but probably will not) bear witness to these selfies and related conversations happening on #ftm. This *could* is not the purpose for creating and sharing these three types of selfies, but it does imbue the content with resistance potential in the face of known and imagined cisnormativity and cissexism. When these selfies are viewed as a series of individual, queer performances, #ftm becomes more than a cohesive imagined community of like-minded people. #ftm is a subaltern counterpublic (Fraser 1990) and world-making project wherein, when free from Instagram's bodily censorship, diverse transmasculine folks can "displace the tyranny of identity" and embark upon "strategies of self-enactment" (Muñoz 1996, 11).

The Necessary Narcissism of the #FTM Selfie

My lived experience as a nonbinary, transmasculine human who has amassed close to 5,000 Instagram followers inspired me to research the hashtag #ftm. I frequently use the hashtag as a content creator and as a user looking for content to follow and like. I only have five transmasculine friends that I spend time with 'in the flesh,' and four of them live a great distance away from me. However, the majority of people that make up my digital community identify as transmasculine, transgender, queer, and/or nonbinary.

I approached the topic of #ftm on Instagram from a place of curiosity. In a world where trans folks are taught to hate their bodies, this essay explores how some transmasculine folks, like myself, are attracted to the hypervisual landscape of Instagram and how, for some, our digital practice includes the use of the hashtag #ftm. I hope my research findings will add to the growing and overlapping fields of transgender studies and new media studies by filling a gap in knowledge around the central question of *how* transmasculine people use #ftm as a textual visual medium for self-representation on Instagram and what they accomplish in the process.

In this essay, I argue that selfies dominate #ftm. While some obvious signs of selfies include mirror shots, the accompanying caption #selfie, and/or outstretched arms, at other times the images I studied were less neatly included in the genre. For the purposes of this essay, I expand the definition of selfie to include what might be more commonly understood as portrait style photography. Whether the images were authored by the users themselves or by other individuals, the result was visual content that focused on the single Instagram user as the primary subject in focus. In order to move beyond a simplistic reading of selfies as narcissistic, I argue that this self-focus may signal the social isolation faced by many transmasculine folks and, as such, I view selfies under #ftm as forms of embodied refusal. The #ftm selfie shows a transmasculine subject that is very aware of the world beyond the self and, in fact, actively refuses erasure and messages of inferiority that extend from this dominant public. I make the argument that the #ftm selfie may document active existence, resistance, or, at least, a visual depiction of queer survival. This essay identifies and explores the impacts of three specific forms of selfies, which I have named: *comparison photo selfies*, *articulative selfies*, and *political selfies*.

Comparison photo selfies are usually presented using Instagram's layout or multi-photo functions. The user generally posts a photo (or photos) from an earlier time alongside a present-day selfie in order to show the physical changes that have occurred as a result of social transition (e.g. haircuts, dress, updated identity documents) or medical transition (i.e. hormone replacement therapy, and/or gender-confirming surgery/surgeries). Comparison photo selfies are often posted on Tuesdays and additionally tagged #transformationtuesday alongside #ftm.

The phenomenon of before-and-after photos is well-recognized in transmasculine social and intellectual circles (Billingsley 2015; Farber 2017; Lorber and Moore 2016). Instagram users talk about these visual depictions as comparison photos, therefore I have not come up with this term, but I have added more depth and dimension to analyses of this type of content by arguing that comparison photos can be used to disrupt linear notions of transition and provide space for exploring memory in relation to transgender identity and embodiment. I describe articulative selfies as using textual visual space to document feelings, thoughts, and reflections about topics, including but not limited to: gender dysphoria, medical procedures, and testosterone use, which I argue also illuminates the relationship between hegemonic and transmasculinity. Finally, I discuss how political selfies allow users to put their image forward as a vehicle for addressing the transphobic injustices of current affairs. During data collection, the political landscape in the US had shifted with the recent appointment of President Trump. The political selfies that emerged under #ftm resisted Trump's announcement to ban transgender soldiers from participating in the US military.

Selfies are everywhere and writing about selfies is particularly salient and timely across many scholarly disciplines and within popular culture. Selfies are

multi-discursive; they are objects, gestures or practices, and genres (Senft and Baym 2015, 1589-90). Selfies are solitary works of art, but they seem to me to also be a tool for negotiating a networked relationship to public life. The cultural production of selfies has been explored from many disciplinary lenses, including: the antisocial productivity of queer selfie (Goldberg 2017), masculinity and selfies (Enguix and Narváez 2018), and the selfie as a postfeminist tool for dismantling patriarchy (Murray 2015). Much of the scholarly and popular conversation around selfies highlights their alleged, unavoidably narcissistic spirit (Sorokowski et al 2015; McCain et al 2016; Moon et al 2016). My research is not interested in exploring the selfie in this psychoanalytical or pathologizing manner. Nor do I have much interest in recuperating the selfie under a neo-liberal, self-care lens, as I think this frame is equally short-sighted. Instead, I am interested in pursuing how the cultural production of selfies on #ftm can (but does not and cannot always) serve minority subjects as a form of queer resistance against a history of misrecognition, unintelligibility, unspeakability, and erasure.

Insta-grip

In our increasingly visual culture, image-based social media platforms, like Instagram, are desirable outlets for personalized expression. Instagram launched in October 2010 with the aim of connecting people through pictures and now boasts over 1 billion users each month (Clarke 2019). Predominately used via a mobile app, Instagram is popular across a variety of users. While the dominant demographic used to consist of upper-middle class, cisgender women aged 18-29 residing in urban city-centers (Parker 2016), the split between genders is now considered even, although the majority of Instagram users are still under the age of 35 (Clarke 2019). As a form

of participatory media, the culture of Instagram encourages users to comment on and/or like posts of interest, follow users, update stories, and attract and retain followers.

Instagram posts are often used for self-representations (Marwick 2015; Siibak 2010; Vivienne 2017) of users' life stories as told through visual and narratives. The old idiom, *a picture is worth a thousand words*, holds true in this space where users are not compelled to engage with commenters on their posts, although they often did in the data that I collected. An important thing to remember about Instagram is that its visibility algorithms are proprietary. However, post frequency and post times, as well as popularity, verification[12], engagement, high quality content, and hashtag use are all thought to contribute to a user's microcelebrity and the likelihood of their content becoming a 'top post.'

Instagram provides users with photo filters and multiple editing options. Should users wish to contextualize their images or engage in a more narrative approach, Instagram also provides photo captioning up to 2200 characters—roughly 300+words—and 30 hashtags. This is a substantial amount of textual space compared to Instagram's main rival, Snapchat, which limits snaps at 80 characters and text messages at 1196 characters, or almost half of the word limit of Instagram[13]. By launching its stories function in 2016, essentially mimicking an alluring feature of Snapchat, Instagram also offered its users the ability to post content that would disappear within 24 hours.

In an additional effort to match Snapchat innovations, Instagram user stories can also include: stickers, face filters, location tags, GIFs, and drawing options. Most

[12] Users may request Instagram verification badges to signify their authenticity and celebrity status. In order to qualify for a verified badge, users must use their real names, have a substantial following (although the exact number is undetermined), and have a complete and public profile.
[13] However, a quick Google search will direct users to various hacks around this imposed 'limitation'.

recently, Instagram incorporated the 'close friends' audience filter that allows users to choose which of their followers see each piece of story content. Although Snapchat is a competitive company, with over 190 million users, it is now witnessing a decline in monthly users in the United States with 77.5 million this year, down 2.8% from the previous annual amount (Leskin 2019), while over 400 million Instagram users posted stories each day in 2018 (Salinas 2018).

Instagram as a Networked Counterpublic

In recent years, there has been a growing body of scholarship dedicated to how trans identities and trans bodies are portrayed in popular culture (Gossett, Stanley, and Burton 2017; Halberstam 1998; Keegan 2013; Stryker 2008). There has also been an upsurge in scholarly attention surrounding how trans folks find and build community on the web (Capuzza and Spencer 2015; Dame 2016; Fink and Miller 2014; Heinz 2012). The study of social media has been central to this research. Cavalcante (2016) explores the difficulties of being out online and how to navigate this new form of instantly accessible digital publicness as a transgender person. Avery Dame (2016) discusses queer folksonomies on Tumblr, and how this social media site can bring users together while also limiting self-narrativity because hashtags can stand in as categorizations and classifications. Most influential to my research interests is Raun's (2016) study of YouTube vloggers. In his text, Raun (2016) studies the self-representations and self-narratives of YouTube vloggers in order to explore the impacts of transgender life storytelling online through the moving image. Raun (2016) explains that YouTube allowed vloggers in his study to "'publicly' disseminate and contest information about what it means to be trans and contest boundaries of what is considered legitimate communication in the public sphere"

(207). I argue that selfies on #ftm offer yet another vantage point for understanding how social media is used as a site of self-expression in a cisnormative and cissexist world.

For transmasculine folks, Instagram can serve as a networked counterpublic (boyd 2014; Cavalcante 2016; Dame 2016; Warner 2005) where users may make their experiences visible in a way that negotiates with or directly opposes the influences of dominant discourses about transness. Due to the social marginalization and representational erasure of transmasculine subjects, I find it important to my research efforts to extend this notion of networked counterpublic to include Nancy Fraser's (1990) definition of *subaltern counterpublics*, which function as "1) spaces of regroupment and withdrawal; and 2) basis and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (as qtd. in Antonakis-Nashif 2015, 103).

The research in this essay is a result of *virtual ethnography*, which, in its simplest understanding, Christine Hine (2008) explains "transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the internet" (257). Virtual ethnography is known by other names (e.g. online ethnography and digital ethnography), and during its emergence as a qualitative social research method in the 90s, virtual ethnography was questioned for the fact that it opened the door to alleged deceit (264). I began my study of #ftm as a user of the hashtag and therefore recognize that social media is, of course, a place for performance, but I do not believe that performance exists on a binary scale in opposition to authenticity.

In my opinion, if there are such things as 'authentic' portrayals of one's self, then these depictions also contain performances, and I believe many performances are, or at least can feel, authentic in the moment. Social media therefore contains no

more or less artifice than face-to-face engagements. In agreement with Ruhleder (2000), I draw no dividing line between 'real' and 'virtual' life, believing instead that the sheer amount of time spent online for some, and, at times, the level of intimacy present in this method of communication, should signal that the virtual is *real* and has incessant and multiple offline impacts.

I initially intended to conduct my virtual ethnographic study of the Instagram hashtag #ftm by collecting screenshots of the top posts[14] and 10 most recent posts three times per day (morning, afternoon, and evening) for one week (July 27-August 2) in 2017. During this time, I took screenshots of the images as well as their captions. If compelling conversations took place in the comments, I also captured this data. For my research purposes, compelling conversations had to specifically include details about transition, transmasculinity, or trans/gender themes. I was not interested in the more mundane uses of #ftm, although I can see how they might function as a fruitful site for other research purposes.

While I had initially intended to look at the hashtag from the perspective of *both* top posts *and* most recent posts in order to ensure that my data consisted of both popular posts based on Instagram's proprietary algorithm as well as real time, uncensored, everyday user posts, to my surprise, Instagram flagged the hashtag #ftm on July 28, 2017 citing that: "Recent posts from #ftm are currently hidden because the community has reported some content that may not meet Instagram's community guidelines."

During the flag, Instagram increased the number of top posts on #ftm from 9 to 36 and prevented any recent posts from being visible. Unaware of how long the censorship would last, I rearranged my research design to include a dataset of all 36

[14] Top posts are determined by a proprietary and ever-changing algorithm, but social media experts (Barnhart 2019) have suggested tips for creating top post content.

top posts, for each time period, every day of the week under study. While I wrestled with the idea of stopping data collection entirely until the ban was lifted, it came to my attention from other users commenting on various content, that Instagram frequently flagged #ftm because of the prevalence of nipples. Ultimately, I decided that this roadblock was, in fact, reflective of a typical user experience, so I proceeded with the modified research design model, focusing exclusively on the top posts under #ftm.

The censorship of #ftm content, due to the frequency of nudity/nipples, reveals how particular elements of Instagram's design are appropriated in the service of publicness (and privacy) (Baym and boyd 2012, 326). The publicness of this censorship shows that Instagram is structured by sexism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity. For example, women *and* trans men routinely have their content flagged as pornographic if it contains nipples, but cisgender men do not face similar, exclusionary consequences. Since it is human users that *alert* Instagram to these *obscenities* by flagging the content, Instagram (ultimately the final gatekeeper on public bodily acceptability in the forum) thereby acts to uphold hegemonic masculinity at the expense of personal user desires, bodily agency, and public expressions of gender that challenge dominant ideals.

There are many ethical issues to contend with while doing social media research, but the considerations of informed consent and anonymity were at front of mind for me. After much deliberation, I chose not to retain informed consent or to provide pseudonyms for the users in my study. Since my research design shifted to look at Instagram's top posts rather than its most recent posts, the content that surfaced was public and already considered popular and share-worthy by users, audiences, and Instagram. As Beninger (2017) notes, there are "two reasons

expressed for why anonymity should be upheld: to avoid judgement from others and to prevent reputational risk" (66). Most of the users in my study had already amassed large followings and indeed expressed a desire to expand their celebrity. Therefore, I operated under the assumption that their social media wherewithal and history with growing audiences made them familiar with potential judgement and reputational risk, and I inferred that the users saw these factors as less important than creating and spreading their content.

While I did not provide pseudonyms, many users who wish to maintain some level of privacy, therefore reducing traceability (Henderson et al 2013), create usernames that protect anonymity, and they may even remove personal names from their profiles. The fact that I was studying a hashtag also meant that there was a certain preemptive user expectation that adding a hashtag made the content more findable by a wider variety of audiences. If a user was particularly interested in keeping content private, common knowledge suggests that they would *not* affix a hashtag to index it publicly.

For these reasons, I feel my research thus offers no inherent, or additional, risk to reputation and, in fact, may support the user's desire to advance content visibility and elongate conversations about transgender embodiment and identity. Another ethical consideration is exploitation. By leaving usernames intact, I hoped to offer and honour the intellectual property rights of these users. Also, my intention to write on the topic was for *good reason* (Beninger 2017)—furthering scholarly knowledge about transgender narrative dissemination online. Finally, I kept the content in context (Henderson et al 2013), grouping content around similar topics of transitioning, transmasculinity, and transgender life. In doing so, I hoped to honour

the initial purpose of the content and present and analyze the patterns and possibilities beneath such already fruitful discussions.

I chose to collect the data at varying times throughout the day to account for time zone differences in relation to social media activity. July seemed like an appropriate month for data collection, since it is a summer month in many countries, which I knew tended to be the season when a number of transmasculine folks discussed their relationship to their bodies because of the added social pressure of binding their chests in the heat or due to increased visibility at the beach, or public swimming pools, after top surgery[15]. I decided to study the hashtag #ftm and not #transman because the former is used over than three and a half times more often on Instagram[16]. However, I must note that the hashtag #ftm is rarely used alone. Most users tag their content with multiple hashtags. Therefore, this essay is not necessarily concerned with what #ftm *means*, but rather *how* it is used as one tool, from an overflowing box, for transmasculine folks on Instagram to self-represent and resist dominant discourses.

After the week of data collection concluded, I combed the content for subject and stylistic patterns and variance. Therefore, I undertook a thematic textual analysis first rather than a straightforward visual or discursive analysis. I decided to approach the data this way because I was amazed by the overwhelming volume of selfies and wanted to explore what, if any, patterns existed across these selfies and what significance certain types of selfies had to self-expression and counterpublic formation.

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[15] Top surgery refers to a double mastectomy medical procedure, or the complete removal of breast tissue, and often (but not always) includes a re-design of nipples and additional chest masculinization or contouring. Keyhole surgery, or the periareolar approach,is a less commonly practiced form of top surgery that minimizes scarring by removing the breast tissue through the areola.

[16] As of today, January 1, 2020, #ftm has 3,584,393 posts while #transman has 1,006,891 posts.

Obvious limitations to my research methods include the pace and precarity of social media content. For example, the number of likes or particular comments at the time of data collection will surely differ now. The echo chamber effect becomes another issue. Since Instagram's top post algorithm is proprietary, it is impossible to know how, and to what extent, the content I viewed was tailored for me based on my previous digital footprint. Also, content can be erased, and users can shut down their accounts (as many in this study did), forfeiting archival and verification potential. By using one hashtag in isolation, I can only make claims around themes and content for transmasculine folks on Instagram who use *#ftm*. It is very likely that hosts of other conversations are existing across content from transmasculine users on Instagram who purposefully avoid this hashtag.

Finally, as articulately described by Baym and boyd (2012, 322), the visibility dilemma of social media poses a limitation. While #ftm is a tool for disruption and relation, I also recognize that much of #ftm top post content remains hidden from wider Instagram audiences. I feel, based on my own experience and from the conversations that I have witnessed on pages of other Instagram influencers, that transmasculine folks are generally aware that their content rarely extends beyond the transmasculine community, but there seems to be an unvoiced understanding that sharing this type of content *within* this community does something productive, or, at the very least, evokes pleasure (and sometimes pain) for the user.

I also deliver my findings in this essay with a reminder about the 'digital divide' (Friedman 2013, 17), or the fact that many trans folks might not have the means or interest to access the Internet or Instagram. After concluding my analysis, I recognize and wish to draw attention to the fact that most users were under the age of 35 and the majority were white. Therefore, the data does not speak for or about all

transmasculine experiences. If anything, I present these findings with the hope to inspire a more deliberate turn toward anti-essentialism while also recognizing the intelligibility and protection provided with labels. Although I do not wish for all trans folks to be seen in the same way (in fact, I wish for the opposite), I do want transmasculine folks to materialize, to matter, to impact and agitate with our substance, and resist current erasure in the process. In my opinion, online engagement is critical to this endeavor.

In this essay, I did not specifically set out to describe the ways that transmasculine people of colour experienced #ftm differently from white transmasculine users of the hashtag. I do not feel that this would be possible without interviewing subjects. However, by not doing this, I run the risk of presenting information that flattens out the category of transmasculinity and lumps all transmasculine users into a general group. A question I grappled with throughout the research process was not only how do users use #ftm but also how do users come to redefine the borders of #ftm? Examples of assemblages that look to deterritorialize and reterritorialize #ftm on Instagram occur with hashtags like #tpoc[17] and accounts such as @melanated_transmen, which has 21.5K followers. @melanated_transman contains a biography that reads:

> We Are All Men.
>
> Connecting Transmen of Colour.
>
> Need Advice?
>
> Got Questions?
>
> Looking for support?

[17] #tpoc stands for 'trans people of colour'. As of January 12, 2020, #tpoc contains 41,800 posts. A glance at recent posts reveals a combination of selfies celebrating personal trans milestones or images that are captioned against a knowledge of erasure, i.e. a trans person of colour wears a shirt that says "We will not be erased."

Follow the rules for a shoutout!

This account posts pictures, almost exclusively selfies, of black, trans men. The administrators tag the user in the caption and instruct the audience to: “Please show some love and support to this brave and proud #melanatedtransman check out their journey.”

In an effort to widen the borders of #ftm on Instagram, accounts and hashtags such as these exist in resistance to what Snorton (2017) describes as “the reductive ways in which binary sex and gender are read back in time through the filter of whiteness, and in ways that dismiss black experiences of fungibility” (108). Snorton (2017) uses historical analysis, borrowing from the work of Spillers, to analyze how black folks experience/d ‘ungendering’ because of the ways in which slavery and thus racial identity were/are visceral and prominent, eclipsing heteronormativity and gender identity. @melanated_transmen may function as a site of reconciliation, reclamation, recovery, celebration, and resistance for black, transmasculine users.

The fact that the administrators of @melanated_transmen tag #ftm alongside other hashtags expresses an affinity to the category (Ahmed 2016) at the site of transness and also a desire to deterritorialize transness from whiteness and demonstrate the ongoing legacy of racism that may render trans people of colour largely invisible on Instagram’s #ftm top post algorithm. Future research focus should be conducted on the work that #tpoc and accounts like @melanated_transmen do to continue to "construct more livable black and trans worlds" (Snorton 2017, 14) thereby extending the legacy that Snorton describes of black trans women who created new, decolonized, nonlinear understandings of their trans bodies and thus formulated "other ways to be trans, in which gender becomes a terrain to make space for living" (175).

Comparison Photos

Throughout my analysis below, when I deploy the term *selfie*, I am referring to *both* the image and the caption and their relationship. One way that transmasculine folks use #ftm is to document comparison photo selfies, which are side by side photos taken at two different points in time with the motive of demonstrating the transformative physical effects of testosterone, medical procedures, and/or social transition methods (e.g. hairstyles and dress).

On #ftm, comparison photo selfies are measured by the time elapsed between the two photos, and this temporality is heavily influenced by the notion of what Horak (2014, 583) calls *hormone time*. Hormone time is measured by when a transmasculine person began testosterone and its subsequent unfolding physical effects. According to Horak's (2014) definition, which she created during her study of YouTube vloggers, hormone time stands in direct opposition to queer time because of its linear, forward leaning direction (580). However, she makes clear that hormone time does not align with straight time because its anchor is *not* reproduction (581). As Horak (2014) notes, using Muñoz's theory, scholarly focus on queer time as being formed through antifuturity can actually be quite harmful for those queer subjects who are already robbed of futures, those who are disappeared by violence, specifically BIPOC queer and trans folks:

> I believe criticizing hormone time for not being "queer" enough misses the life-saving work that these vlogs do. Hormone time's orientation toward a joyful future is analogous to Munoz's (2009: 1) theorization of queerness as 'the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.' The crucial difference is that, for Munoz, this future is always out of reach; whereas, for trans vloggers looking back on their process of transition, it is achieved. (581)

It is therefore important to continue to study various forms of social media instead of assuming a one-size-fits-all theory for transgender narrative dissemination. Similar to Horak's (2014) findings, subjects in my study used this type of selfie to talk about

how testosterone improved their physical self-images with time, but, as described below in my theorizing on articulative selfies, #ftm selfies also created space for talking about the disjointed and sideways moving trajectory of gender transition. In this way, users problematized hormone time by describing their transitions as ongoing accomplishments, simultaneously *in and out of* reach due to the sometimes slow progression and physical unpredictability of testosterone use.

In both academic research and popular culture, gender transition is often conceptualized as a journey by cis and trans folks alike. The predominant inference of the journey discourse, however, seems to suggest that there are starting and end points to gender transition and that the movement between these poles is straightforward, linear, achievable, and desirable. As Keegan (2013) emphasizes: "The display of the transgender 'journey' out of dysphoria and into authenticity and acceptance now also becomes a quintessentially American journey, forward into the nation's democratic future" (7). This journey narrative often foretells that surgery and hormones are the antidotes to gender dysphoria. This idea is problematic because it denies the possibility of happiness at *all or any* point(s) of transgender life while also preventing the imagination of a world where dysphoria is complex, and surgery and hormones may be undesirable for some trans folks. The journey narrative also seems to position itself toward binary gender adherence and cisnormativity. Framed in this way, it is often believed that the longer a transgender person has been on their *journey* the more likely they are to pass as cisgender and subsequently achieve happiness. However, some comparison photos selfies under #ftm actively disrupted the idea of linear transition and of surgery and hormones as consistent cures for dysphoria.

In a side-by-side image on July 27, 2017, Mere Abrams, user @meretheir, poses in two radically different settings (fig. 1). In the first image on the left, they are in a doctor's office, made apparent by the visibility of a surgical machine behind them and a crisp, white setting. They hold open their polka dot hospital gown. Surgical tape covers two fresh incisions across their chest and the dotted surgical marker lines, mapping incision routes, remain visible. @meretheir smiles in this photo. The image on the right is captured outside, in front of a fence, with foliage in the distance. They are shirtless, their scars have significantly faded, and they are still smiling. @meretheir identifies as nonbinary. They are white-appearing with red hair and freckles, able-bodied, and thin. In the caption, they write this about dysphoria:

> After getting top surgery, I felt amazing. I was more at home in my body than ever before. For a few months, it felt like the weight of dysphoria I carried with me for so long was totally lifted. I thought to myself 'maybe I'm in the clear.' Little did I know what was coming. It wasn't long until I experienced bottom dysphoria for the first time […] I now realize it [dysphoria] comes and goes in waves. Though top surgery significantly helped with my chest dysphoria, it didn't make all the gender and body dysphoria go away […] In an effort to be self-reflective and explore my relationship to my body, I try not to see surgery as the answer (for me…for now) (Abrams 2017)



This comparison photo selfie received 1386 likes at my time of viewing and multiple users chimed in with gratitude and expressed that they also related to the sentiment. For example, @memywifeourdogs responded: “Just read this on my worst dysphoria day to date, thank you. At least I know I’m not alone and that surgery may not be the answer.”

Similarly, Felix Glauner, username @barbellsandsocks, poses in a comparison photo selfie (fig. 2) where, on one side, he is in a hospital room bathroom or gym shower with bandages over his chest, covering dark dry blood along fresh incisions. In the other image, he takes the selfie in a full-length mirror that covers a closet door. The caption reads:

> August will always be a special time of the year for me. 2 years ago my life changed, in drastic ways, to the better. Trust me, *transitioning is far from being an easy ride and the daily struggles remain*. What has changed is an inner happiness and growing feeling of becoming “Myself.” Life is in *constant flux* and I’m more than grateful to continue to grow as a human being. (Glauner 2017, emphasis mine)

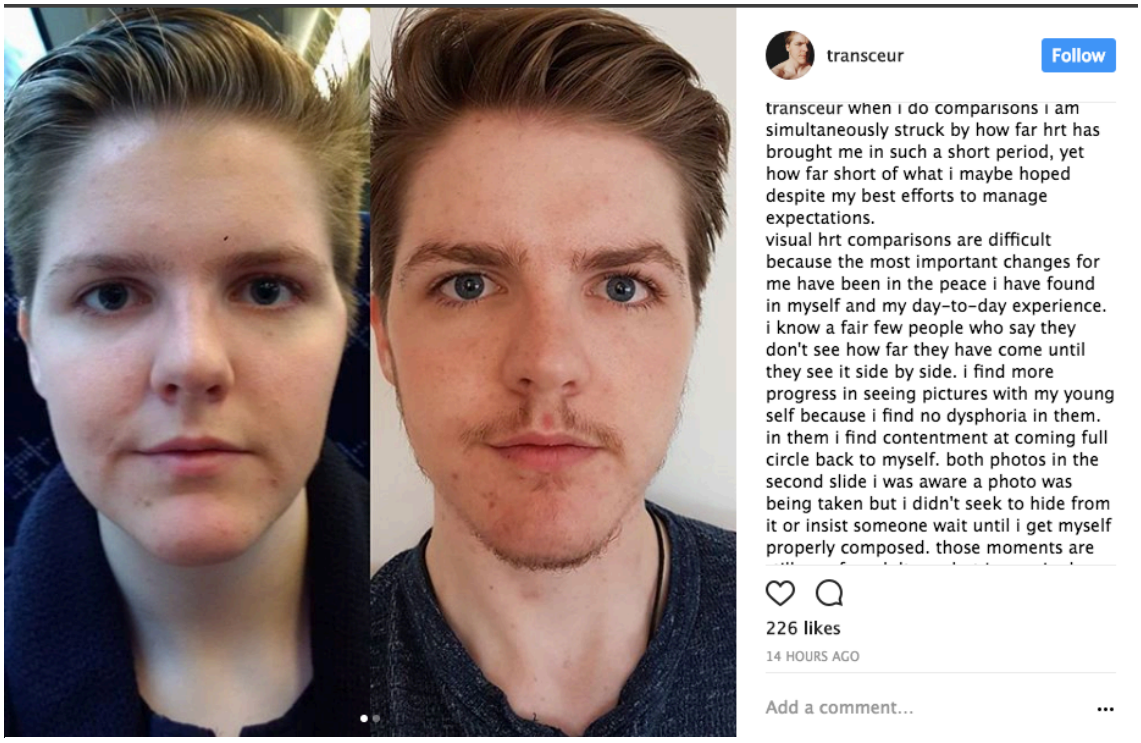


In the textual account, @barbellsandsocks describes a reality wherein, as a trans person, he continues to cultivate happiness and imagine a queer future for himself while also recognizing the daily struggles of being transgender in a transphobic world. Despite the fact that hormone time plays into some stereotypes of the journey narrative by fixating on the physical transformation, comparison photo selfies are also a space to present gender transition as a process that is braided into one's wider life course, which is nonlinear, intersectional, and—as @barbellsandsocks describes—in a state of constant flux. In this way, @meretheir, @barbellsandsocks, and others use the caption tool to further complicate, or perhaps mitigate, the shock and awe impact of traditional before and after photos.

The freshly post-operative body is a popular topic of conversation on #ftm. Across the data I collected, it is clear that for those transmasculine folks who wish to use testosterone, comparison photo selfies are a way to celebrate and mark shifting transgender embodiment. The majority of #ftm top post selfies I viewed contained users with 'passable bodies' in everyday, clothed life scenarios. However, their decisions to make their naked bodies and scars, as well as their differently gendered pasts, visible in this mediated public offers up bodies and narratives that exist beyond common "gender taxonomies and queer lexicons" (Noble 2006, 27). In this way, comparison photos selfies on #ftm highlight incoherences between normative social expectations of gender and transmasculine bodily realities. By discussing the ways their bodies have masculinized or not, comparison photo selfies on #ftm may be used to activate a wedge between the taken-for-granted male body and masculinity, and may even "refuse to let power work through bodies the way it needs to" (Noble 2006, 171).

Another assumption embedded in the journey narrative is that the 'end result' of transition will result in a radically different physicality. Sometimes the changes exhibited through comparison photo selfies are drastic, other times the physical differences are marginally perceptible. Whatever the visual impact, comparison photo selfies are used to elicit affirmation/confirmation of these masculinizing changes through likes and comments, or to express disappointment and impatience when testosterone use does not meet one's expectations. For example, user @transceur explains in their comparison photo (fig. 3):

> When I do comparisons i am simultaneously struck by how far hrt [hormone replacement therapy] has brought me in such a short period, yet how far short of what i maybe hoped despite my best efforts to manage expectations. […] tldr: young me to now me gives me a greater connection to my past and eases dysphoria. comparing me to my more recent history brings out my critical side (sic). (Ewan 2017)



@transceur's discussion of their many selves also draws attention to the negotiation of multiple temporalities present while transitioning, which I discuss further in the section below about memory.

Comparison photo selfies, which are created by visually rendering one body in two forms, signify that gender is not natural, sacred, or always so dichotomized (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 837). In this way, comparison photo selfies highlight the relational aspect of gender, how gender becomes defined in dominant culture by *notness*. This oppositional perspective holds that you are a woman because you are not a man, or you are a man because you are not a woman. In studying #ftm, I have come to realize the power and productivity inherent in the articulation and embodiment of transmasculine folks who reject this structure of notness. While the comparison photos above may visually participate in this oppositionalism, the discussions that accompany the photos can directly challenge any such oppositionalism. What surfaces in the comparison photo selfies described above is a different form of notness. In these pieces of content, the transmasculine person uses comparison photo selfies to reveal how their histories, bodies, and transgender identities make them *not* like cisgender people.

Comparison photo selfies are, however, not without their problematic features. The definite drawback of this type of selfie is, of course, the neoliberal underpinning of a progress narrative or the idea that the trans body must *become* or it is otherwise unfinished, or undone. Comparison photo selfies under #ftm are almost exclusively about the impacts of testosterone on the body, which may be—in my opinion, incorrectly—viewed as perpetuating the transnormative idea that hormone replacement therapy is an automatic decision for all transgender folks. Many of these types of selfies position testosterone as the central guiding force for masculinity, which could be seen as participating in the establishment of hormonal/sex characteristics/biology as a gender directive, which illuminates the overlapping terrain between dominant and trans masculinities. However, by displaying

masculinization as a process and discussing its negotiations, transmasculine folks posting comparison photo selfies also demystify and denaturalize hegemonic masculinity. Through the strategic use of articulative selfies, which I discuss later, #ftm becomes a space for further exploring the varied nuances of transmasculinity.

The Question of Memory

In my opinion, the most fascinating function of comparison photo selfies is how transmasculine folks use them to negotiate the question of memory in relation to gender transition. Since most transmasculine folks were socialized as girls and women for some portion of their lives, these social experiences offer a different—albeit unique and often nonconsensual—gendered experience of the world than what might be expected of cisgender men.

Since all transmasculine folks using #ftm identify in some way with masculinity, and sometimes even identify as men without the qualifier of *trans*, comparison photo selfies can be used as a way to acknowledge, make visible, contend with, and articulate personal histories with femaleness and girlhood/womanhood. In a side-by-side comparison photo (fig. 4) of themselves in present day, as well as from when they were a young child, Christopher Rhodes, username @seethestarsablaze, expresses the following:

> Sometimes I feel robbed of a childhood, or at least one that I can look back on and see me as a younger, carefree Chris. I don't have baby pictures or school pictures that look a whole lot like the me I am now, and sometimes that's not only frustrating, it also makes me sad. But at the end of the day I'm grateful for the experiences I had before this transition and how they shaped me...for who I was and how I got here. My journey is what created me, and is much more important than any destination #transformationtuesday. (Rhodes 2017)

Under Chris' posts, users comment in ways that signal relation and gratitude:

> "I completely feel this post. I went through a little depression around 1 year on T because of exactly what your post is about. Not going to prom in a tux, high school memories, etc. it's really hard to get past that point but in the end I had to realize I am who I am today because of that. Thanks for posting." @killerdoc33
>
> "I feel the same way brother! I'm grateful for the weirdness because it brought me to the amazing people I have in my life now. Thanks for sharing this!" @heyitsjax88
>
> "I know how you feel. It sucks that I didn't get to experience living my life as a little boy and as a teenage boy but, It's nice to know that I am not the only one who feels the same way. I don't have a lot of trans friends to talk to and it's comforting to know I'm not alone." @damienanthony_
>
> "seriously feel this so much. your posts always really resonate w me but this one really hit home[…] seeing your journey has helped ease some of my anxieties and give me hope for my recovery […]." @alekrduncan
>
> "This makes me feel lucky to at least live part of high school as a guy. You're an inspiration to me, truly" @mutterson.jr

To approach this question of negotiating memory and the past, I wish to bring in Heather Love's (2007) work on the ways in which queer studies steers away from the past. Love (2007) cautions that: "Turning away from the past degradation to a present or future affirmation means ignoring the past as past; it also makes it harder to see the persistence of the past in the present" (19). Chris' comparison photo selfie



musters past memories, and figures memory as central to his present conversation about gender. By doing so, this selfie highlights the nonlinear aspects of transition, and hints at the influence that our past gendered selves have on our gender presents, as well as the possibilities for gendered futures. By looking backward at their gender histories, Chris and other commenters reveal how transphobia and cissexism continue to shape not only social and political structures, but also their bodies, personal experiences, and memories.

By tracing memory, these conversations signal the pain and psychic trauma that occurs for some transgender folks when gender options are limited to two and/or gender assignment at birth is nonconsensual (Bornstein 1994, 117). From Chris' comments about gratefulness, it is clear that this reality does not mean that psychic pain is transgender destiny, or that trans folks are fated to sadness, but it does make apparent that a relationship to loss (Butler 1995) marks a trans person's gendered history because of the way cissexist and/or binary identities attempt to shape gender formation from childhood. The taken-for-grantedness of cisgender identity and the lack of gender conversation is what Chris speaks to through his comparison selfie. He powerfully highlights, perhaps unintentionally, how unfair and unproductive a comparison is between cis and trans folks. Chris had a cisgender past experience because he was assigned that default gender identity. In order to open up gender possibilities in the future, we must continue to talk about the ways in which transgender identities have not been and continue not to be accessible as anything but alternatives to a default, or marked as *other* than the norm. Yet, nevertheless transgender identities persist, surface, evolve, and refuse to be ignored.

One commenter, @_mattyyice, in the thread under Chris' post, challenges the biological determinist model that gender can be reduced to bodies or genitals when

they say: “You not being born in your “man” body allowed you to become the man you are now. If you were born a boy you may not even be close to what you’re like nowadays.” Posts like this, and the conversations they inspire, demonstrate that transgender experiences, however difficult in the current cisnormative, transphobic climate, are common and that although they are prone to erasure in everyday life, social media can be a place to safely and frequently recuperate and discuss trans lives, gender histories, and queer futurities. In addition to challenging the limitations and restrictions of the gender binary for all individuals, these types of discussions about the past also challenge transnormativity. As Jamison Green (2006) explains:

> We are supposed to pretend we never spent 15, 20, 30, 40 or more years in female bodies […] In short, in order to be a good—or successful—transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. This puts a massive burden of secrecy on the transsexual individual: the most intimate and human aspects of our lives are constantly at risk of disclosure. (501)

Chris uses #ftm to post a comparison photo selfie that makes space for displaying individual agency around how, and in what way, gender histories are offered up for viewing and discussion, thus mitigating this burden of secrecy. With this in mind, I argue that the comparison photo selfie on #ftm can function in service of archiving ephemera (Muñoz 1996) by keeping transmasculine folks visible and vocally queer, through hashtagging and publishing transness as more than a viable gender alternative, but as a complex and unique identity expressed through individual acts. When defining ephemera, Muñoz (1996) described it as:

> linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things. (10)

In his post about his past, Chris expresses that being locked out of a gender history, and living with fraught gender memories, has made him feel *frustrated* and

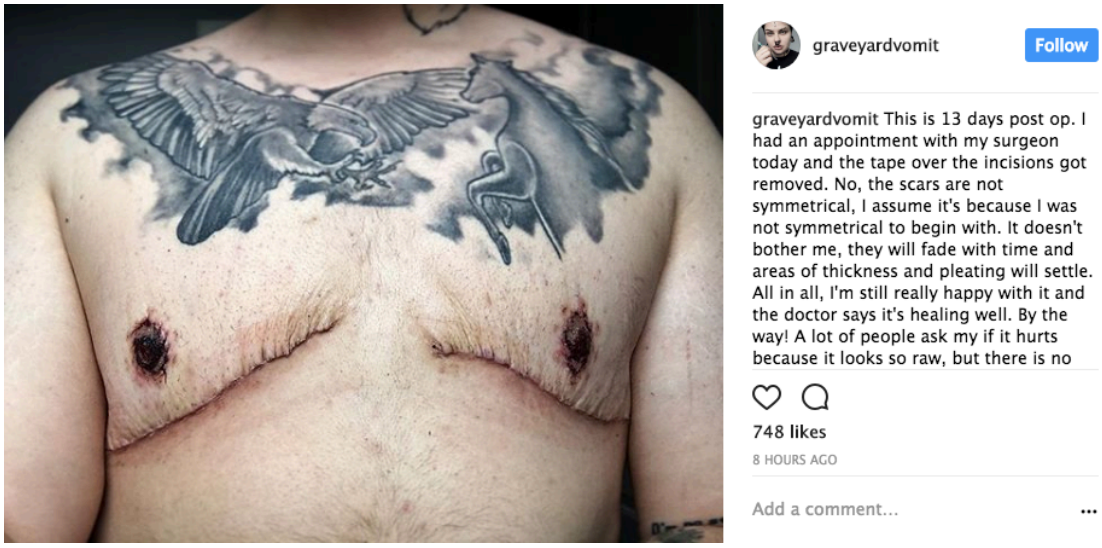
sad but also *grateful*. Despite these general and opposite descriptive emotions, viewers get the sense that other powerful, inarticulable feelings linger under the weight of these terms. What is not said and not seen in his comparison photo selfie oscillates between the two images and exists between the lines of captions and comments. The ephemera is what remains beyond the visual comparison and the verbal explanation of this text—what is known to be contained by the gender binary, what free floats beyond its confines, what is shut out of history and narrative, and what thoughts and feelings bloom beneath the surface, felt but not articulated, and thus never heard, in any clear way. The ephemera is the ongoing ache of comparison when gender is never yours to begin with, but something inherited, something you may divorce or embrace, something you are not meant to question, something you can rework and challenge, something you can resist, and something that might encourage you to stack yourself up against yourself.

Articulative Selfies

Another way that transmasculine folks use #ftm on Instagram is to post selfies that express feelings, thoughts, and reflections about gender transition. I call these pieces of textual-visual content articulative selfies, and they differ from the previously mentioned comparison photo selfies because they do not usually consider personal experiences of transition over time, but rather capture bodies and feelings in the moment, usually from the anchor of a singular image. In this section, I explore how articulative selfies under #ftm become spaces of anti-normativity wherein transmasculine folks may self-present in ways that challenge the production and consumption of both dominant and hegemonic masculinities.

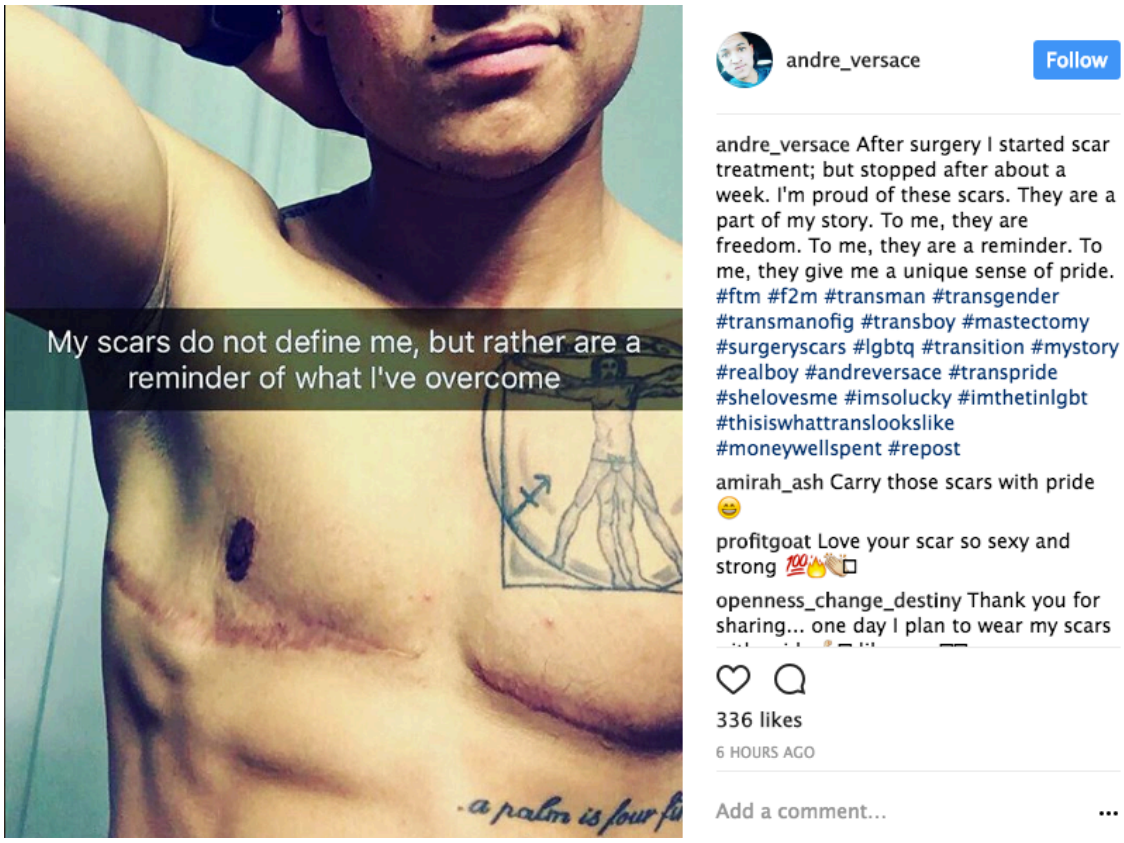
The social element of gender does not mean that gender is up for easy adoption; gender is policed by strict understandings of embodiment, class, social status, and relationships, as Connell (1995) explains: "True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body" (45). While Connell (1995) stresses the importance of the body as central to the re/production of masculinity, she also highlights its potential as a site of disruption and resistance (56). In the same way that bodies can restrict our understanding of gender, bodies may ignite our imagination by introducing us to new forms and expressions of gender. In essence, bodies may illuminate gender possibilities.

Often, the post-operative body is presented in a celebratory tone, but the articulative selfies on #ftm also position the post-operative body as a site for kinship and education. For example, when users post articulative selfies with top-surgery healing updates, other users comment with advice on scar treatment. Often, comments about scars are aimed at fixing them. On Aug 2, for example, Maddox Graves, username @graveyardvomit, posts a selfie from the neck down that showcases their chest tattoos and visible scarring up close (fig. 5).



In the caption, they write about how they know the scars are asymmetrical, but explain that their chest was asymmetrical to begin with. The caption reads: "All in all, I'm still really happy with it and the doctor says I'm healing well" (Graves 2017). Despite this obvious sign of self-acceptance, users comment in ways that reveal an anti-scar bias, i.e. @witchangelanekora replies: "You'll look twice as awesome once the scars fade! So glad you're doing great!" and @caskethound responds: "just to add to @walkthespiral suggestion, of course once you scars are healed, if you rub the oil (or even a good lotion) in the opposite way the scars run it'll help break down the tissue and they should fade quicker."

In this way, articulative selfies are a site of resistance where transmasculine users may present their bodies, but more importantly their scars, to challenge normative bodily expectations beyond and within the #ftm Instagram community. Scar pride becomes an anti-assimilationist tactic for some #ftm users. For example, Andre V., username @andre_versace, posts an articulative selfie from the nose down (fig. 6).



They apply Snapchat filters and a text banner that reads: "My scars do not define me, but rather are a reminder of what I've overcome." The subject is topless in the selfie and their surgery scars are very clearly apparent. The caption reads: "After surgery I started scar treatment; but stopped after about a week. I'm proud of these scars. They are a part of my story. To me, they are freedom. To me, they are a reminder. To me, they give me a unique sense of pride" (Andre V. 2017).

Transmasculine folks also make their post-surgical bodies targets of questions under #ftm in order to offer kinship and to educate each other. Articulative selfies are a way for transmasculine folks to speak to each other about insider knowledge despite who their actual Instagram audience might be. For example, @charman411[18] posts an articulative selfie with the caption:

[18] @charman411 is no longer an active account on Instagram. However, Cody Harman has a new account: @mrcoachcody. This photo is still available there.

> For anyone interested, I've also been documenting my phalloplasty experience on my YouTube channel. Might be helpful if you are planning on phalloplasty in the future or if you are just someone wanting to learn more about it […] Thank you to everyone on here for being such a great support, you have really helped me have the strength to jump over some hurdles! Hopefully things will keep on improving from here! (Harman 2017)

This address serves as evidence that those who use #ftm perceive of the hashtag as belonging to transmasculine folks, even if it is used by others, i.e. new mothers[19]. This sense of belonging often bubbles in words of encouragement, and in expressions of gratitude for a sense of community. For example, Jordan Blisk, username @luckypandacub, posts an articulative selfie about his phalloplasty surgery, saying: "I'm doing much better, and I'm thankful for the kind words and encouragement that you all have so generously lavished on me throughout this recovery. Y'all are the best" (Blisk 2017). In line with Fraser's (1990) definition of subaltern counterpublics as a space of regroupment and withdrawal, #ftm is a place for transmasculine folks to share their similar, yet different, experiences with surgery and/or social transition and to feel that they have support from others who may understand what it is like to navigate a cisnormative world as a transmasculine individual.

Articulative selfies are also used to self-present the pre-operative transmasculine body and by doing so resist transphobia, both internal and external forms, and trouble transnormative discourses. For example, in a topless, mirror selfie (fig. 7), @infamouslykai[20] wrote: "Idk man vacation got me feeling some other way. Fuck censorship. This is my body and I'll do with what I please. I'll have nice ass

[19] Occasionally, #ftm is used by new mothers, the acronym standing for 'first time mother'. Pregnant and new mothers share photos of themselves and/or their children under this hashtag.
[20] @infamouslykai is no longer an active account on Instagram and therefore proper citations cannot be provided in-text or in the references section of this article.

fucking pecs when I get top surgery. #ftm #trans #selflove #bodylove." (Name Unknown)



The censorship @infamouslykai refers to is the rumor that #ftm has been disabled from showing recent posts because of the prevalence of 'female-appearing' nipples. While @infamouslykai does outline their desire for top surgery, which fits the transnormative script, their decision to publicly post a preoperative photo disrupts the traditional visual landscape of #ftm. Most of the comments on their post are supportive and commend them on their courage. However, one troll, @cowcattt, writes: "Ur not allowed to show those nice a$$ tits and you still look like a girl[…]All u did was shorten your hair[…]but the boobs :/" Other users quickly come to @infamouslykai's side and proceed to lecture the troll about gender identity:

> @patchouliprince: “Bless you for having the courage to post this. I only had the bravery to once and someone reported it and had it taken down. This is great it makes me so happy.”
>
> @carina.stoker: “boobs do not equal female”

Although non-operative or pre-operative photos of transmasculine bodies occur regularly on #ftm under recent posts, few of these images make it to the top posts section of Instagram. This could be due to censorship on Instagram’s behalf or because the content is considered less popular in an algorithm, which hints at the grip of transnormativity, internalized transphobia, and the pressure for binary gender adherence. Whatever the motivating factor, it is clear that this particular photo, a preoperative view of a transmasculine chest, received significantly more negative comments, although entirely, seemingly, from a single troll. However, given user agency, it is difficult to discern how many transphobic comments actually exist on post content, but are deleted by the user or reported by others.

In a time when transmasculine folks are largely invisible in mainstream media and may even feel invisible in their daily lives when they are misrecognized as cisgender, the potential of becoming instafamous for those who use #ftm seemingly becomes a goal for many, although few arrive at this threshold. Getting thousands of followers is not unheard of in the #ftm community, and anything above 5k is frequently acknowledged and celebrated. The majority of Instafamous grammers using #ftm are on testosterone and pass, but some have not had gender confirming surgery(ies). As Raun (2016, 112) notes in his study of YouTube vloggers, particular styles of self-presentation evolve and become emulated by others. Articulative selfies are one such replicable style for building kinship and fame in the #ftm world of Instagram.

@young_tillerr25[21], a fit, black transmasculine person, exemplifies this style when he posts a topless selfie standing in front of a white wall by a white marble counter in acid wash shorts (fig. 8). In it, he smudges parts of his chest. The caption celebrates the fact that he has reached 9K followers, but it also encourages users to engage with #ftm because of a sense of shared community, or at the very least, visibility. He writes: "For years I thought I was alone […] I have met so many amazing people because of social media, it gave me a chance to meet other incredible people battling the same struggles as I and that is why I love where I am at rn with social media" (Name Unknown).

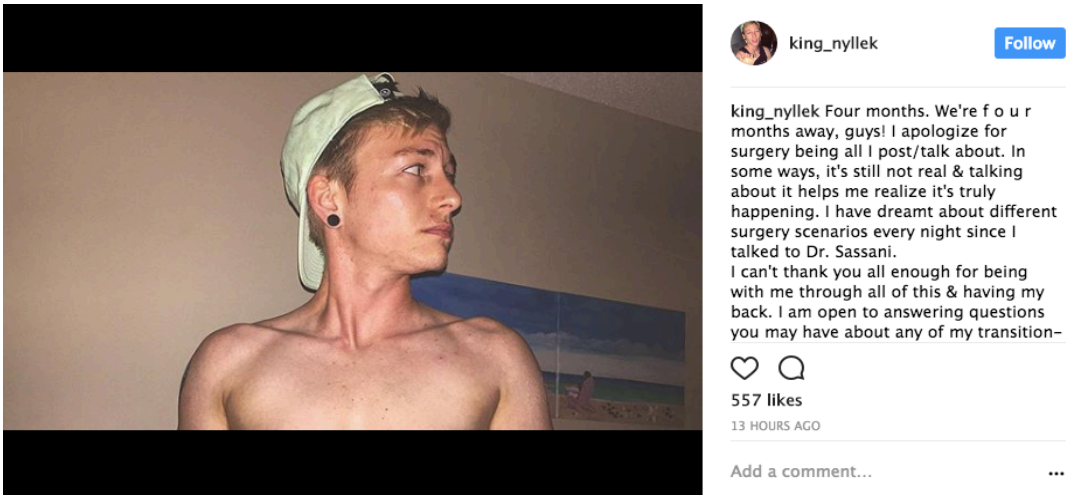
Most of the comments on this post are supportive. Although one user tells him to do more pushups to lose fat on his chest, indicating that articulative selfies are not immune to fat phobic discourses and gender policing. In the comments on this post, confidence surfaces as one reason that users may attract a following through #ftm. @hardly_charlie comments: "Your confidence rubs off on me bro, and I really appreciate it." @paboga1 echoes this sentiment, saying: "all about confidence and good job bro."

[21] @young_tillerr25 is no longer an active account on Instagram and therefore proper citations cannot be provided in-text or in the references section of this article.



Even when the relationship to surgery is unclear in an image, some users allow their bodies to be sites of conversation for community building. For instance, @king_nyllek[22] posts an articulative selfie from just above their nipples (fig. 9). In the caption, they write about being four months away from surgery and apologize for talking about it incessantly. In the hashtags the only surgery tagged is #hysto indicating a hysterectomy. In a similar tone, focused on education and community-building, @king_nyllek writes: "[…] I am open to answering questions you may have about any of my transition-related experiences. I'm here. I'm visible. I am valid. You are valid […]" (Name Unknown).

[22] @king_nyllek is no longer an active account on Instagram and therefore proper citations cannot be provided in-text or in the references section of this article.



Articulative selfies, although founded on the notion of kinship, are also used to air complaints with #ftm as a space for discussing transmasculine life. For example, @luckypandacub posts an articulative selfie in a hospital bed, stating: "When I started this account at the same time as my physical transition, I never expected to have over 5,000 new friends join me in my journey. It's brought me countless opportunities and relationships that I'm beyond grateful to have" (Blisk 2017b). The post then becomes an opportunity for @ladideathstrike to comment not only on @luckypandacub's content, but on the state of #ftm on Instagram as an imagined community. @ladideathstrike writes: "[…]Thank you for sharing your highs and lows and for overall being REAL. You are one of the few that talk about the 'ugly' stuff. I have so much respect and appreciation for you <3." @ladideathstrike's comment expresses frustration with the fact that many users post selfies under #ftm that are positive and celebratory as a way to speak back against a culture that focuses on pathologizing trans individuals, but in doing so, they can often silence the more complex physical and emotional narratives of some transmasculine folks. Indeed, across the articulative selfies that surfaced during my study of #ftm, the content overwhelmingly fell into the categories of: anticipation, gratitude/happiness, and confidence. While there seemed to be strong references to

the fact that life was hard or difficult in real time, by the time users posted articulative selfies their emotions were focused on the positive. For example, Emerson Palmer, @palmer_fivevi posts a selfie with their daughter (fig. 10) where they both smile and wear matching jean jackets. The caption reads: "[…] when people get ugly, you remind me of how truly beautiful life is. You & mommy have made me RICH IN LOVE" (Palmer 2017).



While popular media often presents before-and-after images of trans folks to infer that gender transition is a simple hop from one binary gender category to the next, articulative selfies on #ftm reveal that for some transmasculine folks looking to alter their bodies through hormones and surgeries, this hop is actually a series of deliberate, at times even dissonant, forwards, sideways, and backwards steps.

Articulative selfies that culminate under #ftm reveal the heterogenous qualities of the hashtag as a place to express vast understandings of transmasculinity and trans bodies. By making the process of assembling transmasculinity visible, #ftm users can (if they wish to, and dependent upon other social pressures resulting from

various identities) break some of the typical rules of gender and sexuality that dominant masculinity foretells and move it beyond a historical attachment to a specific male body. On #ftm, masculinity no longer remains "unmarked and underspoken" (Noble 2006, 60).

Users of #ftm who choose to discuss transmasculinity through their selfies show the process of writing one's gender into existence, refusing transgender erasure, defying the oppositionalism that the gender binary depends and has always depended upon, and using masculinity as a tool for relation, but not as the only filter through which a transmasculine person can be seen. As Butler so poignantly explains: "To be material is to speak about the process of materialization" (qtd. in Noble 2006, 86-87). Indeed, through this process of materialization on #ftm, transmasculine people reveal the ways in which transmasculinity, like all gender orientations, is both made and inherited (Noble, 2006, 98).

It is, however, not enough to talk about materialization (Puar 2012, 56); we must ask what this gender-making, what this masculinity re/building, signifies. The broadest answer that I have gathered after conducting this research is that understanding masculinity away from the primary arteries of hegemonic masculinity and dominant masculinity, and their anchors of cisnormativity and binary gender, can be a confusing and isolating experience and one that requires a community of support.

While some readers will argue, and perhaps not entirely incorrectly, that the above images and captions also mobilize the gender binary and the tropes of masculinity (i.e. whiteness, thinness, strength, etc.), I argue that the willingness of these transmasculine users to vocalize gratitude and support, while speaking from a place of vulnerability, in a public way, about their bodies, scars, 'beautiful life,' love,

and ‘battling the same struggles,’ also does the work of destabilizing hegemonic masculinity, however subtly. By publicly displaying and discussing their bodies and gender expressions and identities, transmasculine people using #ftm position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832).

In the process of gaining intelligibility through stylized repetitions on #ftm, transmasculine folks reveal the emergence of a hierarchy of desirable transmasculine embodiment and what normative claims are made around what trans bodies *should* and *do* look like. What #ftm also reveals is that, like any hierarchy or locus of power, this structure is vulnerable to resistance and contestation and these efforts illuminate the fact that other forms of transmasculinity exist and are in circulation, suggesting that transmasculinity is not a fixed or essential identity, but a polymorphous filter through which transmasculine folks may articulate their experiences.

Political Selfies: A Reaction to Trump’s Military Ban

While I cannot comment on whether #ftm is routinely used to engage with political topics of the day, I can verify that during the time I studied the hashtag it was expressly used for this purpose. Whether to reveal themselves as active political agents, or to express exasperation and solidarity, transmasculine folks used the hashtag to post selfies in retaliation to United States President Trump’s Twitter announcement that he intended to ban transgender service members from the American military because of the “tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail” (Trump 2017).

In January 2019, the ban was actualized, much to the surprise of trans service members and activists the world over. The policy expels transgender folks with a

diagnosis of gender dysphoria from military service. Trans people without the aforementioned medical diagnosis can serve, but only if they do so under their assigned sex at birth (Sullivan 2019). In March 2019, the House of Representatives passed a resolution in opposition to the ban, which encourages the Department of Defense to reject the ban and maintain an inclusive military community that welcomes capable trans service members. With the recent DSM declassification of transgender identity as a mental disorder (Cuttler 2019), the fate of the military ban remains unknown, but the transphobic sentiment of rejection, hostility, and devaluation remains clear.

In these political selfies on #ftm, a sense of imbricated identity emerges. Unwilling, or unable, to let go of either their trans identity or their military identity, these transmasculine folks voice and visualize narratives wherein audiences may imagine that the two identities existed with little complication until Trump's interjection. In a side by side photo (see Fig. 13), JD, username @lillionman7 writes:

> I am a Trans Veteran, and no one can ever take that away from me. And if anyone thinks they can step up to the plate. I fought with my fellow brothers and sisters to defend everyone in United States, not just a select group. For those that agree with the President's decision to put into place a new policy that bans trans individuals from joining and would remove thousands; ask yourselves are you going to take their place? Are your children going to take their place? And I hope you realize that yours and my tax dollars will NOT be well spent going down this road. Being trans and in the military is no big deal except to leadership. Those that served next to me could have cared less as long as I did my job, and I did it like I was except to PERIOD! (sic) (JD 2017)

In their caption, @lillionman7 challenges normative thinking about trans life by re-directing the exceptionality of their identity to that of being a soldier, their willingness to risk their lives for strangers, rather than for their transness. Their use of binary gender language, re: brothers and sisters, seems to suggest that they view their own gender identity within or alongside that binary in an uncomplicated

fashion. The recurring smile in both left and right images suggest that @lillionman7 finds pleasure and joy in both their queerness and military service. It is interesting to note that costumes or symbols of identity, indeed stylized expressions, in the form of army fatigues and queer flags respectively, exist in both images.



While one might assume that @lillionman7 operated a highly regulated impression management in order to keep these identities separate, their caption directly suggests otherwise. The fact that they say their being trans in the military was *no big deal* and that *those that served next to me could have cared less* implies that they did not suppress their transness in order to assimilate into this environment. Perhaps they felt they fit in precisely because they stood out alongside their military peers as one of few individuals who would actively engage in this type of work. What these specific political selfies bring to the fore is that users posting on #ftm for political reasons often highlight the fact that transness is only one, albeit major, factor of their identity. In this example, these transmasculine users are also proud military personnel.

The theme of imbricating identities surfaces again in a #ftm selfie from user @killerdoc33, whose last name is unknown, but lists their first name as Ryan. In this selfie, the caption reads: "You'll never go wrong investing in yourself. With the recent events, it's been a rough week for a lot of us but it's important to stay grounded and mission focused, whatever that mission may be" (Ryan 2017). Seemingly, @killerdoc33 views rejection from the government as yet another mission. He therefore takes a service-centred approach to a very personal form of transgender exclusion. The lack of regret apparent in the sentiment *you'll never go wrong investing in yourself* suggests that he does not regret his time invested in the military and also refuses to see his investment in his gender identity as wrong or a misstep. He credits his resilience to what he calls remaining *mission focused*. The mission here seems to be to withstand the cruelty of a transphobic government. It is likely that he feels able to stomach this mission because it is an extension of the ongoing mission to survive and thrive while navigating the wider, transphobic world.

In a similar piece of content, @ftmmagazine re-posts a selfie from James Cutcher, a white-appearing, transmasculine person (fig. 12). In the caption, he describes his service: "I have fought and work hard to prove my worth, not only in the military but in everyday life […] I will continue to do so, no matter what the ignorant and uneducated do. My life shall be an example of *truth*" (FTM Magazine 2017).

What truth is James speaking of? The Truth of gender? That it is complicated and unfixed? The Truth of citizenry? That to be a *good* citizen, under military standards, you must willingly, paradoxically give up your freedom for the freedom of others? The truth that transphobic discrimination occurs within and beyond the military, indeed across most social life? That trans folks are continually oppressed,

erased, violated, and devalued and still they refuse to disappear? Any or all of these truths are enough to inspire a sense of abstract hope in the witnesses of this image.



Figure 12.

Even the most pacifist audience member, when bearing witness to James' resilience, "has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (Sedgwick 2003, 146).

Political selfies also unearth the commercialism stuck to microcelebrity on Instagram. In conducting a virtual ethnography, one must be aware that Instagram is more than a mode of expression; Instagram is a career for some folks. In the advent of social media, the status of a microcelebrity is more accessible than ever before. However, microcelebrity relies on a negotiation. On one end there is the user, who must engage in particular behaviors—such as portraying themselves in intimate ways (Raun 2018, 106) and recognizing themselves as celebrities—and on the other end there is the audience who must grant the status of microcelebrity to the user

(Marwick 2013, 115). In the transmasculine community, Aydian Dowling is the go-to example of a person who lives off the success of his Instagram following, which presently rests at a staggering 196,000 people.

In the wake of Trump's military ban announcement, Aydian Dowling, @alionsfear on Instagram, posted a selfie that seemed to be about awareness building *and* financial gain (fig. 13). The potential removal of trans folks from the military presented Dowling with an opportunity to create, model, and subsequently sell his clothing. In the photo, he wears a custom blue tank top with a trans flag and an upright, clenched fist with bold white lettering that says: "We're not going anywhere."



He mimics the shirt logo, fist held up in defiance. I would be remiss not to draw attention to the fact that this symbol is blatant appropriation of the Black Panther party and black power movement, which often portrayed members and signs

showing fists upheld in the same fashion. Dowling's caption reads: "After a solid chunk of anger and sadness yesterday—I cannot help but feel beyond motivated. My passion to further this community grows each and everyday. We're Not Going Anywhere" (Dowling 2017).

This particular selfie received 5113 likes at the time of viewing. Most comments are about Dowling's physical looks and attractiveness, while others ask where to purchase the shirt. Dowling's microcelebrity provides him with a platform for raising awareness about political issues while simultaneously profiting from his activism, which is aided by his many privileges. In this example, Dowling potentially profits by supplying a visible, yet appropriated, symbol of transgender solidarity in a time of precarity for trans folks. I do not wish to suggest that Dowling is happy for the opportunity to make money from this negligent and volatile presidential decision, rather I do think he recognizes that these types of decisions will continue to be made by those in power and that he can benefit economically from inspiring a, perhaps neoliberal, brand of confidence and imagined collectivity rather than submitting to the banished fate that this and similar decisions attempt to sentence trans folks to.

In being critical of this political selfie, I do not mean to suggest that I think Dowling should not receive money for the affective labour he engages in on his Instagram account, including "accessibility, presence, authenticity, inclusivity and connectedness with the audience" (Raun 2018, 110). What I question with this particular post is how Dowling's brand attempts to flatten out, rather than pluralize, the possibilities for transmasculine identity. In fact, many transmasculine audience members may not wish to endorse or support military involvement. Further, the irony in this particular example is that Dowling is indeed not *going anywhere* because he is

not a military service member. While he *is* transgender, he is not under threat of facing joblessness in this particular example.

In the face of blatant discrimination from their President, some #ftm users published selfies as queer performances that repurposed any potential shame. By posting these political selfies, transmasculine folks produce bodies as resistance efforts, thus surfacing from the theoretical and hypothetical realm of Trump's imagination, recall his framing of trans folks as being "tremendous medical costs and disruption," and becoming, instead, complex individuals who will not be intimidated, relegated to the shadows, expelled, ignored, or erased.

Conclusion

In my study, users posted comparison photo selfies, and articulative and political selfies, on #ftm to re/claim their transmasculine bodies and stories. Across the selfies that surfaced, I feel confident saying that #ftm is a cultural site that both embraces and rejects biological determinism, social determinism, and the liminal and often unknowable cognitive space between. #ftm is a place where users go to celebrate great haircuts and mourn premature male baldness. It is a space where users demonstrate gender play, engage in tricep dips, model crop tops, wear make-up, throw axes, and have self-care nights complete with Golden Girls reruns and hydrating face masks. #ftm is bulging with white muscles. It is also flowing with political resistance.

In celebrating the work of #ftm, I also do not wish to frame the hashtag as a utopia. Instagram, and its algorithms, emerge from the wider dominant capitalist, racist, neo-liberal culture and thus content posted to #ftm is vulnerable to harmful byproducts of these structures, including censorship and erasure. What we get to see

in this space is not all of what we *could* see. On the one hand, the hashtag floods Instagram users with underrepresented images of transmasculine bodies that are no longer shackled solely to the weight of gnawing dysphoria and other limiting tropes. #ftm is often a place where many transmasculine users celebrate their bodies and physical potential, their material differences from cisgender men, their surgical scars, their complex histories and intersectional identities. At the same time, however, #ftm emerges from, and is also, an extension of the physical world: a place that limits what is conceivable and imaginable for the ever-evolving transmasculine body due to fixed or absent representation of transmasculine folks in popular culture and a broader, intellectual obsession with representation in the first place. In my study, which replicated a common Instagram user experience, recent posts were invisible and top posts prevailed. Because of this, I found that #ftm is also a place wherein transmasculine bodies are policed, femininity is largely absent or devalued, and thin, white, fit, able-bodied people are often lavished with microcelebrity.

Although users in my dataset were rarely vocal about wanting to create large scale social change with their content, many posts under #ftm met the criteria of *everyday activism.* Users shared personal stories in a public way via #ftm, and in doing so, these Instagram users altered the visual landscape of intelligibility for recognizing and discussing transmasculine bodies and identities (Vivienne et al. 2016, 13). Overwhelmingly, the data revealed that users' decisions to post with #ftm appeared to have little to nothing to do with educating cisgender people or tackling the prejudices flung unjustly on transmasculine individuals. Instead, #ftm became, in line with Fraser's (1990) first component of a subaltern counterpublic, a place of *regroupment and withdrawal* by providing transmasculine Instagram users with a private-public space to meditate on/or talk out their transness while recognizing

similarities and differences across other transmasculine experiences. From this perspective, #ftm cultivated a Goffmanian (1963) 'backspace' for eliciting support from other transmasculine users, as well as negotiating one's identity as a transmasculine person with the understanding that they are a part of an evolving, online collective of diverse transmasculine Instagram users. Goffman (1963) described these backspaces as areas where people could congregate to "stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigma, nor be overly concerned with cooperatively trying to disattend it" (81). #ftm is therefore important because many users of the hashtag experience transness as an in/voluntary secret in everyday life where cissexist assumptions and perceptions mean they are misrecognized as cisgender.

After studying #ftm closely, my impression is that although many scholars seem to position trans folks as responsible for overthrowing the gender binary, many transmasculine folks did not express feeling radically queer in their genders and orientations. Like Raun (2016), I am not interested in presenting #ftm as a place that fuels the idea that there are subversive/obedient ways of doing and understanding gender (13). What #ftm reveals is that transmasculine people are publicly self-presenting, circulating, taking up, re/producing, and resisting many styles of transmasculine embodiment. #ftm is a window to a world where transmasculinity is an ongoing conversation with dominant masculinity, but also with memory, female and liminal bodies, sexism, ableism, racism, transphobia, and itself.

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ARTICLE THREE: "TELLING TRANSNESS ONLINE: MAKING SENSE WITH MY MANY SELVES"

> Be an academic guerrilla. It won't be easy. In fact, it's virtually guaranteed to be painful, exhausting, and humiliating, but what you gain from sticking with it is your work … and your life, by which I mean your ability to fully inhabit your own narrative. Hey, all it takes is all you've got. And isn't that what life is all about?
>
> -Sandy Stone, *Guerrilla*, 2014.

> I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.
>
> -Joan Didion, "Why I Write," 1976.

The desire to tell my transness online was not only or always a desire. Often, my need to tell was motivated by fear, anxiety, or guilt. I am a storyteller who happens to be a social scientist, or a social scientist who happens to like telling stories. I am both—always. None, first. A few days before coming out as transgender[23], I created a Tumblr blog—Trans Canada (My Way)— where I intended to publish weekly entries reflecting my thoughts and feelings about social and medical gender transition. I wrote the blog for ninety weeks. In addition to a weekly textual account, I also uploaded mundane photos from my life, as well as a recurring, intentional photoset containing three photos of my face (both side profiles and a front-facing perspective) in order to record the physical changes caused by testosterone. In the end, the blog had many purposes. As a creative writer, I knew that transitioning would fuel my desire to write. I knew that I would want to explain what the experience was like for those who would never live it. I knew that I would crave to make sense of new and foreign experiences through a method I've always trusted—my words. Eventually, I came to see my blog posts as short personal essays and each

[23] I came out as transgender on April 15, 2015 in an article published on *After Ellen*, which is a culture website that caters to lesbian and queer women. The article has since been removed. I initially identified as nonbinary and transmasculine and used the pronouns they/them. While I still identify as nonbinary and transmasculine, I often refer to myself as a *trans man* and I now use he/they pronouns interchangeably.

entry was highly edited. Although I did not know what form it would take at the time, another reason I wrote the blog was to generate field notes about my transition. I did so because I imagined that I might later be able to reflect on these entries in some meaningful way for the dissertation. I wrote the entries as an academic, who specialized in gender and media studies, reflecting on my process of transitioning while being in process. My writing was mixed genre and my gender felt this way as well. This interdisciplinary essay is the product of that research and reflection, a project consisting of both creative writing and theoretical analysis.

I have training as a sociologist, gender theorist, and creative writer. This essay will give voice to these selves. In using myself as the subject for analysis, I hope to provide space for feeling in the text. I want readers to enter this text and feel like they are a part of my gender journey. Once inside the text, readers need not relate or agree, but I believe that the very exposure to another way (and thus the possibility of infinite ways) of telling transness is a future-building project because as Butler (qtd. in Holman Jones, 2016) reminds us: "the intersection of theory and everyday language is crucial to telling and re-imagining not only what we can say, but also who we can be" (229). By coming into contact with my relational process of understanding my gender, I hope readers of this essay may become inspired to consider and construct their own meanings around gender.

To begin this essay, I briefly contextualize theoretical discussions about the use of Tumblr, and blogging in general, as a technology of gender and I describe my decision to blog instead of strict journaling as a method for compiling field notes. Next, I explain the appeal of autoethnography, more specifically performative writing, as a qualitative method for this essay. Finally, I present three sections of performative writing, which I have named: On Telling, On Being, and On Feeling.

Why Blog?

Tumblr is a microblog platform that hosts over 478.8 million blogs (Tumblr 2019) although its monthly visitor rate has steadily declined since 2016. In 2018, Tumblr introduced an unpopular policy decision to ban pornographic content, including: sex acts, genitalia, and 'female presenting' nipples. Before this decision, Tumblr had an edgy reputation for hosting #NSFW[24] content and for encouraging sexuality and nudity on the forum (Liao 2019). I chose Tumblr as a medium for publishing my blog based on my understanding of the website as a popular space for queer counterpublic discourse (Fink & Miller 2014). From my brief experiences with Tumblr, I noticed that there was a lot of queer content and that many folks were describing queer and trans life in varied ways. I also noticed a significant amount of content about trans men and nonbinary folks on Tumblr, which I imagined would make up the majority of my blog audience.

In addition to Tumblr being a popular space for queer and transgender content, the site also appealed to my more practical needs—I knew I wanted to post longer textual entries with accompanying photographs. After spending a few days on the platform, I realized that long textual entries were actually less common, and that textual brevity was the norm. This practice is in line with a cultural shift away from scrolling[25]. Another way that I deviated from unspoken Tumblr norms is that I decided early on that I would not reblog, or share, users' content. I was very territorial of my blog space because my writerly-self came to view my blog as an

[24] NSFW is a popular abbreviation that stands for Not Safe For Work. This label is often used as a disclaimer for material that may include profanity, nudity, sexual content or other themes deemed unprofessional or inappropriate in a workplace context.
[25] Recall the popular hashtag, #TLDR, which stands for Too Long Didn't Read. The assumption is if content is too long, people will skim or skip over it.

evolving memoir. Each week, I added pages to my unfolding gender story. I felt like reblogging other content would enforce visual and cognitive space between my entries, thus disrupting the narrative flow. I think it is accurate to say that I approached my Tumblr experience as a writer first and a trans person second. The blog also became a space where I felt validated as a writer. Having taken time off from creative writing pursuits to complete my PhD, this felt like a space where I could also come to think of myself as storyteller once again. This deliberate decision not to promote content from other community members makes me an anomalous Tumblr user. Nevertheless, I do believe that my writing added to transgender cultural production on the forum due to my intentional use of hashtags to garner visibility, which I will discuss further below.

The reason I chose to write the narrative account of my gender transition instead of publishing video blogs, or vlogs, was strictly a matter of personal preference. I have a master's degree in writing and my limited experience in front of the camera[26] induced a level of vulnerability that I do not find exists when I publish my writing. Nevertheless, I was aware that transition vlogs were the most popular and spreadable genre of transgender life storytelling online (Raun 2016), and that my decision to write my account would likely reduce the visibility of my story.

Throughout my young adult life, I was attracted to making my private life public. I think it has something to do with being raised in a very small, rural, town with humble and quiet parents. I spent the first 18 years of my life on a small Canadian island, where I was not encouraged to discuss queerness, bodies, sex, or gender difference. The goal here was assimilation. After leaving the province and moving to a more exciting city to pursue my undergraduate degree, I reinvented

[26] In 2015, I was approached by VICE media to co-produce and host a documentary about transgender healthcare access in Canada.

myself. During this time, I realized that I had the ability to use my words and body to challenge the status quo. I became a killjoy (Ahmed 2017) by writing a queer sex column for the Catholic university paper and writing and producing controversial stage plays. I also came to performance art toward the end of my degree and was invited to become part of a public piece that launched in the downtown core. I sat in the public window of a used bookstore in fishnet stockings and lace underwear, paired with an oversized sweater that concealed my oversized breasts. I had my computer hooked to a monitor that faced the street. Audience members watched as I typed out, in real time, responses to various love letters I had received in the past from exes. These letters were pasted to the window next to my computer monitor. I have, it seems, always been interested in the idea of reflection and of texts speaking to each other out of time and context. I have been interested in the way that words, confessions, and communication linger, carrying emotional matter across time and space.

As a result of these youthful experiences, I started to place a lot of my sense of worth and understanding of my identity in my writing. I knew that writing this blog would allow a more consistent and immediate way to realize how my words were impacting people—if, indeed, they were. As words of support from strangers and surprising acquaintances came flowing in after posting entries, these excited and pleasurable feelings magnified. I bought a Tumblr theme[27] to personalize my blog and I also purchased a website domain to override the standard Tumblr URL. I did this because I thought it would help my content reach a larger audience, for example anyone who might Google my name. I knew I wanted to grow an audience because I believed that having a larger audience meant that my words would "count in a public

[27] Lytton theme by Pixel Union.

way and thus be transformative, changing attitudes and discourses around trans" (Raun 2016, 171).

Another reason that I chose to publish my thoughts and feelings about transition online rather than keeping a private journal was because I knew that by putting my content on Tumblr and orientating it near other trans stories, I might receive recognition and verification that my gender identity, however normative and/or complex, made sense to other transgender folks and was worthy of validation (Dame 2016). In his discussion about online FTM vloggers, Tobias Raun (2016) highlights this mutually constitutive dynamic of vlogs as both recording and tracking transition progress while also creating and manipulating how and in what ways this transition is witnessed. Similarly, my blog also became a type of *performative documentation* or "part of an active process of self-determination" and an "important site for working on, as well as producing and exploring the self" (Raun 2016, 118). By tagging my content with hashtags such as #trans, #transition, #transgender, and #ftm, I deliberately added my self-presentation, or self-fashioning, to a growing online transgender archive[28] (Dame 2016; Cavalcante 2018). Hashtags are one way to make sense of the shapes and extensions of trans bodies and stories in this digital space. Trans specific hashtags catalogue objects for bodily orientation; they may guide the gaze of Tumblr users, opening up the possibility that "different worlds might even come into view" (Ahmed 2006, 15). Despite this potential, Tumblr is not an innocent space. Algorithms may establish lines or directions of orientation, making and disappearing worlds and impacting desires (Ahmed 2006, 70).

[28] I am adapting Cvetkovich's (2003) definition of the queer archive, as a process of documenting "the ephemeral evidence of gay and lesbian life," (243) to also make space for encompassing trans-specific content.

In the beginning, I conceived of my Tumblr as both a private and public space. Here, I believed I could tell my transness and receive affection and kinship while also hiding if I wanted to. Tumblr is saturated with #ftm content and the hypervisibility of other transmasculine people allowed me to imagine my own invisibility. The in/visibility of this online space gave me an illusion of control over how I told my transness at a time when I was frequently outed by others and feared for my physical safety due to the way I stuck out from the expectations of normative binary gender appearance. As the months went on, the masculinizing effects of testosterone took hold of my body and I moved around the world with provisional cisgender privilege where I passed as a man, although at times precariously so, and then I began to see my blog as a site of mediated disclosure. When I started passing, I experienced tremendous guilt. I felt guilty that I passed while others did not, and I felt guilty that I often could not muster the strength to announce my transgender status in physical, public situations when the opportunities arose. For this reason, my ability to tell my transness online became an important tool for dealing with dissonance I experienced when feeling simultaneous joy and guilt at being able to move around the world as the masculine figure I aspired to be. Writing the blog provided me with comfort that, at least for a small audience, a more nuanced view of my gender identity was visible and accessible. In describing the realities of visibility for trans men in the physical world, Jamison Green (2006) explains:

> We are supposed to pretend we never spent 15, 20, 30, 40 or more years in female bodies…In short, in order to be a good—or successful—transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. This puts a massive burden of secrecy on the transsexual individual: the most intimate and human aspects of our lives are constantly at risk of disclosure. (501)

Tumblr became a space for asserting and articulating my transness in order to release this *burden of secrecy* and make public a truth that I was often afraid, although not ashamed, to reveal in my day-to-day physical interactions. I was fearful that my transgender identity would not be accepted. I was fearful that I would internalize this rejection and continue hating myself the way I had before coming out as trans but now for different reasons: not because I was afraid to come out, but because I was out and unwanted. I was afraid that this desire to fit in and have my gender recognized and validated made me somehow less queer or trans. I tried to cut myself some slack. I reminded myself that if we did not live in a world that presumed everyone was cisgender than my transgender identity would not stick out; I would not be made to feel like a deceiver for not disclosing my transgender status. In their study of violence against trans women and the surrounding media reportage of such incidences, Schilt & Westbrook (2009) describe the deception framework for how trans people (in this case transgender women) are seen as "lying about their gender" (454). The alleged deception experienced by cisgender people hinges on a social understanding of "'true gender' as a synonym for sex" (455). While the use of the deception framework has severely violent results in Schilt & Westbrook's study, the conceptualization of transgender individuals as liars or tricksters is quite commonplace in popular culture. A few examples of television shows and films that have portrayed transgender characters in a villainous fashion, include: *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *Naked Gun 33 1/3*, *Soapdish*, *The Hangover 2*, *CSI*, and *Nip/Tuck*.

The deception myth indicates a double bind where transgender people are either liars or they are expected to out themselves as trans in order to do gender properly, but by outing themselves, their sex may take front stage and it is unlikely their gender will be properly seen and validated. Nevertheless, as I started to pass

and became aware that I was no longer seen as transgender, I felt guilty for not asserting my difference. When I did not speak up, I felt like an impostor and like I was being misrecognized or that my gender was invisible at times. But, also, when I did not speak up, I felt relieved and privileged to exist as a man and have my gender be taken seriously. The blog became a space where I could disclose my transgender status, and discuss these parts of my identity without facing the immediate, physical rejection that I feared as I moved about my everyday life.

Although written during a more analog time, de Lauretis (1987, 18) outlines similar resistance strategies that show how people use "subjectivity and self-representation" to speak back, add to, chip away at, and manipulate the construction of gender from the margins of society. Tumblr offered visibility for transmasculine people at a time when popular television and film did not, thus making transmasculinity familiar to myself and others in the way that Ahmed (2006) discusses in *Queer Phenomenology*—as an object for orientation. In a world that does not extend to the shape of transmasculine bodies and stories, Tumblr became a space I could inhabit, a space open to being shaped by and through me, as well as many other transmasculine folks. As more and more transmasculine people post images and narratives on Tumblr, the possibility of being transmasculine becomes available, but, more than this, possibilities for types of trans becoming multiplies because "if gender shapes what we 'do do,' then it shapes what we can do" (Ahmed 2006, 59-60).

While I knew that my digital cultural production as a trans person on Tumblr was by no means revolutionary due to the fact that it perpetuated a longstanding pattern of whiteness, ability, and class privileges associated with transgender visibility, I did think I had something productive to offer with my narrative at the

intersections of transmasculinity and nonbinary identity. At this point, I had not read many online accounts of other transmasculine people, like me, who considered their gender identity nonbinary but also wanted to masculinize their bodies through testosterone and gender-confirming surgeries.

One of the most wide-reaching theories on whiteness emerged from Richard Dyer (1997). In *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, Dyer described the ubiquity of whiteness, its almost imperceptible but weighted nature, and how this made it difficult for white audiences and media makers to notice and thus critically assess (45-46). Since this initial theorizing on whiteness, critical race and media scholars (Ahmed 2004; Rault 2017) have noted that the failure to see whiteness is particular to white people, and that people of colour are always made to notice whiteness. They also argue that the alleged difficulty for white media producers and consumers to see whiteness facilitates the perpetuation of white-privileging media that carries with it social and economic advantages. I am hyperaware that even in spending this time addressing my whiteness, I am, in some part, contributing to the white noise (Rault 2017) that "obscures the analysis of the historical endurance, reach, and flexibility of white power" (588). For white readers of this essay: while you may learn something about my particular understanding of my shifting transmasculine embodiment, I hope you also remind yourself to see my whiteness in these words and to remain critical of the luxuries I am afforded as a white body extending into predominately white spaces.

Queer Methods, Autoethnography, and Performative Writing

Queer social research methods interrogate the genesis and impacts of ideas and categories for how they generalize conditions and fail to encompass the more

specific experiences of those they intend to describe. In discussing how queer methods deviate from more traditional academic approaches, Brim & Ghaziani (2016) explain: "If empiricism grants authority to categories that are operationalized into observable units, then to queer empiricism means to embrace multiplicity, misalignments, and silences" (16).

Autoethnography is a queer method due to its nature as an encounter, a relationship between writer and reader, rather than simply as an isolated exercise of confession. Heewon Chang (2008) describes autoethnographic writing as embodying the ability to "interweave stories from the past with ongoing self-discovery in the present. Stories from the past are interpreted in the context of the present and the present is contextualized in the past" (140). By taking on the role of the autoethnographer, I aim to produce performative writing that moves, not just in the sense of inspiring emotions, but that also embodies the energy of multiple perspectives on gender, from nonlinear moments in time, so that "distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition" (Ellis & Bochner 2003, 209). This methodological approach is best suited for what I wish to accomplish with this essay, which is, in part, producing content that adds to a queer theorist tradition described by Adams & Holman Jones (2008) as illuminating "identity-as-achievement" (382). The performative writing in this essay will bring attention to the relational aspects of my transgender identity in order to create space beyond "essentialist and constructionist debates" about gender (381).

Della Pollock (1998) provides multiple descriptions of what performative writing is and should do. The definition that best describes the performative writing in this chapter is when she states:

> Performative writing is *nervous*. It anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders, linked as it is in what Michael Taussig calls 'a chain of narratives sensuously feeding back into the reality thus (dis)enchained. (Pollock 1998, 91)

Performative writing, as a style of autoethnography, appeals to me for its attempt to centre multiplicity and for how it "does not project a self, even a radically destabilized one, as much as a relation of being and knowing that cuts back and forth across multiple 'divisions' among selves, contexts, affiliations" (Pollock 1998, 86-87). Throughout this essay, I strategically use intertextuality to trace and display my emerging transgender self, rife with paradox and a polyphony of voices, that exists as "a possibility rather than a fact" (87). The intertextual form allows me to include my present writing voice, my past writing that was published on the blog, and the words of academic theorists and creative writers that I have read and/or am reading. By doing so, I call attention to what Marková (2006) describes the 'third party within' or the understanding that a significant amount of conversation between speakers is not knowledge that is arrived at anew, but rather the overarching echo of familiar "traditions, institutions, friends and colleagues, political parties and so on, who speak through dialogical participants" (133).

In this way, I deploy intertextuality as a technique for highlighting the grip of the gender binary and its relationship to sex as being the 'third party within' that accompanies all conversations about gender. By setting my previous writing on the same line as my present thoughts about my gender identity, alongside approaches from gender theorists, and ideas from creative writers, I hope to visually highlight how these conversations speak to and through each other, as well as to and through me. This essay is my attempt to create performative writing that will put pressure on

the inevitable iterability of gender identity, and instead "repeat with a vengeance, making repetition stumble, stutter, driving a wedge into the practices of re/turn (between turn and return), thus at least promising repetition with a *difference"* (Pollock 1998, 92).

Some research questions that I have considered while writing this essay and that might help readers follow the intent of the project, include:

- *What have I learned about my transgender identity through blog writing and present reflective writing?*
- *How do I feel/what do I think now about the way I told my transness on the blog then?*
- *How is my telling transness really a re-telling influenced by the many social, cultural, and theoretical ideas of gender that I have come, and continue to come, into contact with?*

My Performative Hopes

Peggy Phelan (1998) describes the goal of performance as "the ability to realize that which is not otherwise manifest" through autoethnography and performative writing I hope to "extend the oxymoronic possibilities of animating the unlived that lies at the heart of performance as making" (12-13). I align myself with Spry (2011) in viewing performance as the hinge between experience and scholarship. My aim with this performative writing is to immerse the readers in a series of snapshots of my processual transgender self-fashioning and provide audiences with an evocative experience that lingers after the text ends. I hope that my writing will show readers something new about transmasculine embodiment while also demonstrating the permeability of time and skin and the "generative force

of those 'betweens'" (Phelan 1998, 8). Through performative writing, I aim to describe the tensions I am constantly squeezed by as a queer/gender theorist and transgender person who is at once invested in gender fucking and gender conformity for validation and survival. I hope to show how easily manipulatable this position is—how I often feel that I am being highjacked or greased in the service of various social or cultural norms. The performative writing also aims to reveal the impossibility of this position at times. Through the text, I show how my competing identities can spin out and into the abstract realm.

I approached this essay thinking that I would code and map the ninety weeks of blog content and do a rigorous narrative analysis. However, as I started reading the entries, the text became something else. As I moved through different kinds of methods, I eventually stumbled across Maggie Nelson's text *The Argonauts* and became inspired by how alive the writing felt. I decided I wanted to evoke a similar feeling of multi-temporality, dislocation, and critique with this essay by putting my thoughts around my gender identity in present day in conversation with my initial thoughts about it that I posted to the blog while also incorporating conversations from gender theorists and writers I had picked up along the way. The purpose of incorporating the previously written blog content into the performative writing is two-fold. By writing "in the curve of time, weaving past and present together in the nonlinear spaces of memory work" (Denzin 2003: 120) I am able to evoke the agitation, struggle, destabilization, and emotional range I feel and have felt as a trans person in a cisnormative world. Secondly, by reflecting back on the content from a different time and perspective, I demonstrate performative writing by engaging with specific tensions I have grappled with along the way and how they linger or are replaced by others that I am now faced with. This text embodies the transformative

movement between who I was when I first started gender transition and who I am now. The purposefully selected blog content works to disrupt. By choosing to include certain blog passages over others in the performative writing, I access the past to also reveal how the future I imagined for myself did not arrive, or perhaps arrived and was later re-written.

The following three sections of performative writing attempt to stretch beyond the more familiar account of coming out as transgender in order to discuss what happened to my sense of my gendered self after that initial declaration. As I started writing this essay, I felt compelled to make tangible the loneliness and doubt I have felt while wading through my gender crisis and to use this narrative thread to also reveal a yearning for another type of queer future. By disrupting the present moment with snippets of the past and theoretical and cultural influences, the performative text uses intertextuality to demonstrate how my past was always forward-leaning and how my current fantasies about the past also produce a present where there is a sense of absence/presence, or a surplus of meaning. This void is not unique to me as a queer and trans person. Many queer/trans people tell their stories to demonstrate that becoming different is possible, and that personal and social change are desirable.

In the sections that follow, readers will find text lifted from my blog in bold font. Should readers wish to view the text in its original context, they may follow the link in the footnote. Italicized text is writing that has been borrowed from others. I have cited their names and works in the footnotes though not in traditional academic reference form as it disrupts this visual project. Finally, text that appears in regular font is my present-day writing, where I reflexively engage with my previous writing and draw connections to academic, social, and cultural influences.

I. On Telling

The familiar story has always and will always be available.[29] It goes a little bit like this. The doctor says "it's a boy" or "it's a girl," and the first domino falls. *"Sex" is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility*[30]. I wonder if gender relations are precisely about knowing and harming. I know they are also about resistance, survival, and resistant survival. Writing about my understanding of my gender became a public display of admitting how I liked to hurt. It also became a hunt for gender pleasure. Writing was about accounting for that fact that **whenever someone asks me what 'nonbinary' means, I picture myself on the side of the road, waiting with my thumb out, as the idea of transness gains momentum and is solidified into the future**[31]**.** What I couldn't see then is how much shame I carry for the fact that I am starving for a male body (but not one I have to work for). Surgeries hurt. They can be costly and inconvenient. Am I still nonbinary if I want a penis? I think so. I might be ~~alone~~ lonely ~~in~~ when thinking this. I write because I want to be able to wake up and feel like I might survive the day without being reminded that I am a symbol of incongruence, an inconvenient truth, an unintelligible body. *I write when nothing else will bring me peace, when I burn, when I find myself asking and answering the same questions over and over. I write when I've begun to*

[29] Week 28.
[30] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'.*
[31] Week 28.

lose my sense of humor and it becomes a matter of my life and my death to get that sense of humor back[32].

Perhaps the thing that kept me from transitioning was the same thing that convinced me to do it in the end: *revision*[33]. The older I get the more I realize that my life is nothing other than stopping and starting. Why was I so desperately afraid to do to my body the one thing I'd always done with writing—imagine a new ending? I did not know *the pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one's work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again—not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life*[34]. **For me, writing is the only thing big enough to capture the tragedy that is the ordinariness of life. When we realize that we've stuffed small dreams in drawers, writing has a way of making us think widely again. I write to get at what I can't physically or emotionally muster. Or can't get back. Or want to let go of**[35]**.** I thought I wanted to let her go—the me I was never asked if I wanted to be. I see now what I wanted to let go of was the illusion that I am some whole, uncomplicated, 'I' that can ever be recovered or re-membered. I wanted to write about my transition because I wanted to highlight the fact that *to be material is to speak about the process of materialization*[36]. I thought by writing about transition, I could study the shape of gender identity as it materialized. I thought that I could know it. I did it online because some part of me knew that *an account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or*

[32] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw.*
[33] Week 58.
[34] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*.
[35] Week 77.
[36] Judith Butler, "Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'."

existing, and this other establishes the scene of address as a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself[37].

What came out of my blog was something altogether different. It was a collage of my many selves communicating with each other, even fighting each other at times. It was a **chorus of voices, or a primal call from a place of perpetual *nowhere*[38]**. It was also **directions for loving myself. Not always in the moment, but (at least) at last[39].** Or maybe it wasn't about self-love at all. Maybe it was less selfish and less profound. Maybe it was about birthing visual evidence—some images and **words out there to suggest that trans people are more than only transgender[40].** Maybe I wrote the blog because I desperately wanted gender to make sense for me. Perhaps, I thought writing was a way for me to step back and analyze my trans life without always being awash in it. But to write about it was to also drown in the questions. *And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer*[41]. One question I still have is **if it's possible for us nonbinary folks to ever really be *out* in any sustained way in the real world. It would include announcing our difference at a rate so unrelenting that explanation would consume our every day. So we write about it. We theorize it. We wear it. We explain it when we can, when it's safe. We reluctantly give words to feelings. We challenge the boxes designed to wear down our difference until we fit[42].** *We write—think and feel—(with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or*

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[37] Judith Butler, "Giving and Account of Oneself."
[38] Week 16.
[39] Week 81.
[40] Week 35.
[41] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.
[42] Week 28.

hearts[43]. Writing allows me to feel present in my body. When I'm typing at the keyboard my ideas are a freight train that rock through my bones and shake feelings loose.

Writing is about doing the work. Even when it sucks and turns out terribly…you write because words, when used by careful people, can cure loneliness in all directions[44]**.** But what happens if your words can't find the people who might need them? What happens if they are lost in the rush of this textual undertow, pressed down by the weight of a hashtag, or blown into nothingness—a dandelion at the mercy of an algorithm? Writing was my effort at queer performativity, my way of showcasing *the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality*[45]. **I want to snap the world open at its fast-moving, pulsing, centre and transfuse a slow kind of reparative love. I want to inspire a type of meditative resistance that makes room for insistent whispers and the echoes of forgotten people. I want to shatter what we know, or what we know we don't know, and find potential for reflection so that we can make getting around this place easier for everyone on a daily basis**[46]**.** More than this: I write because I am a coward.

I move around the world as a transgender person very aware of the things I cannot say. I spend my days tallying up the moments I've remained silent. *How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives… It is good lives that are hard to come by*[47]. Scars line my cheeks with unutterable words. I chew on a language that wasn't built for me. You put the words in my mouth. I hold them. I can't spit them

[43]Trinh T Minh-ha, "Write Your Body and the Body in Theory."
[44] Week 76.
[45] Eve K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling.*
[46] Week 25.
[47] Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life.*

out without losing some of myself. When I write words, I can move them around like magnets on a fridge. I can work with others to decode this. I can see the imprints. I can slow meaning, even stop it on the page. Keep it there forever. And come back to find it rendered a bit abstract. A bit queer. But then language laughs at me. It's in the thought to slow. It's in the 'down.' It's in the 'bit abstract.' Language is everywhere before me. Before the magnets. Before the fridge. It follows after me. It is through me. I am it. I only have glimpses of myself because of language. What am I leaving behind to be inherited with these words? I have to look backward to know. Am I really teaching myself how to love by writing or am I staring down, or maybe sitting with, *a preemptive loss, a mourning for unlived possibilities*[48]. Is my writing one long elegy for the gender that dare not speak its name, the gender that cannot happen, the gender I am. The ways I am not.

I write to signal citationality.

The citationality of telling.

The citationality of being.

The citationality of feeling.

The citationality of g e n d e r.

Although I'm not particularly great with my hands, I know a thing or two about building. Every day I stack thoughts on each other. I borrow from the engineers that came before me. Sometimes the structure crumples under pressure or inexperience. Delete delete delete[49]. I wonder as I write: where is duty in this? How do I articulate the material experience of living in a hormonally influenced queer body without simultaneously undermining my post-structural

[48] Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender—Refused Identification."
[49] Week 73.

feminist understanding of gender as non-essential and socially constructed? I stand in the middle of these institutional pressures, shoulders squeezed on all sides, my small feelings flutter but often do not find ***Voice.*** **You tell and keep secrets. When I'm speaking on the phone with the cab dispatcher, I get called 'Sir' on repeat. When I dial my father, who is suffering from Alzheimer's, I lift my voice up to a place he might recognize…** ***Voice.*** **You slip away and through me[50].** For a person who finds pleasure in confessional writing, it is strange that I often cannot speak 'my truth'. I can't speak it because I don't know what it is, or if I will ever find it, and I am not convinced that when it may finally arrive it will even feel like mine. I recognize some smaller 't' truths I feel but hide—that I do not meet the acceptable standards for being an academic, and that I do not have a particularly useful transgender story to tell. A story with a happy ending. A story that can challenge or change something. Nevertheless, I stay in the academy. I continue to write about being trans. Some other part of me must still believe that *[b]y articulating their experiences and identities, by affirming their bodies as their own and as viable, and be revealing their sexualities, transpeople and their partners disallow themselves "to be distorted," "consigned to silence," or prejudicially interpreted[51].* My stories carry loneliness out of my life, they hand it around to strangers who then turn it into something else. Sharing my stories is selfish survival. Sharing my stories makes choices and footsteps lighter.

II. On Being

I want to write about my body in a way that might rewrite some other part of me that I can't physically touch. But how will I know if I've succeeded? Between skin and

[50] Week 29.
[51] Jason Cromwell, *Transmen & FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders & Sexualities.*

feeling, between skin and story, between story and feeling, are regions of incompleteness. Lesions of language patch these lonely parts of me; words flash like warning signs—snow plough headlights hovering over a winding road in the dead of Canadian winter. The gender theorist inside of me yells: 'do not generalize your experience!' I know it's dangerous. But the writer and activist inside of me screams: 'generalize your experience!' Because who will save us if they can't see us or relate to us? How will we save ourselves if we can't take up space with our bodies and stories? I try to do both at once—particularize and generalize my trans experience. In doing so, I feel the weight of what's leftover between the particular and the general. The body and story are entwined, the body and society are entwined, the story and society are entwined. Every verb I have to voice the failure of being able to articulate how my story and skin are wrapped and rapturous is physical. *Stomach* the inconsistencies. *Swallow* this absent present. *Sit* with the remnants of that which you cannot name.

Wrong Body

It's the first time I've been alone in a room with only other trans men. The Philadelphia Trans Wellness Conference is underway, and I'm at an Air BnB that I rented with another guy I met on Instagram and two friends we made earlier that day. We talk about our insecurities. For me: it's the size of my feet and hands. Someone mentions the workshop tomorrow on "big dick energy" and we laugh and chat about packing[52]. None of us pack regularly, although we suspect that we are strange because of this.

[52] Packing is the term used to refer to wearing a phallic shaped object that gives the impression and feeling of a genital bulge.

Based off what we've seen on Instagram, we assume most trans men do pack—especially younger trans men. Three of us are in our mid-late thirties, one is in his mid-forties. We decide that it is probably only other transgender men staring at guys' packages in public anyway. This decision sounds a lot like hope. What we don't say is that we hope nobody is looking at our pre-operative, non-existent packages when we do not pack. Later that night, we stagger into a hole-in-the-wall men's gay bar on a dimly lit side street. I realize that our theory is incorrect when a burly man sizes up my pre-operative, non-existent, non-packing, package near the busted bathroom door. I want to say: "I don't have what you're looking for." But do I know what he is looking for? Why do I assume everyone is either looking *at* me or looking for someone *other* than me? When will I believe that I can fuel desire without footnotes dangling from my flesh?

I do understand and relate to the narrative of feeling trapped in your body. I was born in a body that felt stranger to me with each passing year. Transitioning allows me to feel more present[53]. Presence, however, is sometimes also pain—a hyper-awareness of my difference. And this can-do culture I live in tells me that I have the power to change my situation, to overturn this loneliness. But what about the parts of my situation that feel forced or out of my control? How other people react, recoil even, to my transgender status? Or, worse, fetishize my body, by making me a Frankenstein freak they'd like to fuck.

This neoliberal arena of self-improvement also usually fails to mention that money is necessary for such life-altering transformations. One needs cash to drink detox tea or to read *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, or whatever other self-help book by a mediocre white cisgender man who doesn't know much about loneliness is

[53] Week 57.

popular at the moment. I spend too much time contemplating the fact that I do not know how to transform myself because I often feel like I haven't been granted permission to exist in the first place—version 1.0. The me that is legible, the me that is given privileges is a misrecogonized, cisgender, straight white male version of me who both does and does not actually exist.

What does that absent presence inside of me transform into? How does a guilty ghost become a better version of itself? Maybe presence **just means that I'm able to look inside and be with who is there[54].** Who is that? **The image in the mirror reflects something familiar, something that was missing or stifled before[55].** 'Missing' suggests that the image was lost and in need of being found. The reflection I see now in the mirror wasn't hiding before, or if it was hiding, what was hiding was the idea of my gender. The possibility of a new shaped me was wedged under some cognitive flap in my imagination that I could not reach. **In summary, I'm much more comfortable expressing masculinity, but I also enjoy making it more complex[56].** This is only true to the extent that I cannot fix kitchen faucets or rhyme off football teams. If I'm being honest, there's nothing complicated about how my masculinity looks—white, bearded stubble, able-bodied, muscles, and hipster haircut.

After beginning transition, transgender people often hear: "I'm so happy you're just able to be you." I want to be clear that it is very easy to be me. Even when it is difficult. *I live in the in-betweenness of genders and in the borderlands of oppressions. I live as different kinds of "oppressor" and as different kinds of "oppressed." I move in the world as White and able-bodied, with socioeconomic and*

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

educational privilege, and as queer[57]. There is nothing complex about my hunger to write 'man' all over my body. But this body and this writing, are only a glimpse of my nonbinary gender identity—how I feel like neither man nor woman, but something else.

The good news is that I no longer feel trapped in my body. I like what surgery and hormones have done to my shape and face. But I do feel lonely, at times, in this body because I'm aware that it projects a simplistic version of gender. That's the paradox, I guess. How I feel about my gender identity is complex, but how I want to look and move around this world is so damn normative and simple: Hollywood movie star handsome, or rugged enough that you might actually believe that I could build something although I can't distinguish between a mitre saw and a circular saw and I'm absolutely terrible at math. Is this the archetypal experience of all people who hunger after this ideal form of physical masculinity? Feeling like a fucking fraud? Feeling like there's so much about your gender you could say and don't?

I get why this disjuncture makes knowing me confusing. What you see is far from what you get because *within the present horizon of the modern West, the body has retained its central role as the representation of the self, and recognition continues to depend upon the expressive function of the body*[58]. My clothed body makes me temporarily legible and safe. But underneath my pants, behind the curtain of my memories, and throughout the waves of my present stream of consciousness, there are grey spaces, liminal daydreams, and puzzle pieces that refuse to fit. My body is the right body, but I live with the knowledge that to keep this body legible, I must also tolerate being misrecognized. When this misalignment doesn't cause loneliness, it can sometimes provide me with a pleasurable type of resistance. People

[57] S. Nordmarken, "Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness."
[58] Henry Rubin, *Self-made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men.*

make assumptions about me because of my body and then I open my mouth and say something unexpected. I watch as their notion of my gender identity spontaneously combusts in public and I wonder how they will reassemble the visual pieces of my body after this information, equipped with this unexpected gender story, going forward. How will they see me now? Will they refuse to see me any longer?

There are many technologies that help transgender people be seen the way they would like to be seen. Many transgender men feel strongly connected to their packers. They might not even call them that. For some, these are simply their genitals, their dicks, or whatever they like to call them. They wear their packers while they eat, sleep, workout, and walk around town. I feel like an impostor to the transgender community when I pack because wearing a packer makes me feel obscene. I don't feel intrinsically connected to the lumpy flesh. When I do wear it, my packer often shifts and takes on a mind of its own as if to vex me, brand me deviant, at the most socially inconvenient moments. I feel all eyes on my bulge when walking by a park with children, or an elderly couple, or a sweet Bichon Frise. But without wearing a packer, I feel as though I'm sneaking around like a eunuch. Packing, for me, is a choice between what feels like artifice or lack. As I wait for the subway train, packer-less, I imagine that women are staring at the flat ridge of my jean fly and I consider explaining the situation to them— how my penile member got blown off in armed combat. My heroic dick: this seems to be the only plausible history I find comfort in. Despite being a pacifist. Despite the fact that one doesn't generally go about explaining their genitals to strangers. Actually, that's not true. Many trans folks *do* spend a lot of time explaining their genitals to strangers— doctors, government officials, airport security, psychologists, first dates, and more.

I could tell these onlookers that "I have a micro penis," which is not untrue. Or, I could say that "I have a monstrous clit." Or I could say that "I have a transgender genital part." But I don't think it matters what we call it when most people believe that penises need to be somewhere between too big and too small to qualify as purposeful and register as intelligible. This is a moment where I do feel like I am trapped in the wrong body. If only for ease and agency. Having a natal penis would not likely relegate me to the too small side of things and *being trapped in the wrong body is simply what transsexuality feels like*[59]. Being trapped in the wrong body, for me, also feels like suffocating under a difficult decision: have phalloplasty[60] and get my dream penis, but possibly lose all sexual functioning. I do not believe my body was wrong from the start, or is always or only wrong, but it has its moments of wrong feeling.

I am never unaware of my genitals in public. It seems counterintuitive to admit that in writing since much of queer activism, postmodern feminism, and gay and lesbian studies has been about trying to move away from being reduced to one's biology. The idea here being that one's biology has little bearing on their unique personhood, and that our bodies are cultural fictions. What is our actual relationship to our biology? How can we know the specificities and influences of our hormonal makeup? What neurons are firing and why? In most postmodern academic circles, it's accepted and common knowledge that the meanings we attach to bodies are constructed by dominant discourses. Therefore, our bodies are sites of power and oppression that we can challenge. Our bodies are tools. For example, queer bodies can be used to disrupt normative ideologies. "Biology is not destiny!" is often a chorus that rings out at feminist rallies. But in the real world, where most academics

[59] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality.*
[60] Phalloplasty is a medical procedure wherein a penis is constructed.

are also forced to live and participate in, the opposite line of thinking often prevails. One's body is the most important and worthy thing about them. Protect it. Buy it pretty things. Take it to the gym. Put makeup on it. Tie steel toe boots to it. Listen to it when it tells you to fall in love with that imperfect person.

The next step becomes lumping bodies together in order to patrol desires. People are told that they should love something because of their feminine bodies and hate other things because of our masculine ones. As profoundly aware as I am that my biology does not determine my worth or make me the same as another person because we have similar parts, I want to be honest about the fact that I obsess about my body and reduce myself to biology regularly. Voluntarily, even. I wonder if my body has a mind of its own away from the chatter on all sides. I imagine tiny little brains and mouths on the end of testosterone's chemical chain. I want to chant: "Biology is not destiny, but it does manifest strange and often inexplicable things." But the slogan is too long and convoluted. Rallying cries ought to be more certain.

I wasn't born in the wrong body. I was born in a body that looked more like one of two bodies that we associate with a particular gender. For thirty years, I learned to love and honour that body, but I was never excited to wear that skin or shape[61]. What does honour look like? Our bodies *are* our skin and shape. The truth is—I wasn't excited to live. I'm not convinced I did actually learn anything about the first version of my body other than how to survive it. I knew the weight of lugging it from bed to bed. While my relationship with my body is still fraught, I prefer my new obsession with it to my previous utter disregard and disconnection from it.

[61] Week 13.

Whenever I see transgender people on popular screens, whether it's folks like Caitlyn Jenner or Chaz Bono, or Laverne Cox's character on *Orange is the New Black*, they are describing how they felt like they were born in the wrong body. In saying this, they also seem to be saying that their lives would have been perfect if they were been born as the 'other gender'. In effect, if they were born cisgender. According to transgender studies scholars the wrong body narrative has both resistant and damaging effects[62]. First, it sets up an authentic way for being transgender and if your story about coming to transness looks different than this wrong body narrative, you are moved further away from what is considered normal. The next problem with the wrong body narrative is that it does not leave space for transgender as a viable gender identity category. It assumes that all unhappy transgender people would have found gender euphoria if they were born cisgender instead.

The wrong body narrative also strengthens the idea that bodies fit neatly into the binary categories of male and female and later man and woman. However, science[63] and personal stories[64] have told us this binary is simply untrue, and shaky at best. Despite these theoretical arguments about why the wrong body narrative is problematic, it is still a very desirable and reflective way of articulating the transgender experience for many transgender people. Although it is not how I understand my gender identity or my body, I understand that we need a variety of transgender becoming narratives—*whether they are understood as suffering "false consciousness" or as representative of a queer, subversive selfhood beyond categories. I am suggesting, in short, that their claim about themselves should be*

[62] For a brilliant and balanced analysis, read Talia Mae Bettcher's "Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Oppression and Resistance."
[63] See Ainsworth, 2015 and Fausto-Sterling, 2008.
[64] See Emezi, 2019; Gibson, 2018; and Smith, 2017.

taken seriously, in their own terms[65]. I think many people feel like they were born in the wrong bodies. For me, I recognize that it was a struggle to live in the body I was given, until I manipulated it, but I also feel inherently attached to this struggle for gender becoming. It is a part of my DNA. To imagine this struggle erased, might make me feel less lonely but it would also make me feel unfamiliar to myself. *If I have the wrong body, whose body do I have and where is my body?*[66]

As a gender theorist who understood these limitations of the wrong body narrative, I think I tried to force my becoming story to represent radical proof beyond the wrong body narrative. In doing so, I blocked out an important childhood memory. While other girls were waiting for their periods, I felt quite sure my inside penis would soon unfurl—it was in there, I believed, hungry for admiration and excited to change the way my body would move and be defined. When my inside penis did not appear at age fourteen, I became depressed, but I made my way back to this idea of my body in my early twenties. At this phase of life, I didn't call it my inside penis, I called it my psychic dick. I knew it was real because I wasn't the only one who felt it. My ex, Sarah, would lay on top of me while my body appeared to be atomizing on another plain of time and space. I would summon my psychic dick from this ethereal cave into the physical world and then into her.

"This is the craziest thing I've ever experienced," she once said.

Crazy is an apt word. 'Wrong,' as an adverb, came about through the idea of 'wrong-headedness' or waking up on the wrong side of the bed. Basically, being moody, or a little unstable. I think of my fury when I am asked to shrink under transgender shame because of my body. *Rage gives me back my body as its own fluid medium… Here at last is my strength. I am not the water—I am the wave, and rage is the force that*

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[65] David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*.
[66] Jason Cromwell, *Transmen & FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders & Sexualities.*

moves me[67]. My body *does* feel like a wrong body in these contexts—when I second guess that I should utter anything other than what I am. But looking back on that memory with Sarah, it doesn't seem irrational to me now that two people wanting something so badly could shape the air with passion. What I've learned from transgender life is that craving is a fierce creator.

But my psychic dick existed well before I called myself trans. Before I knew the name for what I am. Now, I could reframe that thing between us as evidence of wrong body-ness, or I can also use it to show **there are not only two patterns to build gender from. And the trouble may be the pattern. The repetition. The hard-dashed lines marked out by history, patriarchy, and other systematic forms of oppression**[68]**.** Maybe my psychic dick was just one of many permutations. Gender alchemy. Sexual witchcraft. Spiritual Humping. The manifestation of my psychic dick, although inexplicable, changed the shape of my body and changed my connection to Sarah. Nothing about it felt wrong. And it was never only about a body. But it felt like it belonged to me, and it felt like my penis. Who can say it wasn't given what it did? *In this act of magical transformation, I recognize myself again. I am groundless and boundless movement. I am a furious flow*[69].

Hormones and Surgery

The elasticity of sex—sex, the being, not the doing—begins on our tongues. *Saliva has testosterone and estrogen. When you kiss, you're having a chemical*

[67] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage."
[68] Week 18.
[69] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage."

experience[70]. We slick our words with its sweet mixture. Our desires slip along—part freedom of fantasy and part biochemical destiny. The scission of sex, again the being not the doing, starts at the skin, when bodies bloom into context and categories, when gender takes over the business of difference. I often daydream about what strangers would look like as the 'opposite' gender. It's actually an easy game. The hints are scrawled over faces, waiting for you to illuminate their formations. **Hormone Replacement Therapy**[71] **makes me believe more and more that sex is just a number along a spectrum. It makes me realize that we go about categorizing gender based on this teetering line. Genitals only come into the equation in isolated and intimate ways. Births. Sex. Illness. Deaths. Violence. Art…I think about the social barriers forced between bodies and our understandings of them. The silences. The sciences.**[72]

Testosterone did not change everything about me, but it floated through all of me, leaving its imprint. It altered the way I smell, roughened my skin, widened my jaw, and slowed the pace of my thoughts. I felt protected by the promises it made. The work of testosterone is subtle at first *[t]hen, an extraordinary lucidity settles in, gradually, accompanied by an explosion of the desire to fuck, walk, go out everywhere in the city*[73]. It changed my weight and the space I occupied. With testosterone coursing through me, I grew wider. My wants also stretched. If I say that testosterone made me manly, but it did not make me a man, you might misunderstand what I mean. For me, being manly is the goal. I want to be *of* man while still being somehow beyond it.

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[70] Joe Brugger, "Anthropologist Helen Fisher Researches the Roots of Desire and What Keeps Couples in Love."
[71] Hormone replacement therapy is a regimen wherein some trans folks decide to begin the process of taking either testosterone or estrogen to produce desired secondary sex characteristics.
[72] Week 43.
[73] Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie.*

Looking the part is the important thing for me, and *testosterone alone often does the trick of becoming a visible man*[74]. And it is a 'trick.' I mean to say that testosterone is a tool for meeting the single default lens for being a visible man, or being *of* man, which means being considered cisgender until proven guilty. Trans men: we are everywhere. Tricking you. Nodding in the barber chair. Facing the wall of the change room at the gym. Fiddling with our wedding ring across the desk from you at couples counselling. Some call our existence deceit, but I think of this form of trickery as magic. Testosterone makes me an illusionist. With sleight of hand, a needle plunged into my thigh every week, my sex becomes unquestionable to those who gaze upon my clothed body. At times, this unquestionability brings relief. Pain even disappears. **Since starting my injections, I've felt almost no anxiety or depression (beyond the experiences of being human in a complicated world[75].**

Do not get me wrong, there is *no frictionless way to lay claim to being a man*[76] in this world. The category of man is riddled with doubt. Both transgender and cisgender men know this, but cisgender men will not have their male sex questioned when they fail to obtain or retain it. Cisgender men may have their masculinity questioned, but they will still be men. Transgender men contend with losing both their masculinity and status as males because *upon discovering or suspecting that a person is transsexual, we often actively (and rather compulsively) search for evidence of their assigned sex in their personality, expressions, and physical bodies*[77]. In this Western culture, one site in particular will certainly always sand away signs of masculinity: crying.

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[74] Tobias Raun, "Capitalizing Intimacy: New Subcultural Forms of Micro-Celebrity Strategies And Affective Labour on YouTube."
[75] Week 47.
[76] Tobias Raun, in conversation with me.
[77] Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl*.

Men are taught to make fun of other men who cry. Women are taught to feel unsettled by crying men. After testosterone, I stopped crying the way I once did. I cannot tell if it is the hormonal effects or the pressures of normative masculinity, or a combination of the two, that serve as my emotional armor now. In the past year, my life cruelties have included: a dead father, an almost dead mother, and the recent demise of a long-term romantic relationship. I do still cry, but it is far more controlled and short-lived. Tears recently spilled down my face as I watched my step-son bawl over Skype when we told him we were separating. I cried a little harder as I watched my mother clutch the shoulders of her dead husband before she collapsed on his chest, alone in the world for the first time since she was fifteen. I even managed to sob for a few short minutes after finding out that this same mother, only six months later, laid on a hospital gurney awaiting emergency aortic surgery where her chance of survival was less than 20%. But it takes such catastrophic events now to muster visible signs of sadness in me.

In terms of everyday injustices, such as when I read about people with stage four cancers, pipelines ripping through Indigenous territory, or think of children detained at the US border, I no longer cry. I carry the feeling of sadness in my chest, but its shape is a lump of pinpricks now instead of multiple stab wounds. When I feel this sadness, I cannot manifest it through my eyes as I once did. I wait. Hold them open. Feel the air burn my pupils as I refrain from blinking. Trying. Nothing. I know this is not true for all trans men, or cis men. I know a man or two who can cry. And I want that, but I must also want its absence more. On some deep level, I must desire to be seen, and see myself, as a man who does not cry because otherwise I would, right? It can't be a chemical reaction? During particularly sad experiences and events now, I move through the world with tiny weights balancing on each rib. Maybe the

heaviness in my body is normative masculinity reminding me that tears have no place in my life now. Or maybe it's simply the physiological volume of trapped tears. I do not cry, but I drag my feet.

Without testosterone, I would melt back out. My skin would soften and shift. My mind may return to its frantic state. Testosterone is a *transformative technology, perhaps because it produces visible cues taken by most to represent bodily sexual difference*[78]. How much do I love these cues and thus testosterone? So much so that I will not stop it. Not to birth children. Not to keep my hair. Not to assist my struggling liver. How's this for radical honesty? If I have to live without testosterone, I don't want to live. People often say that transition is a choice, and it very much was for me: the choice to live.

The longer I'm on testosterone, the more I want it. Even in this paragraph, I can't seem to talk or write about testosterone without picturing highlighted medical diagnoses burning through my best intentions, making it so that *I must choose between two psychoses: in one (gender identity disorder), testosterone appears as medicine, and in the other (addiction), testosterone becomes the substance on which I am dependent, a dependence that must be treated by other means*[79]. There is no doubt that I am hooked on its power. It grows my bones. Changes the angles of my face. Harvests body hair. Toughens skin. I am hooked on the transformative potential of testosterone, how it continues to work on, or with, or maybe against me—an elixir that unfixes 'nature' in order to fix me again. And again. Making me more right each week. Right where I want to be—*[b]eing half in and half out of identities, subject*

[78] Tobias Raun, *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube*.
[79] Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie.*

positions, and discourses, and being fluid in a world relentlessly searching for stability and certainty[80].

$C_{19}H_{28}O_2$ is the formula that makes me cyborg—part human and technology. And let's not forget that *[m]onsters, like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. They served to announce impending revelation, saying, in effect, "Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening*[81]. What is the profound thing? Is it my awareness of betweenness? An indication that the dividing line of sex is potent but penetrable? Perhaps it's not just the testosterone at work. **Maybe it's age, body chemistry, psychological shifting, widened intellect, redirection, or a crisscrossing of all these potions, but** whatever it is, **I'm being rewritten**[82]**.** Testosterone makes it so that *[a] face I never entirely lived inside stares back at me, a paradox…a stranger I welcomed in to stay but whose face I can never quite learn*[83]. I did not feel connected to my face before testosterone, but I'm still a stranger now. I stock up on fondness in exchange for familiarity. I like this new face. I didn't like that old one.

Testosterone is a surprise bag—you know you'll morph under its influence, but you don't know how. You'll lose some things. You'll gain others. Maybe the only familiar part about this becoming is this loss. *Then practice losing farther, losing faster: places, and names, and where it was you meant to travel. None of these will bring disaster*[84]. I wonder if bodies are even constant enough to formally revise? After all, testosterone existed within me in trace amounts before I added up its

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[80] Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman-Jones, "Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography."
[81] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage."
[82] Week 45.
[83] Cael M. Keegan, "Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image."
[84] Elizabeth Bishop, "The Art of Losing."

fragments, built it into paragraphs with bold font and exclamation points, until I made its thick sticky ellipsis my new bone coat. I try and fail to separate the biological effects from the social effects throughout my transition:

Review the side effects of testosterone.

Review the side effects of social acceptance.

Remember the fact that I'm privileged.

There are times when I overestimate the power of testosterone and surgery. **As I was wheeled into the operating room, I noticed the sparkling knives on a tray. They reminded me that I was flesh and other organs. In addition to being a complex human with too many ideas, I was also just math and science. That felt reassuring… how much happier I'll be when I can look into the mirror and see a flat chest…my lungs full of oxygen, unrestricted from binders[85]…standing tall[86].** Top surgery is the name of the operation where surgeons perform a double mastectomy to remove tissue from the chest. I had the procedure a year and a half into my transition. My breasts were DD size before I started using testosterone, and, even then, only shrunk to a C cup. I hated seeing them on my body because I had attached only feminine meaning to these lumps. They had been stuffed in corsets to earn cash as a bartender. They had been fondled during a sexual assault. They had been adored during hot, consensual lesbian sexual encounters. They had been painted by a professional artist, immortalized forever.

I imagined that by removing my breasts, I was killing some intrinsically feminine understanding of myself, but what I learned is that *[w]e create embodiment by not jumping out of our bodies, but by taking up a fold in our bodies, by folding (or cutting) ourselves, and creating a transformative scar of ourselves. There is no*

[85] Binders are compression garments used to hide breast tissue and give the appearance of a flat chest.
[86] Week 66.

absolute division, but continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my different historical bodies[87]. Even with a male looking body, I seem to notice—more often than not—how I don't fit in. I was perhaps too hopeful about the affective effects when I said that **[t]op surgery means I will be seen the way I see myself. It means that I won't be constantly seen. Noticed. Studied. There will be less social alerts and unwanted attention. It means a lightness for me**[88]**.** I am still seen. Even though I removed almost five pounds of fleshy reminder that I was once 'woman', the ghosts of my breasts followed me. Right after the surgery, during recovery, I kept sensing them. When I walked, I felt them leading my steps. When I attempted sleep, I felt their weight sink in. These initial phantom limb sensations passed after six weeks. After seeing and reading accounts on Instagram of topless trans men, I imagined that my first topless experience after top surgery would feel liberating. I pictured how I would also proudly strut down the streets of pride with my designer nipples beaming. I longed to wear nothing but swim trunks and a smile under a summer sky. In 2017, a year after the surgery, that day finally arrived.

I was visiting my brother at his cottage. There was a public pool at the campground and it was a hot day. To my absolute shock, I remember my face flushing with embarrassment and fear when I peeled off my black t-shirt and quickly scrambled into the water. I felt like a trans failure. I did not feel the pride that other trans men reported while going bare chested. I felt entirely awkward and paranoid. I thought about how my brother had known me for my entire life. I imagined that even though my breasts were no longer there, he saw still them because he still saw my history as female. I imagined that he was panged with embarrassment for how I was now deviating gender norms by firstly being trans and secondly going topless in

[87] Eva Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transpeciated Selves."
[88] Week 49.

public, scars ablaze. If he was feeling any discomfort, he did not show it. While I would eventually become more and more comfortable with my top off, over time, this experience taught me that bodies are only one puzzle piece in embodiment, and that *[t]rans-sexuals survive not because we become whole, but because we embody the reach and possibility of our layered experience—we have no choice*[89].

As my shoulders sprawl wider, I study the way my head seems to shrink in relation. The bones in my forehead and jaw pronounce themselves, but a head doesn't understand gender norms. A skull doesn't expand in response to societal expectations[90]**.** I can't change the size of my head, but I can adjust its patterns. Chin up high—higher than feels comfortable. Even a little higher than that. *Practice makes a world. In acting, we convert initial situations into new situations. Practice constitutes and reconstitutes structures…The practices that construct masculinity are onto-formative in this sense. As body-reflexive practices they constitute a world which has a bodily dimension, but is not biologically determined*[91]. Air feels sharper in my lungs from this angle. Still, I often forget to speak my words from my stomach. Salutations squeak out of my throat. I tell myself to stand up straighter every five minutes. *I am not a different self, but my social locations are shifting. I prefer to consider, not who, but how am I, now? Under what circumstance am I, now*[92]*?*

Testosterone and top surgery have not altered the fact that normative masculinity is a new language for me. I did not grow up remembering to stare into other men's eyes or practicing a wide gait. I know I am not alone in this struggle. I think many men, especially some gay men, have trouble claiming the label of masculine; they

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[89] Eva Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transpeciated Selves."
[90] Week 47.
[91] R.W. Connell, *Masculinities.*
[92] S. Nordmarken, "Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness."

may feel too insignificant to fulfill a spectre so revered, ancient, and expected yet unknowable. The difference between me and these men is that *the subjugations of femaleness still shape my life. In social interactions, I still behave, perform, and position myself in the ways I have habitually done so, as someone who has been socialized female. I feel the feelings I have habitually felt as a result of being positioned as female and treated as inferior*[93]. I don't know when, or if, or if I want, these feelings to end.

When we go back to the clinic to check on the incisions, my new chest is revealed for the first time. I don't cry. I do say *wow* a lot. I try to look past the tape and sponges to imagine what's there. Although I'm unable to see the full picture, I feel relieved. I'm content with whatever new shape lives beneath the sponges and sutures. I trust the calm that awaits me there[94]. When I look back at the post-operative photos now, they seem grizzly. There are bluish purple bruises peppered along my armpits and scabs where nipples should be. While I am more relaxed with this new chest today, I'm not entirely secure in it. I notice the scars and how one of my designer nipples is slightly larger than the other. It seems that the media, the doctors, and cisgender people want trans folks to say that surgery removes all bodily discomfort. Usually, we say this to secure ongoing medical access, but the truth is that I am not entirely at peace in this body in the world. However, more often than not, I choose to blame the world and not this body.

Surgery has made me something better than I was, and that's enough for me. Yet, I know I remain uncomfortable because *[t]o be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. The*

[93] S. Nordmarken, "Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness."
[94] Week 67.

disappearance of the surface is instructive: in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. The sinking feeling involves a seamless space, or a space where you can't see the 'stitches' between bodies[95]. I spend active moments of every day trying to forget that I have a uterus and that I am overdue for a pap test. I've been on the waitlist for a hysterectomy for nine months. For as long as it takes to grow a fetus in a uterus, I've been begging the government to remove mine. This is how the medical gatekeepers hope to kill us: make us uncomfortable. Make us wait and wait and wait and wait until our bodies eventually betray us because all bodies are designed to betray: accidents, age, illnesses, and death.

Trans is Beautiful?



Figure 2a. AJ flexing on week 1 of taking testosterone and week 90.

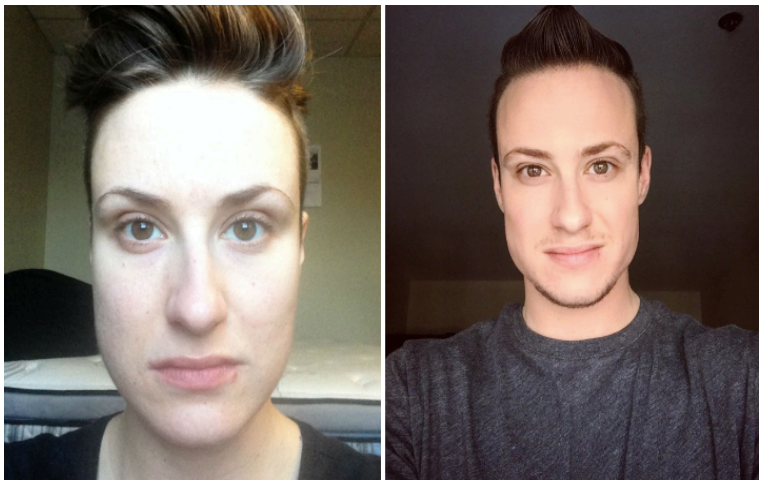


Figure 2b. A closeup of AJ's face on week 1 and week 90 of taking testosterone.

[95] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.*

Trans is beautiful. **These words are packaged as a statement, a fact, a hashtag, and a hope. Camera lenses hold our bodies and faces. Up close and personal. A person, still. Our stories are combed for signs of who we were. When I started this project, I pointed the camera at myself. I knew that this was a thing some trans people did, but I wasn't sure why.** ***Was it a project of memory? Evidence of the magic of hormones[96]?*** I could not know the precise ways that testosterone would write 'man' with my face and body. I could not predict what patches of facial hair would refuse to grow. I could not foresee how my jaw would harden itself into a stern boomerang. The first time I felt my triceps jump when I reached for a beer, I wondered if this new physical fact made me a copy of a copy of a thing called 'man'? *Mimetic representation requires that the writer/speaker employs pronouns, invents characters, records conversations, examines the words and images of others, so that the spectator can secure a coherent belief in self-authority, assurance, presence. Memory. Sight. Love. All require a witness, imagined or real[97].*

Maybe these weekly photos were an accounting strategy, a way for audiences to witness the instability of the gender binary. Onlookers could watch as the gender binary fiction dissolved across my face. Life imitating art. With all my 'original' ingredients, I used testosterone to elongate my body and face into an iteration of myself I no longer felt threatened by. During this process, I noticed an affinity between my being a transgender man and my compulsion to work out. Gender transition and bodily transformation, for me, worked together to reveal *that [t]he built body is not the body one is born with; it is the body made possible by the application of thought and planning, just like the medically modified trans body*

[96] Week 81.
[97] Peggy Phelan, "Broken Symmetries: Memory, Sight, Love."

itself[98]. Capturing this reality through photos gave me a sense of social capital when they were received positively and I was rewarded with the *social power ascribed to the ability to control the size and shape of the body*[99].

In the dramatic before-and-after photos used in news stories, cisgender audiences see transness as a journey toward the cisgender ideal. The photos represent gender as an accomplishment that culminates in a physical makeover that, at some point, is described as finished. This is similar to dramatic before-and-after photos used to highlight weight loss or adherence to normative beauty ideals. Viewers of such images see the potential of skin without knowing how the hours between photographs were lived, often steeped with anxiety and feelings of fear and inferiority. **I think another unintended purpose of taking these photos is for proof. One of the meanings of *proof* is to withstand the damage of a thing. When I took the first set of photos, I kept hoping that I would become more masculine overnight. I wished for this because every time a car honked, I jumped. When people gave me second and third looks, I shrunk smaller with each jerk of their neck. Still, I withstood the damage of these things; I withstood the damaging idea that I deserved less because I did not fit a binary idea of gender. I left the house and went to work and school. I focused on being a great partner and friend despite the harshness the world returned in daily doses. I swallowed small mouthfuls of damage from all directions and tried not to get sick[100].**

The damage these popularized before-and-after photo sets can provoke is that they do not always make visible or normalize the time elapsed between images. They do not always speak directly of the damage of things. These images can eclipse

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[98] Tobias Raun and Cael M. Keegan, "Nothing to Hide: Selfies, Sex, and the Visibility Dilemma in Trans Male Online Cultures."
[99] Ibid.
[100] Week 81.

staggering statistics. They can push aside the faces of black trans women who are murdered each day. Dramatic before-and-after photos of transgender life can distract from the most precarious precipice where transgender life is actually lived—in a transphobic world. Through these before-and-after images, tourists are not invited to the steep cliff that many transgender folks, who are not medically transitioning, climb day in and day out, and slip down and scrape their knees on. These photo sets do not speak of the bodies left behind on the trail or the reality that for many people the beginning of transition happened long before using hormones or having a name for yourself.

Before sharing my own fitness and comparison photos on Instagram, I stalked and liked a lot of this type of content from trans men online. Most were fit and passing. Many were white. Their comparison photos showed the transformative power of testosterone and how they rebuilt their bodies through hormones and exercise. I found their images powerful even though my history as a feminine, sexually objectified woman, reminded me that *under modern regimes of power, it is a sign of subordination if you belong to a group whose primary way of creating value in culture is through the body*[101].

Physical comparison is central to the project of medical transition. Changes are the precise reason one uses hormones. Transformation is the desired outcome of surgery. However, the physical changes are hard to track. They happen [**s]lowly. Cell by cell. I wonder if that's why there is such a focus on bodies in present transgender discourse. I wonder if that's why selfies and body pics fill trans blogs from people who are medically transitioning (my own included). Maybe we are making room for modern day time travel. Maybe we're showing a sped-**

[101] Jamie Hakim, "'The Spornosexual': The Affective Contradictions of Male Body-Work in Neoliberal Digital Culture."

up account of loss and growth. Socially and through the skin[102]. Making these comparison images connected me more with myself.

In the beginning, I was so frustrated with how I looked in the photographs, but as the months turned into years, the images allowed me to find peace with the uncertainty that had surrounded the shape of my face and body. I did not know how I would look from year to year, but by documenting these images, I was able to recognize progress and find pleasure in it. More importantly, to me, I was also able to conceptualize of myself as, at least precariously, sexually desirable.

I knew that I could never, nor would I want to, fulfill hegemonic masculinity because of how I had been socially educated for the first twenty-nine years of my life as a woman. I would never easily adopt a sense of self-importance that was not earned. I would never consider myself more powerful than my female counterparts simply because of laying claim to the label 'man.' I would always question gender roles. Perhaps because of this self-awareness, achieving a sense of erotic capital throughout comparison photos allowed me to feel that I still retained a less cognitively and emotionally painful relationship to ideal masculinity.

A critical view of my decision to post these images would perhaps define me as a narcissist, or a desperate approval-seeking individual who has chosen to wedge themselves into the gender binary rather than help forge a world beyond it. In this limited and dangerous view *trans men who seek self-representation as ideally, desirable can only ever reiterate a toxic logic of dominant masculinity*[103]. This view does not align with the sense of self-approval and agency I feel when reclaiming my image and self-representing online.

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[102] Week 21.

[103] Tobias Raun and Cael M. Keegan, "Nothing to Hide: Selfies, Sex, and the Visibility Dilemma in Trans Male Online Cultures."

Looking at my comparison photos now remind me how far I've come, but they also remind me of the painful way that gender is as tied to memory as it is to the visual realm. My beard and biceps do not prevent some family members from misgendering or deadnaming me almost five years after coming out as transgender. **When I think about my relationship to change, I realize that it's incredibly personal. You may have friends and/or family members who cannot (or don't want to) see your changes. They prefer you to be who you always were. They don't realize that change, in addition to being largely personal, is always partial. Transition is not a complete re-write of the person they knew. Nevertheless, their eyes scan for clues of who you were to them. Their ears hear common echoes[104].**

I slough off deadscales
Flick skinflakes to the ground
Shedding toughness
peeling layers down
to vulnerable stuff
And I'm blinking off old eyelids
for a new way of seeing
By the rock I rub against
I'm going to be tender again[105]

Time and space can never hold two things separately together. They wind up borrowing from each other, connecting, touching, writing, and rewriting. Can

[104] Week 33.
[105] Harryette Mullen, "Shedding Skin."

things really be together and separate? If shedding and regeneration overlap where do *man* and *woman* begin or end in these comparison photos**? What is the** gender **substance that makes up these skins?**[106]

Not-ness

I do not recall where I first read about Billy Lee Tipton's story, but it hasn't left my memory since. Billy was an American jazz musician and transgender man who was active in the music scene in the 1930s-1960s. He kept his trans status to himself. At age 74, he was outed to his son by the paramedics. I don't know the precise details of Billy's final moments of life, but I picture him dying on the kitchen floor, a cigarette smoke trail lingering not far away. I imagine the paramedics opening his shirt to perform whatever their textbooks had taught them about dealing with hemorrhaging peptic ulcers. In the instant of disrobing Billy, I imagine that the paramedics had a new first thought: *this is not a man*. Their textbooks did not teach them about transgender people. Perhaps, they were still professionals, intent on saving the body before them, but I have no doubt their new first thought was not about the response for repairing hemorrhaging peptic ulcers. Their new first thought was likely: *this is not a male body*.

That Billy died in not-ness, being misrecognized by strangers and his son, is what unsettles me. Later, Tipton's ex and other children would take interviews with tabloids to profit from Billy's different gender story. Although disappointing, I am not at all surprised that they turned Billy's gender identity into a spectacle. *The point here is not to reduce transgender identity to violence but rather to show how, through all these stories, "transgender" is institutionally, narratively, and*

[106] Week 50.

biographically linked to the experience of violence with complicated, often painful, results[107].

I think of Billy Tipton every time I'm at the hospital. In order to receive top surgery, I had to prove my heart was capable of withstanding the procedure by taking a simple EKG test. The medical technician flirted a bit, mentioning how much she liked my tattoos. I knew that she must have skipped over the 'F', for female, marked on my medical chart under sex. She either didn't notice the stamp or assumed it was a mistake.

"Okay, just take your shirt off and I'll attach the electrodes," she smiled.

I took a deep breath.

Gender attribution is compulsory; it codes and deploys our bodies in ways that materially affect us, yet we choose neither our marks nor the meanings they carry[108]. It was because of her kindness that I realized she was misgendering me. She saw me as a cisgender man and I had to articulate my way out of that expectation because my body would not comply with those standards in a matter of moments. If her understanding of 'man' had been wider, I might not have had to explain that I was not this box, but also not this box either. **Now is the time to recognize that identities exist like constellations. Alignment is predetermined, and ought to be re-routed and considered in countless formations. In this fertile ground of imagination at work, we can understand space and time as negotiations. Here, life will become wider. Fuller.**[109]

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[107] David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*.
[108] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage."
[109] Week 15.

"Look. When I take off my shirt you're going to see a binder. I'm going to have to take that off too."

Her glazed-over look told me she had no idea what I was talking about. When I squirmed out of the binder and my breasts became visible, her smile faded. She fumbled with the cords and avoided eye contact. She attached the electrodes and hurried the test.

"It's normal," she uttered finally, in a forced tone, speaking about my test results. I knew, instinctually, that nothing about this encounter, for her, was considered normal.

It is situations like these, and other less traumatic ones, where I am reminded that *like it or not, in our present culture our activities are coded as male or female and will function as such under the prevailing system of gender-power relations…One cannot be gender-neutral in this culture*[110]. I know this. I feel this. Everywhere I move, the binary moves with me. And yet, here I am— a nonbinary tree falling in the woods begging to feel anything but imaginary, pleading not to be gaslit for eternity.

Many trans men are happy occupying the category of man—it is more than enough and everything they ever wanted. At times, I am also quite content with this. When I am just a guy buying a latte or trying on jeans—man is enough. At other times, when I am arguing about transgender erasure or describing my queer, feminist politics, man is not enough. Regular folks and academics alike try to tell me that I can't have it both ways. **And still, some queer theorists wander wildly alone, led by a sense of something *else* and the glow of the moon. They communicate with another galaxy of ideas**[111] because *such subversive play happens much more easily*

[110] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*.
[111] Week 15.

in the realm of 'texts' than in the world of human interaction…where such moves challenge, disrupt, threaten—where repression is real[112].

Television has always been an escape from the real world for me. When I was about six years old, I remember watching *Full House* religiously. Looking back now, I think I had a mega-crush on Aunt Becky (Lori Loughlin), but my obsession with the show was a gravitational pull I felt toward Uncle Jesse (John Stamos). Sure, he got the dream woman, but it was more than his heartthrob status that I yearned to emulate. Yes, he was a badass who drove a motorcycle, wore a leather jacket, and played in a band. But Uncle Jesse was also incredibly soft. His fashion was unmatched—he cared about how his hair looked, he unbuttoned his top shirt buttons, and he wore tight jeans. Uncle Jesse was also an exceptional cook. He was very sweet—he spent most of his time smiling, he loved his nieces, and he was a good friend to the men in his life.

I know Uncle Jesse wasn't perfect. He had some limited ideas about gender roles, but when Rebecca pointed out how simplistic and problematic these were, he actually heard her. I was young when I first studied Uncle Jesse's masculinity every night before dinner. At that age, I didn't know why I was drawn to him, but I liked that he confused my understanding of what a man was while also somehow fulfilling my vision of it. Since that time, I've become more aware of how unique his unstable masculinity actually was. The older I become the more I see how we cultivate a social hunger for stark dividing lines, resolution and conformity in each other. It's all over social media. My Facebook feed is filled with 30-somethings throwing gender reveal parties and training for marathons. I know I am not immune to this. I know

[112] bell hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.*

this is not a new turn in ideas, but I think it's been hyper fueled by consumerism, self-care and self-help markets, and detox diets.

I guess my agitation stems from the feeling that resolutions seem to suggest that to do something worthy, you must do it *completely* or *fully*. I think our culture is obsessed with the notion of "finished products." And that's not how life works. At least mine, anyway. Most of everything is a rough draft. Life is messy. Life is full of contradictions[113]. I wonder how my history will count under this system of doing things. How will I be able to live in this body while also gripping onto my history? Is such a harmony possible? Would my messy masculinity be taken as seriously as Uncle Jesse's if I hadn't lived 29 years in a female body?

There are ways that trans people are made to feel this not-ness even within marginalized communities. As queer activists and academics we encourage each other to find meaning in the measure of radicalness: be subversive not normative. We hold transgression high above our heads—the queer golden unicorn trophy—without considering the cost of disruption. How it kills many in our community. What if there are times when I love being normative? What if there are times when I find pockets of trans or queer folks surviving normatively, and this reality calms and refreshes me, and leaves me feeling hopeful? I know that *[t]here will probably continue to be conflict between transsexuals who see the sex-reassignment process as confirming their true gender, and transgendered people who believe that their only hope for liberation lies in dismantling biological sex itself*[114]*,* but I wonder if liberation could be found in other places and spaces without conflict? Is liberation transforming the world so that more people accept that biological sex exists on a

[113] Week 40.
[114] Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*.

sliding scale, or are willing to make it less central to our conversations about gender? Probably. But how do we get there?

My gender feels like more than its performance; my gender also suffuses the moment of contemplation before the negotiation with performative citation. My gender is the waiting. My gender waits for me to think and feel it. This space my gender occupies is not visible, palpable, or articulatable. It is imaginative. Therefore, it's prone to being undone. Transgender identities are not all the same, but there are some common practices. One of these might be how we are made to live and die with the shadow of not-ness stalking us. Right before or after I die, a stranger will see my naked body. Just like with Billy Tipton, this stranger will be aghast by my incongruence. *This weapon, my unruly body, demands to be disciplined, to be stared at. My gender that refuses assimilation is my home, a border, a wound that runs down the length of my body. My gendered body is a wound that runs down the length of society, embodying the trauma that body normativity creates*[115]. Or, maybe not. In the alternate ending of my end of life story, maybe the tides of youth will have washed away these old ideas of bodies and genders for good:

You may forget but let me tell you
this: someone in
some future time
will think of us [116].

III. On Feeling

It's 2019 and I arrive in Denmark for an 8-week foreign study opportunity. I've been on testosterone for over four years. I almost exclusively pass as a cisgender

[115] S. Nordmarken, "Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness."
[116] Josephine Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*.

man and I routinely navigate male spaces with relative ease. I decide to go to the gym one morning before an important meeting with my mentor. A couple of guys nod at me as I enter the change room, covered in sweat, after my workout. I move for my locker and pull out the typical shower items. When nobody is looking, I quickly peel off my boxers and tuck the large blue towel around my waist. I'm thankful that my top surgery scars do not burn as brightly as they once did; the incision lines are masked by tufts of chest hair. I do not like growing out 70s style chest hair, but, more than this, I hate the pink scars that announce my difference. In my mind, my scars will always out me.

As I come around the corner to the shower room, I am surprised by what I find. In Canada, gym showers are often separated by curtains or walls. In this Danish shower room, I see that all the stalls are open. Two rows of about five shower heads each face each other. Each shower space is separated by a very small slab of frosted glass, positioned at waist level, presumably to hide your genitals from those taking a shower on either side of you. But there are no curtains, so your naked body is visible to those people taking a shower on the wall behind you. All I can think about is how my ass is too big, my thighs are too thick, and how my silhouette slopes like an hourglass—too feminine for this space even though I'm alone in the room.

I move to the last stall at the back. I rush. I know I have less than five minutes to get in and out of the shower undetected. Unlike most men who hang their dry towels on the rack on the way into the room, I carry mine to the stall so that I can wrap it around my waist as soon as I turn off the water. This prevents me from having to walk naked down the aisle. I feel like I could never walk by another man naked without also being terrified and emptied of worth. *We have not always been forced to pass, to go underground, in order to work and live. We have a right to live*

openly and proudly. When we are denied those rights, we are the ones whose who suffer that oppression. But when our lives are suppressed, everyone is denied an understanding of the rich diversity of sex and gender expression and experience that exist in human society[117].

As I suds my armpits, I hear another guy enter the room. He chooses a stall on the opposite wall, meaning that he will have a direct view of my body when he turns around to wet his back. I press my quads together, hoping to hide hints of my genitals from behind. If he's looking at me, he will soon realize I do not have a scrotum. He will notice there is nothing dangling between my legs. Out of my periphery, I can see that he is facing me. Watching. I wonder if I will always feel paranoid that I am being watched. How many surgeries will it take for me not to hunch and tighten, shrinking my body, in a world made without transgender people in mind?

Every day as I move around this world, I feel like I am being disappeared. I spend so much headspace thinking about my incongruence, thinking of how I do not fit and cannot ever say clearly what it feels like to live in this body or in a world where words seem too flat to describe the way gender moves within you and flings you around spaces. When I tell cisgender people that I want surgery, they assume it is to cure myself, to make myself normal like them. I know I will never feel normal, so it cannot be that. But I also know that some part of me wishes it were possible. In this instance, I wonder if this man, in particular, will confront me. Although I haven't washed my back or butt, I won't now because I will not face him with a visible vagina. I bet certain cisgender people do not consider the privilege of simple tasks like washing your back and butt without a public trial. I turn the faucet off and grab

[117] Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*.

my towel. I glance at his size and decide I could withstand a physical altercation. I do this a lot. Measure myself against men and consider if I would survive a physical attack. I wonder if he will tell the front desk employee or other people and pose hypothetical survival scenarios. As I hurry from the shower room, my face burns hot. I feel dizzy. When I later describe the situation to a group text of trans guy friends they all call me a hero. I do not feel like a hero. It was the most scared I've been in my whole life. The most vulnerable I've ever felt in public. The weakest.

Passing

I often think about passing while travelling. Masculinity, bodies, and spaces manifest differently at, and beyond, borders. There is a cultural specificity in relation to passing. For example, things that I worry about in Canada, such as the dreaded urinals in every men's washroom, do not follow me to Europe where their toilets are generally single stall—a transgender paradise. Passing is never an individual experience, it's a web of relations, clinging to architectural and social structures in addition to individual bodies. The phenomenon of 'passing', or being read as a cisgender man or woman, is a critical, contentious and sticky conversation in transgender theory. On the one hand, passing helps protect transgender people and may offer a sense of validation, and on the other hand, passing means that transgender identities are erased and that those who cannot or do not wish to pass are further marginalized. There are, perhaps, other perspectives about passing beyond this dichotomizing view. *In contrast to prevailing academic and sociopolitical discourses,* those who pass *are not* necessarily *ashamed of or in denial about their*

trans histories […] Nor do they *unilaterally agree upon a pathological or biologically essential model of transsexuality and gender*[118].

A switch has been flipped…I now pass as a man more than a woman (I'd say it's 70/30). The timbre of my deep voice lulls them comfortably into this gender narrative. These cues make other facts harder to see (such as my larger than average bound chest, my skinny wrists, and small feet and hands)[119]**.** There are three consistent ways I do not pass—while naked, on paper, and when my transgender activism and/or writing outs me. The transgender person who passes is supposed to feel bad because *transsexuals must grow by recruiting members from the class of invisible ones, from those who have disappeared into their "plausible histories". The most critical thing a transsexual can do, the thing that constitutes success, is to "pass"*[120]. To these folks—trans people are symbols of gender binary adherence. Maybe that is true. Perhaps we are also suckers to cisnormative machinery. I know I am often thankful for passing. At a bar, where a group of men could jump me. At a job interview. Or when I'm applying for housing. Less challenging times when I like to pass might be in a party scenario where I do not want to explain transgender identity and politics to a room of strangers.

When I first started passing, it felt like I had 'won.' I had accomplished the physical mission of moving around the world as male. I had finally put the hateful glances, derogatory comments, and laughter from passersby behind me. Now, likely because of this privilege, I feel more critical of passing. Sometimes I still feel affection for its graces, other times I am ashamed because of it, because of the way it minimizes my history of struggle, of survival. Passing is not one thing at one time. It

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[118] Elijah, Edelman, "The Power of Stealth: (In)visible Sites of Female-to-Male Transsexual Resistance."
[119] Week 14.
[120] Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto."

changes based on the moment I find myself in. Sometimes it feels secure. Other times it is precarious. Passing is knotted to contradictory feelings for me like shame, joy, guilt, calm. It is an omnipresent factor in my existence, which you think would mean I would get used to it. I am not used to passing, but I have also decided that my relationship to it cannot be contained simply. Try as I might, I cannot clearly articulate how I feel about passing because I recognize it is put on me by others. I do not bend to its every whim. I do not ask for it. Passing is not mine. But when academic theories want to simplify it, passing transgender folks become the reason that non-passing transgender people are victims of violence, not the fact that the collective 'we' is trained **to see the body a certain way. To recognize alignments. To feel peace in the harmony of objects corresponding with skin that we've been told belong together. Bras on women, for example. Or facial hair on men. We identify the shape, texture, and colour of bodies. We count the number of limbs. We're trained to see a body, organize it, and thus make sense (where there need never be any)[121].**

I'm at a writing retreat in the middle of the Danish woods with nine other PhD students. At night, after dinner, we sit around sipping red wine and Carlsberg beer. I join the smokers on the balcony even though I have long reformed this habit. We chat frenetically about social positionality, the new Michael Jackson documentary, frogs that use bridges in Europe, performance art, and finally, non-monogamy. Between puffs, someone asks how old I was when I got my partner pregnant. Moments like this happen where I am aware that people have no idea I am transgender. One might think you would get used to this over the years, but in certain

[121] Week 7.

contexts it still shocks me. In this moment, I am extra surprised since I have talked at length about my research project on transgender life storytelling. To these people, it was more plausible to assume that I was a cisgender man studying transgender issues than to assume that I was, myself, transgender. Are we that rare? I smile, in the dark, at the physical impossibility of impregnating my partner, but I do not announce my transgender status. Instead, I offer another available truth: "I'm a step-parent."

Of all the spaces where I could disclose my trans status, this circle feels viable. But I don't want to. There are times when I enjoy being a transgender killjoy, by disrupting a social mood with the often uncomfortable truth of my gender, but other times, like in this moment, I just want to sip wine under the full moon, among strangers, and laugh about a ludicrous man who believed he could live among grizzly bears in the wild, while also imagining the equally outrageous idea that I could impregnate someone. In this role-playing moment, I am like them. They see me as cisgender. They see me as a fellow parent. I imagine that we could go on having conversations without any questions, fascinations, or explanations. *Passing, like hope, keeps me sane, or at least helps me cope in an environment that does not produce the identity I psychically inhabit*[122]. Also, why should I have to explain? I am not the problem, the problem is 'passing' to begin with. *I have lived as a man because I could not survive openly as a transgendered person… Being forced to pass is a recent historical development. It is passing that is a product of oppression*[123].

Because I go along with things in this moment in the woods —conversations, gazes, assumptions— I feel a lingering sense of guilt or doubt. If my transgender status surfaces later, I will be seen as having been deceptive here. These new friends will say: *why didn't you just tell us?* Assuming that there is some great truth to be

[122] C. Riley Snorton, "A New Hope": The Psychic Life of Passing."
[123] Leslie, Feinberg. *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*.

told and also assuming that I can trust strangers with my gender identity. But what I will want to say to them in this later scenario is: why must I always confess? What is it I am confessing or explaining? What does the knowledge that I am transgender say about me that is somehow more important than what I've already shared with you?

Theorists who are critical of passing discuss how [*p]assing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a "natural" member of that gender. Passing means the denial of mixture. One and the same with passing is effacement of the prior gender role, or the construction of a plausible history*[124]. I think this explanation glosses over the affective experience of a type of provisional passing that a lot of transgender people embody. Just because strangers do not see, or wish to see, or know, or wish to know, my other gendered histories, **I do not forget the type of automatic respect I am afforded when presumed to be a heterosexual man. I do not forget the occasional looks of disdain or disgust that pushes my chin down when I'm seen as trans or as a gay man...I do not forget how sexual objectification and gender-based violence forces itself on feminine bodies[125].** My multi-gendered perspective continues to shape how I see and how I am seen. I am not sure it is possible for me to outrun the paranoia of wondering how I am being read and what effect that might have in the moment, or for my future. But *[w]hile the social plays an important role in framing our understanding of "self," cultural and social legibility cannot predetermine what is human in every sense; there must be space for the "psyche" or the staging of self for our imaginary other in self-determination as well*[126].

[124] Sandy Stone, "The Posttransexual Manifesto."
[125] Week 44.
[126] C. Riley Snorton, "A New Hope": The Psychic Life of Passing."

We name the place where bodies and feeling overlap 'identity.' Calling this space 'identity' is better than leaving it nameless because we sense that even with a name, and thus a chance of knowing it, this place is so very powerful. Identity keeps us up wondering and worrying. It makes us think and think and think. We know it's a construction because when the wondering and the worrying and the thinking stops, we become hyperaware that identity is a process everyone does. A process that involves the collective. We know that nothing about identity is ever entirely ours. *On the one hand, because thinking necessarily takes the form of socially defined conversations with imagined others, and because concepts of selfhood are themselves cultural products, the psyche is by its very nature social, a 'borderline phenomenon.' On the other hand, because the social exists only insofar as it is implemented in particular moments of particular people's lives, it is always also individual*[127].

Right before the 2015 Canadian federal election, I was contacted by VICE Media. Producers had read my blog and wanted me to co-produce and host a documentary that addressed the lack of healthcare access for transgender Canadians. In New Brunswick, the province where I lived, transgender people had to pay out of pocket for gender-confirming surgeries. After the documentary aired, I took media interviews in order to promote the work. **I'm dressed all in black, but I feel bare. This bareness began over six months ago, since starting the blog. Now, it's moved to international screens, print stories, and radio. Wherever my body goes the bareness follows. Wherever my story goes, the body follows[128].** The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation posted an article about the documentary and enabled online comments. Against the advice of my partner and most people, I scrolled

[127] Gary Saul Morson, editor, *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work.*
[128] Week 27.

through these. There were a couple of supportive statements, even more hateful comments citing mental illness and money, and one death threat that was later removed by a moderator. My eyes stopped on this comment. In that moment, perhaps for the first time in my life, I realized that not only did people hate me, but that they might hate me enough to kill me. I double-locked my door and slept with a knife next to my bed. Being transgender is being intimate with fear.

Every time I saw an interview clip or heard a sound bite, I realized that I was becoming—and indeed positioning myself as—the token transgender person for my geographic area. As a white, able-bodied, masculine, middle-class person who studied oppression, I knew my fulfillment of the stereotype was part of the problem. All of my interviews were condensed to sticky quotes about the desperate need for surgery, staggering rates of suicide, and undertones about unloved bodies. *Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as constituted relationally. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced*[129]. After the initial press for the documentary subsided, I stopped taking interviews. I encouraged reporters to speak with other trans activists in my area—specifically trans women and Two Spirit activists.

[129] Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience."

In January 2016, I accepted my first part-time teaching position at the local liberal arts university. Testosterone had been working on my body for over a year, at this point, but I still felt very androgynous looking. Baby fat filled in my face, my eyebrows were thin arches, and I swam beneath oversized men's dress shirts. I hadn't had top surgery yet, and I soon learned how difficult it would be to teach an entire 50-minute lecture in a garment designed to squeeze your breasts flat to your ribcage. *We could remember the Latin root of the word aspiration means "to breathe." I think the struggle for a bearable life is the struggle for queer to have space to breathe…With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe*[130].

At the time, I was teaching creative writing, not social science, so the relevance of my transgender identity did not surface in course content very often. Still, I was certain that some of my students had seen the documentary and many probably knew I was transgender from my activism around town. They were kind and compassionate. They used the correct pronouns and took my writing advice seriously. The fact that I noticed these things says a lot. I knew that because of my outness I did not have control over my narrative. My being transgender could always trump my being a professor and thus being taken seriously.

One afternoon, early in the winter term, I visited the departmental assistant's office to copy a section of Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet." I had known the assistant from my time as a communications employee with the university years prior. I made a joke about how time changes us and asked if she was surprised to see me in this physical iteration. She confided that she might have been surprised—not in a bad way—but that another colleague had already gone around to everyone in the

[130] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness.*

department to explain that the new hire was transgender, used the singular 'they' pronoun, and was a former student. This colleague had also apparently revealed my dead name and showed people a picture of what I looked like prior to transition.

Is outing the opposite of passing? Maybe they are not opposites since both have to do with external perceptions and influence more than anything else. **I have lost control of how people see me. Maybe, I never had it[131].** By making my story visible, passing is not always an option. I wasn't ashamed of being transgender, so I had difficulty articulating why I felt so embarrassed and violated when I heard about what this colleague had done. *Things aren't all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered*[132]. By politicizing my identity, by giving my experience such simple and finite words, this colleague had made my trans status the most central factor about me. She had made it so that people would identify me first by this fact and I knew that I would likely be reduced to whatever ideas they had about transgender people. I was branded with the label of transgender and the pathologized baggage that trailed not far behind. Would my new colleagues assume I was mentally ill? Suicidal? Would they wonder about how I had sex? Would they find my secret history fascinating and bring it to the attention of others?

I don't know why my colleague told people about my being transgender. Perhaps, she thought she was helping make me feel more at home by policing language and perception instead of letting conversations potentially unfold with time. As a queer person herself, maybe she was trying to divert attention or establish affinity and community. Strength in numbers? Whatever the case was, this colleague's action would cast a long and wide shadow, possibly blocking off

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[131] Week 28.
[132] Rainer Marie Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.

additional points of relation and other ways of recognizing and coming to know me for these people. *In conflating identity politics with visibility, cultural activists and some theorists have also assumed that "selves" can be adequately represented within the visual or linguistic field. The "hole in the signifier, "the Real-impossible" which is unsayable, unseeable, and therefore resistant to representation, is ignored in the full fling forward into representation*[133].

And I've seen panic when I say that I'm trans. Sometimes it lasts just a fraction of a second. Other times it flitters about a person's body– eye twitch, mouth scrunch, arms folded tight, and speech stuffed with *uhhs* and *umms*. The word *paranoid* is unpleasant. It sounds like an abscess or infection. It's an institutionalized term, predicated on falsity and irrationality. Being paranoid means that you *wrongly* assume that people are out to get you[134]**.** What's the word for the feeling when you rightly assume people are out, not necessarily to get you, but at the very least to other you in some lasting fashion you cannot control? *We don't deserve the ridicule, the stares, the fist in our bellies. We are entitled to our anger in response to this oppression: our anger is a message to ourselves that we need to get active and change something in order to survive. So we resist the oppression, the violence—we resist the tendency of the culture to see us as a joke*[135].

When I come out **[w]ell-meaning people try to explain that they don't hate trans people, they just *don't get it.* What I hear is: I don't get you because you're doing it wrong. To "get it" implies that gender is perfectly clear, true, and available to be 'gotten'. It reminds me of the first time I learned how long a kilometer was. My elementary teacher made us walk with a measuring stick**

[133] Peggy Phelan, "Broken Symmetries: Memory, Sight, Love."
[134] Week 53.
[135] Kate Bornstein, "Gender Terror, Gender Rage."

that clicked every meter. It took one thousand clicks to learn the shape of something. As a trans person, I sometimes feel like a measuring stick that teaches people about their shapes[136]. This happens a lot less often now that my testosterone hardens my body into the social, binary understanding of gender. Since my shape is generally accepted, now, when I'm outed, people search for other ways to differentiate themselves from me. Often, the idea of a shared gender experience is the tool that gets used—for example, 'you wouldn't understand since you grew up like a girl' or ironically the opposite 'you wouldn't understand since the world sees you like a man now.'

I watch when they calculate their gender in accordance with mine. Sometimes they squint in thought before they settle on labelling me as unknowable. Beyond intelligibility. In those moments, I struggle to sturdy my shoulders and stand tall, but I know I'm just a shadow to them, a shadow that stands in for something they want no part of. The Other.[137] *Our sense of reciprocity with the world as it appears, our sense of what a person should do and expect, our sense of who we are as a continuous scene of action, shape what becomes our visceral intuition about how to manage living… Intuition is where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices of discipline and invention[138].*

I realized that by living a queer life, I *am* taking a risk. Living a queer life puts you in a position of survival every day. I would be lying if I said I'm not confused by the fact that people—friends, strangers, and allies—seem okay admitting this truth by calling me courageous for living a queer life…And by

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[136] Week 76.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

calling me courageous, people seem to have no trouble acknowledging what I'm outside of—intelligibility, ease, and safety[139]. My feeling of queerness continues as a central part of how I understand myself, but I am aware that with each passing year I become less and less visually queer. The softness I am shown as a result has two opposing reactions. At once, social acceptance periodically dulls my intuition to inspire discontent among the circles I travel. Kindness makes me lazy. At other times, this misrecognition enrages me to action. My intuition in these instances is not self-perseverance, but rather to draw attention to myself as obstacle. To destabilize the category of transgender.

I know it is a privilege that I control when to start and stop these reactions. I also know it is an emotional headache and heartache that makes me question my integrity and commitment to other queer folks. *To misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities—which it might or might not have.*[140]

What's Love Got to do With It?

What I spend a lot of time wondering about now is why so much of my gender identity is tied up with love? **Does love even care if you find it?...Maybe mouths pretend to know everything about love so that people don't suspect hands. They are the ones that pull love across everything. They anchor hugs, hypnotize tired foreheads, dry eyelashes, unpack boxes, and reach. Maybe hands are the real love detectors and we've been idiots this whole time**[141] I stare

[139] Week 5.
[140] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness.*
[141] Week 6.

at my hands. They are much smaller than I'd like. I think of bodies and places I've smudged with my fingerprints throughout history.

You tell me how *you* see me. Your words are crisp but caring. You describe an intricate design of a human being and say that this way of seeing, of recognizing me without familiar categories, will always be our secret. That statement registers in my heart without quotation marks. Whenever you speak to me, I feel it in a series of firsts[142]. Trans people are often reminded by mainstream media that we are lucky to find someone who will love our bodies and honour our identities. That's what they mean when they call us courageous. Courage, in this case, is about facing the world with the knowledge that you are largely unseen, unknown, and unloved.

Nevertheless, it is presumed that when we start to transition, we must fall head over heels in love with ourselves because we *went to so much trouble—just be satisfied.* [but] *I am so, not satisfied. My ancestors were not satisfied*[143] Will I ever be? Maybe. But *[a]ny cure begins with an assurance, a narcissistic gratification. Then you can dig into things and touch the wound*[144]. My wound is the shape of a lifelong grief, of longing for a gender home that might not yet exist. It's hard to imagine that my hands will ever be big enough to hold that.

In this memory, I am with my first real girlfriend. She was not the girlfriend I wanted, but she was kind. We walked along a dimly lit hallway in the belly of a hockey arena. The psychic fair was in Charlottetown for the weekend. We found the one booth with a rainbow flag. The psychic's name was David and his eyes were such a pale blue they almost seemed white. I went first. Thirteen years later, I can

[142] Week 28.
[143] Kate Bornstein, Gender Outlaw.
[144] Julia Kristeva and Scott L. Malcomson, "Foreign Body."

remember only three things David said to me that day. And I cannot be sure that I didn't invent this recollection.

David told me I would be a parent, but I would not birth the child, which is a safe thing to say when two lesbians show up at your psychic booth. Next, David told me that he saw an all-encompassing presence of a man—this was a bolder detail to share when two lesbians show up at your booth. When I asked if this meant I would fall in love with a man, David seemed uncertain. He said it wasn't love exactly, but that this man would come into my life and change me entirely and his presence would last. Now, I wonder if David saw this version of me or if he just took a chance that someone of some gender would have a profound impact on my life. The last thing David said to me was that if I didn't kick two specific habits very soon, which he properly named chain-smoking and drinking to excess, I would die by my 38th birthday.

I am 34 years old now and I no longer smoke or drink to excess, but I would be lying if I said that my elevated liver enzyme count didn't frighten me a bit. **But I'm confident that transitioning is undoing years of knots, where I tied my feelings tighter inside myself because I was afraid they were too monstrous or foreign to reveal to another person. Mostly, myself. My life feels longer now and between the blog posts, injections, stacks of applications, lessons in pronouns, pages of theory, and laughter with friends, I fumble. Make mistakes. Fail. Fuck it up[145].** *But while we may, in the study of a past period, separate out particular aspects of life, and treat them as if they were self-contained, it is obvious that this is only how they may be studied, not how they were experienced. We examine each*

[145] Week 21.

element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in the solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole[146].

The complex whole is a problem for love and memory work. [**W]e want to hold all the memories. We want them to make sense, especially the ugliest parts. We want memory to stop hunting us. We want to be able to see something without peripheral experiences. So we blink and open our eyes again. Present tense. Present. Tense**[147]**.** *[a]ffect is the 'capacity to become', whereas feeling is the reterritorialization of becoming, by means of coding and ultimately controlling it*[148]. When I close my eyes and try to imagine my future, I can't. My face is the same. I am the same age. I sit in the purple reading room of the same house, sipping coffee from the same warped artsy mug, staring at the same busy road.

I'll never forget that until enough time has passed so that my old name has no institutional recall, until my body and gestures match imaginations and expectations, until I agree to bury my history and foreclose those very real memories of my female life, I will have to wonder *why* circumstances in my present tense unfold as they do[149]**.** Why am I denied the job? Why does my neighbour not wave to me? Why does discussing my emotions make me a weird man? *Our question becomes: can we sustain the struggle for recognition, the struggle to make the world bearable for queers, without approximating the very forms of happy heterosexuality? What kinds of alternative kinship stories are possible, which are not organized by desire for reproduction, or the desire to be like*

[146] Raymond Williams, *Preface to Film.*
[147] Week 20.
[148] Lucas Crawford, "Transgender without Organs? Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification."
[149] Week 53.

other families, or by the promise of happiness as "being like"? Do happy queer endings have to annul the political force and energy of the unhappy queer[150]*?*

Looking back might be the answer for being able to imagine forward. When I first arrived at university in 2003, I remember treading in affect. I remember sitting in the library at the liberal arts university where I knew no other students, four hours from my hometown, and feeling both impossibly small and radically unhinged by the vastness of new thoughts that were rushing in. I had never felt both so out of place and yet so entirely at home in a place. *An idea can be assigned to a man or a book, and the history of ideas to a series of isolated men or groups. But we need a more ordinary awareness of that pressure of active and general life which is misrepresented entirely by description as 'background'. There are no backgrounds in society; there are only relations of acts and forces*[151].

During these years, I learned about Marxism and YouTube from a Quaker who would later be brutally murdered. I fell in lust over my English professor who read Sylvia Plath between scarlet lips and had four leather miniskirts on rotation. I read Toni Morrison and cried and tried to write better. I lost my virginity to a Norwegian rock star and later dumped him for a female bartender who had a lower back tattoo of a dragon tagged with a Tennessee Williams quote—*a prayer for the wild at heart kept in cages*. I narrowly avoided a Baptist cult and became a functioning stoner.

It was during this time that I came to queer theory through feminism and I came to feminism while reading Butler's *Gender Trouble* and waiting for my laundry to finish tumble drying at Paragon on Charlotte Street. I came to queer activism by working at a gay bar where gay men got jumped in back alleys by military bucks

[150] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
[151] Raymond Williams, "The Idea of Culture."

after hours. I handed over warm cloths to cover bloody faces, and smooth broken teeth. I described events to cops who arrived too late and cared less than they should. **Rather than being bogged down by these hauntings, fearful of blood splattered headlines, or hypnotized by early exits, the queer theorist *could* stop for death and usually does. They let death amble by on all sides, taking stock of the tragedies like a parent marking a child's height on a wall in the basement, with equal feelings of love and loss.**

I came to queerness as a last resort. At 19, I faced my own impermanence, squeezing a bottle of Prozac in my fist, and decided that I could be straight, or I could be alive, but I couldn't be both. Suicide would linger long after that, orbiting my queer life like Saturn's young rings—its icy spokes formed by ignorance and the dark debris that sticks when you're refused personhood. It was only a matter of time until suicide would touch me again directly when my coworker checked into a hotel in Toronto during gay pride only to drink whisky and walk off the balcony instead of dancing under a glitter shower at the parade. **A queer theorist may understand that suicide is not a cowardly act, and it is certainly not a solo endeavour. Though they know death well, queer theorists hope against it. Slapping posters on poles, they identify missing bodies of knowledge. They record the static of untold stories, and circle the absent parts of speech in a sentence designed to disappear people[152].**

Most people go about their day to day life remembering the past and imagining the future. This process is what allows for an understanding of the self. If trans affect under the present structure is inherently cruel then the answer seems to be that *[w]e must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports*

[152]Week 15.

are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion. We need to step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present[153].

I hope somewhere, in this moment, hard scientists are studying the trauma of living in a homophobic and transphobic world. I hope they are mapping how this harshness, these emotional fractures, likely batter medial temporal lobes to the point where many queer and trans folks cannot remember the past or imagine a future. Maybe a utopic queer future is being unstuck from the loneliness of the present moment? *While feeling bad can result in acting out, being fucked up can also make even the apparently simple act of "fucking shit up" seem out of reach*[154]. There are many ways to recall memory. So too must there be many ways to invent futures. I am trans. I am queer. I am stories. I am places. I am emotions. Imagine me. Carve me over your conundrums. Make me. Make sense.

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[153] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.
[154] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*.

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CONCLUSION

What is *a piece of art (or a gender)…other than its own insistence on our senses? (Keegan 2019, 185)*

The 'tipping point' in transgender media representation is a misnomer because it suggests that there has been a significant shift in how mainstream media represents trans folks. Since mainstream media operates to safeguard and reify the shared hegemonic imagination of a culture (Herman and Chomsky 1988), when transgender images occur in mainstream media today they are still typically filtered through regimes of power and citizenship discourses that call attention to trans otherness while enacting assimilation tactics in the name of a certain politic of respectability (Boyd 1998). Nevertheless, this current surge of transgender representation affords media and transgender studies scholars the opportunity to ask whether space is being made for transgender people to produce their own images and share their unique narratives (Keegan 2019).

In writing about the importance of representation, Stuart Hall suggests that the inherent binary of representation is that it at once introduces new knowledges and positionalities while also threatening to flatten out identities that share a subjective vantage point by overlooking their complexities and perpetuating a presumed homogeneity (Glover 2016, 340-341). Throughout this dissertation, I chose to focus on content made by trans folks about transness because my research interest is in revealing how this content can simultaneously defamiliarize and de-essentialize transgender identity while also creating the potential for relation and recognition.

While it is important to study the impact of breakout texts by cisgender producers (Cavalcante 2017), the writing on the topic often centres around the propagation of transgender tropes. Cavalcante (2017) discuses such *regimes of representation* (Hall 1997, 274) in his work by exploring how audiences react—at

times favourably and critically—to breakout texts that pedal stereotypes of transgender figures as monsters, freaks, exotic outliers, etc. Aware of my own incessantly paranoid reading strategies, I wanted the articles in this dissertation to deliberately turn to a more (although, perhaps, never completely) reparative approach (Love 2010; Sedgwick 2003). By focusing on transgender cultural production, the articles in this thesis explore how these producers not only disseminate more and different representations of transness in the face of having meaning fixed by dominant discourses about transness, but also how and in what ways these texts attempt to "go into the power of the stereotype itself and begin to, as it were, subvert, open and expose it from inside" (Hall 1997, 21).

I chose to look at transgender cultural production from three different lenses: popular culture, social media, and through the personal act of telling (parts of) my own trans narrative because I wanted to add to the scholarly conversations about transgender representation through close readings of texts and create self-representation that made visible the process of telling transness. To grasp the phenomenology of transgender cultural production on a more intimate level, it felt imperative to create content and put my creative decisions under the same analytical scrutiny. By including autoethnography and performative writing alongside textual analyses, I engaged in queer methodology or what Jack Halberstam (1998) describes as a "scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior" (13).

In the first essay of this dissertation, I argue that Jill Soloway deploys their version of the female gaze, specifically the tenant of feeling seeing, in *Transparent* in a way that successfully overcomes what Eric A. Stanley (2017) describes as the

double bind of transgender visibility—or being seen in a way that also means being hunted or threatened with extinction. I argue that Soloway achieves this gaze by making Maura visible without making her completely familiar or knowable. *Transparent* presents a lead transgender character who is in many ways transnormative—white, wealthy, feminine—but Soloway also subverts other stereotypes.

Through scenes of mirror imagery, Soloway illuminates and challenges an ever-present, cissexist, form of gender watching while also invoking silence to disrupt and resist particular transnormative scripts. Maura, in the mirror, becomes a character with a negotiated relationship to gender dysphoria/euphoria, a complex agent of her own sexual desire, a transgender figure with an intimate and ongoing connection to her past, and a person who will not be 'cured' by hormones and surgeries in the future. Finally, I argue that Soloway's feeling seeing is innovative for how it invokes the sensual experience of the *transgender now*, or a queer temporality that is unique to trans folks (and indeed unique among trans folks) that includes the process of simultaneously looking forward, backward, and at. When I think about the future of transgender cultural production, I am particularly inspired by Chase Joynt's description of how "artists are subverting the pervasive power of the dominant narrative through aesthetic means. As method, this kind of re-fashioning and re-enactment affords spectators an ability to look back at a lack" (Rosskam 2018, 18). This is precisely the work that I argue Soloway offers audiences through their female gaze and feeling seeing.

Future research I would like to conduct related to this essay revolves around the impacts of streaming media on transgender cultural production. While sites like Netflix and Amazon Prime offer the opportunity to create compelling transgender

content that is arguably more widely accessible, the same sites also enforce algorithms designed to narrow audiences. Conducting this research would be incredibly difficult given the proprietary nature of streaming site algorithms. For this very reason, powerful claims could be made about the potential and dangers of big data in connection with the future of television as it pertains to the representation of marginalized communities.

In the second article of this dissertation, I explore how #ftm on Instagram functions as a subaltern counterpublic for transmasculine folks by uncovering the cultural production of three specific forms of selfies—comparison photos, articulative selfies, and political selfies. I chose to use thematic textual analysis in place of participant interviews because I was not necessarily concerned with how it *felt* to engage with #ftm but rather what worlds the hashtag made visible (and obscured), or what narratives of transmasculinity surfaced through these specific selfies and their impacts. It was important for me to focus my attention on transmasculinity as it acts as a 'counter-strategy' (Hall 1997, 277) to the overwhelming absence of transmasculine figures in popular culture.

While texts produced by cisgender folks about transgender issues often run the risk of using transgender narratives solely as educational tools about transness, I argue that #ftm is a place of progressive transgender cultural production because, overwhelmingly, the content had nothing to do with educating cisgender people. Instead, #ftm exists as an environment of *regroupment and withdrawal* (Fraser 1992, 124) by providing transmasculine Instagram users with a private-public space to discuss, celebrate, or dissect their trans experiences while recognizing how these experiences are similar to and different from other transmasculine users. In this article, I do not glorify #ftm as a space free of trans and cisnormative pressures, but I

do describe how certain selfies work to destabilize the stereotypical depiction of gender confirming surgery and hormones as absolute cures to gender dysphoria, and the notion of gender transition as a linear process.

At a surface level, comparison photo selfies perpetuate a hyper-focus on transgender bodies; however, I argue that their visual aesthetic also works to destabilize the gender binary, as a sacred Truth, by showing the migration across/between both allegedly natural and fixed binary gender categories. Comparison photos also provide transmasculine folks with the opportunity to discuss the relationship between transgender identity and memory, which is a conversation that does not usually figure into the popular imagination. Through such conversations and meditations, selfies became vehicles for users to challenge the taken-for-granted assumption of cisgender identity and to explore the potential trauma caused by nonconsensual gender assignment at birth.

By making post, pre, and nonsurgical transgender bodies visible on #ftm, I discuss how articulative selfies on #ftm both disrupt and adhere to normative masculine bodily expectations. Beyond strategies of resistance, transmasculine bodies on #ftm are also used to offer kinship and medical education among the transmasculine community. In this way, articulative selfies embody a specific style of self-presentation (Raun 2016, 112) that is often replicated by those looking to build a following. In the essay, I note that #ftm selfies are used, at times, to discuss post-operative healing and I agree with Jenzen (2017) that future academic research should consider how such *care structures* get established in online communities, particularly Instagram, and their effects (1638). By researching this topic more theoretical evidence will be generated to undermine simplistic charges of narcissism faced by those who create selfies.

Perhaps if I were not protected by so many privileges, I would not be surprised that the top posts of users on #ftm did not discuss whiteness and that Instagram did not seem to hide the fact that its top post algorithm clearly fed from racist, patriarchal, able-bodied, thin regimes of power that do not reflect many of the *transsituated discourses* that "are produced by transpeople whose identities, bodies, and sexual desires fall outside of the dominant discourses and even outside of the available lesbian and gay discourses" (Cromwell 1999, 519). These discourses would become visible, and thus more viable, while investigating recent posts in addition to top posts. While Instagram's decision to censor #ftm at the time of my data collection prevented me from examining both top and recent posts, doing so is integral to future scholarship to track how #ftm both constructs and destabilizes a hierarchy of transmasculine acceptability. This research will highlight the many transmasculine bodies and narratives that exist beyond trans/normative confines and that are, indeed, already creating and circulating meaning online. Studying such content will serve to strengthen the argument I made in this essay that #ftm is a place of possibility for speaking back to a history of misrecognition, unintelligibility, unspeakability, and transmasculine erasure. By studying recent posts, the heterogeneity of #ftm may reveal itself and decolonizing and reterritorializing efforts on #ftm could be mapped and their specific impacts further explored.

Political selfies surfaced on #ftm as a rejection of Trump's decision to ban transgender service members from the military. The latent function of these selfies is that they additionally signaled the complexity of identity. Transgender cultural producers of such selfies articulated that transness was only one identity factor that comprised their individuality. Political selfies also revealed the commercialism present within #ftm and the allure of social media microcelebrity. In an effort to

make money and/or appease his following, I argue that one particular user posted a political selfie that deployed strategic essentialism at the site of transness, which flattened out transgender identity and appropriated and eclipsed other identities.

In their article "Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now (and Then, and to Come)," Keegan, Horak, and Steinbock (2018) quote Susan Stryker as saying that "making things real is what trans people do" (4). The third essay of this dissertation was my attempt to make. By creating performative writing that consisted of present-day self-reflection, my previous thoughts about transition that I had made public on a blog, and influences of queer and gender theorists and writers, the third essay in this dissertation became a gender inquisition. It also became a personal interrogation of my own transgender *real*ness.

The most significant impact of this essay is how it embodies and addresses disruption; it reveals both what disruptions make possible and how dangerous disruptions can be and feel. This essay disrupts the traditional academic thesis format, it disrupts clear literary genres and fixed ideas about binary gender, and finally it disrupts linear time. By selecting certain portions of my blog to include in the essay over others, I demonstrate that how I access the past influences how I perceive of myself in the present and what I imagine, or sometimes cannot imagine, for myself in the future, which puts into form and practice the *transgender now* I theorize earlier in the dissertation.

This essay is also an effort to produce transgender cultural production that speaks to nonbinary gender identity but perhaps, intentionally, unclearly. Since I find it difficult to articulate my own understanding of my gender, as I feel both nonbinary and both binary and transmasculine and a range of other things, writing about these feelings is, at times, muddled and ambiguous. Nevertheless, by taking on the role of

the autoethnographer, this essay has allowed me to produce performative writing that moves, not just in the sense of inspiring emotions, but that also embodies the energy of multiple perspectives on gender, from nonlinear moments in time. In doing so, this essay adds to a queer theorist tradition of illuminating "identity-as-achievement" (Adams and Holman Jones 2008, 382).

The experience of writing this third essay is difficult to articulate even now. A paradox rested on my shoulders each day I sat down to write. I felt myself pleading for the ability to have my gender mean something without fully knowing what meaning it was that my gender made or would make. What became clear after writing this essay and having it edited by trans and cis folks alike was that the audience experiences were notably different. However, this is not uncommon for most texts. Each trans person who read this essay came at the text from their own unique and intersectional experience. Trans readers expressed that they felt alignment with parts of my story and unfamiliarity with others, but what repeatedly surfaced across their comments was gratitude for giving substance to a form of loneliness that feels both universal and specific.

Transgender readers of this text, unlike some of their cisgender counterparts, did not suggest happier endings or clearer stakes. Although I am not sure what that fact means exactly, I trust that it does mean something. I hope that my exploration of loneliness in this essay does not feed into the trope of the sad transgender character, but (similarly to Soloway) I hope it makes cisgender audiences aware of the many exceptional and routine ways that they may force trans lives off the tracks—through intentional discrimination, but more often, through unthinking, unfeeling, or unseeing. If I offer no clear understanding of what my gender means or means to me, I hope, at the very least, that the text reveals the specific ways in which I am made to

feel loneliness, to know it intimately and rework it, often, at the expense of something else. I also wrote this essay as a decision to put my "scholarship into praxis and concrete action" (Fischer 2018, 102) during a time of increased global anti-intellectualism and during a moment of my own mistrust of the post-secondary educational system and disenchantment with my participation in it. While theorizing queer and trans lives occasionally felt like a reductive process, writing about my trans life felt generative, however lonely.

A major effort of transgender studies has been to position trans folks as "speaking subjects rather than objects to be studied" (Horak 2018, 201). In describing Lucas Crawford's powerful analysis of Beckett's *The Unnamable,* Primo (2018) argues that Crawford's work "shows the potential of trans studies, in conjunction with queer theories, to grasp the simultaneity of stickiness and instability in identity projects" (709). The articles in this dissertation are my attempt at offering something similar. Across each article, but specifically in the third text of my own creation, I demonstrate how transgender cultural production can produce representation that shows and speaks of many unique trans experiences, but that also alludes to, or even commits to, a common project of expressing what is feels like to live in the lingering voids that get set up in the shadows of cissexism and binary gender. If, as Horak (2018, 201) describes "the first academic investigations of trans cinema and media arose from feminist and queer scholarship" and "often conceived of trans as an imagined position unconnected to the experiences of actually existing people," then the work in this dissertation matters because it investigates how transgender cultural production is a strategy for transgender folks to move from the enforced positionality of the imaginary to occupying the agential position of those who imagine.

Transgender cultural production is necessary because it works against strategies of erasure that affect all transgender folks but have even greater impacts for those who experience multiple forms of oppression. In talking about a very limited form of visibility available to transgender women of colour, specifically images such as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, Glover (2016) argues that mass media clings to *transnormative respectability* or a "compulsory appeal to respectability politics in order to situate them [trans women on colour] as individuals worthy of incorporation into heteronormative society" (340). In agreement with Glover (2016, 346-347), I think that future research should focus on how trans people in general, but trans women of colour specifically, may use social media to break away from politics of respectability. Additionally, research about the impact of the television show *Pose* may assist this conversation. Although not entirely created by trans folks, *Pose* has a significant number of actors and producers who are trans people of colour and its narrative revolves around intersectional experiences of ballroom culture.

While I have described transgender cultural production as content by trans people about trans people, I am also open to the fact that the definition may be slipperier and that this evasiveness is likely a necessary strength. However, through the close readings of texts I present, and through the autoethnographic writing I perform, this thesis argues for transgender cultural production that, at the very least, engages with the ways in which gender insists upon the senses (Keegan 2019). In describing the future of trans cinema, Chase Joynt says: "If we consider genre to be a recognized set of bounded, stylistic conventions, that when referenced by others produce a set of routinized associations or assumptions, we can see how gender is often considered in similar terms" (Rosskam 2018, 20). Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate the power of transgender cultural production to call attention to the

limitless possibilities inherent in viewing gender as genre, or a polymorphous form under which bodies and stories may knot, untangle, and fray themselves to shift the structures of meaning that contain them.

In his review of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Keegan (2019, 184) discusses how transgender representation works as both a "threat and a promise," both a trap and a door. I have discussed the trap above when mentioning the, sometimes crushing, weight of transnormative respectability and how repeated, limited images attempt to fix, or essentialize, transgender lives in the service of hegemonic ideals. The promise, the door, is more difficult to speak of and to, perhaps because we are still in the process of imagining it. Mainstream transgender representation can be harmful, but it can also be useful in terms of creating objects for disidentification that may problematize such stereotypes and produce more and different transgender images. My arguments in this thesis support a movement toward what the editors of *Trap Door* and Keegan (2019) call for with the figure of "known un-known" (184). To stay in defamiliarized territory, transgender representation needs to continue to hinge on what Keegan (2019) identifies as remaining "not immediately perceptible as one thing or another…the sort of sly switch game that transgender people need to know how to play to survive" (184). My essays in this dissertation offer further evidence in support of Glover's (2016) claim that: "transnormativity—while pervasive in media—is a process of individual strategic negotiation with systemic oppression" (348). This negotiation may be the sly switch game that Keegan speaks of.

Each of the examples of transgender cultural production presented in this thesis focus on paradox, a dance between essentialism and (imagined?) individualism, in interesting ways that work to both normalize specific forms of

transness while also showing how it feels to be made to feel abnormal at almost every turn (McInroy and Craig 2015, 612). Ruby B. Rich has said "when the baton passes from insider to outsider, the terms of cinematic enunciation change abruptly" (Rich 273). While there are many theoretical claims that support the productivity of transgender cultural production, there are also very practical reasons for advocating for it. In the wake of this present 'tipping point,' at a time when violence and homelessness and joblessness continually threaten trans lives at elevated rates, it is no longer enough to consider trans representation solely in the context of characters or subjects in mainstream media. As Felix Endara writes, there needs to be "real power-sharing (e.g. trans people directing, receiving grants, awards, residencies, etc.)" (Rosskam 2018, 20). Why? Because you need to survive to imagine.

Transgender cultural production is alive, circulating, and mutating the possibilities of transgender becoming; it claws back against revisionist and appropriative projects wherein "white cis men enact a form of 'aesthetic gentrification' that 'occup[ies] queer, trans, and of colour histories" (qtd. in Horak 2018, 203). While I do not have a specific definition for it, I have argued that transgender cultural production is and does many things. Transgender cultural production may speak between ruptures in language; it may carry overlapping bodies and memories. Transgender cultural production may shine light into liminal space to reveal how the dust of ephemera sparkles with a plurality of meaning and demands an excess of imagination. And it may do none of these things at all. Across becoming or rebecoming or unbecoming is simply *being*. Transgender cultural production describes what being is like, not necessarily what being transgender is like, for a transgender individual at one moment in time. Transgender cultural producers may keep an eye to history and hold out hope for a (different) future.

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Ripley, AJ. 2015. "Transgender Today." *The New York Times*, May 6. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/opinion/transgender-today/stories/aj-jardine

Additional Creative Credentials

Webseries. (Writer and Creator). "Babes." YouTube, 20 June 2016. Web.

Blog. (Writer). *Trans Canada My Way*. Tumblr, 2014-2016. Web.

Documentary. (Co-producer and host). "On Hold: Investigating Transgender Health Access in Canada." VICE, 10 October 2015. Web and City TV.

Presentations, Guest Lectures, and Conference Participation

Guest Lecturer. *Me-Search and Academic Writing from the Margins*. SOCI 3583: Research for Social Change, St. Thomas University.
Instructor: Dr. Gulhanim Caliskan. Fredericton, NB. (March 2019).

Guest Lecturer. *Transgender Social and Structural Challenges*. LAW 5210: Clinical Law. Faculty of Law, University of New Brunswick.
Instructor: Professor LA Henry. Fredericton, NB. (November 2018).

Guest Lecturer. *Introduction to Gender Diversity*. HMRT 1006: Introduction to Human Rights. Department of Human Rights, St. Thomas University.
Instructor: Dr. Christina Szurlej. Fredericton, NB. (October 2018).

Guest Lecturer. *Un/Doing Gender: Intelligibility Beyond the Binary*. SOCI 1006: Introduction to Sociology, St. Thomas University.
Instructor: Dr. Gulhanim Caliskan. Fredericton, NB. (September 2018).

Presentation. "Fredericton Pride Transgender Panel." Fredericton Pride. Crowne Plaza. Fredericton, NB. (August 2018).

Subject Matter Expert. "LGBTQ Roundtable: Strategies to Include Men and Boys in the Advancement of Gender Equality." Status of Women Canada (SWC). Toronto: Ontario. (August 2018).

Conference Presenter. "'Feeling Seeing': What *Transparent* Offers Transgender Studies through the Mirror." Qualitative Analysis Conference. Fredericton, NB. (May 2018).

Guest Lecturer. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Sex but Mean to Talk About Gender*. SOCI 3553: Sociology of the Body, St. Thomas University.
Instructor: Professor Robert McCoy. Fredericton, NB. (May 2018).

Show Guest. *Not A Saviour*. Podcast. New York University, New York. (January 2018).

Presenter. "Transgender Day of Remembrance 2017." QMUNITY and UNB Student Union. Bailey Hall. Fredericton, NB. (November 2017).

Guest Lecturer. *Writing Diverse Characters*. ENGL 2123: Creative Writing Strategies. Department of English Language & Literature, St. Thomas University.
Instructor: Dr. Kathleen McConnell. Fredericton, NB. (November 2017).

Guest Lecturer. *Introduction to Gender Diversity*. HMRT 1006: Introduction to Human Rights. Department of Human Rights, St. Thomas University.
Instructor and Department Chair: Dr. Amanda DiPaolo. Fredericton, NB. (November 2017).

Guest Lecturer. *Introduction to Gender Diversity*. HMRT 1006: Introduction to Human Rights. Department of Human Rights, St. Thomas University.
Instructor: Dr. Christina Szurlej. Fredericton, NB. (October 2017).

Guest Lecturer. *Script Writing and Prose*. ENGL 2123: Creative Writing Strategies. Department of English Language & Literature, St. Thomas University.
Instructor: Dr. Kathleen McConnell. Fredericton, NB. (January 2017).

Co-Organizer and Co-Moderator. "'Be Nice or Leave': Killjoys, Academic Citizenship, and the Politics of Getting Along." University of New Brunswick. Fredericton, NB. (January 2017).

Presenter. "Transgender Day of Remembrance 2016." QMUNITY and UNB Student Union. Bailey Hall. Fredericton, NB. (November 2016).

Conference Panelist. "'Be Nice or Leave': Killjoys, Academic Citizenship, and the Politics of Getting Along." Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC-AAUC) Conference 2016. Université du Québec à Montréal. Montreal, QC. (October 2016).

Presenter. "Transgender Rights and Healthcare." Dalhousie Feminist Law Association and Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF International). Dalhousie University. Halifax, NS. (October 2016).

Panelist. "Fredericton Pride Transgender Panel." Fredericton Pride. Crowne Plaza. Fredericton, NB. (August 2016).

Presenter. "Fredericton Pride Movie Night." Fredericton Pride. Barracks Square. Fredericton, NB. (August 2016).

Presenter. "Trans Healthcare and Personal Narrative." Canadian Association of Nurses in HIV/AIDS Care Conference. Dalhousie University. Halifax, NS. (May 2016).

Presenter. "Film Screening: *On Hold*." Faculty of Arts and Gender & Women Studies. University of New Brunswick. Fredericton, NB. (March 2016).

Presenter. "Healthcare Professionals and Transgender Needs." Chalmers Hospital Speaking Series. Chalmers Auxiliary Theatre Speaking Series. Fredericton, NB. (February 2016).

Guest Panelist. "The Current." CBC Radio One. Toronto, ON. (January 2016).

Guest Lecturer. *Documentary Film and Marginalized Life*. JOUR 1113: Fundamentals of Effective Writing. Department of Journalism and Communication, St. Thomas University. Instructor and Department Chair: Philip Lee. Fredericton, NB. (December 2015).

Guest Lecturer. *On Living Trans*. HMRT 1006: Introduction to Human Rights. Department of Human Rights, St. Thomas University.
Instructor and Department Chair: Dr. Amanda DiPaolo. Fredericton, NB. (October 2015, November 2016).

Guest Lecturer. *Creative Nonfiction and Memoir Writing*. ENGL 2103: Creative Writing Skills. Department of English Language & Literature, St. Thomas University.
Instructor: Andrew Titus. Fredericton, NB. (October 2015).

Guest Lecturer. *Transgender Health Access in New Brunswick*. HMRT 1006: Introduction to Human Rights. Department of Human Rights, St. Thomas University. Instructor: Dr. Christina Szurlej. Fredericton, NB. (October 2015).

Panelist. "Fredericton Pride Transgender Panel." Fredericton Pride. Crowne Plaza. Fredericton, NB. (August 2015).

Show guest. *Femisphere Radio*. CKUW 95.9 FM. University of Winnipeg, MB. (May 2015).

Conference Presenter. "Against the Grain: Should Creative Nonfiction Challenge Political, Social, and Literary Conventions?" Creative Nonfiction Collective Annual General Meeting. Banff, AB. (April 2011).