

**Anatomy of a Gender: A Micro-Example**  
**(Or, An Autotheoretical Disruption of Societal Demands for Trans Legibility)**

By Noah René Rodomar

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Women's and Gender Studies

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

© Noah René Rodomar, 2021

## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I employ autotheory, critical discourse analysis, and interview-based research to address the question of how, even as trans acceptance grows more common, normative scripts of (trans)gender still limit and marginalize trans people who are additionally queer, gender non-conforming, and/or nonbinary. Centring my lived embodied experiences as a trans gender non-conforming man, I demonstrate that gender can be far more unknowable and incoherent than any single definition of trans experience can hope to describe. In so doing, my thesis contributes to debates within trans studies concerning the legibility of individuals whose gender identities and expressions challenge the rigidity of the binary logic present in cisgenderism and transnormative politics. Furthermore, my making visible some of the struggles that nonbinary and/or gender non-conforming trans people go through to live an authentic life contributes trans politics beyond the academy.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been completed without, firstly, its acceptance by the Pauline Jewett Institute of Women's and Gender Studies at Carleton University, and secondly, the vast amount of insight and knowledge that I was so privileged to receive from my supervisor, Dr. Dan Irving. Thank you, Grampa Dan, for pushing and challenging me, engaging so comprehensively with my ideas, and drawing some modicum of sense out of the tangled mess of thoughts I deposited in your inbox every couple of weeks. As we have both said at differing times, gender is a clusterfuck, so thank you so much for helping me navigate it.

I must emphasize the incredible amount of support I have received from Dr. Katharine Bausch, firstly throughout my degree, but especially in the final semester of writing this thesis. Thank you so much for creating a space for me to explode all over the place. The amount of emotional labour that you have done for me is something I can never repay, but I will continue to try through movie recommendations and a mutual appreciation of pretty boys.

Our graduate studies cohort only had four students, which we began to call the 'Passel', the little-known term for a group of possums. This group has sustained me throughout this program; our afternoon visits to Mike's Place, late evenings at Black Squirrel Books, and early mornings in Feminist Theory (taught by the aforementioned superstar, Katharine Bausch) were bright spots in a stressful time. Thank you to PJ Javier, Hailey Johnston, and Erin McHarge for your friendship, patience, and eclectic thoughts. Furthermore, I would be remiss to not briefly highlight Erin McHarge for her particularly tireless support, both of this thesis and simply of my existence. You have become one of my most dear friends, and your brilliant mind relentlessly inspires me to continue learning—even if only to remain competitive in our constant debates about the ethics of, for example, voluntary cannibalism, or a carnal relationship with one's clone.

The Passel would surely have not existed without its ‘parents’. To our dear Poppa Possum, Dr. Patrizia Gentile, who bestowed upon us our possumly designation in the first place and has been steadfastly guiding us ever since; and to Dr. Ann Cvetkovich, whose teachings expanded our Passel’s understanding of creative scholarship and the value of ephemeral knowledge—you are the High Priestess in the Tarot deck of our lives.

To my very best Djoodis, Angela Ives Thurston and Sarah Patrick. Thank you for supporting my high-flying endeavours, always giving me a place to land, and keeping my head above water when I’m determined to go for a shark-infested deep dive. I could not have asked for a better chosen family.

To Lana Keon, who has been both my guide and my student at different points in this degree. You are a true gift to this department and everyone in it!

I am deeply grateful to the staff of Happy Goat Coffee on Elgin Street, who have been so welcoming as I parked myself in their café every day for eight weeks and answered every “How are you today?” with a strangled groan.

It seems absurd to write acknowledgements for creatures incapable of abstract thought, let alone literacy, but if this thesis has taught me one thing, it is that the absurd is where I thrive. Thank you to my dog, Kootenay, and my step-cats, Zuko and Cricket, for having adorable faces and paws for me to squish when I need a break from thinking.

For some historical acknowledgements, thank you to Mary Shelley for creating such a neat metaphor for trans scholarship to eventually work with, and to Dr. Susan Stryker for unearthing that metaphor. Furthermore, we are all endlessly indebted to Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Stormé DeLarverie, Miss Major Griffin Gracy, and so many other powerful trans

people of colour whose names have been lost to time that stood up for the rights we enjoy (and are free to critique) today.

Finally, thank you to my brother, Eric, my twin twenty months removed. You wrote me a Happy Birthday Sibling card for my 20th birthday. Our parents assumed this was just Quirky Teen Language, but it was actually a way to avoid misgendering me without outing me before I was ready, and I think that is a particularly astute example of your compassion and creativity for which I am so grateful.

To my father, Barry, for all your help along the way. Your support and cheer are indispensable counters to my ceaseless commitment to doom and gloom.

And to my mother, Renée, for everything. Thank you for always hearing me.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iii
<b>Introduction (Or, I Don’t Have Pronouns, I’m Normal)</b> .....	1
Methods and Methodology.....	8
<i>Why These Methods?</i> .....	10
<i>Recruitment of Interview Participants</i> .....	12
Chapter Breakdown.....	13
<b>Chapter One: “Begin at the beginning, and go on ’til you come to the end: then stop.”</b> ....	18
The Spectre of the Transsexual Childhood.....	20
Discovering The Existence of Trans (Heterosexual) Identity.....	24
<b>Intervention: Frankentok</b> .....	26
<b>Chapter Two: My Body Is A Stage (Or, <i>Degrassi: The Next Generation</i> Ruined My Life— And It Can Happen To You!)</b> .....	29
Interviews: Raised By Television.....	40
<b>Chapter Three: Permission to Identify (Or, My Gender Is A Corkboard of Conspiracy Theories Connected With Red String)</b> .....	43
-Phoria .....	44
Miss Direction.....	50
In The Closet But With The Door Open.....	54
If A Quiz Is Quizzical, What’s A Test?.....	59
<b>Intervention: Tweet Posted February 27, 2021</b> .....	64
<b>Chapter Four: Drag Me To Hell (Or, Little Orphan Anni)</b> .....	66

Drag Validates My Gender, Take One.....	69
Gentlemen, Your “Check Engine” Light Is On.....	70
Your Story—Our Way.....	73
If Your Tits Aren’t Store-Bought, Making Your Own Is Absolutely Not Fine.....	80
Drag Validates My Gender, Take Two.....	83
<b>Intervention: Tits.....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Designs &amp; Archives (Or, If This Doesn’t Scar, I’ll Be Very Disappointed)...</b>	<b>87</b>
FTM (Female To Monster).....	89
Beautiful Scars.....	93
How Dare You Mistake Me For Human.....	95
Ruin and Wrath.....	97
Who Am I? That’s None of My Business.....	100
<b>Post-Script: The Castrated Man (Or, One Final Abjection).....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>113</b>
Letter of Invitation.....	113
Informed Consent Form.....	115
Interview Guide.....	118
Recruitment Poster.....	119

## Introduction

### (Or, I Don't Have "Pronouns", I'm Normal)

Trans identities are a hot-button issue in our socio-political climate—it only requires a cursory scroll through Twitter on any given day to confirm this assertion. From arguments about which restrooms to use and which sports teams on which to play, to the question of informed consent when administering health care to trans youth considered to be minors, everybody (or perhaps, every-body) has an opinion. Unfortunately, many of these ‘opinions’—even some that are supportive—are derived from a deeply narrow understanding of what it can mean to be trans. Rhetoric such as the ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative populate common discourses about trans people. ‘God made a mistake’, is another angle that personally amuses me. Yes, God sure did make a mistake when They made me, but not in the shaping of my body—rather, by placing my impetuous self at a point in time affording me the privilege to flex against the limits of this thing called ‘gender’ without too much external strife. I am white and middle class, therefore I do not have to reckon with some of the intersecting oppressions creating barriers for many who are also in my position. Had I been born even one generation earlier, I say that I doubt I would have survived very long, but truthfully, I imagine that I, more likely, would have lived a long and awkward, though not necessarily painful, existence as some man’s wife—not because I could not have transitioned if I had wanted to, but simply because I would not have realized I wanted to transition.

~~Tragedy and acute suffering seem to be the default  
tunes to which trans stories are set, but I wonder  
how many of us instead just live with this low  
-thrum of discomfort or misery, not palpable~~

~~enough to merit inquiry and thus define as  
gender related—it's less cinematic, by far, so I can  
hardly begrudge its exclusion from the dominant narrative.<sup>1</sup>~~

This project was borne out of my own difficulties as a gender non-conforming trans person: I am a trans man who is often feminine in aesthetic and behaviour. My motivation originates with my frustration that my experience as a trans person is not reflected by the culture around me, nor recognized as legitimate by a society that has a very strict, gender normative understanding of transgender identity that is largely relegated to material dimensions—both self-styling as masculine or feminine, and the role of medical transition procedures to ‘create’ a ‘properly’ sexed body. Being white and transmasculine, once again, I experience privilege that others do not, and thus my ability to access legal and social recognition has not been significantly impaired by my dissonant gender presentation. I have grappled, however, with years of internalized transphobia emerging from the inability to clearly define myself, as regulatory discourses about gender advance the impression that gender is supposed to be simple—there *are* only two, after all, and if there is any confusion, a look in the mirror should clear things up!<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this thesis, I may use a legion<sup>3</sup> of terms to refer to my own gender. Some of these terms may read as contradictory and with varying levels of crassness: trans man, trans masculine, trans male, genderqueer, nonbinary, FTMT+ (Female-To-Male-To-+, the “+” referring to the one used in the acronym “LGBTQ+”), transsexual, girlyboy, femboy, transfag,

---

<sup>1</sup> These brief poetic observations, justified right and intentionally struck out, are one of my strategies to disrupt the academic insistence upon the cohesive organization of a text, which I will unpack more clearly in my methods section.

<sup>2</sup> I am begging my reader to understand that I make this statement in the most sarcastic possible manner.

<sup>3</sup> “[...] for we are many.” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Mark 5:9)

“just some guy”, and on and on. Despite having come out nearly five years ago, and in that time, completing a Bachelor’s degree in Gender Studies and subsequently writing this thesis, I still do not have a full and concise grasp on my own gender, and likely never will. Susan Stryker, in reflecting on the emergence of trans theory alongside queer theory, has described the former as “queer theory’s evil twin” (2004), writing the process of deconstructing gender eventually erodes any notions of fixed and precise sexual orientations or gender identities (p. 212). The longer that I live with gender, both my own and as a general concept, the more unknowable each becomes.

Recent years have made a wider range of trans representation visible, particularly on social media, in which content is generated by users themselves and thus gives trans people more control over their own stories, but this process is slow. The most common understandings of trans identity are rooted deeply in a medical model of transsexuality bestowed solely through surgical and endocrinological intervention and woefully binary in nature. One transitions from man to woman or vice versa. Implicit in this ethos is the belief that the woman one becomes will be feminine, or the man, masculine. I ask, how do culturally legible narratives of trans identity place limits on legitimacy for trans people who do not conform? How do some trans people, particularly those who are nonbinary, or binary and gender non-conforming, through these more abstract avenues of gender discovery, consciously complicate notions of gender identity and expression and how does this disrupt current culturally-accepted definitions of trans identity to create more space for gender diversity to exist, and, in doing so, resist our arrested development in Canadian society? The ultimate goal of this project is to establish an understanding that trans people can be additionally nonbinary, or binary and gender non-conforming, given that these terms are often incorrectly used interchangeably or assumed to be mutually exclusive categories. Gender non-conforming trans people, both those who identify as a binary gender and those who

are nonbinary, often reject hegemonic definitions of gender that locate gender solely as anatomical configuration paired with expression (masculinity for men, femininity for women) and instead forge new and creative paths toward gender affirmation, that may or may not include medical intervention of any kind. Judith Butler (1990/2006) notes that gender and its constituents are socially expected to follow a (so-called) logical path: “‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire,” (p. 23). For some, trans experience can be understood in a variant of this framework, in which identity (as a man or woman), expression (as masculine or feminine), and sexual orientation (heterosexuality) all line up in a socially accepted manner, if not sex (which is culturally restricted to male or female). For others, being trans is a creative project too big, too messy, and too full of contradictions for these linear expectations, regardless if we are binary or not, follow any form of medical, legal, or social transition, or choose to reject these options all together. For some, being trans can be a pursuit of joy unmotivated by pain (dysphoria), or any number of lyrical, ephemeral descriptions that go beyond my abilities to elucidate.

‘Trans’ can have a variety of definitions. Such plurality motivated the recent tendency to write ‘trans\*’ thereby making space for any given suffix, or lack thereof—‘-sexual’, ‘-gender’, ‘-vestite’, (though this last iteration has been out of fashion for quite some time). I define ‘trans’ as meaning any person whose gender is not aligned with the one they were assigned at birth, regardless of the methods with which they express, or choose not to express, that gender. To use the language of Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), gender is not something that is, but something that is done, given the clear discrepancy between sex and sex *category*—the sex one assumes another to be without having seen any tangential proof, given that most everyday

interactions do not involve such comprehensive scrutiny (p. 127). Gender is a separate concept, an ongoing series of behaviours that are meant to reinforce—or live up to—one’s sex categorization (p. 134). Butler (1990/2006) discusses gender as a social construction in her book, *Gender Trouble*, now a foundational text for queer theory. Butler argues that any attempt to define a gender—her example is the notion of “woman”—in a stable and static manner will fail, as the concept of “biological sex” is already one that is gendered itself, and thus cannot be named as the origin point of gender (p. 10). This is not to say, however, that Butler does not believe that the body has a role in the construction of gender. She criticizes earlier scholars, such as Simone de Beauvoir, for their reproductions of notion of mind-body dualism that privileges the mind as the sole location of the self and ruler of the subordinate body (p. 16). Nonetheless, she notes that any hypothesis of gender as a tangible substance is instantly dispelled by any discordant traits of a member of that gender, and thus the bodily aspect of gender is an act of meaning-making and creation, rather an immutable reality circumscribed to anatomy (p. 33). Evidently, this project follows in Butler’s footsteps by understanding gender as a malleable social construct that exceeds binary categorization despite the larger population who identify with these binary categories.

Despite the aforementioned malleability, I understand that heteronormativity and cisnormativity shape the ways that gender is socio-politically conceptualized. Heterosexuality is assumed to be the default sexual orientation, and furthermore, this sexual attraction is framed as being contingent upon the genital configuration of a chosen partner, as this determines their gender according to cisnormative logic (Butler, 1990/2006; Berlant & Warner, 1998). In Canada, the unceded and unsundered Indigenous land upon which this thesis is being written, these essentialist concepts originate from settler colonial impositions of a binary sex/gender system

that is just one aspect of the ongoing cultural genocide of Indigenous people (Cannon, 2012; Morgensen, 2012). Over the past century, this strict gender essentialism has slowly been eroded by the emerging visibility of trans identities; however, my use of ‘essentialism’ here refers largely to the equation of gender with one’s birth assigned sex, given that even this expanded definition continues to largely uphold the essentialist perspective that gender is inherently binary.

For example, the history of trans experience in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, as awareness of trans identities began to emerge more widely, is described by doctors and surgeons who received desperate pleas from trans people seeking “sex changes” after a lifetime of certainty that their sex was incorrect (Meyerowitz, 2004, p. 135-136). As mentioned above, these narratives often cited extreme and clearly-identifiable dysphoria that intervened with their “true self” and could be resolved only through medical intervention (Meyerowitz, 2004, p. 138). Meyerowitz acknowledges that this reliance upon the notion of a “true self” is outdated in academia (p. 138), but nonetheless, current widespread understandings of trans identity outside of the academy are still firmly rooted in medical discourses. This rhetoric defines gender most commonly as a series of body parts and other physical sex traits bestowed by a doctor to create as seamless an illusion of a cis body as possible, like some kind of full-body gender prosthetic layered over the opposing chromosomal truth.

Nikki Sullivan (2008) criticizes the assumed universality of the “born in the wrong body” narrative, by comparing its application regarding trans bodies to the oft-invoked parallel issue of self-demand amputees (Sullivan, 2008). This narrative relies upon, once again, the notion of mind-body dualism, in which the body is simply a vessel for the mind and does not play an equal role in the production of subjective experience (Sullivan, 2008, p. 106). Sullivan further notes that gender confirmation surgeries—which she calls “sex reassignment surgeries” (SRS)—are

justified in a cisnormative climate by framing the two binary genders as “naturally occurring”, and thus SRS is a procedure that simply helps a body assume a different, but still “natural”, state, defined by an inherent identification with the according binary gender (Sullivan, 2008, p. 111). Evan Vipond discusses the emergence of what they term “transnormativity” (2015): a specific narrative of transsexuality that has been advanced to access gender-confirming medical treatment. This narrative involves a deep-rooted sense of gender discordance in early childhood, a hatred of one’s genitals, and often assumes the individual will identify as heterosexual, though this is no longer a formal diagnostic criteria for gender confirmation procedures (2015, p. 26). They additionally note that emphasis is placed, above all else, on passing for cisgender and burying one’s pre-transition past as evidence of being or having been trans (Vipond, 2015, p. 28). Such examples of “trans erasure” (Namaste, 2000) impact trans peoples’ experiences with other dominant institutions such as the legal system. The neoliberal push toward trans rights often reproduces an essentialist agenda by regulating who can be defined as legitimately trans, as determined by medical professionals (Spade, 2011; Vipond, 2015).

Yet more manifestations of gender exist: Jason Lim and Kath Browne administered a questionnaire to gather data regarding gender variance and embodiment among trans people (2009). The results motivated them to advance the idea of a “sense of gender” that informs the identificatory choices of many trans people, separate from a sexed body as the basis of gender (para. 6.2). This abstract term suggests that gender, “should be understood as an effect that can emerge in relation to a sense of dissonance (so facing both the body and its expression) and to discourse and expectation (so facing both the body’s relations with other bodies, discourses and institutions, and the expression of these relations),” (para. 6.2). The abstraction of gender continues in Jack Halberstam’s (2018) recent publication, *Trans\**. Halberstam advocates for a definition of trans

embodiment that includes a fluidity and ongoing participation in the shaping of one's skin, rather than only ever describing the body as a prison at odds with the mind (p. 24). It is within such scholarship on trans experience that I locate my work and seek to contribute to a living celebration of trans multiplicity.

### **Methods and Methodology**

I approached this project with the original intention of employing a single method: one-on-one semi-structured interviews. My reasoning for this was that I felt I needed to find evidence of my own experience in the narratives of others for it to be considered worth documenting. Scholars working in feminist epistemology have noted that the value of lived experience has historically been disregarded as academic knowledge, emerging from a masculinist, Western-centric insistence upon a division between the researcher and the researched (Harding, 1986, p. 647). Dorothy Smith (1972) was instrumental to challenging this notion with her article, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology". She writes that sociological standpoints that insist upon distance and objectivity, forcing any findings into abstraction to fit into pre-established frameworks, neglect the essential role of material consequences (p. 9). Smith was specifically discussing the exclusion of women's knowledge, but this bias is applied to the knowledges of any subjugated group, as Donna Haraway (1988) argues in her case for the value of what she calls "situated knowledges" (p. 581).

Trans people who do not fit within normative gender expressions must seek external validation through gaining the understanding and acceptance of others. As demonstrated by scholars working in fields such as trans rights (see Spade, 2011; Meerkamper, 2013) and healthcare (Meyerowitz, 2004; Sullivan, 2008; Vipond, 2015), trans people must render themselves intelligible to mainstream society or face dire material consequences. While recognition fosters an intelligibility and, therefore, a livable life (Butler, 2003), for some trans

people, the insistence upon this legibility creates what often feels like an insurmountable and debilitating additional barrier that impedes our quest for self-understanding and self-acceptance. Ironically, I sought the stories of other nonbinary individuals to locate and collect experiences similar to my own to reinforce and validate my own discordant experience of becoming trans.<sup>4</sup>

The conversations I had were lovely and demonstrated some of the breadth and diversity of trans and nonbinary experiences but did little to advance my goal. It was not until I began reading about autotheory as a legitimate research method (Fournier, 2021) that I realized that I was looking outward for ways to describe *my own experience*. My ‘theory’ had already been proven true because I had lived it. I was particularly tentative about using autotheory initially, as I was concerned about the project becoming self-indulgent. Nevertheless, after several months of failing to summarize the crux of my thesis to others without making specific reference to my own experiences, I relented. The autotheoretical method, or at least this naming of it, is a relatively new emergence and has gained prevalence over the past decade in feminist, queer, and racialized academic spaces in particular (Fournier, 2021, p. 13). Nonetheless, this research tradition has a long history in these communities under other names. Feminists, particularly feminists of colour, have often used their lived experiences to argue political points, against the assumption that supposedly objective distance is the only legitimate form of analysis. The anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1983), is an example of racial activism enacted through life writing. Furthermore, Indigenous scholars have used autotheory and creative expression to challenge the institution of the academy that privileges Western constructions of knowledge over Indigenous ways of knowing (see Benaway, 2018; Whitehead, 2018).

---

<sup>4</sup> I use “becoming” in reference to Butler’s (1988) conception of gender being an ongoing process —one can never “be” any gender as this suggests an immovable and permanent designation (p. 525).

My second chapter, as a methodological aside, uses televisual discourse analysis to examine the ways that trans experience has been portrayed in mainstream media. Klaus Krippendorf (2019) defines discourse as, “text above the level of sentences,” (p. 21). To analyze discourse is to examine how representations of various concepts are communicated indirectly within a given production, and how these representations contribute to a cultural consensus regarding the nature of the concept at hand—whether it is accurate or not (p. 22). To tie this discourse analysis into the wider method of life-writing that guides my project, my case study will be the cultural production that was my first concrete exposure to trans subjectivity: a two-part episode of the television series *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. While this is, of course, only one piece of a wide range of trans representation in mainstream media, Krippendorf states that content analysis, of which discourse analysis is one iteration, requires close readings of specific examples (p. 22). Similar to cisnormative and transnormative discourses in health care and the legal system, trans identities can also be subject to narrow portrayals in discourses perpetuated by media portrayal, including television.

#### Why These Methods?

I began this project with the goal of conducting semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data about the experiences of gender nonconforming trans people. Interviews are a method that allows individuals to craft narratives about their own lives, situated in and influenced by the culture around them (Chase, 2003, p. 274). The choice of a semi-structured format was meant to allow the participant space to elaborate and share their story without significant constraints while still remaining focused on a particular subject of inquiry. My project was intended as a consciousness-raising effort and an attempt to contribute more nuance to the conversations concerning trans identities taking place socially. I believed that interviews that are

less structured are beneficial for projects of this nature, because I was not testing a pre-established theory but instead looking to gather knowledge and understanding of others' experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 117).

It took far too long for me to realize that “experiential, qualitative data about the lives and existences of gender nonconforming trans people”, as I wrote above, includes my own existence. Autotheory fuses one's own experiences and selfhood with academic theory. Due to its personal nature, this method is not strictly limited to academic writing and can be found across the arts as well (Fournier, 2021, p. 12). As a result, autotheory has a strong potential to reach non-academic audiences, as well as those within the academy.

Lauren Fournier (2021) writes that, “performative writing approaches memory with a reflexive sense of instability and play. In performative writing, the writer's memory of their lived experience is one material among others, like the theory and artworks and literary texts they reference...” (p. 20). This allows the writer to move flexibly between creative self-expression and reflexive, critical theorizing. Stephen Whittle (2006), in his overview of tensions that exist between feminist theory and trans theory, writes that trans people have consistently used life writing to push back against assertions that we cannot be objective about our experiences (p. 199). This strategy has been used in trans studies since its inception, with the groundbreaking performance, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” by Susan Stryker (1994). Stryker personally aligns herself with Frankenstein's monster, as had been done to her and others by discourse perpetuated by transphobic feminists, and advocates for a reclamation of this accusation (p. 240). She embraces her own surgical construction, and argues that her existence is reviled because it exposes the “seams and sutures”—continuing with the metaphor of Frankenstein's monster—of gender as a

whole (p. 241). A formative trans scholar, Stryker's scholarship-as-monster has produced unruly offspring. I am one of them.

My choice to use discourse analysis of a television episode emerges from my academic background as an undergraduate student in film studies. I believe that popular culture has a profound impact in shaping public perception. Krippendorff states that content analysis, including discourse analysis, is a valuable method because it recognizes that the meaning of any given text extends beyond the intentions that informed its composition (p. 2). He elaborates to explain that social reality is "discursively co-constructed": understanding is based in a shared language, and thus uses of this language contribute to larger conceptions of supposed truth, whether intentionally or not (p. 3).

#### Recruitment of Interview Participants

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, I recruited participants entirely online. I created an Instagram account specifically for the project, sharing my recruitment poster every few days and employing many trans-specific hashtags. Examples of such hashtags include general identity categories (#trans, #transgender, #transman #transwoman), slang terms (#t4t, #tgirl, #transmasc), and slogans commonly associated with trans communities (#transisbeautiful, #girlslikeus). Despite receiving many emails of inquiry, many did not move forward once I responded with the letter of invitation. My final sample included five interview participants, all young adults living in Eastern Canada. All participants were white except one, who preferred that their ethnicity remain unspecified. While I had sought to recruit a range of participants gender non-conforming binary trans people and nonbinary trans people, all five participants are nonbinary.

The interviews were digitally audio recorded, transcribed in a word processing program, and then uploaded to NVivo for coding. The themes that emerged from the interviews were

scattered, but there were some that resurfaced in a moderately consistent fashion, including an ambivalent attitude to being gendered in any direction; a lack of available information regarding gender diversity; intentionally queer self-styling choices; identification choices that were informed more by practical constraints than ‘accurate’ reflections of the self; and the essential role that connections with other trans people played in the gender discoveries of participants. Once again, as the method of this project has shifted to centre autotheory more than interview data, I will not be using all of these codes, but I believe even listing this selection demonstrates a sense of resistance to understandings of gender as inherent and static. I will still occasionally raise some points of commonality between interview subjects throughout this project as illustrative examples of the intangible, creative, and fluid nature of gender for many trans and nonbinary people.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

Following in the tradition of other autotheoretical trans writers, I will be constructing this thesis out of smaller academic and anecdotal pieces to resist the linear, seamless style of cisnormative scholarship (see Stryker, 1994; Wilchins, 1997; Preciado, 2008/2013; Bornstein, 2012, 2016; Clare, 2017; Chu, 2019; Thom, 2019; Wark, 2020). This resistance reluctantly emerged as I struggled to craft a cognizant narrative out of the threads of my life and the lives of my interview participants—what was I trying to argue? The longer I attempted to grasp a definitive, ‘objective’ point, the more it disintegrated in my hands. I would not say that I am ‘arguing’ a finite point in the traditional sense, but rather, demonstrating some (in)definite possibilities of trans performativity. The logical flow of gendered checkpoints upon which cisnormative expectations insist to create an understandable and succinct definition of trans identity was simply impossible to maintain when reflecting truthfully on my own life. This has

lead me to, rather than craft a traditionally structured thesis, embrace illegibility and create a piecemeal collection of thoughts instead.

My chapters will be primarily comprised of life-writing, the order of which will be linear, because I consider it important to provide an account of my experiences in the order that I lived them. The other option (as I was recommended) would be to organize my thoughts by theme, which I feel would create an inaccurately cohesive narrative as opposed to allowing my reader to follow through the unconventional benchmarks of gendered development as I have lived them. I will then conclude each chapter with brief creative or anecdotal interventions—musings that were written parallel to the (attempted) formal construction of this thesis as a form of decompression. These ended up being some of my favourite pieces and have since been elevated to comprise much of my thesis as I have veered away from a traditional academic style of writing. These interventions will be labeled as such and formatted using ‘justified right’, to differentiate them from the more structured life-writing and explorations of interview data that precede them. As mentioned above, I will also occasionally interrupt my own writing with small, freeform poetic stanzas, formatted with a strike through to represent the way that creative thought is often edited out of academic writing.

Chapter One will briefly explore the pre-transition self that transnormative discourse would have me bury instead, as per Vipond’s definition of the term—he writes that, “Trans persons are often expected and encouraged to create a ‘plausible history.’ This entails constructing a fictional past that aligns with one’s gender post-transition,” (p. 28).

In examining a childhood in which explicitly-defined gender discordance was never an issue, I hope to demonstrate that trans subjectivity can sometimes manifest in forms that can only be identified as trans with a comprehensive and inclusive knowledge of gender diversity.

Chapter Two engages in a close reading of the trans discourse perpetuated in the two-part episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation* entitled “My Body Is A Cage”. This was the first time that the series featured a storyline exploring transmasculinity. This was the only education regarding trans identity and experience that I received until I was well into university, and the normative script of the episodes convinced me for many years that my gender warranted no investigation.

In Chapter Three, I examine the notion of choice and how it relates to my gender journey. With so much emphasis placed on determinism in mainstream conversations surrounding gender — whether a conservative asserting that someone “cannot change their sex” or the insistence that queer people are “born that way”—I found myself delaying my own self-acceptance as a trans person because that sense of certainty was not something I felt. My intention with this chapter is not to suggest that trans people who *are* certain of their gender are somehow incorrect in that feeling, but instead to demonstrate that this certainty is not universal. I cover the factors that lead to my eventual realization of myself as trans, including the essential and oft-neglected role of gender euphoria. I discuss how non-heterosexual attraction can be a factor in one’s gender journey, against both the assumption that heterosexuality is a requirement for transgender identity, and the counter-assertion that gender identity and sexual orientation have absolutely nothing to do with one another. Finally, I unpack my ambivalent relationship to some frequently observed trans milestones—specifically, the act of ‘coming out’ and the beginning of hormone replacement therapy.

Chapter Four completes the final branch of life-writing in the past tense, in which I unpack the difficulties I have had with gender *since* beginning transition, framed by accounts of my experiences working as a transmasculine drag queen in gay bars in and around Ottawa. By

making gender my art, as most (but not necessarily all) drag artists do, in a public space, I was able to notice the ways that the illusion of binary gender is still upheld by a cisnormative drag culture even as it claims to be gender transgressive.

I use Chapter Five, my concluding chapter, to explore more abstract and fantastical avenues of gender creativity, and how being/becoming trans has led to attempts to reconfigure my affective responses to various expectations regarding how to have a gendered body in a cisheteronormative climate. “Trans”, as a prefix, is defined as “across from”, and this has become my tendency, not solely in terms of crossing a gendered line, but in taking an oppositional stance to hegemonic perspectives more generally. I will be unpacking the thoughts of those who have influenced this shift in perception, engaging with such themes in trans theory including trans monstrosity (Stryker, 1994; Jones & Harris, 2015), transhumanism (Haraway, 1985/2016), body modification (Halberstam, 1995), and illegibility (Halberstam, 2011; Bornstein, 2016).

These are some benchmarks I can isolate that have emerged from my experience of becoming trans. My supervisor pointed out to me in his feedback that this selection of chapters seems “random”, and I agree. These chapters are a handful of examples of the ways I have experienced trouble with gender (as Butler would say) throughout my lifetime as a gender-nonconforming trans person. Narratives of trans experience, according to mainstream media, are linear and easily understandable once explained. I seek to emulate, as I have discussed previously, a tradition of trans-produced writing that pulls together different scraps and stitches them together in a way that may not make perfect sense (see Stryker, 1994; Bornstein, 2016)—because gender does not make perfect sense.

~~I taught myself to hand-stitch, and those stitches  
can be seen on many of the clothes I own,~~

~~from where I have affixed patches  
and mended tears. They are crooked and uneven,  
because my hands shake and I do not have the patience  
to make them precise, but they work.  
I would like this thesis to function in much of the same way.~~

## Chapter One:

### **“Begin at the beginning, and go on ’til you come to the end: then stop.”<sup>5</sup>**

In this chapter, I seek to provide a brief overview of the ways I can remember interacting with gender as a child, long before the concrete notion of transition ever crossed my mind. This is to dispute the impression that trans identity always has identifiable precursors, heralds of a gender to be imminently rejected. Kathryn Bond (2009) argues that childhood is queer by nature, suggesting that children “grow sideways” instead of up. She explains that this metaphor is meant to reflect that, rather than a linear, progressive growth that begins with childhood and ends with adulthood and children of one’s own, “‘growing sideways’ suggests that the width of a person’s experience of ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain to any age,” (Stockton, 2009, p. 11). Furthermore, Stockton presents the gay child as temporally displaced, as children are denied the identity of ‘gay’ by a culture that refuses to recognize children as sexual beings, and thus “since they are ‘gay children’ only after childhood, they never ‘are’ what they latently ‘were’,” (p. 15). I feel as if I am only just beginning to ‘grow up’ now, in the last few years, given that the childhood I had is so far out of line with what is expected of a pre-transition trans boy; as a matter of fact, in many ways (but not all), I leaned into ‘girlhood’ quite heavily.

To explain my fascination with gender nonconforming and nonbinary identities is to review my own life and times as a gendered subject given the amount of mental gymnastics I have done over the years to arrive at a semi-cogent definition of my own gender. This, like the instructions that title this chapter, might seem straightforward but elicits a futile endeavour: the King of Hearts demands that the White Rabbit read aloud an unsigned poem he found as

---

<sup>5</sup> Carroll, L. (1865) *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland*. MacMillan Publishers.

evidence in a trial about stolen tarts, and Alice, the only rational character (or so we are lead to believe), insists there is not, “an atom of meaning to it” (Carroll, 1865, p. 141).

Similarly, my personal history may be entirely irrelevant to my current experience of gender. I may be projecting retroactively onto what was, in effect, a ‘cis’ childhood—as much as any child can truly be cis, as the queerness of childhood creates an identity that produced by deferral and impossibility (Stockton, 2009, p. 11). My gender realization was abrupt, unexpected, and, frankly, a shock even to me, much like my love for Alice’s adventures now, which started out as a deep horror of the uncanny upon viewing the 1951 Disney film at about six years old. Obviously, I did not have those words to describe my discomfort then, but I have settled on the term ‘uncanny’, given that my anxiety stemmed from the fact that the conversations Alice had with the creatures she met *almost* made sense. The tone of these interactions were mild and pleasant, but ultimately, I felt I was complacently witnessing the story of a little girl, trapped in a confusing world, where no one she met was willing or able to understand that she was lost and needed help. I reached forward and pressed ‘eject’ on the VCR while the movie still played. Nothing about the story changed, but as I grew older, I came to treasure what I had once found disturbing. I was the one who changed, as I stopped seeing myself in Alice and instead began to recognize a kinship with the ‘mad’, incoherent, and utterly fascinating inhabitants of Wonderland instead. In the same way, when reviewing my own experiences of gender, I want to remain open to the idea that I simply changed my mind one day—I am not definitively wedded to the idea, but I also would not like to preclude it entirely. I would like to believe that such a thing is possible for anybody who feels like doing so.

Before beginning, I must draw explicit attention to the fact that much of the narrative contained to these pages is based on memory, which is a fickle thing at the best of times. In

discussing the role of memory in autotheoretical writing, Fournier notes that accuracy is less essential than it would be for the more traditional forms of memoir or autobiography (p. 20). This is because the intention of autotheory is not to document the past but to instead fuse one's sense of self with critical thought to craft inquiry and discussion regarding a wider topic. The topic that is central in this thesis is the fluidity and impossibility of a clearly defined notion of gender through which trans experience can always be measured and detected early in a person's life. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Jack Halberstam writes that, "we can never put the past back together in the way that memory promises," (p. 85), and, as bleak as this may sound, I certainly hope that he is right.

#### The Spectre of the Transsexual Childhood

*"I cannot explain myself, I'm afraid, sir," said Alice,*

*"because I'm not myself, you see."*

*- Alice's Adventures In Wonderland, Chapter V: Advice From A Caterpillar*

When I was a toddler, according to my mother, I was only interested in playing with dinosaur toys. This does not surprise me; anybody in our family who might attempt to claim they had forgotten my early childhood interest in dinosaurs would be lying, myself included. What startled me about the conversation in which this information was mentioned was the next observation she made: "It was only after we sent you to kindergarten that you started asking for princess stuff." My younger brother eventually assumed the responsibilities of Family Dinosaur Connoisseur, and I moved on to Barbies, Disney Princesses, and dress-up. Halberstam, after Stockton, specifically highlights the notion of children as unruly beings that require discipline to create heterosexual, gender conforming subjects (Halberstam, 2011, p. 27). I had believed that my interests as a small child had always been blended—the idea that there was a perceivable,

abrupt shift, in correlation with my entry into the school system, seems almost *too* convenient to learn as an emerging gender scholar. Maybe I was taught that girls should like Barbies, but perhaps I simply discovered a new interest when faced with other children of my age. Either is possible.

I have tried, thus far at least, to avoid looking back on my life to find ‘evidence’ of my trans identity throughout my childhood, because it really was not there in any way perceivable to the naked cisgender eye. I do not remember ever wishing outright to be a boy or any sort of similar sentiment, and, much like Spade writes in his piece, “Mutilating Gender”, I feel that the narrative of the “transsexual childhood” can be counterintuitive as it has become an essentialist strategy of legitimizing trans identity (Spade, 2006, p. 320). Stories of trans experience often begin with something along the lines of, “I always knew I wasn’t a girl,” or a similar sentiment. This is not my story. I relished in femininity, which I took to mean girlhood. My gender identity was not thrown into question until I was in university. My childhood and adolescence do not fit the convenient gender-non-conforming-which-is-actually-gender-conforming narrative that would have had me rejecting all things feminine, as proper little trans boys are expected to do.

As a young child, I was, simply put, a chaotic little beast. One day I would wear my favourite purple velvet dress with capped sleeves because it made me feel like Ariel (*The Little Mermaid* was my favourite princess<sup>6</sup>), and the next I would be trying to show up the neighbourhood boys by climbing the highest out of all of us on the jungle gym, scraped knees be damned. I liked to feel like one of the boys, from the time I was in primary school to my first job and beyond. At school, I clustered with the ‘other’ girls because of the strong gender divide in the classroom, but I always felt like the odd one out. When I played outside with the kids who

---

<sup>6</sup> The frequent affinity for mermaids, and this Disney film in particular, demonstrated by trans people has been noted by both academic and cultural observers (see Spencer, 2014; Mock, 2017).

lived on my street, who happened to be all boys, it was irrelevant that I was a girl because I was the only one—until I started developing crushes on boys. This action was what marked me as gendered to them and drew the line in the sand regarding my membership within the group. Soon enough, I was just playing pretend with myself once again.

My head was—and still is—constantly filled with fantasies of being people I am not, because being ‘myself’ never felt very good. I remember being very young and having my first existential crisis about the fact that my name (at the time) was the word that people used to identify and refer to me, even though it was assigned to me and I did not feel any affinity for it. Our basement bathroom in my parents’ (now my mother’s) house had a jacuzzi tub and a wall-to-wall mirror. I had just finished watching an episode of *Timothy Goes To School*—or perhaps it was *Franklin*? I was sitting on the tile floor, staring at myself in this enormous mirror, and thinking “You are [redacted]. That’s how people know you. When they hear that word, they think of you.” The thought was troubling enough that I remember having it to this day. It was not a bad name by any means, and I think it is quite pretty on other people, but on me, it was cumbersome and ill-fitting.

These fantasies of being someone else were able to emerge explicitly every year on the holiday that I have, as an adult, heard endless colloquial references to being “gay Christmas”: Halloween. I never understood kids whose priority on Halloween was the collection of candy—that was simply incidental to me. The appeal of the holiday for me was dressing up, and my costume always struck the intersection of creepy and glamorous: a dead bride, a vampire countess, the Devil in a red dress. This was not limited to the haunting season, however: this was simply the only event that allowed me to bring such fantasies outside. At any given time of the year, I would stay up in my bedroom after I was meant to be asleep, put on my most audacious

clothing, and lip sync in silence, as this was before almost every young child had earphones through which to play music.<sup>7</sup> I thought this meant I wanted to be a pop star, even though I had no real interest in singing. For every pop star daydream, however, there was a fantasy about a sudden tragedy, a life thrown into chaos, and a protagonist that had to escape in disguise, often dressing as a boy to go undetected. I likened myself in those scenarios to Mulan from the titular Disney film, or Éponine of Hugo's *Les Misérables*, using scarves to bind my barely-there chest. When that narrative frame had been exhausted for the week (I liked to keep my programming fresh), I was a vampire, a witch, or a demon—though mostly a vampire, especially after I was gifted DVD seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* when I was twelve. I created my own characters to feel included in my favourite stories: daughters or sisters of the male protagonist, who were all invariably scrappy girls with sharp teeth and tongues, who could hit back as hard as any man, and essentially filled the role of the original protagonist, just with a bit more flair. These stories<sup>8</sup> always had at least one Strong Female Character already, who I would treasure deeply, but I never identified with her the way that my parents assumed that I did—I was determined that I had to make my own.

I raise these examples as an illustration of my childhood to demonstrate the amount of evidence that was stacked against me when making my claim to transmasculinity, which was largely an internal struggle against cisnormative expectations of cohesion. My biggest hurdle was internalized transphobia: persistent anxieties that I could not be trans, even if I wanted to be,

---

<sup>7</sup> I originally wrote this sentence as "... before young children had..." and was reprimanded by my supervisor, since the technology of The Earphone existed when *he* was a child, and he is two decades my senior. I simply meant it wasn't commonplace at the time, but perhaps even that would be inaccurate, so I will clarify that *I* did not have earphones as a child; my parents were strict with us about technology and I did not even have a cell phone until I turned 15 in 2011.

<sup>8</sup> *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* (which is ironic, in retrospect, considering its author's transantagonistic views) were notable examples

because I *had* not been perceptibly trans. The figure of the queer child, as described by Stockton, was once again at work, as I placed limits upon myself in the present based upon what I believed I never was (Stockton, 2009, p. 15). I am fortunate enough that my access to medical care and social affirmation as a trans person has not been overly impacted by my gender presentation, but at the beginning of my transition, I also did not express myself the way I wanted to, because I knew that if I wanted to *become a boy*, I had to perform *boy* the right way, failing to understand, even as I knew it on a logical level, that there is no ‘right way’ to do a gender (see West and Zimmerman, 1987). My own self-realization was delayed for quite some time and I still find myself frequently battling thoughts of internalized transphobia, questioning my own legitimacy, when left alone for too long<sup>9</sup>.

#### Discovering The Existence of Trans (Heterosexual) Identity

I was in high school before I learned about the existence of ‘transgender people’ in any constructive way. I have vague recollections of transmisogynistic jokes and comments about ‘he-she’s’ made by myself and peers from my earlier days, but there was no clear understanding present of what a ‘he-she’ actually was, besides a reprehensible figure. It is embarrassing to admit, but I learned the term ‘transgender’ from *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. I became fascinated with the character of Adam (played by cisgender actress Jordan Todosey), for reasons I could not explain to myself at the time. He was a traditionally masculine, heterosexual young man, who was just unfortunate enough to have been born in a girl’s body<sup>10</sup>. I was sympathetic; that sounded terrible, and though I could not relate, I was happy to call myself an ally to trans people everywhere.

---

<sup>9</sup> This sentence was, in a brilliant stroke of self-imposed dramatic irony, written just before the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, in which we were *all* left alone for much too long.

<sup>10</sup> I discuss the transnormative discourse perpetuated by the writing of this character in Chapter Two

This understanding of trans identity was reinforced in my mind in the same year, when my older cousin, Liam<sup>11</sup>, came out as a trans man, having up until that point presented himself as a butch lesbian. This was new territory for my family, but being the socially liberal white suburbanites we collectively were, it was a journey we were happy to take with him. Liam checked every box on the transsexual childhood checklist: he had an engineering mind, preferring to play with Legos or build things out of cardboard than play with dolls; we all knew he hated dresses and makeup (the one time he got dressed up for a school dance was uncomfortable for everyone involved because it was *so not him*); and he was only attracted to women. His transition *made sense* to us all. Believing that there was a naturalized order to the system of gender as I did at the time, I mistook the symptom for the cause, and assumed that since none of the traits I saw in Liam—or in Adam on television—applied to me, there was no reason to question my own gender, and so I never did.

~~Last Christmas, I gave Liam a brief summary  
of my thesis intentions, which involved mentioning  
him, to ensure that he would be comfortable with that.  
He said he was (evidently), and then apologized to me, saying  
he hoped his gender expression as a masculine, straight trans man  
didn't "mess things up for [me]," in reference to my own  
gender discovery. This is, of course, not the case,  
given that everyone's gender is their own,  
and I told him as much:  
what "messed things up for me"~~

---

<sup>11</sup> Names have been changed

~~was a cultural discourse that continues to reinforce  
that form of gender expression as  
the *only* legitimate iteration of transmasculinity.~~

For another five years, I never questioned why I felt *weird* and *wrong* a lot of the time.

Maybe I *am* just weird and wrong.<sup>12</sup>

### **Intervention: FrankenTok**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the popularity of the online lip-syncing platform TikTok exploded, and I am embarrassed to say it took me less than a month of self-isolating to cave and create my own account. As a drag queen living in a world with no open bars or clubs, I was looking for an outlet, but I never expected to find such a brilliant pocket of gender creativity and queer joy along with it. On a typical day, my feed (generated by the app's algorithm, curated based on the type of content with which the user has previously interacted) is filled with gender-bending fashion, queer cosplayers, gay comedy, hot gender diverse people, and drag artists, all celebrating embodied self-expression. There are an innumerable amount of these fifteen-to-sixty-second videos about which I could wax poetic, but one that particularly stands out to me is by TikTok user Grace Hyland (@grace.hylandd).

Hyland is a trans woman with a following of over 60,000 users. She uses her platform for trans advocacy and frequently releases clips responding to ignorant comments left on her videos. The video in question was prompted by a comment by TikTok user @userc7017s1djd, which reads, "No. Trans people are trans. Don't pretend for a second that you know what a real woman feels like. You are Frankenstein's monster to real women." Hyland did not address the comment verbally, but instead shot a brief montage of herself putting on makeup, set to a song

---

<sup>12</sup> Well, yes, but not for these reasons.

from the Monster High fashion doll franchise. The final look, modelled by Hyland during the second half of the video, was designed after the doll Frankie Stein, from the aforementioned franchise. Hyland’s look is glamorous and a little bit vampy, and she poses confidently for the camera.

I was astonished when this clip initially crossed my feed. I had just witnessed the telos of Stryker’s performance-piece-turned-article, “My Words To Victor Frankenstein Above The Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” (1994), a foundational piece of trans theory, coincidentally condensed into a 30-second pop culture reference and put into practice. Beyond that, the clip had amassed almost 20,000 “likes” and the comments were flooded with positivity. It was utterly effervescent.

Writing this anecdote, as a matter of fact, has caused me to realize that, by revelling in the memory of that joy, I have missed my own message: that trans identity exists beyond the confines of feminine womanhood and masculine manhood, but that this is rarely recognized in widely-circulated media, and thus, social understandings of what a trans person is meant to look like.

The two performance pieces—Stryker’s and Hyland’s—are *not* entirely parallel; perhaps the content, but certainly not the execution. Hyland is a thin, blonde, conventionally attractive young woman, and she embodies her experience of gender in this video by applying glamorous makeup that is an homage to a franchise of dolls. Stryker’s piece, while text-based, also describes her appearance during its original performance, as this was an integral part of her message as well. In her introductory notes, Stryker writes,

During the performance, I stood at the podium wearing genderfuck drag—combat boots, threadbare Levi 501s over a black lace body suit, a shredded Transgender Nation T-shirt with the neck and sleeves cut out, a pink triangle, quartz crystal pendant, grunge metal jewelry, and a six-inch long marlin hook dangling around my neck on a length of heavy

stainless steel chain. I decorated the set by draping my black leather biker jacket over my chair at the panelists' table. The jacket had handcuffs on the left shoulder, rainbow freedom rings on the right side lacings, and Queer Nation-style stickers reading SEX CHANGE, DYKE, and FUCK YOUR TRANSPHOBIA plastered on the back. (p. 237).

I was so high on the joy of seeing my favourite piece of theory come to life, and be embraced on a mass scale, that I forgot that part of my goal in creating this project, including the piece I was beginning to write about Hyland's update to the trans Frankenstein metaphor, is to highlight and disrupt transnormative expectations regarding gender expression. Hyland's piece is transgressive by embracing the "Frankenstein" designation hatefully assigned to her, like Stryker's, but its success may also partially be on account of its nature as transnormative. This is a *version* of Stryker's "Words" that is more palatable to a cissexist audience because Hyland performs her gender in the 'correct' way. This is not to argue that there is anything wrong with Hyland's personal self-expression as a feminine woman or the celebration of that, of course, but to highlight instead how the cultural representations of trans people that are positively received, or even visible on a large scale, are those that reinforce traditional notions of gender expression —not performing the grotesque, but instead reinterpreting the accusation of grotesquerie as something traditionally beautiful after all. While progress has certainly been made in the 25 years between these two productions, Stryker's complete vision, of "genderfuck drag" as a strategy to "FUCK [...] TRANSPHOBIA" (p. 237), remains unrealized.

## Chapter Two: My Body Is A Stage

**(Or, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* Ruined My Life—and It Can Happen To You!)**

*And take my hands, they'll understand / Take my heart, pull it apart /*

*And take my brain, or what remains / And throw it all away /*

*'Cos I've grown tired of this body / A cumbersome and heavy body ...*

*- Mother Mother, "Body"*

The first time I saw a trans man, I was thirteen years old, and he was not a trans man. I had started covertly watching *Degrassi: The Next Generation* on MuchMusic (which was basically Canada's MTV, for you uninitiated) because I had seen two boys kissing in the trailer that played after the show I had been watching before, and I was intrigued. Of course, my parents could not find out about this operation, even though they would have no way of knowing why I was watching the show, which featured a multitude of storylines of which the token gay character was only one. Teenage queer shame is funny like that. I went looking for gay boys, and found them, but more significantly, I found Adam, the first transgender character to be introduced to the show, played by cisgender actress Jordan Todosey. Despite being certain that I was a bisexual girl, I was entirely fascinated by this character and his journey to self-define his gender. Looking back, *Degrassi* was an interesting case study: I watched it to see myself represented without even knowing that was who I was at the time, or, perhaps more accurately, who I was going to become. As Véronique Bergen (2006) notes while reviewing the concept of 'being' in Deleuzian philosophy, the impulse to ground ontological concepts as empirical is simply an illusion, a strategy to accept the precarious nature of reality:

This precariousness implies that no one can foresee the direction that forces may take and no one can posit *a priori* the evolution that the processes of actualization are about to witness. It cannot be otherwise because the intensity that constitutes to the ground of being is active at the very level of its actualizations. (p. 63).

My fixation with the character would have, in a comfortably cisnormative narrative, caused me to ask myself some questions about my gender, but despite both of us being trans men, I do not see myself in Adam's story at all. My understanding of what a trans man should be came from him, and so the idea that I could possibly be trans myself did not cross my mind for another five years, high school dramas like *Degrassi* having been long since forgotten. I only remembered this sort of latent, repressed fascination recently. While this example may seem trivial, many people receive their primary education about trans identities from television and the Internet, like I did—especially considering the reforms to the sexual education curriculum that the Province of Ontario implemented in 2019 that delays the necessary conversation of gender identity to at least Grade 8, if it is covered at all (Jones 2019). My knowledge of trans identities, rather than being informed by scholarship and the lived experiences of trans people, was authored by cisgender screenwriters who peddle in stereotypes and are more invested in creating a dramatic story arc than educating the masses. In the absence of a comprehensive education on trans identities offered at schools and by other social institutions, the understanding of who a trans person can be is limited to a strict, cisheteronormative set of checkpoints, often focusing solely on the material aspects of this journey—normative gender presentation and medical transition. Episodes 15 and 16 of *Degrassi* season 10, entitled “My Body Is A Cage” are exemplary of such a limited understanding of trans identity and transition.

Episodes of *Degrassi* generally follow a three-perspective format, toggling between a featured character and two other characters' separate personal narratives to create a sense of simultaneity, so while the run time of “My Body Is A Cage” is 44 minutes long, the content featuring Adam only makes up about half of the episode. I isolated several themes and uses of imagery that are common in trans film and television, advancing a specific narrative of trans

experience. The themes I focus on are the splintering of the self into ‘pre-transition’ and ‘post-transition’ personas, *external image* as the sole defining factor of one’s gender, heterosexuality as a reinforcement of transmasculinity as ‘authentic’ masculinity, and trans self-harm. Furthermore, I will do a brief discourse analysis of the language used to describe the trans experience ‘from a trans perspective’, in a scene where Adam comes out as trans to his two best friends.

The two-part episode aired in the summer of 2010, and even the title<sup>13</sup> already informs the viewer of the sort of narrative to which they will bear witness. The concept of being ‘born in the wrong body’, or more specifically, being ‘a man born in a woman’s body’ or vice-versa, is a common invocation used to explain transgender identity to cisgender people. Trans scholars have long critiqued this belief, particularly those who are nonbinary. For example, Riki Ann Wilchins (1997) notes that, despite her body remaining physically the same, the year after she began to present as feminine brought her a whole new host of insecurities based upon others’ assessments of her, rather than an internal sense that her body was ‘wrong’ (p. 37). Her feelings about her height, her voice, and her size in general *became* negative as a result of cisnormative assumptions both that she was a woman, and that her body was incongruous with that designation (p. 38).

Increasingly, nonacademic discourses have become more nuanced, however, the ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative is still considered the basic foundation for understanding trans existence. This idea may be helpful to some trans people that find that this appropriately explains their experiences, but just as many may be deeply uncomfortable with the implications of this phrase. To define a body outright as a ‘man’s body’ or a ‘woman’s body’ based strictly on genital configuration reinforces the cisnormative, biologically essentialist understanding that gender is

---

<sup>13</sup> Drawn from the Arctic Monkeys’ song of the same name, which is just so quintessentially 2010.

something inherent to the physical form, and that trans people are deviant outliers who work against the 'natural' gender of their bodies. This not only naturalizes cisgender identities and places trans people on the margins, but this description also creates a hierarchy of trans experience within those margins, excluding trans people whose bodies are *not* cages. If designation as trans is defined as being in the wrong body, but one's body does not feel 'wrong', then one must not be trans. Trans experience is reduced to a material phenomenon that can be quantified by medical intervention to 'correct' the body and render it cis-passing, which even further reinforces the assumption that being cisgender, or to come as closely as possible, is the goal in every scenario. Trans identity has been historically treated as a medical issue that is assessed by a cis professional, who deems the patient sufficiently trans enough based upon their adherence to the traditional norms of their gender, and from there is provided with medical treatment that 'validates' that gender (Vipond, 2015, p. 25). The body then 'becomes' a man's or woman's body based on its physical traits. This expectation is additionally reflected in trans people's abilities to access legal recognition, as noted by Andrew Sharpe (2006). In his critique of trans jurisprudence, Sharpe notes that trans people have been subjected to expectations of genital surgery that would allow them to participate in normative heterosexual intercourse before the law would recognize them as a legitimate member of their gender (p. 623). Nikki Sullivan (2008) additionally critiques the trope of the 'wrong body' as an overly simplified explanation of transgender experiences, stating that this rhetoric reaffirms the philosophical notion of mind-body dualism, treating the body as a thing occupied by the subject, rather than a part of the subject's own autonomous existence (112). In this way, the alienation of the self from the body is not only treated as a required symptom of trans identity, but is additionally hoisted upon the subject by the medical system by demanding that trans individuals treat their bodies as separate

from the self to access treatment (Sullivan 113). This, to me, is a harmful ethos. At the risk of sounding overly simplistic, no matter what parts make up my body, it is a man's body because I am a man and it is my body.

The first of the two episodes opens with Adam and his cisgender older brother Drew (Luke Bilyk) being dropped off at school by their mother (Ramona Milano). Adam raises a clearly well-worn argument, expressing his frustrations about having to take remedial gym class and being denied access to sports. His mother asks him to stay “under the radar” for his own safety, and mentions an upcoming visit from the boys’ grandmother, saying, “I thought it would be nice if Gracie could join us for dinner,” (Grassi 2010). Adam is not revealed to be trans until halfway through this episode, but the mysterious “Gracie” is mentioned several times beforehand, creating the impression that she is a different person and, according to the logic of the narrative, she is. “Gracie” is Adam’s dead name<sup>14</sup>, and Adam’s family has created a separate persona in their minds to refer to him pre-transition, using “she/her” pronouns and saying that they have not seen her in awhile. Furthermore, sometimes Adam refers to himself in the third person to discuss coming out to his grandmother: “I want to introduce Grams to Adam tonight,” (Yorke 2010). This creates an ontological division between Adam’s masculine existence and the feminine persona he “used to be”, rather than two iterations of the same person that has simply come into a clearer understanding of himself.

Despite the fact that Adam states that he has known he was trans since he was four years old, he is haunted by the spectre of his own self, “Gracie” looming over him like the idealized

---

<sup>14</sup> The gendered name he was given at birth. Despite arguing against the expectation that a trans person must ‘kill’ or otherwise completely reject their pre-transition self, I still use this term, because, to me, it refers not to the person, but to the function of the name used to describe them. It is a signal to others that this name, and its connection to that particular person, has been foreclosed, and is not to be used (or kept ‘alive’) anymore.

memory of a relative who has died, instead of an authentic part of his lived experience.

Eventually, after being outed at school and chastised by his mother for being selfish, Adam gives in to the pressure to “revive” Gracie and present as feminine. He clips a barrette in his hair and puts on a blouse to attend dinner with his grandmother, where both his brother and mother make wistful, longing comments that they “missed” him, further advancing the impression that Gracie is a different person than Adam. As a result of this positive reception, Adam continues to present himself as Gracie at school, though his body language is visibly and obviously uncomfortable. After demonstrating in a material way how much pain this causes him, his family and friends say goodbye to the idea of Gracie by burning all of Adam’s “girl clothes” in a bonfire. He chooses not to burn a picture of himself as a child, commenting, “It’s still me,” (Yorke 2010). Despite that final, uplifting comment, the narrative of the episode has not endorsed this message, creating a clear division between the pre-transition self as an inauthentic, negative feminine construction that must be wholly condemned and the openly trans self as inherently masculine, positive and natural.

The presentation of identity as an externalized, relational experience is in part the fault of the medium through which the story is being told: the internal journey of a trans person would be incredibly difficult to articulate through audio-visual means. Nonetheless, the use of mirrors and clothing in these episodes reinforce an impression that trans identity is about the clothes you wear and how you look. Several times throughout the episodes, Adam is shown gazing into mirrors, watching himself as he binds his chest or double-checking the placement of his hat<sup>15</sup>. He and his mother argue about clothes he can wear, and when he eventually decides to socially detransition, wearing feminine clothing to school, those around him immediately adjust their

---

<sup>15</sup> An essential piece of trans self-presentation!

language, referring to him by his dead name without any prompting. This advances the impression that trans identities are conditional upon gendered clothing and the ability to pass, rather than a deeply felt sense of affect that may not connect that closely with external appearance or clothing choices. Jason Lim and Kath Browne (2009) deconstruct their concept of “senses of gender” as being a far more complex notion than simply a question of a mind that does not align with a body, writing, “[what] we propose is that senses of gender emerge in between bodies, discourses, institutions, technologies, expectations, experiences and thought,” (para. 5.4). The concept that external appearance defines gender neglects the extensive matrix of factors listed herein, all of which can interact in different and specific ways for each individual. This neglect leads to an absence of recognition: if one cannot be recognized as one’s gender, as a piece of the self, this creates a sense of alienation that can lead to withdrawal, isolation, depression—dysphoria that does not necessarily begin and end with anatomical configuration. Lim and Browne write that, “this *sense* of gender is virtual: it is *of* the body, part of it, but not the same as the body’s actual fleshiness or materiality. Such a sense may not literally be the body, but it belongs to the body in much the same way as one can make a distinction between the body and its sensations or its movements,” (para. 5.2, original emphasis).

Adam is also a demonstratively heterosexual character. He discusses the opportunity to socialize with “cute girls” during his upcoming ballroom lessons with his friend Eli (Munroe Chambers), and his driving force in part one of the episode is his crush on his dance partner, Bianca (Alicia Josipovic). Adam is confident and forward with Bianca, despite her intimidating behaviour, which elicits a positive response until she discovers that Adam is trans while flirting with him and outs him to their entire school. Throughout the episode, Adam’s sexual orientation is questioned, both by his friends who are attempting to understand him, and by those who are

threatened by his attraction to girls, labeling him a lesbian. Regardless, Adam remains firm in his heterosexual identity: the device of ballroom dancing is used as an erotic metaphor through his attraction to Bianca. When she rejects him as her partner, his male ballroom instructor offers to be Adam's new partner, which he declines. During the low point in the two-episode arc, when Adam attends school as "Gracie", he accepts his instructor's offer in an attempt to play a feminine role. (Hetero)sexual object choice is linked subliminally to gender, and Adam's willingness to dance with a male partner is meant to underline his shame and despair regarding his own gender.

Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook (2009) discuss how transgender identity is reinforced, or obtains legitimacy, through performances of heterosexuality, especially among transgender men. In their case study, interviewing trans men who transitioned in their current workplace, they found that cisgender colleagues frequently used heteronormative rituals to express their support or acceptance for their trans coworker (447). Their acceptance of their coworker relied upon understandings that he had been a "masculine woman", and so his transition made sense and was "natural," (448-449). Furthermore, Schilt and Westbrook found that cis men who were attempting to relate to their trans coworker would often do so by engaging him in sexual discussions of women, finding the "common ground" of their shared gender through an assumption of mutual heterosexuality (451). This heteronormative assumption derives from the belief that one would transition because they desire women, and, "becoming a presumably heterosexual man can be viewed more positively than being a lesbian," (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 451).

Finally, Adam's character demonstrates the incredible pain of gender dysphoria by having a history of self-harm; a history to which he returns during his time playing "Gracie". He

removes the barrette in his hair, heats it with a lighter, and presses it to his skin, parallel to similar, but faded, scars. Once again, this may be a result of the medium used to communicate this pain, but the emphasis on self-harm also creates an understanding that trans existence is agonizing, and to engage in feminine acts as a trans man is unilaterally the most mortifying experience imaginable. Adam's trans identity is defined through suffering as Gracie, rather than through the joy of being Adam. For trans or questioning viewers who do not experience dysphoria or cannot recognize their feelings of dysphoria (as I did not when I was that age), the extreme portrayal of this character's pain places gender exploration at a distance, reserved only for those who feel this level of suffering.

Adam advocates for himself throughout the two-episode arc, defending his trans identity to his mother, brother, teachers, principal, friends, and classmates, correcting his family members' microaggressions with a well-worn look of disdain that is familiar to most openly trans folks. Upon first viewing, with all of these corrections, it might be easy to forget that all of the dialogue was written by cis writers and spoken by a cis actress. There is only the illusion of a trans voice that can self-advocate, and this becomes most apparent in a sequence that takes place almost at the end of part one, in which Adam, having been backed into a corner after his friend Clare (Aisling Paul) notices he is carrying tampons with him, decides to come out to both her and Eli. Adam's language to explain trans identity is deeply simplistic, perhaps due to writers' assumption that many viewers would have never heard of trans experiences. More importantly, however, this language follows an incredibly cisnormative script, and thus a moment of media pedagogy is transformed into a circus of misinformation and tokenism.

Adam begins his explanation by stating immediately, "I'm a guy—like, 100% dude... but I was born in a girl's body," (Grassi, 2010). The qualification of one's gender in such strict binary

terms is a matter of individual identification, but given that this was written by cisgender writers and many audience members' first exposure to the concept of a transgender person, this language contributes to a broader, normative set of conditions to trans acceptance, as long as individuals still fit in these strictly defined binary categories. This is when the 'born in the wrong body' discourse becomes imperative. *They're just like normal people, but with one small problem!* Adam does not first define himself as a transgender man, but instead as a man in a woman's body. His friends' confused faces prompt him to clarify, "I'm an FTM: female-to-male transgender," (Grassi, 2010). This is an agonizing line. At the risk of sounding pedantic, "transgender" is an adjective to describe one's gender or lived experiences—as a noun, it becomes pejorative and dehumanizing. Furthermore, the acronyms "FTM" and "MTF" (male-to-female, or a trans woman) are now outdated<sup>16</sup>, but this was not necessarily the case at the time of this episode's airing. The issue with these terms is that the language being used still affords legitimacy to the physical body as a determinant of gender by grounding the term in the subject's 'birth sex': an FTM is a 'female who became male', rather than a 'male who was inaccurately classified as female'. These critiques could be dismissed as linguistic nitpicking, considering that these episodes were made ten years ago, and trans scholarship has evolved exponentially, but the sequence continues and becomes far more evidently dangerous in its generality. The concept of the mind-body dualism, as described by Sullivan (112), is reinforced again when Clare asks Adam if that means he's gay, and he replies, "No, I like girls, and since I'm a guy *between the ears*, that makes me straight," (Grassi, 2010, emphasis added). Adam's identity in his mind ("between the ears") is framed as counteracting the fact of his "female" anatomy, which

---

<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, as one may have noticed in my introduction, I do occasionally use variations of this acronym to describe my own gender, but this is a deliberate reclamation, and not a term I would ever ascribe to another trans person without their consent.

otherwise would be committing a homosexual act when having sex with a woman. This implication reinforces an understanding that certain body parts and traits are inherently male or female.

When asked how long he had known he was trans, Adam says, “Since I was four? Five? I hated wearing dresses and having long hair,” (Grassi, 2010). Gender is, once again, narrowly defined by masculine clothing and hairstyles, and additionally portrayed as something that should be easy to understand about oneself very early in life. Dean Spade (2006) reflects upon the narrative of the transsexual childhood after encountering these assumptions while attempting to access gender affirming treatment: how trans people are expected to have been gender-variant children, how gender is treated like a tidy, inherent thing that should be evident to a child, that the masculinity of a “female” child and the femininity of a “male” child are not only diagnosable traits, but that the opposite is sufficient evidence of a “normal”—that is, cisgender—child (p. 320). Spade uses Foucault’s concept of productive power to analyze this narrativizing impulse, writing that the act of medicalizing gender nonconformity in childhood creates a myth that there is a natural gender binary, and only those that adhere to this binary are defined as authentic transsexuals (p. 321).

Finally, Clare asks Adam, “Well, how do you know you’re not just a tomboy, or a lesbian?” to which Adam replies, “I just... know,” (Grassi, 2010). Much like the final sequence of part two, when Adam decides not to burn the photograph of himself as a child, the affective nature of gender is referenced, without any clear definition of what that means and having been entirely contradicted by the conversation that precedes it. The writers recognize that there is an elusive, immaterial component to gender, but without the language to describe it or the

knowledge that lived experience could provide to express it, Adam's conclusions that end both of these episodes—"I just know," (Grassi, 2010) or "It's still me," (Yorke, 2010)—become hollow clichés.

This is only one example of the ways that cisnormative discourse defines trans experience in film and television, but similar narratives can be found in plenty of popular media that features trans characters played by cis actors in the twenty-first century. Films such as *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015), *3 Generations* (Dellal, 2015), and *Girl* (Dhont, 2018), as well as television portrayals on popular series including *Glee*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Family Guy*, *Nip/Tuck*, *The L Word*, *Orphan Black*, and *Transparent*, among others, could all be deconstructed to find similar messages to Adam's narrative on *Degrassi*. While the entertainment industry is evolving, more frequently hiring trans actors and writers to ensure accurate and respectful portrayals of trans experiences, this does not erase the discursive impact that the aforementioned catalogue has had and continues to have upon public understandings of trans identity.

#### Interviews: Raised By Television

"Representation matters!" has been a rallying cry for feminist, queer, and anti-racist activists when discussing inclusivity in media. The inclusion of a character who belongs to an underrepresented group in television or film can have an incredible impact, for both members of that group and for individuals who have not yet been exposed to someone of that identity. The reason that I include such a lengthy analysis of a niche episode of television that aired over ten years ago is to demonstrate the impact that limited or inaccurate representation can have. While my interview questions did not specifically ask about pop culture or the general dearth of publicly-circulated information regarding gender identity, this issue still surfaced at least once in each of the five conversations I had. My participants' understandings of trans experience were

collected, much like my own sordid education in the halls of Degrassi High, from fiction novels, TLC programs, episodes of *Glee*, and Youtube vloggers, all of which are dubious sources at best, and at times downright misleading or harmful. Blu<sup>17</sup>, who is nonbinary and uses he/him pronouns, when asked what caused him to begin questioning his gender, made indirect reference to the exploitative tone used in television specials featuring Thomas Beatie, a trans man who made headlines in 2008 by publicly announcing his pregnancy. As noted by Damien W. Riggs (2014), in conducting a nationally-televised interview with Beatie, Oprah Winfrey consistently asked questions and offered responses that presented gender as a natural fact of the body, equated with sex, that, while not explicitly disregarding Beatie's legitimacy as a man, created a conversation that discursively undermined the aforementioned legitimacy (p. 161). Blu briefly mentioned this special as the first time he remembers learning about trans identities, and while not commenting upon it extensively, he demonstrated his disdain in the sarcastic tone of voice that he used to describe advertisements for the interview. He continued by noting that an elective university course he took on human sexuality, several years later, was the first time he encountered a description of trans identity that resonated with him.

Participants made mention of education from both the position of student and teacher. Avery, who is nonbinary and "definitely more on the feminine side of that," made specific reference to the fact that they did not learn about trans people in school, despite being "a very good school for, like, in terms of LGBT issues [sic]," and had to self-educate to learn the term "nonbinary". Lavender, who is nonbinary, described coming out to their parents, who were entirely unfamiliar with the concept: "I think—you know how you kinda hear some things here and there but you don't really understand it, I think that was my parents [...] So I—I definitely

---

<sup>17</sup> All names have been changed, and pseudonyms were selected by participants.

had to do a lot of, like, explaining and educating and teaching them what it's about," forcing them to perform additional labour while simultaneously engaging in the emotionally rigorous process of coming out.

As demonstrated by my own experience, even when some modicum of information is available, the narrow representation of experiences can cause additional confusion for individuals attempting to sort through the swampy mess that is gender identity. Four of my participants out of five noted that they initially identified themselves as binary trans people, which, in a cisnormative narrative, should be the end of the questions and the confusion. However, as this project is meant to demonstrate, even self-identifying as trans can be as restrictive as self-identifying as cis when one is still confined to the gender binary. As noted by August, a genderqueer leather dyke, "I was really modelling my transition and my expectations after [trans men on Youtube], um, because that was literally all that I had access to, and that felt better, but it didn't feel right. It still felt inauthentic, it was something I had to think about how I was presenting still [sic]". Blu stated that he began policing his self-presentation after coming out as a trans man to more accurately fit an image of manhood: "I had pierced ears as a kid and that was a way to express myself but when I came out as a man I took them all out because I was like 'no piercings, that's too fem'."

I raise these examples to demonstrate the effect that limited representation, being distinct from a complete absence of representation, can still fail those on the margins of trans experience. Despite having the language and understanding to know themselves as trans, my interview participants and I were still grappling with binary gender expectations that dampened the liberatory possibilities of this realization.

### Chapter Three: Permission to Identify

#### (Or, My Gender Is A Cork Board of Conspiracy Theories Connected With Red String)

*You're not your thoughts, you're not your brain /*

*You're just the character you've made /*

*Up in your head, down in your heart /*

*What seem like separate body parts /*

*Come together to believe they're you ...*

*- Will Wood, "Marsha, Thankk You For The Dialectics, but I Need You to Leave"*

The concept that trans people—and before that, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people—were ‘born this way’ is a popular piece of rhetoric, often used strategically to justify queer existence, but also creates a discursive impression that queer identities are definitive and static. I want, instead, to use this chapter to explore some ways that queer identities can come down to choice, since potentially-trans people may not always experience the feelings of certainty or authenticity that are considered essential to trans identification. I use the term ‘potentially’ to acknowledge that trans identity is not something that is necessarily innate for everybody and can instead be pursued intentionally.

Gender dysphoria is a term used to describe a sense of distress with one’s assigned gender. It is also a medical diagnosis, as listed in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and has historically been a requirement for access to transition-related medical procedures (see Meyerowitz, 2004; Spade, 2006). As observed by Jack Halberstam (2018), the clinical definition of gender dysphoria fails to recognize that external factors that can affect a trans person—his examples include “social exclusion, family violence, or reduced employment opportunities”—can be the cause of

dysphoria, rather than being solely located in the gendered embodiment of the individual (p. 47). The emphasis placed on dysphoria within the medical system, and the emphasis placed on medical transition by cisnormative understandings of gender, have created a false impression that this is the only motivation for transition and that this sensation should be easy to identify: are you happy with your genitals or not? This, however, is not always the case. Luna Ferguson (2019) notes that constant insistence upon cisnormative behaviours throughout childhood can disrupt a trans person's ability to recognize dysphoria as such (p. 29-30). Binary gender dictates children's lives, from the gendered division of the classroom to the aisles at the toy store, and there is no space made for ambiguity between the two (Ferguson, 2019, p. 30). As Riki Anne Wilchins (1997) notes, "We cannot see what we cannot name, and what may not exist. Thus, knowledge itself becomes coercive, forcing us to see some things and marginalizing others," (p. 11). In this chapter, I trace my own experiences jumping through various hoops of identity to unpack experiences of buried gender dysphoria and shining gender euphoria, misguided identification with the (in my younger mind) more legible gender of 'lesbian'<sup>18</sup>, and then resurfacing with my patchwork version of 'coming out' and my nebulous relationship with hormone replacement therapy, in an attempt to demonstrate the twisted road toward trans identification that can occur for those whose feelings toward their gendered embodiment are not so clear.

-Phoria

---

<sup>18</sup> I have intentionally referred to 'lesbian' as a gender here and not a sexual orientation because, as I will unpack in this chapter, I used this term for myself as a form of identity to cope with gender discordance rather than to describe a specific experience of sexual attraction (though I did not realize this at the time).

As a teenager, I wanted bigger breasts. I had been cursed with A-cups while my best friend, Jaeden<sup>19</sup>, got double-Ds that had the boys paying attention to her in a variety of unsavoury ways. She always told me I did not want them, that her breasts caused her back pain, and that she was being constantly harassed. Her testimonies did nothing to dissuade me. I wanted to be harassed like that if it meant that boys wanted me. That was how little self-worth I had (not to mention an extreme lack of compassion for Jaeden's experiences). Nonetheless, I remember being in sixth grade and switching for the first time from a training bra to an actual bra with an underwire. It was a cute turquoise number, spotted with little white polka dots and lace around the edges. I was excited to wear it to school—until I put it on. I will never forget the sudden wave of nausea that washed over me, the lurch that heaved in my chest, right behind the offending body part, the sudden weight of them over my lungs. I was baffled. This is what I *wanted*; I was finally developing like a woman should and I got to wear this cute bra but it made me feel sick. I did not take it off and ignored that *wave* so impetuously that it would only surface when I wore a new garment over my chest—the unfamiliar sensation making me hyper-aware of *them*—and I figured that that was just what having breasts felt like. These feelings persisted for ten years.

This was not the only example of my lack of observational skills regarding my relationship to my gender. Over the course of my late adolescence, I had enjoyed being mistaken for a boy several different times, but never made a connection that this was grounds for further gender exploration. For example, my first job was at an independent butcher shop. I was the only

---

<sup>19</sup> Names have been changed

girl stationed behind the Fresh Meat<sup>20</sup> counter, and this is one more time that I experienced being ‘one of the boys, but not quite’. I remember once that an elderly woman peered over the counter at all of us and pronounced us to collectively be a very handsome group of boys. My head knew she either did not notice me, or could not see very well, but my heart said, “She means *you*”. Writing it down, this incident seems like a very clear sign that I should have been asking myself some questions about gender, but that, of course, would make far too much sense. I did not tie that thought back to anything at the time; by cisnormative standards, my childhood had already proven me to be a girl (see Spade, 2006), and this moment was ‘just a funny thing that happened’.

When I (finally) started to wonder if I was trans, I was in university. I was sitting in my Gendered Violence lecture, two years into a Women’s and Gender Studies bachelor’s degree when my professor noted that “most trans people never actually have any surgeries.” I was gobsmacked because I had been under the impression that one had to have, or at the very least, *want*, all available surgeries to be ‘properly trans’. Suddenly, I was imagining being able to call myself a boy without the pressure of changing my body, which I thought was fine as-is (having not even registered that the physical reaction I occasionally had to my chest as anything unusual). I use the word ‘boy’ intentionally, despite the fact that I was approaching 20 at the time. The instability and uncertainty that I was experiencing made the term ‘man’ feel far too

---

<sup>20</sup> I was advised after my first draft not to capitalize ‘Fresh Meat’, but I have always considered it the department’s title rather than just a description of its contents. The words were mounted directly above the heads of our entirely-teenaged staff, of which, again, I was the only girl.

definitive. ‘Boy’, on the other hand, had a flexibility to it—a ‘boy’ is not yet complete. He is still learning how to ‘be’, as it were.<sup>21</sup>

I had tried presenting as masculine a few times beforehand under the guise of a ‘social experiment’—the most memorable one being part of an assignment from my first-year Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies class. The assignment was to go to a public place dressed in a gender conforming way, then go to the same place the following day in gender non-conforming attire, and write about the discrepancies in how you were received by others. This assignment was problematic at best, potentially harmful, and certainly trivializing the lived experiences of trans folks, but I did not know any of that yet and threw myself into the project with enthusiasm. This took place in the months before I began questioning my gender. As I percolated upon the information that “most trans people don’t have any surgeries” (which is, granted, an oversimplified summation), I began to toy with the idea of being genderfluid. I experimented with using ‘they/them’ pronouns, but that felt uncomfortable and still does now. I flattened my chest using two layers of sports bras and found that this aesthetic appealed to me, despite still being convinced that I wanted a bigger chest.

The more moments of gender euphoria that I experienced from this period of genderfluid exploration (seeing photos of myself that I thought made me look masculine, successfully binding my chest, being called ‘he’ by the few friends in whom I had confided) the more I realized that my previous perception of myself as cisgender had not actually fit as well as I had thought. I began my journey thinking I would make a solely social transition, one that did not permeate every aspect of my life. I would share my new name and pronouns with my friends and

---

<sup>21</sup> It is also important to note that this impulse to claim ‘boy’, and the naïveté that this term evokes, as an emerging adult is also an effect of my white privilege, as black men have historically been denied a recognition of full adulthood by white people’s use of this term as a racial slur (Bennet-Alexander, 2010).

my family would never need to know. I could not ‘take their daughter away from them’, which, logically, I knew was not what transitioning would mean, but transition-as-loss is a well-established social perception that infected my mind nonetheless. Shirley Emerson and Carole Rosenfeld (1996) conducted a study on familial responses to a trans person’s coming-out. The authors specifically likened the average emotional trajectory to Kubler-Ross’s five stages of grief, writing that once these stages are complete, “[a]cceptance of any transgender behavior [...] may evoke feelings of loss of the person one thought one knew,” (p. 7). I did not feel like a different person, and the thought of presenting my family with information that would make them feel like they suddenly did not know me was terrifying. I reasoned that I did not experience dysphoria—not *really*—so this could not be that severe of a circumstance.

Meanwhile, I replaced a lot of my wardrobe with clothing designed for men, even though all of it was too big for me and just felt awkward, but I kept a lot of my ‘girl’ clothes—just in case. My drawer full of makeup was not emptied but instead became a restricted zone, not to be used under any circumstances. It seemed odd to me that I was willfully moving away from my own desires by rejecting my previous, comfortable wardrobe and disavowing my interest in cosmetics. Nonetheless, having little impulse control in general, I could not resist the pull toward this new gender, which I believed required such a sacrifice. It took several months of adjusting to this new designation in my social circles before I realized that my gender identity was not something I could compartmentalize. I was in a single stall, gender-neutral bathroom, removing my only binder to put on my winter coat so that my mother would not notice my flattened chest when I arrived home from campus, when I looked in the mirror and thought my chest seemed larger than before. The mysterious *wave* came back.

*Oh. That's dysphoria.* I had never realized before. My misery over my chest had, for years, manifested as an issue of size, but it had been misattributed. I became a little bit angry with myself: how could I have been so stupid? Butler (1990/2006) argues that while gender and sexuality are separate categories—manhood does not inherently mean an attraction to women and vice versa—these two elements can work in tandem to affect identity formation (p. 30-31). I believe my confusion regarding my bodily dysphoria is in line with Butler's argument: my attraction to men, framed as heterosexual based upon my assigned gender at birth, confounded my displeasure with my body and redirected that displeasure to fit a heterosexual framework. My heteronormative, grade-school-level epistemological training had created a simple equation: I do not like my chest + I want boys to like me = my chest should be bigger because that is what boys like.<sup>22</sup> I did not know that some trans men are bisexual, gay, or queer, or that bisexual, gay, or queer cis men are attracted to them, so I never entertained that thought. This perception of my body as something that must be impressive to a hypothetical straight male observer was so insidious that I had forgotten to keep checking in with myself regarding how I actually felt about having a bigger chest; I had uncritically internalized the idea that I wanted one, and that this was 'the Truth', even when I was deliberately choosing to flatten my chest instead. Gender dysphoria did not make itself known to me until I had experienced gender *euphoria*. It was joy that fuelled my transition, not suffering; it was still present, surely, but it was a secondary concern, and one that was difficult to even identify without the presence of euphoria to contextualize those sensations.

The notion that one has to be dysphoric to be trans, and that this dysphoria must be medically validated, is incredibly limiting. Ferguson (2019) describes this discordance in their

---

<sup>22</sup> I intentionally worded this in an overly simplistic way to reflect how heteronormative standards of attraction are taken for granted as universal truths.

own nonbinary gender journey, writing, “The [medical] tests were meant to make some sense of me, or to help my parents understand me. The more insidious aim was to correct me along the lines of a pathology, to recraft me into a ‘normal’ child. I didn't present to my parents with an urgency for health care intervention. I was gender-creative. There was nothing wrong with me. My gender creativity was right, not wrong,” (p. 16). Their experiences with a medical system that was determined to locate them as either male or female caused more harm than help, whilst the joy of their gender creativity was discounted and ignored (p. 15). The value of gender euphoria as a factor of transition, especially in resistance to the medical pathologization of trans experience that places focus entirely upon the presence of gender dysphoria, cannot be overstated.

#### Miss Direction

I realized I was bisexual in the summer between grades 6 and 7. I cannot recall ever consciously identifying as ‘straight’, but I had had crushes on boys throughout my early childhood and before claiming a bisexual identity, it stands to reason I was probably assumed to be a heterosexual child by the adults around me. My sexual orientation has worn many hats since then. I dated boys in high school, but I remember feeling strange about it and telling my therapist that, “I was attracted to my boyfriend, just not to *us* as a couple.” She had no idea what I meant, telling me that it was his job to be attracted to me, not mine, but I would not accept that. After graduating high school, when I realized I could not overcome the feeling that I was not attracted to myself in a relationship with a man, I tentatively called myself a lesbian instead. That identification choice felt bold and empowering, at least for a little while. I was very motivated to achieve this specific hard femme lesbian aesthetic that still felt like a lot of work to maintain all the time, despite being my supposedly authentic self: high heels, dark lipstick, a slick bob

haircut. These are all things that I still like to this day—when I’m in drag, as I will explore in the following chapter.

Dating women was easy because most of my one-on-one social life growing up—playdates, sleepovers—was spent with girls. It felt low-pressure, but it also did not ignite a fire in my chest the way kissing strange boys at house parties had, even though they were not exactly the most gifted with their hands. At this point, I became very invested in Adrienne Rich’s (1980) theory of compulsory heterosexuality and used it to mentally justify to myself every instance of attraction to men that I could remember. Rich advances the notion that many potentially-lesbian women experience internalized misogyny, which she calls “male-identification” (p. 645). This mindset precludes the possibility of a relationship with another woman by framing women as subordinate to men, despite the powerful role that same-gender connections often take in women’s lives anyway (Rich, 1980, p. 646).

~~I find it ironic that I was so invested in the  
idea of ‘male-identification’ jamming up my supposedly  
woman-centred truth, only to learn later that the issue was  
male identification of another kind, so to speak.~~

For someone that was clearly not exclusively attracted to women<sup>23</sup>, I was extremely committed to establishing a lesbian identity. I think it was the appeal of claiming a queer self, and the way that the identity of ‘lesbian’ can open up avenues to exploring masculinity while maintaining a connection to femininity that appealed to me. Monique Wittig’s (1992/1993) argument regarding lesbianism as a departure from womanhood in the traditional sense comes to

---

<sup>23</sup> I also recognize that there are conversations happening within lesbian communities right now regarding the efficacy of defining lesbianism as “exclusive attraction to women”—to explore them here would be a massive digression from my point, but the issue is important to acknowledge so that I do not, in my quest for validation, passively invalidate the identity of someone else.

mind: “The refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not,” (p. 105).

Encounters with women notwithstanding, the most satisfying erotic experiences I had in my adolescence were conducted alone, solely the business of me and my iPod Touch’s browser history (which I cleared daily). First, I would use fanfiction.net, and when that site became unfashionable for the modern fandom enthusiast, I moved over to archiveofourown.org, colloquially known as “ao3”. I exclusively read gay male erotica and love stories, and often wondered why the relationship gender dynamic that most appealed to me was the one in which I could never participate. Lou Sullivan (1973/2006), in an argument with a radical feminist who would likely be labeled as a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) today, describes a moment of pre-transition clarity that, despite my own experiences taking place in a digital and fictional realm, still feels terribly familiar. Sullivan writes, “The awakening came for me when a beautiful gay came up to me on the street in the fall of ’71 and I couldn’t take time to even talk to him cuz I was meeting my boyfriend on the bus and it was coming a block away. And I knew when I got on that bus and left that beauty standing there that I’d never stop regretting that moment,” (p. 164). *Having* a boyfriend is fine, but it turned out that *being* a boyfriend is just as important for me. As written above, I was not attracted to myself in a relationship with a man, but the issue was not the man—it was me. This piece of my gender dysphoria only manifested in relation to another person, as opposed to the expectation that dysphoria is individual and located solely within the body (Halberstam, 2018, p. 47). I was unhappy dating men, not because I was not attracted to them, but because my own emerging sense of queer masculinity was not being validated in relationships that would have likely been otherwise satisfying.

Along with questions of sexuality, my gender discovery also caused what I believed to be a crisis of morality. I was so invested in calling myself a lesbian feminist that it was deeply alarming to realize that I was not a woman, not a lesbian, and perhaps, as a consequence, not even a feminist. I had thrown myself into a Women's and Gender Studies degree based upon my passion for feminist and queer activism, and I felt frightened to leave that cause behind, which is what I gathered that 'becoming a man' would be. Paul Preciado captures this sentiment when he asks: "How can I explain what is happening to me? What can I do about my desire for transformation? What can I do about all the years I defined myself as a feminist? What kind of feminist am I today: a feminist hooked on testosterone, or a transgender body hooked on feminism?" (Preciado, 2008/2013, p. 21-22). The culture of feminism in which I was involved at the time was of a vaguely Valerie-Solanas-style persuasion, at least in a metaphorical sense. The rallying cry was that 'men are trash', which, to be entirely fair, remains true today. My own pocket-sized Janice Raymond (1979/2006)<sup>24</sup> lived on my shoulder, berating me for betraying my cause—"Male behaviour is notably obtrusive," (p. 133), and whatnot.<sup>25</sup> Suzanna Walters (1996) bemoans that, "*Queer* (as opposed to *gay* or *lesbian*) lets you off the identity hook the way that 'gender studies' has vis-a-vis 'women's studies', while cashing in on the trendiness of postmodernism," (p. 840) as if women are the only ones with a gender, and thus the only ones that merit study. This attitude that the field is 'women's studies' and not 'gender studies', is emblematic of the narrow feminist perspective in which I was immersed: being a woman was radical and full of potential— "the creative power that is associated with female biology [...] is

---

<sup>24</sup> A leading voice in trans-exclusionary feminist theory.

<sup>25</sup> I must note that Raymond's argument was focused on attacking trans women specifically, framing them as 'men invading lesbian/women's spaces', but her violent, trans-exclusionary logic has been applied to trans people of all sorts over time.

multidimensional, bearing culture, harmony, and true inventiveness,” (Raymond, 1979/2006, p. 136)—while being a man (or anything else, though this perspective rarely acknowledged anything outside of the binary) was reactionary and disappointing. Being a woman *becoming* a man was thus an absolute travesty.

This perspective, of course, did not last, as I was exposed to more accounts and interpretations of transmasculinity, both in person, by meeting other trans people at the Gender and Sexuality Resource Centre on campus, and in writing, as part of my degree. In the anthology *Nobody Passes* (2006), Logan Gutierrez-Mock’s essay “F2Mestizo” discusses the discordance between his own sense of Chicano masculinity, and the traditional machismo of Mexican-American men that caused his mother such strife, and as a result, her negative reaction to his transition (p. 234). He deliberately chose to pursue a, “faggoty/divalicious/pink-is-my-favourite-colour/trans masculinity”, and with it, a celebration and acceptance of his biracial identity, having previously passed as white (p. 232). His identity as male is inseparable from his active rejection of hegemony, and accounts like his were incredibly healing for my perspective of my own identity. Being white, I cannot fully understand the extent of Gutierrez-Mock’s personal journey, but I can appreciate it, with the understanding that race is tied to gender in a way that cannot be disentangled. I have been privileged enough that I have not had to grapple with mine while sorting out my gender, given that the white supremacist society in which we live naturalizes whiteness, erasing it as a cognizable race and instead framing it as the default form of existence (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 369). Regardless, accounts like Gutierrez-Mock’s that demonstrate trans experiences of alternative, queer, or feminine masculinities (I love a contradiction) reminded me of the same thing I had been reinforcing to others as a feminist for years: that

gender is a malleable social construct, and can manifest in innumerable ways, regardless of what that gender might be.

### In The Closet But With The Door Open

For all my experimentation with various labels over the years, I have done very little actual ‘coming out’. I mainly just allowed those around me to draw some form of conclusion in their own time, helped along by the occasional joke I could not resist making. I dated a few guys in high school, and a few girls after graduating, and my family did not ask a lot of questions about it, besides my mother occasionally needling me about whether I found various male celebrities attractive after picking up along the way that I had started calling myself a lesbian.<sup>26</sup> The only official, proper Coming Out I did was on March 11, 2017, when I took a bus across town to my parents’ house and asked them both to sit down on the sofa across from me.<sup>27</sup> My voice broke on the word ‘trans’, which is incredibly funny in retrospect, given the oft-publicized vocal journeys of trans people beginning to take testosterone. At the sound of distress, my dog rose from where he had been lounging in the kitchen and padded into the living room to put his chin on my knee and stare up at me with his big, stupid, whale eyes. He wins Best Response to Someone Coming Out forever.<sup>28</sup>

I find the fixation on parents’ reactions in relation to coming out narratives to be quite tedious, given that the (cis) person doing the asking is almost always fishing for some sort of juicy sob story, so I will not be extensively detailing my own parents’ responses to this news.

---

<sup>26</sup> We could cancel my mother here, given that this would be a fairly blatant microaggression in another circumstance, but I would encourage folks to reconsider, given that she clearly knew something about me, specifically, that I didn’t at the time.

<sup>27</sup> I can feel my heartbeat increasing from residual anxiety right now while revisiting this memory.

<sup>28</sup> Donna Haraway’s (2003/2016) *Companion Species Manifesto* covers the intricate affective relationship between humans and dogs in particular, but to explore this here would be a significant digression (amongst digressions) that exceeds the scope of this thesis.

Overall, their reactions were cautiously neutral, and both have adjusted perfectly well. I have instead chosen one comment I can remember from each to unpack to demonstrate how trans identities are discursively framed to demand certainty in ways that do not account for the experiences of those who are not definitively gendered (see Wilchins, 1997; Bornstein, 2016; Ferguson, 2019). I apologize in advance to my parents, given that publishing these comments may cast them in a slightly negative light—please understand, reader, that these remarks are comparatively tame, even arguably positive compared to some of my peers’ experiences when taking the same step.

Seconds after my admission, my father carefully asked, “... [t]o what... extent... are you trans?” I think this was an attempt to ask if I was nonbinary, but he could not recall the term. At the time, I was not calling myself nonbinary since, as I discussed in the closing reflection of chapter two, information regarding gender diversity and the fluid potentiality of trans identification was still something to which I had little access, and my understanding was that I could be either nonbinary or a trans man, but not both. Since the pronouns that feel correct for me are ‘he’ and ‘him’, and I was still wedded to the belief that pronouns are an unequivocal announcement of gender identity, rather than being just one piece of gender expression, I had decided I was a binary trans man. Nonetheless, I lied and said that I was genderfluid<sup>29</sup> and used ‘they/them’ pronouns. This was borne partially out of a sense of guilt, that I was ‘abandoning’ my mother and leaving her stranded in a family of men between my father, my brother, and me, but the more important reason that I said this is one that relates back to the dubious way that my

---

<sup>29</sup> But in retrospect, was that really a lie? It felt like a lie when I said it, but is now much closer to the truth than I recognized at the time, so does that statement become retroactively true? To say so would assume a static and inherent gender identity, which, as I hope I have made abundantly clear, I do not believe necessarily exists. To call it a lie, however, would be to validate the narrow assumptions I myself made about my gender based on the information available to me at the time. I have stumbled upon yet another impossible question.

father phrased the question in the first place: claiming a nonbinary identity, within a mental framework that still believed that binary trans people ‘transition’ (in the medical sense) and nonbinary people do not, seemed less ‘extreme’, and thus something that I hoped would be easier for my parents to accept.

In a study of parents’ strategies when raising gender-variant children, Elizabeth Rahilly (2015) describes the initial strategy used by many parents as “gender hedging” (p. 347). Parents made compromises with their children regarding the child’s desire to express gender non-conformity, to balance that desire with a socially acceptable image—“A parent purchases pink socks for their ‘son,’ for example, but not a skirt,” (Rahilly, 2015, p. 347). As an emerging adult, slowly establishing independence from my parents at that time<sup>30</sup>, I used gender hedging in an inverse way, to ease my relationship with my parents when attempting to explain an illegible gender identity and choice to transition that likely seemed very sudden and potentially alienating (see Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996). I gave them permission to continue using my dead name<sup>31</sup> and calling me their daughter because I was afraid of the way their acknowledgement of my non-normative gender would affect our relationship. This eventually just caused me more pain and put a strain on our relationship, regardless. I had, without realizing, hoped they would use the correct name and pronouns of their own initiative, and they had instead taken me at my word. After a few weeks, I rescinded that permission, having realized my mistake.

That evening, during the car ride back to my apartment, my mother reviewed the day’s events. I think she may have asked me if I had really believed there was a possibility they would not be accepting, since I had noted my own anxiety over the process. She presented me with an

---

<sup>30</sup> I had only moved out of my parents’ home a month beforehand, partially with the intention of having a metaphorical escape hatch to duck through after coming out.

<sup>31</sup> As defined in chapter two, the gendered name I was assigned at birth.

alarming query: “If we hadn’t accepted you, what would you have done?” I blanched and eventually admitted I would have let the whole thing go, and just carried on living a cis life. My family, my support system, was too important. She countered me by saying that she had wanted to hear that I would transition anyway and that I should be so certain of this that nothing would stand in my way. While I do not doubt that this was meant to be encouraging, this sentiment is reflective of the ways that criteria of severity are placed on trans identification. How can one be certain of something that is, by its own nature, abstract and indefinable? How am I supposed to know what it feels like to be a ‘boy’ when I have never “done”<sup>32</sup> it before?

Joanne Meyerowitz (2004), in her chronicle of early medical transition procedures developed in the 1950s and 1960s, describes the ways that trans people consistently described experiences of unrelenting suffering from living as their assigned sex to access medical treatment. This involved frequent allusions to suicidal ideation, ostracization from familial and social circles, and, again, an easily identifiable sense of discordance that began early in life (p. 134-136). She quotes an anonymous trans woman who states, “You have to tell the doctor that if you don’t get [the desired surgery] you will commit suicide,” (p, 158). While these are stories from the relative origin of trans medical discourse, the insistence upon the “fierce and demanding drive”—as Meyerowitz titled her chapter after the comments of Debbie Mayne (pseudonym), a trans woman seeking surgery—persists. My mother’s belief that I should be willing to sacrifice my connections to my family to pursue transition reflects this discourse that anything less than a totalizing and unwavering obsession with transition, at any cost, does not require addressing or treatment.

---

<sup>32</sup> As West & Zimmerman (1987) would say.

From then on, I did absolutely no coming out (besides a brief social media post sharing my name and pronouns, but deliberately sidestepping the question of identification). As I had suspected, given my previous reluctance to do so, once was more than enough. Through my passivity, I relocated all that responsibility to my cis family members, in collaboration with time and decay. This last term may seem morbid, but as a bittersweet example of its function: my paternal grandmother, who was my last living grandparent, only saw me once after I came out. It was over FaceTime, my aunt sitting beside her to hold the phone up. Having lost significant chunks of memory at that point due to dementia, she asked, “Who’s that?”

My aunt replied, brightly, “That’s Noah!”

My grandmother said, “Oh,” and nodded slightly, as if considering this information, before announcing, “He’s good.”

#### If A Quiz Is Quizzical, What’s A Test?<sup>33</sup>

I began taking testosterone on June 29, 2017. My roommate at the time came with me to the appointment. We made a whole day of it since I was very anxious, which is characteristic of my general response to most events. This time, however, it took me most of then day to fathom why my anxiety was so high, given that this was a choice I made, and I do not have a phobia of needles. I received my initiating jab, and we walked around the mall all afternoon, trying on the most ridiculous garments we could find and then laughing at each other. I kept the cotton ball taped to my thigh long after the injection site had surely scabbed over, as a badge of achievement. It wasn’t until that evening, coming out of the shower, that I realized the cause of my trepidation. Looking down my torso to the apex of my thighs, already checking for signs of

---

<sup>33</sup> My least favourite classmate said this to me in the 10th grade, and I still remember it because I was surprised that he made me laugh instead of saying something nasty, as I had learned to expect from him.

growth, it hit me that I was anxious about my body becoming *unfamiliar*. This is interesting to me in retrospect, given how often the dominant narrative of trans experience frames individuals as being alienated from their bodies *before* beginning transition, and becoming increasingly comfortable with every new step, certain of each one long before it is taken. I did not experience the “fierce and demanding drive” (see Meyerowitz, 2004) to the extent that is generally expected; in fact, I rarely experienced dysphoria of any kind regarding the shape of my genitals, and so I worried that I was somehow making a mistake and rendering my body incoherent by my own hand. *What if I’m wrong?*

This, fortunately, did not happen, and I am now very fond of the “angry inch” I have gained (Mitchell, 2001).

Eli Clare (2017), in unpacking his relationship with medical transition and hormone therapy, disparages his own early attempts to romanticize testosterone: “I caught myself thinking of that pale yellow synthetic hormone as honey and light, the smell of sugar pine, infusing me. Through metaphor, I was trying to wrench my transformation away from the medical-industrial complex,” (p. 179). His previous perspective on testosterone draws imagery from nature, evoking the “settledness” for which he yearned, before acknowledging its inextricable role in the medicalization of gender transition (p. 179). Conversely, Paul B. Preciado (2008/2013) approaches his relationship with the hormone from a different direction, positioning his use of testosterone as an intentional refusal of a ‘natural’ state: “We’re *copyleft* users who consider sex hormones free and open biocodes whose use shouldn’t be regulated by the state or commandeered by pharmaceutical companies,” (p. 55). He describes his first experience on T as analogous to the ingestion of a hard drug: he pulls all-nighters, seized with a fervour to write, “lucid, energetic, wide awake, like I was the first night I had sex with a girl,” (p. 56).

When planning this section, I knew I wanted to engage specifically with other transmasculine writers' descriptions of testosterone, but struggled to conjure what I would say in response. I felt neither the romantic notions Clare described, nor Preciado's passionate, raging trip<sup>34</sup>. In fact, I cannot recall much about my early days on testosterone beyond the agentic pride at being brave enough to inject myself, and the satisfaction of making my own 'voice update' videos in the same style of transmasculine content creators on T that came before me. Essentially, I got the material changes I wanted from hormone replacement therapy, and thought little about it otherwise.

More irony abounds: as I write this, I have been off testosterone for two months, and, before stopping, wrestled with similar bodily questions of identity that had plagued me upon deciding to start. Mostly, *what if I'm wrong?* I read testimonies from other trans people about how much misery they experienced when having to stop taking hormones, and parallel assertions of the suffering of cis people subjected to hormone therapy (in instances of chemical castration or medical malpractice, for example). I feared that I had not realized how despondent I had truly been before taking testosterone, and that my only choice was to continue for the rest of my life, despite resenting the amount of body hair I have grown, the way that my shape has shifted over time, and quite simply, the weekly injections that have shifted from a source of pride to a chore that I frequently forgot to do in the appropriate time frame. I questioned my legitimacy as a man, because what kind of man would essentially choose to cut himself off from testosterone?

This kind, I suppose. The assumption that a man must have testosterone in his veins relates, once again, back to the notion that gender is biologically determined. The tentative conclusion upon which I have settled, in the absence of any definitive answer, is that my

---

<sup>34</sup> I fear I've created a false binary here—understand that these are simply two examples of, undoubtedly, thousands of affects that may arise from hormone therapy, depending on the individual.

relationship with sex hormones is ambivalent, regardless of which sex with which they are affiliated. Each is a vehicle, a means to an end with benefits and consequences, rather than a permanent state of being. Testosterone gave me an Adam's apple, five o'clock shadow, and a (micro) dick, but raised my body temperature to miserable levels and plugged up my tear ducts. Estrogen requires no maintenance and keeps my skin clear, but brings with it a monthly gore-fest that previously felt unbearable and humiliating;<sup>35</sup> though, since its recent resurgence, has been surprisingly tolerable. At this point, there is no 'right' choice—I just have to pick one, again and again.

The sense of indefinability and ambivalence that I have been delineating in bits and pieces throughout this chapter was also reflected in the interviews I conducted. Multiple participants explicitly appreciated how the term 'nonbinary' has allowed them to be more flexible with gender expression without feeling strictly defined by those choices. Avery stated, "I like to wear a little bit of makeup, paint my nails, that kinda thing, which I guess is a very societally feminine thing, but I don't like being boxed in like that even though those are a lot of interests that I have and things I find key to my identity." Blu's comments on the matter reflected the tension between this lack of restriction and (as I explored in chapter two) the effect of limited representation: "But now, with me identifying with non-binary, it doesn't have, like, a specific look. It doesn't have someone to emulate necessarily, and that comes with a lot of freedom, but sometimes I'm just like, 'uh, what do I want to look like?' Because I have literally no conceptualization of what I want to look like."<sup>36</sup> This ambivalence is even further reflected in Jordan's and Lavender's comments, both of whom made reference to being gendered

---

<sup>35</sup> Hence why I do not address my relationship with menstruation almost at all in this project—it is full of potential analysis, but I do not enjoy unpacking it. It's my thesis and I'll omit things if I want to!

<sup>36</sup> Quote has been edited for clarity.

inaccurately by others: Jordan “brush[es] it off” while Lavender has “kind of stopped caring”. I raise these examples as a final demonstration that trans experience is not always precise and exacting—the only thing that may be unilaterally consistent about all trans experience may be a lack of consistency.

### **Intervention: Tweet, Posted February 27, 2021**

Twitter is on fire again today. I wish that I didn't engage with it so obsessively, but I do. It's like reading the newspaper in the morning, if the newspaper was peppered with memes and none of the reporters actually knew what was going on. Today, a transfeminine anarchist that I follow tweeted that, "Being trans can be a choice," emphasis on the word "can". I snapped my fingers in agreement and moved on, thinking this statement clear and uncontroversial. Apparently, we were both wrong, as a number of tweets have since crossed my timeline—largely from transmasculine folks—stating that being trans is *never* a choice and to say so sets a dangerous precedent. Many claimed that the original poster was stating that otherwise-cis people can, and would, just up and choose to live a life of discrimination, violence, and invalidation, writing that they would give anything to wake up cis, that this line of logic was one used to justify conversion therapy, and that this was a perspective of teenagers with no understanding of real-life consequences.

Even without the surrounding context, a trans person writing "I would give anything to wake up cis," raises a lot of red flags for me. Each individual has the right to feel however they want regarding their status as trans, of course, but these sorts of statements smack of cisnormativity and the privileging of cis masculinity or femininity as more legitimate. I think we can safely assume that the poster, who was transmasculine, was stating that they wish they were a cis man. The issue here is that this transmasculine poster also made a choice to stop 'being cis' as much as anyone can 'be' cis when they decided to follow the path toward transition. Framing trans identity as "not being a choice" suggests that there is some threshold, some inherent and unmistakable indication that a person is trans, leaving them with no choice but to transition. In reality, as there is no way to measure gender, there is no way to confirm any person to be definitively trans or not. Furthermore, in a society that conditions its citizens into a performance

of cis identity by default, many people may assume, as I did, that because they do not have this clear, indisputable sign that indicates they are trans, that they must not be so, given that it is “not a choice” and to choose to explore that possibility is frivolous and unfair to those like our transmasculine Twitter user, who is tragically and irrefutably trans but wishes they were not.

Strict criteria to define trans experience, whether it is heterosexual identity, performances of masculinity or femininity, medical transition options, or a sense of destiny that was not chosen but instead bestowed, demarcates the boundaries of trans identity in a way that inherently excludes large groups of potentially-trans people who are additionally queer, gender non-conforming, and/or nonbinary. This exclusion creates an unrealistic image of a ‘real’ trans person as being straight and cis-passing meaning that the existence of trans identity would become its own absence and return the world to a cisnormative affirmation of the meaning of gender itself.

## Chapter Four: Drag Me To Hell

(Or, Little Orphan Anni)

*Pull apart all of my pieces / Soak 'em in liquid adhesive /*

*Paint it all blue when it freezes / Build a new me out of*

*papier maché ...*

- Elliot Lee, "Pink (Freak)"

It was not long after starting hormone replacement therapy in the summer of 2017 that I returned to experimenting with makeup. The testosterone I was taking weekly and the ensuing changes put me at ease. I felt that I had earned enough legitimacy as a man to start complicating that label. Nonetheless, it would be nearly two years before I would enter the local drag scene in Ottawa despite my wanting to do so for years. When I finally began performing in drag, it brought a new host of complicated emotions regarding my crafting of a cognizant gender identity which, for some reason, took me by surprise. I would say, if pressed, that performing in drag has been overall affirming for my sense of gender rather than invalidating, but the metaphorical scales of this question are nearly even.

Drag gave me somewhere to put the things I *liked*. For so long, I conflated 'liking' with 'being', and 'interest' with 'identity'. If I feel like a boy (man? guy?), why do I swoon over lacy evening gowns or think my legs look sexy in heels? Why do I delight in decorating my face with lipstick and eyeliner, curtained by locks of long, colourful hair that is not naturally my own? Menswear is so *boring*! Wow, khaki joggers and a fitted t-shirt? A black suit with a white shirt and black tie—maybe midnight blue if you're feeling adventurous? Thrilling! While this may seem trivial, these were some of the obstacles that consumed my thoughts and told me I was not a trans man because one cannot be a proper man and relish in gender bending aesthetics. If I was

to be *legitimately* trans then I would have to confront my desires to break new grounds with cosmetics and clothing. Such style and flare would have to be sacrificed in exchange for a lifetime of black, grey, and navy tones. Drag reminded me that men can and do enjoy all the things that I do, and being a man myself did not have to mean relinquishing them.<sup>37</sup>

In this chapter, I use my experiences with drag to explore notions of contradiction—how can an art form that uses gender transgression as its primary medium still uphold bioessentialist notions of the gender binary? Performing in drag has validated and invalidated my gender simultaneously, causing equal amounts of joy and pain. Lauren Berlant (2011) advances the notion of “cruel optimism” in her book of the same name, using affect theory to describe this paradoxical concept: “optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving” (p. 2). I see this cruel optimism in contemporary drag as a whole, as well as how that has trickled down to affect local communities of performers. Just before beginning my own drag career, I had seen Kimmy Couture win the prestigious title of Miss Capital Pride and left the pageant dreaming big. If an out and proud trans woman had won the biggest drag competition in the city, surely the community had space for me as well. I have now learned my achieving success in my local drag scene would come at a cost. Achieving success would require me to enact and perform a binary presentation of gender while limiting my repertoire to ‘crowd pleasing’ party numbers (i.e. Top 40 pop songs). Regarding my interactions with other performers, I was expected to keep my mouth shut when more influential performers (who were, invariably, cis gay men) misgendered me or made reference to my anatomy without my consent.

---

<sup>37</sup> To be fair, the strides made by mainstream mens’ fashion in the last few years have been significant; celebrities such as Lil Nas X, Billy Porter, Harry Styles, and Troye Sivan have received praise for embracing feminine aesthetics in Vogue photoshoots and on red carpets. It’s a shame I don’t have any red carpet events coming up, then I would have nothing to worry about!

Furthermore, I was to perform and fraternize with performers who have displayed racist, misogynist, transphobic, ableist, and other types of violent biases. Finally, and, perhaps most importantly, I was expected to spend a ridiculous amount of money on high-quality wigs, makeup, and costumes so that I seemed ‘polished’. The entire notion of drag as a commodity is cruel in its optimism—drag promises a celebration of gender transgression and queer beauty to gender-diverse people, but to create a profit, drag must be marketable to a wider audience, one that, regardless of orientation, is often still committed to the maintenance of a binary gender system<sup>38</sup>.

This is particularly disappointing, considering drag as an art form finds its origins in queer and trans communities of colour. As Ivan Monforte (2010) chronicles, ball culture emerged in New York City in the late 19th century, creating a space for “female and male impersonators” to express extravagant gender non-conformity and celebrate themselves and each other (p. 28). This culture was, in large part, composed of individuals who would be considered trans in this day and age (p. 28). Over the 20th century, particularly the latter half, ball culture gained traction and began to proliferate. This proliferation was observed within queer communities, as racialized queens began to splinter off and create their own scenes to avoid racist standards that privileged white queens (p. 28). Additionally, in the mainstream media, documentarians began to capture footage of this subculture to share with the wider public (p. 28-30). The 1960s were a particularly transformative decade, in which the Compton Cafeteria Riots and the Stonewall Riots took place, both of which were led by trans women—a demographic that, at the time, were known as “female impersonators”, as the clear definitional line between drag queens and trans

---

<sup>38</sup> My fellow MA student, Erin McHarge, addressed these issues much more comprehensively in her thesis entitled, “Got To Be Real: Queering Reality, Identity, and Audience Affect on RuPaul’s Drag Race” (2021).

people that is observed today had not yet been solidified (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 219). In the Canadian context, Jamie Lee Hamilton (2014) provides a firsthand account of the violence experienced by trans sex workers in the late 1970s and early 1980s at the hands of Vancouver police. She describes how, as trans women were driven out of sex work with arrests and fines, many, herself included, turned to working as “gender illusionists” to maintain a steady income (p. 30). Nonetheless, despite these varied and radical origins, as drag has become a worldwide art form, hegemonic expectations have begun to seep into this transgressive and revolutionary culture in ways that can be clearly observed in local communities, such as my own.

As I will discuss, as a performer that does not fit the more normative binary that commercialized drag has come to support, my drag has flourished in small, unknown bars, where I have regularly performed three numbers per night for less money than it cost to travel to and from the venue. My few times performing in popular clubs were unpaid bookings, most of which were a part of a *RuPaul’s Drag Race* competition-style live show that took place throughout the summer of 2019. Much like the television show, we were evaluated by a panel of judges, and this, more than anything, taught me that any drag that does not replicate the hegemony described above is still unwelcome in mainstream communities, as I will demonstrate in a case study below.

### Drag Validates My Gender, Take One

I stepped into the Ottawa drag scene as Anni Elation in January of 2019, 18 months after starting testosterone. I had visions of being ‘stealth’ — a slang term in the trans community for someone who lives openly as their correct gender, but is assumed to be cis. I wanted drag to be a hobby, a place where I could take a break, not having to advocate for the legitimacy of my gender for a few hours every week. After all, drag is all about gender-bending. I felt confident

that the community was open-minded and inclusive. A little spark of hope shimmered within me that, just this once, I would pass, and not have to rely upon this open-mindedness. I could be one of the boys again because we *all* looked like girls. That hope was dashed almost instantly.

### Gentlemen, Your “Check Engine” Light Is On<sup>39</sup>

Admittedly, the dashing of my hopes was partially my fault for making two assumptions; first, that all the performers with whom I would be working would be men, and second, that those performers would all perform feminine personas. Having only been exposed to drag through reality television (e.g. *RuPaul’s Drag Race*) at the time, I had an unrealistic and narrow understanding concerning who populates the average drag scene.

I could not resist inserting a *RuPaul’s Drag Race* reference into the title of this section despite my ever-growing disdain for this VH1 television sensation. I appreciate that the program has elevated drag in public perception, allowed more queens<sup>40</sup> than ever before to make a living from their art, and provided access to the art form for queers in places where there was previously no drag scene. Nonetheless, after becoming involved in a real-life drag community, the male-dominated cis-centrism displayed by *Drag Race* now leaves a sour taste in my mouth. *Drag Race* told me that cis gay men perform feminine drag, and that is all. Instead, I learned that people of all genders do all kinds of drag, but unfortunately, this is not demonstrated by popular local clubs, whose line-ups are so often reflective of *Drag Race*’s hegemonic casting patterns.

---

<sup>39</sup> This is a play on the words RuPaul speaks to begin the competition portion of each episode of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*: “Gentlemen, start your engines.” After significant pushback from viewers as a response to RuPaul’s trans-exclusionary views, this catchphrase has been changed in recent seasons to “Racers, start your engines,” (Bailey et al., 2009-present).

<sup>40</sup> I specify “queens” rather than “artists”, because drag kings and gender diverse drag performers are not afforded a platform in the RuPaul Industrial Complex.

In some ways, however, the cruelty that seeped into my optimism about the potential of drag to expand to the horizons of gender was beyond my control. Within two weeks, I had been outed multiple times by both circumstance and by peers who I had assumed would exercise more discretion than they did. As a result, my entire drag career has been bracketed by the general knowledge among the audience that the body they were watching has a pussy—and too often, unfortunately, that was a far more important fact about me to them than anything as flimsy as a ‘gender identity’. Without a dick to tuck away, it seemed that all the other efforts required to create a drag queen—makeup, clothing, body-shaping, wig styling, performance—were rendered null and void, as I was rarely tipped (which is a customary practice at drag shows).

I have found that there is a tendency with mainstream perceptions of drag (bolstered by the aforementioned reality television franchise) to fetishize the notion of linear and temporary gender transformation of cis bodies from ‘one sex’ to ‘the other’. The focus is not the performance of gender; instead, emphasis is placed on sexed embodiment that is defined primarily by one’s genitalia. There has been a debate in the community for some time about whether (cis) women can perform as drag queens<sup>41</sup> because there is ‘no transformation’—as if using wigs, makeup, costume design, props, and performance to turn oneself into a hyper-feminine “parody of a parody” (Butler, 1990/2006, p. 188) is something that cis women do regularly, and requires no effort by virtue of their anatomy. RuPaul himself stated that, “[d]rag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it’s not men doing it, because at its core it’s a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture,” (Aitkenhead, 2018). Yes, because nothing says ‘fuck you’ to male-dominated culture like hanging a ‘men only’ sign on an art

---

<sup>41</sup> By the way, there is already a definitive answer to this “debate” which is “yes, they can and do.” I mention this question only as an illustrative example, not to afford it any legitimacy as a debatable topic. Some examples of cis female drag queens include Venus Envy, Crème Fatale, Victoria Scone, Courtney Conquers (who began her career in Ottawa as well), and my own drag sister, Phionna Kitty.

form.<sup>42</sup> In the same interview, RuPaul states that trans women who have undergone gender confirmation surgery would not be welcome in his competition, discursively locating the body as the true site of gender and invalidating the trans women who have already appeared on *Drag Race*, such as Peppermint, Carmen Carrera, and Gia Gunn (Aitkenhead, 2018). Because these trans women had not yet had any surgeries when competing, by RuPaul's logic, they had male bodies, and thus were still performing "dangerous" and "ironic" (i.e. 'proper') drag.

I see similarities between this bio-centrist discourse in the drag community framing gender as a physical trait and Sandy Stone's (1987/2006) analysis of some of the first biographies of trans women that were narratively constructed to depict a binary journey from one gender to the other (p. 225). Stone notes that in Lili Elbe's biography, there is a clear distinction made between the character of 'Lili' and the character of 'Andreas'—Lili's pre-transition, or 'male', self—through the heteronormative understanding of their respective sexual attractions (p. 226). In these (auto)biographies described by Stone, gender itself might be transgressed, but the sexual 'norm' for each of those binary genders is upheld, assuaging the anxieties of readers and reassuring them that there is still a 'natural' way to experience gender.

Although subverted, this theory is reflected in mainstream cisgender perceptions of drag, which can be observed by watching episodes of *Drag Race* or engaging with the popular factions of local drag communities. This logic sees gender transgression as a straight line from man to woman because these are the only two poles that exist. Success as a drag performer is measured by how far down that line one can walk. Gender is not treated as a form of creative expression that performers can mold and shape in a multitude of ways, rather gender performance is dictated

---

<sup>42</sup> My supervisor suggested that Anni was the one who wrote this snarky line. I did not know how to break it to him that I am actually a lot bitchier than she is.

by sex. Thus, drag is framed as a challenge to wage visually against one's sex as a temporary optical illusion, recognizing that underneath, there is still a definitively cisgender, male body and thus no threat to the gender binary. Esther Newton (1972) describes drag as being “a double inversion that says, [...] ‘my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.’ At the same time [...] ‘my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine,’” (p. 103). While an astute demonstration of the possibly contradictory nature of a practice like drag, I will humbly suggest that this description is now perhaps unnecessarily convoluted, and makes significant assumptions about who is doing what kind of drag. In the presence of women who perform as drag queens, men who perform as drag kings, and non-binary drag performers of all kinds, this “double inversion” falls apart. Masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive, whether ‘outside’ or ‘inside’, and to frame contemporary drag this way reinforces limitations placed upon the art form and its nature as an expression of gender.

#### Your Story—Our Way

To demonstrate a practical example of how this reliance upon binary, linear gender performances is woven into mainstream, profitable drag communities, I will compare two numbers I performed during my stint competing in season one of Ottawa's Drag Race in 2019 as a case study. The show, a 14-week live competition drawing inspiration from the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise. It was hosted by successful local queen Euphoria Bliss<sup>43</sup> in the city's most popular gay bar and solicited the participation of emerging drag performers. All styles of drag were welcome and we were told that, while we would not be paid for our labour, this would be

---

<sup>43</sup> Drag names have been changed using a drag name generator I found on the Internet.

‘great exposure’ and would ‘open doors’ for us as performers.<sup>44</sup> Each weekly instalment had a theme, and competitors were evaluated by a panel of judges on the quality of their number and their ability to adhere to the prompt. For the majority of the competition, I coasted through in the middle of the pack—making neither the Top or Bottom Three of the week. Here are the two most notable exceptions to this pattern:

I was so excited for week six, Halloween in July. One of the first numbers I ever performed, in the gritty, dimly-lit underground gay bar where the have-nots of Ottawa drag congregated, was a monstrous, grotesque thing set to Billie Eilish’s song “bury a friend”. It is my favourite number to this day. The chance to perform it for an audience as large as the one attending Ottawa’s Drag Race every week was thrilling, as my style of drag normally tended toward girlish bubblegum pop to appeal to broader audiences, so this number is a massive departure.

The piece is itself disjointed. This number bends the body in ways that are deliberately uncomfortable to communicate a sense of being controlled by outside forces and ends with a neck-snapping suicide. Aesthetically, my character is battered and bruised, with black, sick-looking veins that creep down her cheeks out of two discordantly coloured eyes. In newer iterations of the piece, she has grown ripped and jagged false nails, similar dark veins on her arms and an exposed ribcage. In planning the choreography for this character, I thought about the sort of figure that populated my own nightmares, and ultimately came up with the uncanny: close to human, but something unnameable is *just not right*. It is unclear if she is villain or victim, as there is a visible struggle between the way she moves and how she wants to move. At times she stares into the audience from a distance with terror written on her face, but at just as many points

---

<sup>44</sup> Most artists are able to recognize these phrases as clear red flags, but at the time, I believed it with all my heart. Cruel optimism, indeed.

she laughs, delights in the perversity of her embodiment, and allows the audience to move in close, grabbing their hands or coming almost nose-to-nose with them. The audience knows she won't do anything to them (not only would that be unethical, but the bar could be held liable so we're literally forbidden) but for a moment they feel like maybe she could.

In her piece, "My Words To Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage", Susan Stryker (1994) writes,

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both.

I did not create this piece with academia in mind, but reflecting upon the number from a distance, I can see Stryker's monster at work. Stryker describes the disappointment of Dr. Frankenstein when he learns that his creation, despite being successfully rebuilt as a living creature, would not follow the behavioural script demanded of him, especially as he learned how horrifying the rest of the world saw him to be (p. 243). She equates this with the experience of being a 'post-operative' transsexual woman, where cisgender doctors pride themselves on their mastery over medical technology that they are able to 'create' a woman, but are shocked and disgusted to learn that she has agency, and refuses to conform to their proscriptions of womanhood (p. 244).

I feel this sense of monstrous trans resistance when referring to my unnamed puppet girl, inverted to tell the story of a feminine trans boy. He bears all the physical traits of cisnormative femininity: the hair, the lips, the dress, the hips, the cunt... but something about him is *wrong*. He is just *not a woman*, no matter how close he is forced, or attempts, to get. The icons of

femininity that he wears are made ugly—black fishnets that are torn, long hair that is grey and tangled, false nails that are torn ragged or lost entirely, leaving bloody fingertips behind. In performing this distorted sort of drag, to borrow McKenzie Wark’s (2020) description of her relationship to black tights, “I could slip between genders, shimmy past masculinity for a moment, but not really launch into another gender. It was more the euphoria of lofting out of gender for a moment [...] To not-exist in a non-existing gender, to float a femme phantasmagoria of skins and signs,” (p. 96). This character I had created was womanly but not a woman, male without any way to prove it, dead but still moving, reanimated for only a moment. The struggle between the desire to be understood in his wrongness and the desire to be loved by being right plays out through his body, and it is unclear which one he is attempting to achieve, but it is certain that he cannot have both at once. His wrongness leaks out of him (see Shildrick, 1997), through the veins of his eyes, the uneven black sequin tendrils of his dress, the blood that drips down his thighs, and yet he smiles—and snaps his own neck to the sound of applause.

The suicide finale could be intellectualized as well: is it a tragic dramatization of the end met by so many trans people from living in a world of systemic transphobia, or a victorious cutting of the invisible puppet strings that held him up as *she*? If I’m being honest, I included it so that I could end the number with a death drop because the audiences are basically guaranteed to lose their minds when performers do that - and they did.

The judges, however, did not like it and I had to ‘lip sync for my life’.

Contrariwise, my most successful week on Ottawa’s Drag Race was the semi-final show (I managed not to be ‘sent home’ after Halloween in July). The theme was Pride, and the second of three prompts given to competitors—since we had few enough at that point that everyone

performed three numbers per show—was Evening Gown Pride, in which we were expected to perform a ballad demonstrating what Pride meant to us.

After going eleven weeks attempting to minimize the knowledge that I'm a trans man, and learning along the way that my attempts were futile as I was going to get outed one way or another, I figured that I might as well 'play the trans card', and recreated the look I wore to my senior prom for the Evening Gown challenge. I had a red wig, close to the shade I had dyed my own hair at the time, and the dress still fit (mostly—I needed a couple clip extenders to accommodate my shoulders, which was pretty satisfying). I fished out all the jewelry I had worn and had retrieved the shoes from my mother's house. I brought with me a 16x20 print of myself attending prom five years prior, which can be seen in the centre image of three below.

I was the first on the set list out of the six remaining contestants. I used the song "Rainbow" by Kesha, and gave a fairly straightforward performance. I held up the photograph for the first verse before handing it to my drag sister offstage, delivered an impassioned lip sync, and pulled out a rainbow flag, draping it around the shoulders of an audience member, but the key point came in the final thirty seconds of the number. I unclipped the dress at the shoulders and removed it to reveal my chest, bound with blue KT tape, and pink boxer briefs.<sup>45</sup> I tore off my wig and ruffled my shaggy hair. I regret pulling out a trans flag and waving it around. It looked very cliché in retrospect, and not to mention bludgeoned the audience over the head with the point, but some of them might have needed that clarification. Later in the evening, I was told onstage, that I did not need to perform in the final challenge of the evening because "Rainbow" had motivated the judges to send me directly to the finale. They said the phrase I had been

---

<sup>45</sup> I put on the purple blouse pictured below after the number was finished, because I don't love being that naked while receiving critique.

hearing intermittently from weepy audience members since I had finished the number: “*Thank you for sharing your story.*”

That expression annoys me to no end because it implies that a trans person’s journey is some sort of ‘very special episode’ that cis people are occasionally granted permission to gawk at for the three minutes it takes to tell. What I did onstage was not ‘my story’. Perhaps a Cliff’s Notes version of it, akin to recounting a Shakespearean tale in eight sentences. This is not to say that I disparage that number completely, nor that I’m unappreciative of the positive feedback. It was still a statement and one that I was excited and happy to make. It was a refusal to let others speak for me, to out me amongst each other. I took control of the narrative that was already telling people in that community that I’m a trans man, and that felt really good. Many people’s tearful reactions were probably authentic, and I like to think that it might have left a positive impact on some viewers who had never known that trans people do drag, especially ‘different gender’ drag. That being said, I also think that so many people loved that number because it showed them exactly what they wanted to see: binary cisgender woman becomes binary transgender man and lives proudly ever after! The Gracie/Adam paradigm on *Degrassi*, the Andreas/Lili binary as seen in Elbe’s biography (Stone, 1987/2006), had been re-enacted live before their eyes. Part of me wishes I had said that I had told them a more affectively accurate version of my story six weeks prior and they had all hated it but I was still labouring under the delusion that being nice had more currency within the drag scene as “affective economy” (Ahmed, 2004).

That was my last moment of success in the competition and beyond. I was never booked by Euphoria, her production company, or the bar hosting Ottawa’s Drag Race again. They had already gotten what they wanted from me, after all.

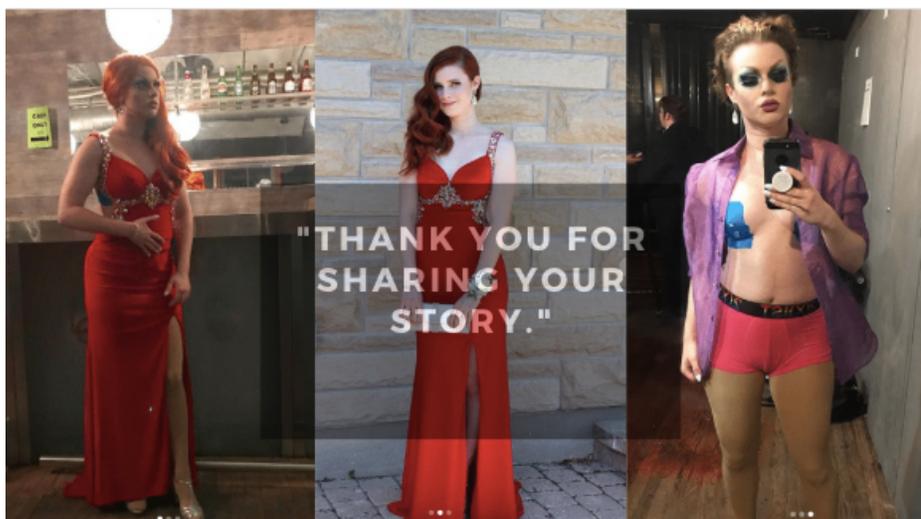


Image description: Three images are lined up beside each other. The first image shows Anni Elation in 2019, looking off-camera and standing in front of the back counter of the Lookout Bar and Nightclub. She wears a red gown with an open back, bejewelled straps and breasts, and a slit running up the left side, exposing her dance-tight-clad leg, with strappy silver high heeled shoes and a red wig, swept over her left shoulder. The second image shows Noah in 2014, attending his high school prom. He stands in front of a beige brick wall, looking into the camera and wearing the same clothes described in the previous image. His own hair, long and dyed a deep auburn, is swept over his right shoulder. The final image is of Noah and Anni simultaneously, taking a mirror selfie approximately an hour after the first image was taken. They are still wearing drag makeup, but no wig. Their hair is short and pulled back from their face. They are wearing pink boxer briefs, a sheer, open purple blouse, and light-blue KT Tape to flatten their breasts. The text superimposed over all three images reads: “Thank you for sharing your story.”

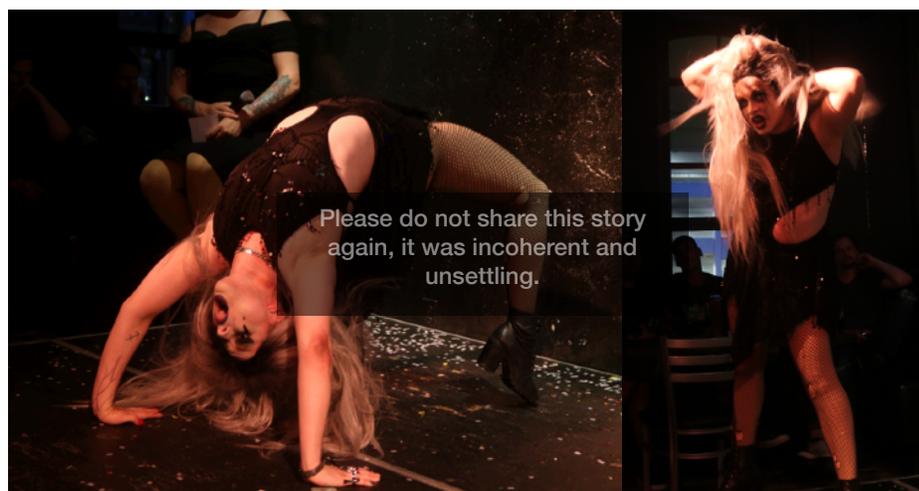


Image description: Two images of Anni Elation performing her “bury a friend” drag number are lined up beside each other. In both, Anni is wearing a black dance dress with cut-outs along her waist and dangling, uneven black sequins that give the illusion that she is dripping. She is wearing a tangled black and grey ombre wig, ripped fishnet tights, black lipstick, and a metal choker. Black tear tracks run down her cheeks, and she has special effects makeup on her arms and neck to depict severe bruising and dark, raised veins. In the first image, she is bent over in a bridge position, evocative of the iconic spider-walk sequence in *The Exorcist* (1973), raised up onto her toes with her mouth open as if screaming. The seated body of Euphoria Bliss is visible in the background, watching Anni’s performance, but the image has cut off her head. In the second image, Anni stands, bent at a slightly odd angle, with her right hand fisted in her wig to drag her head up while her left arm is raised, moving stray locks from her face, which bears a grotesque expression with her mouth open and her eyes rolled back. The text superimposed over both images reads: “Please do not share this story again, it was incoherent and unsettling.”

### If Your Tits Aren't Store-Bought, Making Your Own Is Absolutely Not Fine

Circumstances of this sort do not improve by intellectualizing them, of course. I can don my metaphysical armour of gender theory, attempt to insulate myself from the closed-minded attitude perpetuated by some facets of drag culture, but my experiences have proven that this will not protect me. An unruly body in drag will be located and sexed as either male or female whether it likes it or not, and from there, its value as a performer will be calculated based upon which one it is found to be. Here is an overview of a few (of many) brief examples where this attitude has been made abundantly clear to me, as a body that was found wanting.

The first example can be extracted from the week before the beginning of Ottawa's Drag Race, as each competitor performs to promote the upcoming series: I am about to go onstage. The queen before me was a lesbian, and Euphoria Bliss's job, as the hostess, is to bridge the gap between performers. She does so by introducing me with the words, "Speaking of lesbians..." knowing full well that I am trans and like men.<sup>46</sup> She excuses herself later after I raise the issue first, qualifying the comment as a "slip of the tongue".

My second example takes place during a Pride Week show. Hostess Amanda Foxxx<sup>47</sup> makes explicit reference to my chest after I finish performing, outing me as 'female' to the bar. Insult is added to injury when, later that evening, I am told the bar has not made enough money to pay me, despite what I was offered when I accepted the booking. This is not the first time I have been 'graciously' allowed to 'perform just for tips' to ensure that the more-established

---

<sup>46</sup> And, weeks later, when I finally gather the stones to correct her by self-identifying as a "transmasculine queer" instead, she begrudgingly accepts it as appropriate payment for her returning definition of me as "just human". The whole crowd cheers. I smile as if I haven't been insulted.

<sup>47</sup> All drag names in these examples are, once again, Internet-generated pseudonyms—those mentioned are all cisgender men.

members of the line-up (who are invariably cis men) receive their regular cuts, but I have never had the promise of payment rescinded before.

My third example emerges from week five of Ottawa’s Drag Race: Our guest judge for the week is a boylesque performer from Toronto. During his feedback on my number, he states, “This number is especially powerful for you as a bio queen.”<sup>48</sup> I am forced to almost shout, having been given no microphone with which to respond, that I am a trans man, not a woman. He splutters out, “I, ah, love it *even more*, then!” and immediately ends his critique.

My final demoralizing example occurs in Ottawa’s Drag Race semi-final show: after twelve weeks of competitive performances, the show’s permanent judge tells me that he “finally sees me” after I finish performing “Rainbow”, in which, again, I had re-enacted a binary transition journey. This elicits cheers from the audience, and I cannot even think to ask where exactly he had been looking for the past eleven weeks.

All of these interactions happened in front of an audience. To these community members, ‘the’ transmasculine experience can be summarized in a single sentence/number: “I used to wear dresses, and now I don’t wear dresses.”<sup>49</sup> As a drag performer, I have told stories about fallen angels, dragon queens, aspiring vaudeville stars, rogue Artificial Intelligence systems bent upon the destruction of humanity to end the desolation wrought by the Anthropocene era, and clowns with tear-drop painted cheeks and stapled permanent smiles. Regardless, the only one that is of any interest to cis drag professionals is the number that gives them a glimpse of my sordid girlhood that I am, in their eyes, tragically falling short of transcending. They can give me smiles

---

<sup>48</sup> “Bio queen”, short for “biologically female queen”, is a slang term for a (cis) woman who performs as a drag queen—as opposed to simply calling her a drag queen.

<sup>49</sup> With thanks to fellow nonbinary queen and dear friend, Elle Faekwa, for this sardonic comment describing the oversimplified understanding of trans subjectivity demonstrated by cis members of our community.

laced with pity, thank me with strategically choked-up voices, and pat themselves on the back at the end of the night for proving to their audience that they are good trans allies, all the while reaffirming their own understanding that trans men are girls trying to be boys.

With this misunderstanding in mind, it makes sense that I am frequently presented with a specific quandary when I talk to people about my art: *Why doesn't feminine drag cause you dysphoria?* I do not mind this question when posed by another trans person, as I can safely assume that the query arises from a place of interpersonal curiosity based on lived experience. When a cis person asks me this, however, it feels like some sort of fetishistic scientific fascination, based on the aforementioned fundamental misunderstanding of my identity, which increasingly deters me from answering in any constructive way.

It is not always phrased like this. Sometimes it is a *how* question: *'How can you like doing drag when you're a trans guy'* or simply *'why would YOU do drag'*? That last sentiment, where the emphasis on 'you' does the discursive heavy lifting the asker is afraid to handle, normally comes from cisgender people. The term 'dysphoria' is often not in their repertoire, since common understandings of trans identity have been entirely reduced to experiences of dysphoria, so the term itself becomes redundant and unnecessary: it is simply that the whole existence of me as a transmasculine person in feminine drag is a logical fallacy to them. *Why would a girl trying to be a guy then dress up like a girl? Why go back?*

To answer the question once and for all, sometimes I do get dysphoric when I'm in drag. When people made comments about my pre-op chest or, to this day, ask if I'm a 'real woman', that familiar cocktail of dread, disappointment, shame, and self-loathing creeps up my throat. Best case scenario, I tell them a glib half-truth ("Honey, these tits are nothing but duct tape and a

dream”<sup>50</sup>), grab another drink, and move on. Worst case, I end up outside the venue vomiting into the grass. Fun stuff.

So yes, invasive questions or comments about my body do cause me dysphoria, but they do that when I’m out of drag, too. The drag itself—being called *she* or *gurl*, batting my inch-long eyelashes at people, sporting lingerie or a skirt—that’s all part of the game. It’s done with a wink and a nudge, and I delude myself into believing that the largely queer audience populating a drag bar has a shared understanding of the context in which this performance is situated. I’m not *she* as in a girl, I’m *she* as in a drag queen.

### Drag Validates My Gender, Take Two

I have all but abandoned Anni’s original queen-next-door attempt at universal allure. My more recent performances, as infrequent as they have been between the COVID-19 pandemic and my attempts to finish graduate school, have returned to the unsettling tone of my early anti-gender puppet creation—clowns, demons, fauns with ice-white eyes, literal man-eaters drenched in red-dyed corn syrup. The hundreds of polished, flirty pop numbers I’ve done at this point still bring me less satisfaction than one “bury a friend”. Playing by the rules got me nowhere, so I might as well just do what I want. Much like my out-of-drag persona, Anni has become a little femboy freak with niche appeal. She is never going to be the headliner I had imagined when I began, and yet I carry on, because the act of looking unsuspecting patrons in the eye through bright red sclera contact lenses and watching them jump is still one of my favourite hobbies.

My mother has, more than once, criticized me for my bitterness when I discuss my drag community, given that I frequently re-hash the ways that the scene has been organized into hegemonic tiers, and I suppose her exasperation is fair. As this chapter draws to a close, it may

---

<sup>50</sup> I actually owe this particular canned response to Liezel Hues, another wonderful trans drag performer and friend, who came to my rescue during one such interrogation the first night we met.

seem that I am feeling acrimonious due to my own lack of success as a performer, and perhaps I am; however, my lack of success is not solely an individual failing. I am angry for my drag sister, a cis lesbian with skills in makeup, costume design, and hairstyling far beyond anything I could ever hope to achieve, who was exploited for her art and labour under the false pretence of compensation, as I was, since we both have vaginas and that is what defines us as second-tier drag performers. I am resentful for the single trans woman to make headlines in our city, working in a high-profile club that is known to only hire cis men and uses her as a shield against allegations of transphobia, while passively disregarding her identity with this open-secret policy. I am livid for the nonbinary drag artist I watched participate in Ottawa's Drag Race season 2, who was called a "drag thing" by Euphoria Bliss every week without permission, and lauded publicly by the permanent judge for reminding him of his "favourite from last season, Anni Elation," but mocked privately to the other judges from behind a clipboard, failing to realize I was sitting right behind him. I am furious for the ways that Drag According to RuPaul has failed anybody who is not a cis man. Nonetheless, I cannot participate in this scene without such an affect—that would be to accept that there will be no change. My constant disappointment is symptomatic of the fact that I still hope for improvement, that perhaps space will be eventually made on the popular stages for all different kinds of drag, genders, and bodies, without qualification. As Berlant (2011) writes, "it would be wrong to see optimism's negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently," (p. 14).

### **Intervention: Tits**

I'm going to talk about my tits now, since so many of my peers in the drag community have already taken the liberty to do so without any input from me.

I was always a little bit cute when I had to make reference to my chest before top surgery; I'd use avoidant, made-up words, calling them *mits* ('man-tits'), *chesticles* (a fairly self-evident portmanteau), or even just *flesh lumps*. I never claimed to hate them, per se; they were simply in the way. I even postponed surgery for several years because I wanted to be 'really sure', whatever that means, and because the six weeks allotted to recovery seemed like too great of an inconvenience. The dysphoria simmered under the surface, mild and manageable. For those years, my chest was like a cracked iPhone screen—unfortunate, but functional, and thus not worth the cost of repairing it. I can't remember if there was a particular event that pushed me over the edge when it came to biting the bullet on surgery. I had been performing in drag for a year, and unsolicited comments about my chest were abundant, so it may just have been a gradual erosion of my patience over time. If I had to isolate a single incident, however, it would be one that occurred on the final night of Ottawa Pride Week 2019, to which I have already alluded: cis drag queen Amanda Foxxx, as the host of the evening, took to the stage after I had finished performing and announced to a packed bar, "If I had tits, I'd wear something like that, too!" It was a basic bodysuit with a low neckline, a cut I have seen her wear several times before and since. The shoulder of my drag sister's outfit was drenched with tears outside the venue minutes later, as the crushing humiliation of having my least favourite body part pointed out once again, this time to a massive audience of my peers, finally became too heavy for me to carry. While my cleavage was no doubt visible during my performance, by choosing to highlight my breasts specifically, essentially confirming them to be 'real' (as opposed to a breastplate),

Amanda had enacted a public definition of my sex and implicitly ascribed a gender to my body  
without my consent.

*She has tits, and she no longer means drag queen.*

Now, I get quite a bit of amusement out of calling them tits. My surgeon did a bit of contouring, so I have two clearly defined pecs instead of the vast expanse of flat, tight skin that I had expected. They still give a little jiggle when I go down a flight of stairs or jump up and down. If I squeeze my upper arms tight against my sides, I can even create the tiniest swell of cleavage. My nipples are bumpy and misshapen, having been removed and trimmed down before the doctor grafted them back on in a position considered appropriately male, and half the time I forget where exactly they are on my body now, which does come as a nasty surprise when I go to scratch an itch and one of them gets caught on my bitten nails. The silvery scars, reddened around the edges, that stretch jagged over the lower half of my breasts are still a little bit numb, even eleven months post-op, and before going under<sup>51</sup>, I was warned that full sensation may never return. At the edge of my left scar, under my arm, the skin puckers, creating a tiny peak where the flesh was sutured together—these are colloquially known as ‘dog ears’ and generally happen when one is not at their ‘optimal weight’ during surgery, according to the professionals. I do not wear a breastplate in drag, and if my scars are visible, even better.

As far as I’m concerned, I’ve got the best rack I’ve ever seen.

---

<sup>51</sup> Actually, *immediately* before going under, lying on the operating table as they prepared the oxygen mask, I lifted my head a little bit to look my chest in the eyes and whisper, “See you in hell.” If the surgeon or nurses heard me, they did not show it, which was a little bit disappointing because I thought it was very funny.

## Chapter Five: Designs & Archives

### (Or, If This Doesn't Scar, I'll Be Very Disappointed)

*I'm the greatest God created / I'm a sickness, I'm contagious*

*I'm a demon, power trippin' / On a mission, and vindictive*

*Suffocatin', exterminatin' / And I love it, every second*

*Full of hatred, irritated / Cut you open for entertainment*

- Kim Petras, "In The Next Life"<sup>52</sup>

This project has become a celebration of contradiction: feminine masculinity, cruel optimism (see Berlant, 2011), nonbinary manhood. This final chapter seeks to add another instalment to the list, which is negative joy—or perhaps, positive disgrace? I have found that, in learning to love myself as an unintelligible trans subject<sup>53</sup>, I have become increasingly invested in reframing my own definitions of what is positive and what is negative. I owe this understanding, in great part, to Sara Ahmed's (2017) indictment of happiness in *Living A Feminist Life*. Ahmed urges readers to embrace the designation of being a feminist killjoy throughout her book, and this involves questioning the assumption that happiness is universally desirable (p. 48). Happiness, Ahmed argues, is an institution of heteronormativity, and a rejection of deviance: "Not to want your children to be unhappy can mean in translation: not to want them to deviate from well-trodden paths," since taking an alternative path can lead to exclusion and harassment throughout one's life (p. 51). Unhappiness has arguably arisen from my choice to

---

<sup>52</sup> I cannot cite something from Kim Petras' discography without acknowledging that these lyrics were written in collaboration with Lukasz Gottwald ("Dr. Luke"), who has been accused by multiple female artists of sexual assault and abuse. I choose to include this lyric regardless because Petras has made a powerful impact as an international trans pop star, and her album *TURN OFF THE LIGHT* (2020) is a magnificent celebration of trans monstrosity; nonetheless, it does pain me to give even partial credit to a man that has caused such suffering.

<sup>53</sup> Emphasis on *learning*—never fear, I still have plenty of self-loathing to keep me humble.

transition; it is the pain and disappointment of being misgendered in public, even after years on hormones, or wondering if each person in my life is just humouring me when they use the correct pronoun. Unhappiness is seeing images of conventionally attractive trans men on social media and knowing that I do not fit that model—my hips are too wide and my body too short to meet traditional standards of masculine beauty (I was privileged enough to grow up attractive, by feminine standards, so transitioning and becoming ‘undesirable’ has been quite an adjustment). My mother even noted, early in my transition, that she wished I had “just stayed [dead name]<sup>54</sup>” because she would sit up at night worrying that I was out somewhere experiencing transphobic violence. She was expressing discontent about my gender, which was hurtful, but was also borne of concern for my safety and happiness. I could have avoided all of this by “staying” cisgender<sup>55</sup>, and yet, that is far more unfathomable to me than all the supposed ‘unhappiness’ I have experienced from choosing otherwise.

My attempts at affective reframing have also been helped along by Jack Halberstam’s (2011) theory of the “queer art of failure”, in his book of the same name. Halberstam presents the notion of failure as one that is itself queer in a capitalist socio-economic system that awards the designation of “success” to conformity and profit (p. 88-89). Furthermore, while not a strictly academic text, the thesis of somatic sex educator Caffyn Jesse’s (2015) independently published book *Orientation: Mapping Queer Meanings* is to reclaim homophobic stereotypes, which I have found influential to my own perspective. Jesse finds creative ways to reinterpret accusations that queer people are, among many other designations, anti-family (p. 60-63), shallow and

---

<sup>54</sup> I do not reveal or make reference to my dead name unless the situation explicitly calls for it, especially in writing—another way I am letting down my cis public, who all too often are curious to know “what your name was... y’know... *before*.”

<sup>55</sup> Though this is not to suggest that cisgender women are not also subject to physical, sexual, and epistemological violence. I would not have been perfectly safe, just safe from these specific examples.

narcissistic (p. 33-35), hedonistic fools (p. 78-81), furious hags (p. 107-110), hypersexual (p. 111-114), and so on and so forth. Jesse traces each stereotype back to mythic archetypes, writing, “Stereotypes are undistinguished, trite and obvious images that keep us locked in empty nothings. Archetypes are powerful, living symbols that link us to myth and history,” and proceeds to draw power and beauty from those stereotypes based on their archetypal origins (p. 14).

This is not to suggest that I have somehow transcended standard affective responses to positive and negative events, but rather, that I have attempted to shift my perspective to foster a sense of pride and joy in the pieces of my own identity that are often decried as undesirable. In the footsteps of trans and genderqueer scholars that have come before me, I have found comfort and validation by finding enthusiasm for (as a non-exhaustive list) designations of monstrosity, scars, dehumanization, ruin, and incoherence. As the character Tyrion Lannister advises in the first book of George R.R. Martin’s (1996) *A Song Of Ice And Fire* fantasy series<sup>56</sup>, “Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armour yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you,” (p. 57).

#### FTM (Female To Monster)<sup>57</sup>

I have made reference to the uncanny several times in this project—the illusion of rational conversation that so unsettled me, and later fascinated me, in *Alice in Wonderland* (Geronimi, Jackson, Luske, & Kinney, 1951), the perversion of femininity enacted my drag puppet creation—and I imagine that this is a response to a lifetime of being what I can only

---

<sup>56</sup> And the more well-known HBO television series adaptation, *Game of Thrones*.

<sup>57</sup> I feel as if some form of this pun has been made somewhere before, but unfortunately, my memory fails me. I do recognize, however, that this is not a new (or even particularly clever, at this point) twist on the familiar acronym.

describe as ‘woman-adjacent’. My relationship to femininity, to the gender I was assigned, was just a little bit *off*, but I lacked the knowledge and language to articulate why, even to myself, and so my affinity for the unsettling proliferated. As I move forward in life, however, as an explicitly trans subject, this interest increases still, branching into new and more blatant forms of abjection. The theory of abjection, developed by Julia Kristeva (1982), defines the notion as that which is rejected, that violates the boundaries between the self and the other, and that exposes order as a falsehood (p. 4). Kristeva deliberately compares the abject to the uncanny, writing, “Essentially different from ‘uncanniness’, more violent too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even a shadow of a memory,” (p. 5). My deviation from a cisgender script, in which my sense of gender was just grazing the unfamiliar, has given way to an incoherent mess that fails to meet even transnormative expectations.

As one can probably assume from my descriptions of my drag in the previous chapter, I am a big fan of the horror genre—though this was not always the case. I had to be convinced, as I was firm in my assessment that I hated being frightened and had no interest in it for the first ten (or so) years of my life. My best friend, Jaeden, had to force me into watching my first horror film with her, and suddenly a switch had flipped, and I was hooked. Having been versed in horror theory during my undergraduate degree in film studies, this affinity only became stronger over time, and while my interest may not have been explicitly tied to gender confusion at first<sup>58</sup>, it has become apparent that my fascination with monsters of both human and inhuman origins, body horror, and killer femmes is an expression of gendered embodiment. In her feminist theoretical text, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol J. Clover (1992) writes that, “The world of horror [...] repeatedly contemplates mutations whereby women begin to look a lot like men (slasher films),

---

<sup>58</sup> At least, in a way I could have identified at the time

men are pressured to become like women (possession films) and some people are impossible to tell apart,” (p. 15). Clover was not discussing trans people, specifically, in this quote, but the complications of gender that she observes throughout the genre are, regardless, an example of how the subversion of gender has been discursively tied to horror, thus implicating trans people in that imagery whether we are actually mentioned or not.

Of course, there have also been a wealth of scholarly texts regarding horror in which trans identity *is* explicitly invoked. As has been mentioned several times in this project already, Susan Stryker’s (1994) “Words to Frankenstein” are foundational to this tradition: Stryker actively reclaims the designation of ‘monster’ that is used against her as a trans woman, and specifically the comparison of transsexual women to Frankenstein’s monster, by achieving embodiment through surgical intervention (p. 239). References to Frankenstein’s monster continue with Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris’ (2015) article, “Monsters, Desire, and the Queer Creative Body”, in which the authors discuss how homonormative acceptance of some queer and trans identities has increased while other, less intelligible identities are still eluded by mainstream understanding, focusing upon genderqueer people and femme lesbians (p. 518). Jones and Harris argue that queer creative embodiment, being visibly queer, is cast as monstrous by being unknowable: “Stories of ‘queer shame’ are read as relatable, sympathy-generating, and therefore acceptable queer narratives, while proud, fluid, perverse and politically angry narratives are deemed ‘too hard’ for most listeners to see, hear, or bear. As such, these narratives remain persistently unintelligible and therefore monstrous accounts of queer selves and lives,” (p. 521). While I am wary of ascribing any sort of monstrous designation to other people, I must note that intentionally queer self-styling and a fondness for the friction that this can cause were one of the few consistent themes throughout my interviews. Lavender, who is nonbinary, lives in a small

town, and enjoys expressing themselves with bold and unconventional makeup, stated, “Yeah, you wanna look cool and weird and like—uh, sometimes it can be uncomfortable, obviously, but I find it, like, almost fun? When I get stared at for being weird, like people are looking at you on the bus and you’re just like, ‘Yeah, this is me!’”<sup>59</sup> Another participant, Jordan, made reference to a desire for unknowability that is reflective of this resistant ethos as well, stating, “I just want people to look at me and be just like, ‘That is—I don’t know what that is, I don’t know who that is’ and like, start questioning that.” Jordan’s ideal self-presentation is not only described as being illegibly gendered, but additionally would provoke thought regarding traditional understandings of gender as a whole, much like Jones and Harris’s conception of the visibly queer person (“monster”) as a figure that forces others to acknowledge the assimilative nature of hegemony (p. 527-528).

To be called a monster is assumed to be an insult. Monsters are, generally speaking, ugly, frightening, confusing, and unreasonable. I am not trying to dispute this, but simply to say that if someone is going to experience anxiety or distress as a result of my incoherent gender, then I take enormous pride in being the cause of that distress.

*N: this scene<sup>60</sup> is my gender*

*E: Yeah that’s correct [...] The dripping blood, crouched on the floor, fisting a roast chicken, vomiting sentient black gobbly goo [...] is very you*

*- Personal communication with Erin McHarge, October 4, 2021, via Teleparty*

---

<sup>59</sup> Quote has been edited for clarity.

<sup>60</sup> In *Jennifer’s Body* (2009, US, Karyn Kusama)

## Beautiful Scars

When I was a young teenager, one of the many (many) social missteps I made in that time happened in my school's gym changing room; my friend Eleanor had removed her shirt and I noticed the skin on her chest above her bra had what looked like little lightning bolts peppered across it, so I pointed them out, telling her they were cool. She curled her lip, insulted, and informed me that they were stretch marks, her tone indicating clearly that they were not something upon which it was polite to comment. I was embarrassed and tried to socially recover by telling her that I wished *my* breasts were big enough for stretch marks, since mine were, as previously discussed, notoriously unimpressive. I cannot remember if it worked, or if she stayed mad at me for that week. All I know is that my friend had a pattern on her skin that looked very much like clusters of lightning bolts and I was very envious.

As I invest more effort and emotion into building the person I want to be, I double-down, time and again, on my love for marking the body. Tattoos, of course, are a fantastic option, but I also have said for many years that I love the stories told by scars. I would argue, "It shows the body has been lived in!" Every new scar came with advice to use vitamin E to make it less visible, which I rejected out of hand. In fact, after getting top surgery in December of 2020, I deliberately went against medical advice and was reaching above my head long before the 6-week recovery period had passed, because the rationale against it was that reaching would increase the visibility and thickness of the scars. I nodded along as my surgeon explained this to me, knowing full well I was going to be breaking some rules in the near future<sup>61</sup>.

---

<sup>61</sup> As a quick disclaimer, I recognize that not all individuals have the same relationship with scars that I do, nor am I suggesting that they should; many people carry scars that are the result of painful or traumatic experiences that they have no interest in romanticizing as I do mine.

Kathleen Del Mar Miller (2020) explores the connection between skin marking and gendered embodiment based on the anecdotal experiences of her trans and nonbinary patients' perspectives regarding their skins and the various marks left upon them. Miller notes that previous psychoanalytic interpretations of skin marking normally cast the behaviour as evidence of an underdeveloped "skin-ego", or psychic sense of self in relation to touch (p. 145). Using three of her patients as case studies and a framework of "radical openness—a potentiality rather than a pathological lack" (p. 146), Miller explains that, rather than these previous interpretations of such behaviour, trans and nonbinary applications of marks upon the skin are another form of embodiment and expression in relationship to gender, sexuality, and race (p. 152). One patient uses "cute" floral tattoos as a way to reckon with the implicit accusations of threat assigned to him as a transmasculine Latinx person (p. 150), while another treasures his top surgery scars, likening them, after Miller's suggestion, to birth marks (p. 151).

Jack Halberstam's (1995) book, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, pays close attention to the function of skin as a site of queer gender. Halberstam argues that skin, being the coating that holds human bodies together, is "the ultimate boundary" (p. 7). The violation of this boundary is demonstrated, in Halberstam's examples, by humanoid monsters across the last several centuries: the suturing of skin extends from Frankenstein's monster at the genesis of the horror genre (p. 28-29) to *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) as antagonist Buffalo Bill creates a "woman-suit" in direct response to gender dysphoria (p. 168-169). Kristeva's concept of abjection—"what does not respect borders, positions, rules"—emerges once again (p. 4). While not as extreme as a suit of skin, my affinity for scars is a physical demonstration of a boundary violated, something that one is expected to want to hide<sup>62</sup>.

---

<sup>62</sup> Hide: (1) verb, to conceal; (2) noun, skin. Halberstam (1995) notes that puns are frequently deployed in the Gothic horror genre (p. 178).

I am certainly not the first, last, or only person to find validation in scars from gender confirmation surgery; I simply want to note that the marks littering my body, both from surgery and other times that my skin has been opened<sup>63</sup>, are as much an expression of trans embodiment as my flat chest, facial hair, or drag persona.

### How Dare You Mistake Me for Human

A headline recently crossed my social media feed, published by Newsweek, which read: “Laura Ingraham Guest Says Trans People Will ‘Destroy’ Gender Norms to Create ‘New Species’ — ‘Human and Part Machine’”. Scanning the article, which was published two years ago, brought significant amusement. Ingraham, a Fox News reporter, and her podcast guest, Paul Nathanson, were speculating that trans people are, “abandoning gender, not simply re-writing it, [and in doing so] they’re basically trying to use social engineering to create a new species,” (Palmer, 2019). Given Ingraham’s conservative views, I can only assume that these assertions were meant in a negative manner, but, tone aside, I found myself delighted by the accusations therein, as they reflect a growing awareness of the potentiality that trans and nonbinary people’s visible existences bring to light.

The notion of a trans politic that rejects humanity is, admittedly, inflammatory, and certainly not something for which I would advocate as a unilateral praxis. Frameworks that invoke a shared humanity have been effectively deployed to secure legal protections for many marginalized groups, including queer and trans people (see Spade, 2011; Singer, 2020). I have spoken to other trans and nonbinary people that have experienced dehumanization and are, rightfully, very upset about it. Butler (1988) writes that, “Discrete genders are part of what

---

<sup>63</sup> A notable example of ‘other times’: I have a triangular scar on the inside of my right wrist from when I put my hand through a window trying to kill a fly that had found its way into my apartment. As I attempted to expel the abject, it ricocheted back onto me instead. I needed stitches, and the fly survived.

'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture," and notes that, without that humanization that comes from being definitively-gendered, people are vulnerable to repercussion (p. 522).

Nonetheless, inhuman and posthuman perspectives of trans experience challenge the assumption that claiming a human identity, which is often denied to us in transphobic discourse, is even good or desirable in the first place.

I return once again to Stryker's (1994) "Words", to note that she also engages with a certain disdain for humanity. The primary focus of her performance-piece-turned-article is a celebration of gender ambiguity and 'unnatural' bodies, but also encourages a species-wide ethos of humility: "As in the case of being called "it," being called a "creature" suggests the lack or loss of a superior personhood. I find no shame, however, in acknowledging my egalitarian relationship with non-human material Being; everything emerges from the same matrix of possibilities," (p. 240). Stryker revisits these thoughts in her 2015 publication, "Transing the Queer (In)Human", and advances the notion of somatechnics, "the mutually constitutive and inextricably enmeshed nature of embodiment and technology," (p. 229). The term's necessity stems from a recognition that bodies are always in a relationship with technology, regardless of gender modality (Stryker, 2015, p. 229).

One cannot raise the notion of the body's intersection with technology without mention of Donna Haraway's (1985/2016) "A Cyborg Manifesto". Haraway uses the metaphor of the cyborg—part human, part machine—to describe the integral relationship between the two, arguing that humans are invested in the notion of mastery over the machines we have invented, and that there is a definite boundary between authentic, natural humanity and a mechanical reproduction (p. 11). This, however, is a fiction; the figure of the cyborg complicates this duality by being both, much like the way that humans are unable to survive without some measure of

technology: “A cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial and contradictory standpoints,” (Haraway, 1985/2016, p. 15). As I have mentioned many times, contradictions seem to have become my trade, so a world full of them sounds thrilling to me. This could be a result of my own trans subjectivity, or just the idea that such a thing terrifies the likes of Laura Ingraham, but regardless, I say, bring on the transhumans<sup>64</sup>!

### Ruin and Wrath

As a brief digression, I will now turn my attention to a controversial theory that ‘came out’ around the same time that I did, known as Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD). The term was coined by Lisa Littman (2018), who argued that peer influence, or social contagion, was causing adolescents and young adults (AYAs) to impulsively claim a (presumably ‘inauthentic’) trans identity (p. 4). Littman recruited parent participants who were skeptical of their recently-out trans child, since (by the parents’ observations) the youth had only recently begun to express gender dysphoria. The concern of the article was that these AYAs may be able to access gender-affirming medical care and too easily make permanent changes to their bodies that would result in harm (Littman, 2018, p. 37).

I would like to now speak as someone who meets the observed criteria of this pseudo-scientific disorder. According to the respondents of Littman’s study, conducted to describe her theory, ROGD is most common in “natal females”, nearly half “expressed a non-heterosexual sexual orientation before identifying as transgender”, more than half “had reportedly been

---

<sup>64</sup> There are examples out there of literal transhumans—trans people who have engaged in body modification beyond what is traditionally understood as gender confirmation in order to pursue a less human aesthetic and to distance themselves from the species, such as transgender ‘dragon lady’ Eva Tiamat Medusa, but an exploration of these forms of embodiment unfortunately exceeds the scope of this project.

diagnosed with at least one mental health disorder or neurodevelopment disability prior to the onset of their gender dysphoria”, and approximately a third had social circles in which, “parent participants indicated that the majority of the members became transgender-identified,” (Littman, 2018, p. 2). Check, check, check, and check. My own narrative aligns incredibly closely with Dr. Littman’s data, along with her general definition of the phenomenon: “parents have reported that their children seemed to experience a sudden or rapid onset of gender dysphoria, appearing for the first time during puberty or even after its completion,” (Littman, 2018, p. 1). I am a person with a vagina—since the term “female” is itself gendered (see Butler, 1990/2006)—who called himself a lesbian before coming out, has been diagnosed with multiple neuroses, and self-identified as trans very suddenly at the age of 20, after finding a peer group of “transgender-identified”<sup>65</sup> individuals, having shown no clear signs of gender distress in childhood. As I covered in Chapter 1, the belief by an external observer that a child has experienced no signs of gender distress is circumstantial evidence at best, and furthermore, that dysphoria in childhood (or at all) is not required to claim a trans identity.

There are already plenty of comprehensive scholarly critiques of Littman’s assertions (see Ashley, 2020), her methodology (see Restar, 2020), and the discourses she perpetuates (see Hall, 2021). My intention here is not to recreate them, but instead to appropriate Littman’s descriptive study, which suggests that someone who meets these descriptors (according to an external observer) is inauthentically trans and should be protected from the physical ruin that medical transition procedures could cause (p. 40). One particularly fantastic line in Littman’s paper is as follows: “The most striking examples of ‘not seeming at all gender dysphoric’ prior to making

---

<sup>65</sup> The reason I put this term in quotations here is because the last thing I want to do is discredit the identities of the other trans youth that were part of my social circle at that time—none of whom, to my knowledge, have since de-transitioned. They are not “trans-identified”; they are trans, period.

the announcement included a daughter who loved summers and seemed to love how she looked in a bikini, another daughter who happily wore bikinis and makeup, and another daughter who previously said, ‘I love my body!’” (Littman, 2018, p. 13). Moving right along past the bizarre fixation that Littman seems to have regarding bikinis, specifically, these examples once again relegate gender to the body, including traditionally feminine forms of styling that body, such as makeup. While bodies play a function in gender for many people, the insistence that trans people



Image Description: Noah is taking a mirror selfie in 2017. The mirror is oblong, with an ornate, curling black frame of roses. Noah stands with his left hand behind his head, and with his right hand he holds up his cell phone to take the photograph. He has short bleached-blond hair with a brown undercut, and is wearing dark lipstick, a slim black choker, and a navy blue bra and panty set. His body is slim and white with an hourglass figure, a flat and toned stomach, and small but well-shaped breasts. The text superimposed on the image reads: “If I were a woman I’d have a fantastic body god fuckin damn it”

must “hate” their pre-transition bodies is a terribly strict expectation. As Butler (1988) notes,

The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. (p. 526)

I’d like to refer to the image to the left, drawn from the archives of my long-dormant Snapchat account. It was taken

July 9, 2017, months after I came out as trans. I can say I loved my pre-transition body, because it was objectively a nice one. I just had absolutely no hand in making it. I have spent the last four years meticulously ruining my body with intra-muscular and subcutaneous injections, synthetic

hormones that can cause cancer<sup>66</sup>, elective radical amputation<sup>67</sup>, potentially-infectious ink, ammonia-drenched hair-dye, and ramen, until it has become something that I can look up and down in my full length mirror, wide hips and surgical scars and treasure trail and back rolls and soft belly and inexplicably over-defined triceps<sup>68</sup>, and say that I did that—and I may yet do more, which I hope reads as the threat I intend it to be.

### Who Am I? That's None of My Business

I like to show the process of things. I like works-in-progress and peeks behind the scenes. This is why I include occasional footnotes explaining how my writing of this very thesis has evolved, and the observations I have used to entertain myself along the way; I believe that these, while not necessarily essential to the thesis itself, pay respect to the understanding that queerness and gender are states of continuous becoming, with no true end to be reached (Butler, 1988, p. 523). I recognize that this thesis is not cohesive, but again, this was intentional. I have pulled together *some* of the scraps of my experiences I believe serve to demonstrate an unconventional narrative of gender development. Kate Bornstein (2016) directly addresses her use of this writing style in the first pages of *Gender Outlaw*: “a little bit from here, a little bit from there? Sort of a cut-and-paste thing. And that’s the style of this book. It’s a trans style, I suppose,” (p. 5). The incoherence of my own gendered subjectivity lives in these pages, stitching together experiences that are arguably entirely disassociated from one another to form something vaguely resembling a narrative.

---

<sup>66</sup> As my interview participant, Blu, was warned by a new doctor after having already been taking testosterone for four months.

<sup>67</sup> To quote a friend’s bigoted parent describing gender confirmation surgery.

<sup>68</sup> I am absolutely not interested in working out or building muscle, and never have been—I just ended up with notably beefy upper arms, for some reason.

My childhood lacked the traditional markers of a transmasculine persuasion, but my identification with a grotesque form of distorted femininity was already present in my Halloween endeavours. This interest went untouched for years, only to re-emerge as a monstrous drag persona and an affinity for the horror genre's abject depictions of gender. Chapter One, unidentifiable as trans, returns as Chapter Five, a subversion of transnormative expectations. My introduction to such transnormative narratives, cut from a single viewing experience in my youth and pasted into this document as Chapter Two, lead to a misidentification with a variety of terms as seen in Chapter Three and an unwillingness to 'commit' to any of them, including the ones with which I identify to this day. Chapter Four demonstrates how a supposedly gender transgressive subculture like the world of drag can still leave those that are indefinite behind, choosing instead to align with finite narratives of binaries and bioessentialism while insisting a celebration of the opposite.

Legibility has all but gone out the window at this point because the embodied experience of gender is so far beyond me, having only one mind and one body in which to put it all. I wanted these pages to hold the queer nature of an individual gender, unpacked, flayed, and spread out<sup>69</sup> for observation. Whether or not I succeeded, I am uncertain, which is ultimately thematically consistent with the rest of this project. Perhaps, as Halberstam (2011) suggests in his introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure*, "Illegibility may in fact be one way of escaping the political manipulation to which all university fields and disciplines are subject," (p. 10).

With these scraps, I have attempted to demonstrate the frustrating and sometimes contradictory nature of gender when it is held to such strict standards as binary restriction,

---

<sup>69</sup> This metaphorical use of "spread" can be imagined as a pair of legs or as a viscous substance over toast—reader's choice.

bioessentialism, “plausible histories” (see Vipond, 2015, p. 28), or gender conformity. This has been reflected in the scattered style of my writing and my refusal to conform to the limiting expectations of academic scholarship. I am hoping that this thesis is able to reach a variety of groups— young people whose notions of gender are not yet as rigid as is expected by the adults in their lives (see Halberstam, 2011, p. 27), people of all ages that are not aware that ‘wanting to be trans’ is simply ‘being trans’ in the future tense, those who have been postponing transition because they fear they would not be ‘good at’ being whichever gender they desire, those have detransitioned and regret doing so, cis academics whose knowledges of trans experience lack a subjective element—I could continue endlessly. Ultimately, this thesis is intended, not to make any definitive conclusions about trans experience as a whole, but instead to contribute to a collection of subjective knowledge that destabilizes any discursive truth-claims about what constitutes a ‘real’ trans person.

**Post-Script: The Castrated Man**  
**(Or, One Final Abjection)**

When my parents told my paternal grandfather that my cousin (on my mother's side) would be transitioning, my grandfather exclaimed, "What's he gonna do for a dick?!" It was comical at the time—that my mid-70s Russian grandpa had no objections to the notion of transition<sup>70</sup> and that his first thought was instead concern for a near-stranger's ability to obtain the so-called 'appropriate' set of genitals. In retrospect, however, it is probably for the best that he died before I had to explain my own FTMT+ identity to him, because he would surely ask something similar, and I would have to be truthful, though I cannot imagine him liking what I have to say:

I love my gash, and frequently refer to it as such. I embrace my existence as a supposed eunuch. The deep, unrelenting psychoanalytic fear of castration that many believe drives hegemonic performances of masculinity has no hold on me whatsoever. The urge to engage in grandiose displays of machismo meant to ultimately communicate the size of one's cock, relative to present company, does not waste any time in my day. Having never had a cock in the traditional sense, I cannot fear its loss and frankly struggle to sympathize with those who do.<sup>71</sup> I am the worst-case-scenario for the cis man whose masculinity is held up as more legitimate than mine: the nadir of his story from which there is no upswing, the poetic punishment for the most abject of crimes. Think about cultural productions of castrated men: the brutal fantasy of the rape-revenge film which justifies such a consequence, the pathos of those who survive the cut

---

<sup>70</sup> I had never heard the opinions of anyone on my father's side regarding trans identities. I wish that were still the case, if only out of complete exasperation.

<sup>71</sup> Before anybody castigates me for being callous, I do, of course, recognize the horror of literal genital mutilation; I refer instead, specifically, to the psychological complex.

whether or not the narrative believes they ‘deserve’ it, the inevitable loss of self and will to suicide that follows. The cock is a privilege revoked for bad behaviour, whether legitimately evil (as in instances of rape) or simply a transgression against some vicious authority (the father, the captor, the state, et cetera). I never learned to live with, to understand the horror of living without, and so a punishment of such psychosocial magnitude eludes my range of sensory possibilities. My ‘lack’ is a lack of fear, a lack of need to prove, a lack of deterrent against all sorts of potential wickedness. I suppose I could be, in a way, re-castrated by removing my access to hormones<sup>72</sup>, but that would simply be a return to the form in which I, against odds, learned to be some kind of man in the first place. I forged my claim to something resembling manhood in the same embodied afterspace where a cis man would feel his grip on masculinity weaken and slip away. His end is my beginning. That which destroys him entirely was my starting point, and

I am unencumbered by what he cannot get back.

---

<sup>72</sup> At the time that this piece was written, I was still taking them.

### Works Cited

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective economies. *Social Text* 79(22-2), 117-139.
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Aitkenhead, D. (2018, March 3). RuPaul: 'Drag is a big f-you to male-dominated culture'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/03/rupaul-drag-race-big-f-you-to-male-dominated-culture>
- Ashley, F. (2020). A critical commentary on 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria'. *The Sociological Review Monographs* 68(4), 105-125.
- Bailey, F., Barbato, R., Campbell, T., Charles, R., Corfe, S., Salangsang, M., McKim, C. (Executive Producers). (2009-present). *RuPaul's drag race* [TV series]. World of Wonder.
- Benaway, G. (2018). *Holy wild*. Book\*hug Press.
- Bennet-Alexander, D. D. (2010). The use of the term "boy" as evidence of race discrimination: Apparently the eleventh circuit didn't get the memo. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1785095>
- Bergen, V. (2006). Chapter 4: The precariousness of being and thought in the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou. In Boundas, C. V. (Ed.), *Deleuze and Philosophy* (pp. 62-73).o
- Berlant, L. & Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry* 24(2), 549-566.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Bornstein, K. (2012). *A queer and pleasant danger: The true story of a nice Jewish boy who joins the Church of Scientology and leaves twelve years later to become the lovely lady she is today*. Beacon Press Books.
- Bornstein, K. (2016). *Gender outlaw: On men, women, and the rest of us (revised and updated)*. Vintage Books. Original work published 1994.

- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal* 40(4), 519-531.
- Butler, J. (2003). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.
- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble* (2nd ed.). Routledge Classics. Original work published 1990.
- Cannon, M. (2012). The regulation of First Nations sexuality. In Fitzgerald, M. & Rayter, S. (Eds.), *Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies* (pp. 51-63). Canadian Scholars' Press, Inc.
- Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*. MacMillan Press.
- Chase, S. E. (2003). Taking narrative seriously: Consequences for method and theory in interview studies. In Lincoln, Y. S. & Denzin, N. K. (Eds.) *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief* (pp. 273-296). AltaMira Press.
- Chu, A. L. (2019). *Females: A concern*. Verso.
- Clare, E. (2017). *Brilliant imperfection: Grappling with cure*. Duke University Press.
- Clover, C. J. (1992). *Men, women, and chainsaws: Gender in the modern horror film*. Princeton University Press.
- Emerson, S. & Rosenfeld, C. (1996). Stages of adjustment in family members of transgender individuals. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy* 7(3), 1-12.
- English Standard Version Bible*. (2001). ESV Online. <https://esv.literalword.com/>
- Ferguson, L. (2019). *Me, myself, they: Life beyond the binary*. House of Anansi Press.
- Fournier, L. (2021). *Autotheory as feminist practice in art, writing, and criticism*. The MIT Press.
- Grassi, M. (Writer) & Earnshaw, P. (Director). (2010, August 11). My body is a cage (1) (Season 10, Episode 15) [TV series episode]. In Schuyler, L. & Stohn, S. (Executive Producers),

- Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Epitome Pictures.
- Halberstam, J. (1995). *Skin shows: Gothic horror and the technology of monsters*. Duke University Press.
- Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer art of failure*. Duke University Press.
- Halberstam, J. (2018). *Trans\*: A quick and quirky account of gender variability*. University of California Press.
- Hall, S. F. (2021). Panoptical time, cissexism, and heterosexism: How discourses of adulthood discipline queer and trans youth. *Feminist Formations* 33(2), 283-312.
- Hamilton, J. L. (2014). The golden age of prostitution: One woman's personal account of an outdoor brothel in Vancouver, 1975-1984. In Irving, D. & Raj, R. (Eds.) *Trans Activism in Canada: A Reader* (pp. 27-32). Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3), 575-599.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Harding, S. (1986). The instability of the analytical categories of feminist theory. *Signs* 11(4), 645-664.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2006). The practice of feminist in-depth interviewing. In Leavy, P. L. & Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Eds.) *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (pp. 111-148).
- Jesse, C. (2015). *Orientation: Mapping queer meaning*. Erosprit.
- Jones, S. H., & Harris, A. (2016). Monsters, desire, and the creative queer body. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 30(5), 518-530. DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2016.1210748
- Jones, A. (2019, August). Ontario government releases new sex ed curriculum, similar to

- scrapped version. *Global News*. <https://globalnews.ca/news/5792416/ontario-new-sex-ed-curriculum/>
- Joseph, A., Saint John, J., Petras, K., Gottwald, L., & Hudson, S. (2020). In the next life. [Performed by Kim Petras]. On *TURN OFF THE LIGHT*. Berlin, Germany: Amigo Records.
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.) Sage Publications.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- Kusama, K. (Director). (2009). *Jennifer's body* [Film]. Fox Atomic & Dune Entertainment.
- Lim, J. & Browne, K. (2009). Senses of gender. *Sociological Research Online* 14(1), n.p. DOI: 10.5153/sro.1859
- Lipsitz, G. (1995). The possessive investment in whiteness: Racialized social democracy and the “white” problem in American studies. *American Quarterly* 47(3), 369-387.
- Littman, L. (2018). Parent reports of adolescents and young adults perceived to show signs of a rapid onset of gender dysphoria. *PLoS ONE* 13(8): e0202330. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0202330
- Martin, G. R. R. (1996). *A game of thrones*. Bantam Books.
- Meerkamper, S. T. (2013). Contesting sex classification: The need for genderqueers as a cognizable class. *The Dukeminier Awards: Best Sexual Orientation Law Review Articles* 12, 1-23.
- Meyerowitz, J. (2004). A “fierce and demanding” drive. In *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (pp. 130-167). Harvard University Press.

- Miller, K. D. M. (2020). Working clinically with the skin's surface: Tattoos, scars, and gendered embodiment. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 21(3), 143-154. DOI: 10.1080/15240657.2020.1798188
- Mitchell, J. C. (Director). (2001). *Hedwig and the angry inch* [Film]. Killer Films.
- Mock, J. (2017, May 30). *Beauty beyond binaries: The mermaid trend has an extra-special meaning for many trans women*. Allure. <https://www.allure.com/story/trans-women-mermaid-trend-meaning>
- Monforte, I. (2010). House and ball culture goes wide. *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 17(5), 28-30.
- Morgensen, S. L. (2012). Theorizing gender, sexuality, and settler colonialism: An introduction. *Settler Colonial Studies* 2(2), 2-22. DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2012.10648839.
- Mother Mother. (2008). *Body. On O My Heart*. Toronto, Ontario: Last Gang Records.
- Namaste, V. (2000). *Invisible lives: The erasure of transsexual and transgendered people*. University of Chicago Press.
- Nelson, M. (2015). *The argonauts*. Graywolf Press.
- Palmer, E. (2019, March 28). Laura Ingraham guest says trans people will 'destroy' gender norms to create 'new species' — 'Human and part machine'. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/laura-ingraham-podcast-trans-people-species-machine-paul-nathanson-1377906>
- Preciado, P. B. (2013). *Testo junkie: Sex, drugs, and bio politics in the pharmacopornographic era* (B. Benderson, Trans.). The Feminist Press. (Original work published 2008).
- Rahilly, E. P. (2015). The gender binary meets the gender-variant child: Parents' negotiations with childhood gender variance. *Gender & Society* 29(3), pp. 338-361.

- Raymond, J. (2006). Sappho by surgery: The transsexually-constructed lesbian feminist. In Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (Eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 131-143). Routledge. (Original work published 1979).
- Restar, A. J. (2020). Methodological critique of Littman's (2018) parental-respondents accounts of "rapid-onset gender dysphoria". *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 49, 61-66.
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5(4), 631-660.
- Riggs, D. W. (2014). What makes a man? Thomas Beatie, embodiment, and 'mundane transphobia'. *Feminism & Psychology* 24(2), 157-171. DOI: 10.1177/0959353514526221
- Rosenberg, S. (2008). History, memory and MTF transsexual activism: A review of *Screaming Queens* (and a retort to Margaret Wentz). *Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20, 217-224.
- Schilt, K. & Westbrook, L. (2009). Doing gender, doing heteronormativity: "Gender normals", transgender people, and the social maintenance of heterosexuality. *Gender & Society* 23(4), 440-464.
- Sharpe, A. (2006). From functionality to aesthetics: The architecture of trans jurisprudence. In Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (Eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 621-631). Routledge.
- Shelley, J. A., Harris, M., & Heyaca, M. (2020). Pink (Freak). [Recorded by Elliot Lee]. On *Pink (Freak)*. New York City, New York: Photo Finish Records.
- Smith, D. (1972). Women's perspective as a radical critique of sociology. *Sociological Inquiry* 44(1), 7-13.

- Spade, D. (2006). Mutilating gender. In Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (Eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 315-332). Routledge.
- Spade, D. (2011). *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of the law*. South End Press.
- Spencer, L. G. (2014). Performing transgender identity in *The Little Mermaid: From Andersen to Disney*. *Communication Studies* 65(1), 112-127. DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2013.832691
- Stockton, K. B. (2009). *The queer child, or, growing sideways in the twentieth century*. Duke University Press.
- Stone, S. (2006). The Empire strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto. In Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (Eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 221-235). Routledge. (Original work published 1987).
- Stryker, S. (1994). My words to Victor Frankenstein above the village of Chamounix: Performing transgender rage. *GLQ* 1, 237-254.
- Stryker, S. (2004). Transgender studies: Queer theory's evil twin. *GLQ* 10(2), 212-215.
- Stryker, S. (2015). Transing the queer (in)human. *GLQ* 21(2-3), 227-230.
- Sullivan, L. (2006). A transvestite answers a feminist. In Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (Eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 159-164). Routledge. (Original work published 1973).
- Sullivan, N. (2008). The role of medicine in the (trans)formation of 'wrong' bodies. *Body & Society* 14(1), 105-116. DOI: 10.1177/1357034X07087533
- Sycamore, M. B (Ed.). (2006). *Nobody passes: Rejecting the rules of gender and conformity*. Seal Press.
- Thom, K. C. (2019). *I hope we choose love: A trans girl's notes from the end of the world*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

- Vipond, E. (2015). Resisting transnormativity: Challenging the medicalization and regulation of trans bodies. *Theory In Action* 8(2), 21-44. DOI: 10.3798/tia.1937-0237.15008.
- Walters, S. D. (1996). From here to queer: Radical feminism, postmodernism, and the lesbian menace (Or, why can't a woman be more like a fag?). *Signs* 21(4), 830-869.
- Wark, M. (2020). *Reverse cowgirl*. Semiotext(e).
- West, C. & Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society* 1(2), 125-151.
- Whitehead, J. (2018). *Jonny Appleseed*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Whittle, S. (2006). Where did we go wrong? Feminism and trans theory—Two teams on the same side? In Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (Eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 194-202).
- Wilchins, R. (1997). *Read my lips: Sexual subversion and the end of gender*. Magnus Books.
- Wittig, M. (1993). One is not born a woman. In Abelove, H., Barale, M. A., & Halperin, D. M. (Eds.) *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Routledge. (Original work published 1992).
- Wood, W. (2020). Marsha, thankk you for the dialectics, but I need you to leave. On *The Normal Album*. Richmond, Virginia: Say-10 Records.
- Yorke, B. (Writer), & Gunnarsson, S. (Director). (2010, August 12). My body is a cage (2) (Season 10, Episode 16) [TV series episode]. In Schuyler, L. & Stohn, S. (Executive Producers), *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Epitome Pictures.

## Appendix



### Letter of Invitation

**Title:** Trans-gender-nonconformity: Exploring gender diversity and expression among transgender individuals

**Date of ethics clearance:** June 9, 2020

**Ethics Clearance for the Collection of Data Expires:** April 30, 2021

March 15, 2020

Hello,

My name is Noah Rodomar and I am a Master's student in the Pauline Jewett Institute of Women's and Gender Studies at Carleton University. I am working on a research project under the supervision of Dr. Dan Irving.

I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in a study on non-conforming gender expression amongst trans-identified people. This study aims to document the experiences of openly transgender individuals who do not conform to traditional expectations of gender presentation, whether that is a rejection of medical transition, gender-bending performance art (e.g., cosplay, acting, or drag), or simply refusing to perform traditional masculinity (for transgender men) or femininity (for transgender women) to attain perceived legitimacy as trans in a gender normative society.

This study involves one interview of approximately 1 hour that will take place on a mutually convenient, secure video chat service. With your consent, interviews will be digitally audio-recorded. Once the recording has been transcribed, the digital audio recording will be destroyed. You will also be asked to complete an optional demographics form where you can specify your selected pseudonym, if you choose to select one yourself. This form will also ask you your age, hometown, current town of residence, gender identity, sexual orientation, and race, to help identify any potential trends that may occur across these identities. You can decline to answer any or all of the demographics form's questions based on your comfort level. If you choose to participate, you can be assured that your identity will be protected. You will be asked at the start of the interview to choose a pseudonym, which will be recorded on your demographics form. If you decline to select a pseudonym

yourself, one will be assigned to you. Any identifying information (e.g. mentions of your workplace, neighbourhood, family and/or friends) will be edited out of transcript and will not appear in any publication. In addition to ensuring that all of your responses are anonymous, you can request that certain responses not be included in the final project.

You can end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason, for up to 30 days after your interview. If you choose to withdraw, your consent form, demographics form, email communication, digital file of interview and transcript (if transcribed by that date) will be deleted or destroyed.

This study is not funded and therefore, no compensation will be provided.

All research data, including audio-recordings and any notes will be encrypted. Any hard copies of data (including any handwritten notes or USB keys) will be kept in a locked cabinet at Carleton University. Research data will only be accessible by the researcher and the research supervisor.

This ethics protocol for this project was reviewed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board, which provided clearance to carry out the research. Should you have questions or concerns related to your involvement in this research, please contact:

**CUREB-A:**

If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

If you would like to participate in this research project, or have any questions, please contact me at [gnctransstudy@gmail.com](mailto:gnctransstudy@gmail.com) or [noahrodomar@cmail.carleton.ca](mailto:noahrodomar@cmail.carleton.ca).

You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Dan Irving, at [dan.irving@carleton.ca](mailto:dan.irving@carleton.ca).

Sincerely,  
Noah Rodomar

## Informed Consent Form

**Name and Contact Information of Researchers:** Noah Rodomar, Carleton University, Pauline Jewett Institute of Women's and Gender Studies

Tel.: [REDACTED]

Email: noahrodomar@cmail.carleton.ca

Supervisor and Contact Information: Dr. Dan Irving, Carleton University, Pauline Jewett Institute of Women's and Gender Studies, Email: dan.irving@carleton.ca

### Project Title

Trans-gender-nonconformity: Exploring gender diversity and expression among transgender individuals

### Carleton University Project Clearance

Clearance #: 112636

Date of Clearance: June 9, 2020

### Invitation

You are invited to take part in this research project because you are a self-identified trans individual who has volunteered to participate in this study. The information in this form is intended to help you understand what I am asking of you so that you can decide whether you agree to participate in this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and a decision not to participate will not be used against you in any way. As you read this form, and decide whether to participate, please ask all the questions you might have, take whatever time you need, and consult with others as you wish.

### What is the purpose of the study?

The study seeks to document the experiences of openly transgender individuals who do not conform to traditional expectations of gender presentation, whether that is a rejection of medical transition, gender-bending performance art (cosplay, drag, acting), or simply refusing to perform traditional masculinity (for transgender men) or femininity (for transgender women) to attain perceived legitimacy as trans in a gender normative society.

### What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in the study, we will ask you to:

- Complete an approximately 1-hour semi-structured interview with the Principle Investigator
- The interview questions will ask you about your gender expression, presentation, identity and experiences with others regarding your gender
- Complete an optional demographics form prior to the interview that identifies your selected pseudonym for this study, along with your age, hometown, current city of residence, gender identity, sexual orientation, and race, any of which you can decline to answer
- Interviews will take place over Skype, Zoom, or another mutually convenient video calling service, in accordance with Carleton's COVID-19 regulations

- The interviews will be audio recorded to facilitate accurate transcription

### **Risks and Inconveniences**

We anticipate the possibility of psychological risk, discomfort, or trauma associated with conversations regarding one's gender, recognizing the sensitivity of this subject. As a result, you can withdraw consent and end the interview for any reason. Resources will be made available to you during a post-interview debriefing to access additional support as necessary.

### **Possible Benefits**

You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation may allow researchers to better understand how transgender individuals may still be constrained by normative expectations of gender even after coming out as transgender.

### **Compensation/Incentives**

You will not be paid or compensated for your participation in this study.

### **No waiver of your rights**

By signing this form, you are not waiving any rights or releasing the researchers from any liability.

### **Withdrawing from the study**

If you withdraw your consent during the course of the study, all information collected from you before your withdrawal will be discarded.

After the study, you may request that your data be removed from the study and deleted by notice given to the Principal Investigator (named above) within 30 days after your completion.

### **Confidentiality**

I will remove all identifying information from the study data as soon as possible, which will be after the interview takes place, during the transcription process.

I will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent. Research records may be accessed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board to ensure continuing ethics compliance.

All data will be kept confidential, unless release is required by law (e.g. child abuse, harm to self or others).

The results of this study may be published or presented at an academic conference or meeting, but the data will be presented so that it will not be possible to identify any participants unless you give your express consent.

You will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym, or if you are not interested in doing so, one will be assigned to you, so that your identity will not be directly associated with the data you have provided. All data, including coded information, will be kept in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer.

We will password protect any research data that we store or transfer.

**Data Retention**

Your de-identified data will be retained for a period of 5 years and then securely destroyed.

**New information during the study**

In the event that any changes could affect your decision to continue participating in this study, you will be promptly informed.

**Ethics review**

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact the Chair of the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

**Statement of consent – print and sign name**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.  Yes  No

I agree to be audio recorded.  Yes  No

I would like to receive a copy of this study when it is complete.  Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Research team member who interacted with the participant**

I have explained the study to the participant and answered any and all of their questions. The participant appeared to understand and agree. I provided a copy of the consent form to the participant for their reference.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. How do you identify yourself in terms of sex and/or gender?
3. At what point in your life did you start to question your gender and how did that come about for you?
4. There are lots of different ways to transition, including medically, socially, legally, et cetera. What does “transition” look like for you, personally?
5. How did people around you react to your coming out? Did they “see it coming”? Were there any strategies you adopted that were meant to reinforce your trans identity to others?
6. Has your gender expression shifted since you first came out and if so, how?
7. Are there ways that you might want to express your gender and don’t? Do you find yourself making compromises to satisfy the expectations of other people? Who?
8. How do you feel about the trans community, both in the city and online? Do you engage with it? Why or why not?
9. Have you ever had your trans identity invalidated? If so, can you explain what happened?
10. Are there any aspects of your identity that influence how you describe your gender? This can relate to anything including (but not limited to) intersecting identities, passions/art, political choices, linguistic convictions/barriers, and so on.



**Carleton**  
UNIVERSITY

Canada's Capital University



**TRANS-GENDER-  
NONCONFORMITY:  
EXPLORING GENDER DIVERSITY  
AND EXPRESSION AMONG  
TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS**

YOU QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY IF YOU:

- SELF-IDENTIFY AS TRANSGENDER
- RESIDE IN CANADA OR THE UNITED STATES
- ARE OVER THE AGE OF 18
- EXPRESS YOUR GENDER NON-TRADITIONALLY  
(I.E. GENDER-CREATIVE, GENDER DIVERSE,  
GENDERQUEER, NON-BINARY, DRAG) AND/OR ARE  
NOT FOLLOWING A TRADITIONAL MEDICAL  
TRANSITION PATH

TO INQUIRE OR SIGN UP, PLEASE EMAIL  
GNCTRANSSTUDY@GMAIL.COM

This project is conducted by Noah Rodomar, MA student, PJIWGS  
Supervised by Dr. Dan Irving, PJIWGS (danirving@cunet.carleton.ca)  
Ethics and Protocol Clearance ID: #112636

Clearance Date: June 9, 2020

To raise ethical concerns, contact Chair, Carleton University Research  
Ethics Board - A (613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email: ethics@carleton.ca