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**TRANSGENDER DIGITAL EMBODIMENTS: QUESTIONS OF THE TRANSGENDER
BODY IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Academic Faculty

By

Jessica Rae Fisher

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in American Studies

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Acknowledgements

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And to my family, who taught me the value of a good book, a long debate, and of tenacity. I am forever grateful to be a Fisher.

Introduction

There has been much said about Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." It is of interest to socialists, feminists, transgender folks, women, third world activists, to name a few (and not to neglect the intersections). Haraway writes in that essay, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 1991).¹ The first time I read that essay and encountered that quote, I became enamored with the idea. What is a cybernetic organism? I think of the Terran in the popular video game series StarCraft. Take your pick of characters and units from the game, Science Vessels, Adjutants, Ghosts – my favorite is thinking of Jim Raynor in his Vulture. But we do not need to think of futuristic, militaristic sci-fi to think of a cybernetic organism. Instead, this thesis will posit a person at a computer, a person at a video game console, a person on a smartphone are all cybernetic organisms. This is further made true for transgender individuals, who are made up of the social realities of transphobia and transmisogyny and the fiction of the worlds and selves that can be made in the world wide web.

In addition to Haraway, this thesis is informed immensely by Susan Stryker, who drove my interest in how both society and the transgender community think about transgender embodiment. I too want to "lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity" (Stryker 1994).² I too believe that there is power in reclamation, and that being on the edges of a community, even a community already on the edge like the transgender community, doesn't mean that there isn't room for reclamation. In fact, it provides all the more room for reclamation.

At first, when I went on Tumblr, I was awash with the acceptance of transgender women, which meant I was awash with acceptance for who I was. Which was something that never

¹ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," (Artificial Life: Critical Contexts, 1991), 456

² Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," (GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies, 1994), 246.

happened in 19 years of living life as a confused and mostly-closeted queer trans person in a southern, rural town in the early 2000's. I got on Tumblr in 2011. However, the longer I spent on Tumblr and the more involved in the transgender community there that I was, the more I read posts about on-going intracommunity dialogue, discussion and discourse, the more I realized that the community I had thought was accepting, wasn't. Between 2012-2014, I still mainly identified as a transgender woman. I knew that I had gender dysphoria. I knew that I wanted to get on hormone replacement therapy, I knew I wanted gender affirmation surgery (GAS). But when I first read the word "transtrender," it caused pause.

Transtrender

The top definition for "transtrender" on Urban Dictionary as of the time of the writing of this thesis is, "A transtrender is a person (usually between the ages of 9 and 19) who calls themselves a transgender person because they think it makes them cool or special" (transapple 2015). The definition goes on to claim that "Transtrenders never experience dysphoria [sic] transphobia or oppression [sic], and often identify as 'otherkin,'" (transapple 2015). This raises important questions: Is it true that so-called transtrenders never experience dysphoria? Is it true that transtrenders never experience transphobia? And is it true that transtrenders never experience oppression? The definition goes on to say that transtrenders use "ridiculous, impracticable [sic] neopronouns or nounself pronouns, and often the gender they identify with isn't even a valid gender (e.g. "stargender", "ferngender")" (transapple 2015). More questions arise. What qualifies as a valid gender? What makes pronouns and neopronouns practical and reasonable?

Should pronouns and neopronouns strive to be practical and reasonable? For whom? Under what circumstances? Should genders strive to be valid? For whom? Under what circumstances? Transapple's definition, cosigned by 430 other Urban Dictionary users, claims

that transtrenders are “basically” cisgender and that they are “pretending” to be transgender “because they think it makes them feel special, and want to be able to say that they are oppressed by being in the transgender community because they think it makes them look cool” (transapple 2015). The definition culminates in the ultimate claim of those who oppose transtrenders: “Transtrenders are incredibly disrespectful to real transgender people, making a mockery of what transgender people experience, invalidating the problems and hurt that real transgender people face, and turning these people’s identity into a fashion trend” (transapple 2015).

It is not as present here in transapple’s definition, but transapple does hint at a contention of the anti-transtrender: that the transtrender, through their existence, and through their requests to be called by their pronouns and names and understood as the gender(s) they are, that they are harming the transgender rights movement. This question of harm can be answered in part by better understanding autonomy – what rights one has, and how one’s rights interact with those around them, and whether these rights cause harm, or not and whether this harm is justifiable. This will be addressed in the ‘Autonomy’ section below.

This thesis is meant to talk about who transtrenders are, as such, looking briefly at the available, albeit limited, definitions for the term available in the literature, is important. Christine Feraday in her essay, “For Lack of a Better Word: Neo-Identities in Non-Cisgender, Non-Straight Communities on Tumblr” relies on Urban Dictionary definitions to define “transtrender.” Lee Fraser writes in their essay “Reblogging Gender: Non-Binary Transgender Subjectivities and the Internet” that, “People who publicly identify as non-binary can be accused of being a ‘transtrender,’ especially if they do not display visible effort to receive medical treatment to alter their bodies” (Fraser 2017).³ Fraser also turns to Urban Dictionary to define

³ Lee Fraser, “Reblogging Gender: Non-Binary Transgender Subjectivities and the Internet,” (The University of Western Ontario, 2017), 91.

this word, in addition to Tumblr and Reddit. Jordan Forrest Miller writes in their master's thesis, "‘I Wanna Know Where The Rule Book Is’: Youtube as a Site of Counternarratives to Transnormativity," "Some trans people who do not have immediate plans to medically transition, such as Milo [Stewart], are pejoratively named transtrenders or social justice warriors (SJWs) and are said to only be claiming to be trans in order to gain popularity and ‘social justice points’" (Miller 2017).⁴

Jay H. Wu in their essay "‘On This Side’: The Production, Progression, and Potential of Cisgender" noted that when they asked 155 respondents the question "Do you know any words to refer to people who are *not* transgender?" (emphasis added) some respondents wrote that words they knew for people who are not transgender included: "faker, intersex, normal, not transgender, *transtrender*" (emphasis added, Wu 2015).⁵ Wu goes on to write that, "the terms faker and transtrender were also driven by a knowledge of queer and trans identities, but with an added animus towards, in the respondent's own words, '[p]eople trying to claim the transgender struggle for their own when not really being a part of it.'" (Wu 2015).⁶

Autonomy

What does autonomy look like? When I was first on Tumblr, freshly out to myself and others as a transgender woman, I thought autonomy as a transgender person was identifying your pronouns, and asking, if not demanding, to be called by those pronouns. I thought autonomy as a transgender person was identifying your name(s) and asking, if not demanding, to be called by that name(s). I thought autonomy as a transgender person meant identifying your gender, and having that gender be respected by those who care about you. Encountering this discussion,

⁴ Jordan Miller, "‘I Wanna Know Where the Rule Book Is’: YouTube as a Site of Counternarrative to Transnormativity," (Georgia State University, 2017), 21.

⁵ Joyce H. Wu, "‘On This Side’: The Production, Progression, and Potential of Cisgender," (Swarthmore College, 2015), 16.

⁶ Wu, "‘On This Side’," 17.

encountering transtrender as a derogatory term, I realized this may not be the case, at least in popular discourse.

Jenny Sunden also contributed to the motivation for this project, writing in her essay “What if Frankenstein(’s Monster) Was a Girl?” about the hypertext fiction *Patchwork Girl* and *Frankenstein*, observes that , “*Patchwork Girl*, like *Frankenstein*, is about the limits of what it means to be human. It is about the struggle to come to terms with difficult feelings of being made, not born” (Sunden 2008).⁷

It is in narratives of being made and not born, and of self-making, that this thesis is interested. Using Cullen O’Keefe’s ideas of autonomy will be useful for the “self-making” component. “I defend the following view: some degree of liberty is a necessary condition for ideal autonomy, but it is not sufficient for it,” he writes, differentiating between autonomy and liberty. “In addition to being sufficiently free, to be autonomous one must also be empowered to accomplish one’s goals” (O’Keefe 2016).⁸ Therefore, autonomy requires one to be not only “sufficiently free,” one must also be empowered to accomplish their goals (O’Keefe 2016).⁹ O’Keefe notes that, “The gender binary is deeply engrained in our culture, and so many people resist the validity of “genderqueer” or other non-binary gender identities” (O’Keefe 2016).¹⁰

That O’Keefe contends that “by assigning individuals to a sex at birth, the State also effectively assigns them a gender at birth” (O’Keefe 2016)¹¹ is also helpful for thinking about how we are made, not born. The State makes us in its image, and its made populous makes resistance to that medico-legal gendered making all the more difficult.

⁷ Jenny Sunden, “What if Frankenstein(’s Monster) Was a Girl?,” (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2008), 160.

⁸ Cullen O’Keefe “‘It’s a girl?’: Sex Assignment at Birth and Autonomy,” (University of Michigan, 2016), 13.

⁹ O’Keefe “‘It’s a girl?’,” 13.

¹⁰ O’Keefe “‘It’s a girl?’,” 47.

¹¹ O’Keefe “‘It’s a girl?’,” 48.

Joshua Weiss, writing about autonomy, contends that, "As such, one's right to self-identify understandably extends to the right to influence others' perceptions of that identity, including the right to amend any and all forms of identifying legal documentation to show appropriate identity markers" (Weiss 2016).¹² Except for in a few cases in the United States, non-binary individuals have no hope of reaching this point of amending identifying legal documents in a way that represents their non-binary gender. It isn't my hope to argue for a state solution, per se, but O'Keefe and Weiss's arguments are built around, at least in part, state recognition, and state recognition, at least in the United States, plays a very prominent role in discourse about one's right to exist¹³.

For my own part, I've already laid out my journey a little bit above. I held my gender together for 18 years with journal entries and lies told in AOL chat rooms and to strangers on Myspace. My story will be told in an autoethnography at the end, and will hopefully help inform the conversation about autonomy and self-making, keeping in mind that I aim to claim my own monstrous identity and that I find myself a creature of social reality and of fiction.

The topic of transgender digital embodiment brings together sub-fields of embodiment, transgender studies, digital embodiment, identity formation, digital identity formation, transgender embodiment and transgender identity formation. These intersections are important, because, in the still-young field of transgender studies, it is important to consider the space(s) and place(s) where digital embodiment happens – video games, social media platforms and the internet broadly. As a transgender person who has, in part, grown up with the internet, and who has, in part, depended on digital embodiment for my expressions and actualization as a

¹² Joshua Weiss, "Trans Autonomy: The Right to Personal and Perceived Gender Identity," (Dialogue, 2016), 56.

¹³ See Feinberg and Prince for different responses to role of the state in gender identity and expression.

transgender person, I have a personal investment in improving understandings of these spaces and places and how they allow for embodiment to occur.

Phenomenology and Affect

Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, writes about tracing lines and how this “depends on straightening devices that keep things in line” (Ahmed 2006).¹⁴ This “holding in place” as she called it, is useful for thinking about what is being held in place when binary sex is advocated for. What, and who, are being held in place when the medical model of transgenderism is advocated for? When transtrenders and neo-pronouns are fought against, what is being held in place? What is a cisnormative society trying to trace onto the bodies and lives of transgender people? Is Tumblr (as a stand-in for social media and the world wide web more broadly) aggravating because there is a body there that cannot be held in place? Is Tumblr aggravating because a so-called transtrender’s body cannot be made to be in place? There is a place for the transgender body to be, set out first by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), and reinforced in the West in part by U.S. professional medical, psychiatric, and psychological organizations.

Brian Massumi’s idea of the grid in *Parables for the Virtual* is useful for thinking about what happens when the transgender person goes online and redefines the parameters of their body. Massumi says at first that, “The body came to be defined by its pinning to the grid” (Massumi 2002)¹⁵ and then asks, “Where has the potential for change gone?” (Massumi 2002).¹⁶ Where has the movement gone, can the grid change or be changed? The transgender community, transgender scholars (inside and outside of transgender studies), queer theorists, activists, and everyday individuals have all tried to *grow* the grid, but one wonders if we aren’t still pinned to

¹⁴ Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2006), 42.

¹⁵ Brian Massumi, *Parables For The Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, (Durham & London, 2002), 2

¹⁶ Massumi, *Parables For The Virtual*, 3

male and female. Even if a transgender person can *move* themselves *within* the grid from male to female or from female to male¹⁷, the grid still does not grow, especially if one believes the grid cannot change. What does this say then about our relationship to gender? Gender, gender identity, gender expression – these ideas we are told are new – can we fit them, and ourselves, *into* the grid? Or, is the position of the transtrender, both as a force outside of the limits of cisgenderism and as outside of the limits of conventional transgenderism¹⁸ truly, actually off of the grid? It would seem that the actions to fit the transtrender into the medical model of transgenderism (and their hesitancy, their refusal, their discomfort) proves their position *off* of the grid. To go back to Ahmed, the transtrender’s body seemingly cannot be held in place.

It is as important to think about the position of the transgender person, especially once they get online, as it is to think about how they think about their position while they’re doing these things. It’s important also to think about how their thinking about their offline position(s) may influence their drive to log-on).

Counterpublics

Joshua Barnett writes in his essay, “Social Media: Fleshy Metamorphosis: Temporal Pedagogies of Transsexual Counterpublics,” that online spaces “have played a particularly important role for transsexuals and others who experience any number of oppressions, providing scenes of community making and information sharing that are not otherwise available” (Barnett 2015).¹⁹ Is it possible to consider the transtrender community a transgender, if not a transsexual, counterpublic? What does it mean that, for example, *fae/faer/faers/faerself* pronouns aren’t being

¹⁷ Massumi’s description of movement on page three could be said to already account for this sort of predefined movement.

¹⁸ With conventional transgenderism enforced by, if not established by, those transgender people themselves who are invested twofold in a binary idea of sex and gender, and in the idea of a medical model of transgenderism.

¹⁹ Joshua Barnett, “Social Media: Fleshy Metamorphosis: Temporal Pedagogies of Transsexual Counterpublics,” (Lexington Books, 2016), 159-160.

taught in elementary schools? The accusation that the etymology of this pronoun set can't be traced back to Middle English or earlier is used to delegitimize its user. An accusation of supposed etymological shortcoming doesn't delegitimize those who uses fae/faer/faers/faerself pronouns. Instead, it shows the usefulness of online spaces to provide themselves with scenes of community making and information sharing that are not available offline

Barnett cites D.C. Lin as well as R. Mitra and R. Gajjala when noting that “recent” social media research indicates that “many transgender people find blogging an empowering practice” (Barnett 2015).²⁰ Further, Barnett uses the case study of Riverdale, who tracks his [medical] transition online through a series of photographs, to suggest that the blog where this occurs creates a transsexual counterpublic. Of transsexual counterpublics Barnett writes, “... within a transsexual counterpublic ideas of mutability and transformation, along with practices of bodily poesis and representation, are able to surface as legitimate areas of conversation, spectatorship, and imagination” (Barnett 2015).²¹ It is only, then, within the transtrender counterpublic²² that transtrenders’ ideas of gender, gender identity, gender expression, pronouns, dysphoria (bodily and social), are able to “surface as legitimate areas of conversation” (Barnett 2015).²³

Michael Warner writes of a public that it is, “... a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, *Web sites posted*, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed” (emphasis added, Warner 2002).²⁴ Warner goes on to write that, “...and because they differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the

²⁰ Barnett, “Social Media,” 160.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

²² See nonbinarypastels.tumblr.com for a place where transtrender counterpublics exist online.

²³ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁴ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” (Duke University Press, 2002), 50.

dominant culture to understand itself as a public, they have come to be called counterpublics" (Warner 2002).²⁵ The way that transtrenders differ, then, I argue, is through their refusal to follow binary ideas of sex and/or gender, and, at times, their refusal to accept any ideas that one must experience gender dysphoria to be transgender.

Barnett invokes Haraway for a few different purposes, namely her idea of "becoming with" (Barnett 2015)²⁶ and her idea that "the body is always in-the-making" (Barnett 2015).²⁷ This idea of the body as always-in-the-making is wonderful for thinking about transsexual embodiment and the medical model of transgenderism and transsexuality. This thesis will argue that it can also be useful for thinking about the transtrender, transtrending body as well as for the digital/ social media/world wide web body, as well as for the bodies made on the intersections. Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey and Brooke Foucault Welles, in their article "#GirlsLikeUs: Trans advocacy and community building online," note that the "digital labor" of trans women and particularly trans women of color "represents the vanguard of struggles over self-definition" (Jackson, et al. 2018).²⁸ As a transtrending trans woman, I'm mainly interested in examining this digital labor and these struggles over self-definition.

Jackson et al. use network and discourse analysis to show how transgender women's "support and advocacy online epitomize the complications and possibilities of networked counterpublics" (Jackson et al. 2018).²⁹ The framework of networked counterpublics will prove useful for thinking about discourse and dialogue that happens on Tumblr, Twitter, Urban Dictionary, Facebook and other social media spaces. They build on the concept of network

²⁵ Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 81.

²⁶ Barnett, "Social Media," 157.

²⁷ Ibid., 165.

²⁸ Jackson et al. "#GirlsLikeUs: Trans advocacy and community building online," (new media & society, 2018), 1868.

²⁹ Jackson et al. "#GirlsLikeUs," 1869.

counterpublics that had previously been built by coauthors Jackson and Foucault Welles who “extend the concepts of the networked public sphere and counterpublics to the cultural work and interventions of historically marginalized citizens on Twitter” (Jackson et al. 2018).³⁰

The authors invoke Michael Warner to think of the use of #GirlsLikeUs as having the world-making “power of publics, that is, the discursive self-organization of a public among strangers that reflexively speaks to the historical and contemporary contexts of its makers and observers” (Jackson et al. 2018).³¹ What does it mean that so-called transtrenders have self-organized among the “strangers” of both transgender people at large, as well as cisgender people? What historical and contemporary contexts are the so-called transtrenders trying to speak to? The authors make note of Squires (2002) who detailed that counterpublics “emerge not only in reaction to oppression from the state or dominant public spheres, but also in relation to the internal politics of that particular [counter]public sphere and its material and cultural resources” (Jackson et al. 2018).³² One only has to think of the argument presented at the beginning of this thesis: that transtrenders delegitimize the transgender rights movement. Tolerance, acceptance, equality, and equity are made out to be finite resources, it seems, and those who are anti-transtrender posit that transtrenders are obstructing access to these resources by flouting a respectable way to be transgender. The withholding of tolerance, acceptance, equality, and equity doesn’t make those things finite; it makes those who withhold them gatekeepers, or more honestly, oppressors.

Jackson, et al. start off by arguing that transgender women have faced “historical and contemporary exclusions, both in the mainstream and within identity-based counterpublics” and

³⁰ Ibid., 1869.

³¹ Ibid., 1869.

³² Ibid., 1870.

as such the “communication constructed by and for trans women online illustrates some of the most subaltern” (Jackson et. al. 2018).³³ In consideration of this the authors look at how the *Advocate* magazine “chastised” Jennicet Gutierrez for a “lack of civility” and “rudeness” as an example of how trans women, and particularly trans women of color, have intersectional identities that “result in simultaneous marginalization” and thus place them in “subaltern positions” (Jackson et al. 2018).³⁴

Kimberle Crenshaw writes in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” about the difference between someone who “claims ‘I am Black’ and the claim ‘I am a person who happens to be black’” (Crenshaw 1991).³⁵ There seems to be a difference between someone who says, “I am transgender” and someone who says, “I am a person who happens to be transgender,” though this difference doesn’t map neatly onto a transgender-transgenderer dichotomy. For Crenshaw, the statement “I am Black” is a statement of empowerment that becomes “a positive discourse of self-identification,” whereas for the person who makes a statement of being a person who happens to be something, self-identification is achieved only through “straining for a certain universality” (Crenshaw 1991).³⁶ In the ethnography it will be seen that some transmed-transgender individuals position themselves as those who happen to be transgender, and that being transgender isn’t an interesting, unique or political part of their identity, whereas transgender-transgenderer individuals will claim their transgender identity, they will say, “I am transgender.” Jackson, et al.’s framework of the

³³ Ibid., 1870.

³⁴ Ibid., 1870.

³⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” (Stanford Law Review, 1991), 1297.

³⁶ Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1297.

subaltern position is useful for considering so-called transtrenders. Who are transtrenders? Transtrender, being a label put-on and not commonly a self-identifier, it is hard to say.

Jackson, et al. go on to note, paraphrasing the work of co-author Moya Bailey that, “independently produced media help gender-marginalized people to ‘survive and thrive’ in an otherwise hostile biomedical landscape” (Jackson et al. 2018).³⁷ Whether it is true or not, a supposed lack of gender dysphoria is what shuts so-called transtrenders out of the transgender community, as those transgender individuals who vilify transtrenders accuse them of not meeting their individual ideas (sometimes informed by the DSM-V, sometimes not) of gender dysphoria.

A person such as I, who both longs for biomedical intervention while simultaneously advocating for resistance against its growing necessity amongst transgender individuals, is stuck between a rock and a hard place as it were. I intend to show more fully the pro-biomedical intervention discourse below; for examples of it, see the Trump Administration’s proposed re-definition of “sex,” (Green, et. al. 2018).³⁸ This re-definition would roll back Obama Administration definitions of gender as not being determined by sex assigned at birth and being more about individual autonomy. This re-definition would see gender as intrinsically connected to the conditions of one’s genitals at birth, reinforcing a need to pursue medical models of transgenderism for one to change or adapt their legal documents. The so-called transtrender isn’t defined by transapple as being an advocate for the abandonment of the medical model of transgenderism, but certainly that intracommunity schism plays a role in this and other ongoing conversations.

³⁷ Jackson et al. “#GirlsLikeUs,” 1872.

³⁸ Green et al., “‘Transgender’ Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration,” (New York Times, 2018).

Jackson, et. al. quote Rawson (2014) in speaking about the importance of transgender worldmaking online as a site of historical activism: “cyberspace provides a revolutionary tool for creating, sharing, and preserving trans histories that would otherwise remain untold” (Jackson et al. 2018).³⁹ In fact, this is one of the calls to action of this thesis.

Arguably now more than ever there is an unprecedented amount of primary source material coming from transgender people in the forms of blogs, vlogs (video web logs), tweets, Instagram posts, etc. and while there can’t be an expectation to catalogue all of it, there should be honest effort put toward cataloguing enough of it to better and more fully represent the entirety of the transgender community. Transgender and non-binary narratives must be catalogued as well, not just the parts that satisfy dominant narratives. For example, dictionaries, especially ones that already do etymology work and work around tracking gender language, should continue to expand the words available through their site. For example, Merriam-Webster has a definition and a rudimentary etymology for bigender, but not one for pangender. The Oxford English Dictionary, similarly, has entries for agender and bigender, but not for pangender. This project should interest etymologists, lexicographers, historians, queer theorists, feminists, autoethnographers, activists, trans studies scholars and ethnographers, amongst others. Jackson et al. found that trans women use #GirlsLikeUs in three primary ways:

(1) to connect with one another on every day, often mundane, experiences, (2) to advocate for trans issues and rights (particularly through critiques of mainstream representations of trans people and anti-trans violence), and (3) to celebrate the accomplishments of trans women. (Jackson et al. 2018)⁴⁰

³⁹ Jackson et al. “#GirlsLikeUs,” 1872.

⁴⁰ Jackson et al. “#GirlsLikeUs,” 1876.

It will be worthwhile to see if these primary uses translate to other social media, and if so-called transtrenders use social media for similar purposes.

Bryce Renninger writes in his article “‘Where I can be myself ... where I can speak my mind’: Networked counterpublics in a polymedia environment,” about asexual communities; however, because the article is built on [danah] boyd’s analysis of social networking sites as networked publics to “account for the technological affordances for networked counterpublics” (Renninger 2015)⁴¹ it is useful for thinking about transgender people online as well.

Renninger notes it is “widely acknowledged that the Internet’s possibility for decentralized communication affords the possibility of a networked public sphere” (Renninger 2015).⁴² He also hopes to expand on boyd’s analysis “to create a model for understanding the affordances and the social dynamics therein of various SNSs for *counterpublic* communication” (Renninger 2015).⁴³ Probably the most useful of Renninger’s ideas is the idea of multiple publics “many of whom counter the hegemony of the dominant public”.⁴⁴

Departing from Renninger and his use of Nancy Fraser’s conception of a subaltern counterpublic, it is useful to turn to Gayatri Spivak’s conception of the subaltern. The subaltern is a heterogenous group. The transtrender, then, defined as it is by the transgender, and particularly, the transmed-transgender community, is a group whose identity is its difference (Spivak 1988).⁴⁵

This thesis argues if there is a community which could be called a transtrender community, ill-defined as that potential community remains at this point, it would be a subaltern.

⁴¹ Bryce J. Renninger, “‘Where I can be myself ... where I can speak my mind’: Networked counterpublics in a polymedia environment,” (new media & society, 2015), 1513.

⁴² Renninger, “Where I can be myself,” 1513.

⁴³ Ibid., 1514.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1516.

⁴⁵ Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Marxism and the interpretation of culture, 1988), 284-285.

There are people who are non-binary, agender, libragender, pangender, bigender, and demigender to name a few; whose publics and counterpublics are not self-constituted as a community that knows or identifies itself as transtrender.

To close out thinking about counterpublics, there is Sonja Vivienne, Anthony McCosker and Amelia Johns' *Digital Citizenship as Fluid Interface: Between Control Contest and Culture*. The authors aim to “challenge the prevailing normative sense of digital citizenship by exploring digital, mobile and social media affordances that, even in their risks and failings, can point towards innovation, social change and public good” (Vivienne, et al. 2016).⁴⁶ The authors note that through engaging in networked publics, there has been a rise of “alternative modes” of resistance to “renegotiate their identities and civic commitments, in the process subverting and transforming existing political and legal orders and structures” (Vivienne, et al. 2016).⁴⁷

Thinking of the social media use of transgender folks as a participation in counterpublics is an important part of situating the transgender person in relation to the world around them and gives an indication of why transgender people may turn to social media to create and participate in these counterpublics – where, when and how else can they create and participate in counterpublics? What do counterpublics look like offline compared to how they look online?

Digital Embodiment

Russell Belk notes in his essay “Extended Self in a Digital World,” that “with the advent of the Internet (especially ‘Web 2.0’),” there are a “greatly expanded set of ways in which we may represent ourselves to others” (Belk 2013).⁴⁸ Belk asserts that research on the extended self must consider dematerialization, re-embodiment, co-construction of self, expanded self and the

⁴⁶ Vivienne, et al., *Digital Citizenship as Fluid Interface: Between Control Contest and Culture*, (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), 1.

⁴⁷ Vivienne, et al., *Digital Citizenship*, 3.

⁴⁸ Russell Belk, “Extended self and the digital world,” (Current Opinions in Psychology, 2016), 50.

extended mind. Belk writes that the extended self-formulation “envisions” that “certain” possessions and other people “are seen to be part of us” and that “they extend our identity beyond our mind and body alone” so that, “when they are damaged, die, or are lost, we feel their loss as an injury to the self” (Belk 2013).⁴⁹

Belk is concerned with “how we more self-consciously present ourselves to non-commercial others online as well as how our digital productions and activities affect our own sense of self” (Belk 2013).⁵⁰ Belk argues that we do become attached to our “digital virtual possessions” such as our online avatars and virtual weapons as well as blog posts, selfies and personal web pages (Belk 2013).⁵¹

He notes that while we are disembodied “when we use social media, e-mail, blog, engage in online dating or virtual worlds, or play digital video games,” we are re-embodied in most of these instances “via avatars, photos, or videos” (Belk 2013).⁵² While, according to Belk, we are more likely to represent ourselves using virtual bodies, this does not mean that these representations are accurate or honest. Belk notes that there is a tendency “to choose online visual representations that are closer to the fantasy or ideal self than the actual self” (Belk 2013).⁵³

Here is a place where I would challenge Belk’s idea of an actual self, as well as his ideas of accuracy, honesty, fantasy and ideal. What, for the transgender person whose online body doesn’t match their offline body, makes their offline body more honest? Belk also notes that

⁴⁹ Belk, “Extended self,” 50.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 50

⁵¹ Ibid., 51

⁵² Ibid., 51

⁵³ Ibid., 51.

there is evidence that “our activity on online social networking sites is likely to reveal personality characteristics accurately” (Belk 2013).⁵⁴

Belk notes that “with the guise of pseudonymity online, it is easier to first come out in a new gender identity online before doing so offline” (Belk 2013).⁵⁵ In fact, it is not uncommon, online, to see transgender people asking for advice and best practices on how to come out, especially for young transgender folks coming out to parents. This was true for me, I came out on Tumblr as transgender before I came out to either of my parents.

While Belk works to problematize what is real, he falls short on his considerations of the actual. Considering both that virtual possession can be real for their owners and that personality characteristics are accurately revealed on social networking sites, I would contend, at least for the transgender user, that the “fantasy or ideal” self that is represented could be closer to the actual self. As for transgender persons in analog space, the “actual” cannot always be actualized in non-virtual spaces, whether through financial, technological, or medical limitations.

Where Belk takes an economic approach to digital embodiment, Hansbury takes a psychological approach. In his essay “Trans/Virtual: The Anxieties of Transsexual and Electronic Embodiments,” Hansbury is interested in “cyberbodies and trans bodies, the places where they intersect and overlap, and how they each have the potential to inspire anxiety in us” (Hansbury 2011).⁵⁶ Hansbury’s comparison between cyberbodies and trans bodies is crucial, especially from his location as a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), and it leads him to the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁶ Griffin Hansbury, “Trans/Virtual: The Anxieties of Transsexual and Electronic Embodiments,” (*Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 2011), 308.

question, “is cyberphobia akin to transphobia? If so, could cyberplay be used to better understand and empathize with the trans experience?” (Hansbury 2011).⁵⁷

Hansbury uses this framework of cyber- and transphobia to think about the fears people have about what digital embodiment can cause:

Here we have a common twofold anxiety stirred up by trans people and cyberspace. First is the anxiety that someone will have too much – too many genitals, too many choices, too much multiplicity. Beyond that, perhaps underneath that anxiety, is the fear that all this seemingly limitless choice is actually the cutting off of possibility and multiplicity. For some, multiplicity is threatening. For others, there is threat in the binary. The transsexual *danger* often depends on where you stand politically and philosophically; from the classical to the postmodern. (Hansbury 2011)⁵⁸

Demetrios Psihopaidas, in his essay, “Intimate Standards: Medical knowledge and self-making in digital transgender groups,” writes about “self-making” which refers to “the intimate labor that goes into producing and maintaining our sense of self” (Psihopaidas 2017).⁵⁹ He notes that “Trans persons (as we would call them today) were ‘early and enthusiastic adopters’ of the internet as an infrastructure for building communities of support” (Psihopaidas 2017).⁶⁰

Psihopaidas notes that digital groups “provide crucial linkages” between trans people and communities that are “often separated by social and geographic divides.” The result of this, for Psihopaidas, is that these groups, “provide a unique opportunity to witness the intersection of

⁵⁷ Hansbury, “Trans/Virtual,” 309.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 312.

⁵⁹ Demetrios Psihopaidas, “Intimate standards: Medical knowledge and self-making in digital transgender groups,” (Sexualities, 2017), 413.

⁶⁰ Psihopaidas, “Intimate Standards,” 417.

self-making and standardization in action” (Psihopaidas 2017)⁶¹. He writes about a conflict in these online communities that I also observed in my research on Tumblr. “Some users express that extensive transition seems expected, and that users should desire to, and seek whatever means available to them, to ‘pass,’ or appear cisgender” (Psihopaidas 2017).⁶² It’d be worthwhile to remember the discussion about the 2015 transgender survey report above, here. Psihopaidas notes that, as opposed to medical, occupational, educational and legal spaces, in digital spaces users “were able to explore their gendered self and embodiment” (Psihopaidas 2017).⁶³ He also notes, as Belk did, that digital groups are the first place where transgender folks will “express to another person that they might ‘actually’ be a woman/man ‘inside’ despite having been assigned a different gender at birth and having presented a gendered self that matched that assignment” (Psihopaidas 2017).⁶⁴

In their essay “Embodiment and Gender Identity in Virtual Worlds: Reconfiguring Our ‘Volatile Bodies’” Sonia Fizek and Monika Wasilewska begin by noting two important things: one being, “traditionally defined gender identity based on binary oppositions (male versus female; heterosexual versus homosexual) is still being reinforced online” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011)⁶⁵ and two that, “we are more likely to fill the virtual worlds with unusual objects or imaginary scenery than to populate them with gender ambiguous creatures” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁶⁶

⁶¹ Ibid., 417.

⁶² Ibid., 418.

⁶³ Ibid., 419.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 419.

⁶⁵ Sonia Fizek and Monika Wasilewska, “Embodiment and Gender Identity in Virtual Worlds: Reconfiguring Our ‘Volatile Bodies,’” (Routledge, 2011), 75.

⁶⁶ Fizek & Wasilewska, “Embodiment and Gender Identity,” 75.

Quoting Giddens, the authors make note that identity is created and not given (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁶⁷ The authors believe that an alliance with technology can allow women to become “fully emancipated” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁶⁸ This thesis argues that the same is true for the transgender community, and the supposed transtrender community as well. Fizek and Wasilewska pose the question, “Are gender and corporeal transgressions only appealing to minorities or do they reflect the universal longing of the postmodern human for fluid identity?” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁶⁹

They may note that while the “virtual-real opposition” may seem apparent at first, that the “phenomenon is far more complex” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011)⁷⁰ and they paraphrase Boellstorff in saying that “the virtual is in fact real and should be rather opposed to the actual instead” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁷¹ Continuing to cite Boellstorff, they write that the “presumption that our experiences online (in virtual worlds) are perceived and felt as real, and may turn out to be as meaningful as the ones encountered offline” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011)⁷²; this is useful to use in an argument about how gender, gendered beings and gender(ed) bodies can be formed online as real and meaningful. The authors center the avatar in their discussion of fluid identity, disembodiment, and re-embodiment as well as the “utopian dream of a post-gender world as evoked by [e.g., Donna Haraway in ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’]” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁷³

⁶⁷ Ibid., 77

⁶⁸ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 82

⁷⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁷¹ Ibid., 84

⁷² Ibid., 84.

⁷³ Ibid., 85.

Fizek and Wasilewska cite that in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), users could choose from “up to 10 different gendered and agendered identities” which were represented by a “pronominal system” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁷⁴ Imagine if major news outlets ran this in their news stories about Facebook, OKCupid, and/or Tinder adding gender options to their platforms. Fizek and Wasilewska use the term “enacted bodies,” which they note in a parenthetical are our “real-life bodies placed in front of the computer screen, cf. Hayles 1999” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁷⁵ “Enacted body” may be the most useful way of speaking of the body in front of the computer in that it doesn’t play into real-fake or real-virtual dichotomies. They go on to note that our enacted bodies “impose a certain social identity on us,” that we are “recognized and judged by others on the basis of our sex, race, ethnicity, social status, among many others, regardless of whether these categories comply with our own perceptions of ourselves” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011).⁷⁶ It is my argument that it is these judgements about our enacted bodies that make the internet, social media, and video games important outlets where our enacted bodies are unknown, where we can shape and re-shape ourselves as needed and as wanted. The authors do conclude, however, by saying that ignoring the physical body in front of the screen “will not help women in building a more independent social image,” (Fizek and Wasilewska 2011)⁷⁷ and it is here where this thesis will diverge from Fizek and Wasilewska.

This thesis is not interested in suggesting that transtrending is the “next” way of being, or that it is a “new” way of being, nor is this thesis interested in suggested that being a transtrender is the only or the last way of being. This thesis is written keeping in mind that so-called transtrender genders, pronouns and ways of being are transgressive now, a subaltern within a

⁷⁴ Ibid., 85-86.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 89.

counterpublic, and possibly an eventual counterpublic within a counterpublic. There remains the possibility, if not the probability, that the intersections of digital embodiment, gender and medical science as well as technology at large will create new and different transgressive ways to imagine, embody and enact gender. There will be transgressive ways of coming to and doing gender that this thesis and this author could never begin to imagine. This is welcomed. Maybe not in a postmodern hope for meaninglessness and/or gender abolition in as much as a hope that “the way it always was,” will never supersede access to autonomy for the individual, particularly those who are silenced and erased; all while recognizing the ways in which autonomy is affected by economic systems and the current state of politics, technologies and medical science.

I will explore the ways in which identity formation within the transgender community is a communal process of negotiation, and how online forums mediate that in our current moment. Hopefully the work here will help to dispel ideas of division between the virtual and the analog, or offline, world. This thesis is interested in pulling out the difference between body dysphoria and social dysphoria, which may lend some necessary nuance to the questions herein. Additionally, it will be important to consider internalized transphobia, as well as lateral violence within the transgender community when considering appeals to the medical model of transgenderism and appeals to assimilation. This thesis will also observe the role of the academy within intra-community discourse among transgender people. What role does academia play, and what role *should* it play? As a part of the limitation of not being able to portray individuals across time, the ethnographic work in this thesis is not able to reveal much about the forum participants, aside from their being transgender. It will be shown in this thesis how Tumblr allowed me to teach myself about what I could be. While some focus first on being and on language second, I focused on language first and being second. Offline I was recognized as a

cisgender heterosexual man, but online, I was able to understand myself as a queer transgender woman. I will argue in this thesis that transgender people in the west may wish to consider which goalposts we wish to meet, especially if those goalposts seem to ever move in a more conservative direction. I will further argue that trying to enclose some people and exclude others has never worked for the transgender community, and it doesn't seem to be working now.

Ethnography

Online ethnography remains a somewhat contentious methodology. Despite this, the presence of the internet in people's lives cannot be ignored. While popular conversations conceive of "real life" and the "real world" with the internet being separate from that, it is my contention, and the research supports this view, that what happens online is as much a part of one's "real life" as what happens offline. The worlds are not separate; in fact, they interact in the brains of the people who engage in activity online, from forums, to video games, to social media.

In my ethnography, I look at conversations among transgender people on social media. I look at conversations transmed-transgender individuals have amongst themselves, and I look at conversations transtrender-transgender individuals have amongst themselves. I look at what they say about each other, and how they say it, and I look at the conversations they have between each other when they occur.

The transgender community at large chooses to talk past one another when it comes to this disagreement. While some view it as the latest in a long history of gatekeeping in the transgender community specifically and the LGBT community more broadly, others believe that the medical model of transgenderism is infallible, while still others believe that appealing to cisgender-normativity and assimilation are necessary for the furthering of the transgender community.

Jenny Sunden, citing Manuel Castells, notes that one worthwhile way of thinking about the connection between the online and offline world is to think of it in terms of real virtuality. (Sunden 2002).⁷⁸

Quoting Howard Rheingold, Sunden writes about virtual communities as social aggregates that come about when people engage in “public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Sunden 2002).⁷⁹

Furthermore, Maria Bakardjieva notes users approach the internet from various positionalities and with different motivations which, she notes generates “a rich repertory of use genres” each of which should be considered on its own “merits” (Bakardjieva 2003).⁸⁰ For Bakardjieva, upholding ideas of virtual communities versus “real/genuine” communities confounds the “empowering variations” of technology to come about (Bakardjieva 2003).⁸¹

Bakardjieva believes that, even though virtual togetherness may not “live up to the value-laden name of ‘community’,” this does not “undermine the idea of collective life in cyberspace” (Bakardjieva 2003).⁸²

All of this will inform the ways I think and write about online transgender communities, particularly when looking at the divides and schisms created and perpetuated by this conversation about transmed-transgender individuals and transtrender-transgender individuals.

⁷⁸ Jenny Sunden, “Material virtualities: Approaching online textual embodiment,” doctoral thesis, (Linköping University, 2002), 825.

⁷⁹ Sunden, “Material virtualities,” 825.

⁸⁰ Maria Bakardjieva, “Virtual togetherness: an everyday-life perspective,” (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, *Media, Culture & Society*, 2003), 311.

⁸¹ Bakardjieva, “Virtual togetherness,” 311.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 292

Throughout this ethnography, there will be citations of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's Standards of Care (WPATH SoC). This isn't to suggest the *rightness* of the WPATH SoC's, nor is it to reinforce a medical model of transgenderism. Instead, WPATH definitions may hopefully serve as a *starting* point for transtrender-transgender and transmed-transgender individuals to have conversations that start from similar understandings of terms.

The diffusion of transgender terminology in the last twenty or so years is a wonderful thing, but it means that even those *within* the transgender community may not be talking about the same thing, even if they come prepared with definitions, facts, and so-forth. A goal of this thesis, and particularly this ethnography is to suggest that, for all sides of this conversation, just because one set of facts doesn't match another set of facts doesn't mean that someone is wrong, or, moreover, malicious, violent or *dangerous* for the community at large.

Transtrenders as cultural appropriators

There is a group of transgender individuals who see transtrender-transgender individuals as appropriators. One post reads: "You guys wanna talk about appropriation? How about we talk about the fact that all you teenagers are pretending to be transgender just for the oppression points. I'd say that's pretty appropriative" (Tumblr 2017). This post contains a few of the parts of the conversation that have been mentioned in the literature review, while introducing the concept of the transtrender as appropriator. There is the element of the transtrender being a teenager, the element of playing pretend at being transgender, and the element of speaking and performing a transgender identity simply for "oppression points," a sort of currency that's supposedly available in neoliberal identity politics.

While it might be beyond the scope of this thesis to settle any of the intra-community schisms, it is the goal to attempt to add nuance to the conversation and maybe to bring the

different factions to more nuanced understandings of each other's arguments. One Tumblr post, which claims that one does in fact need to experience dysphoria to be transgender, cites Google Dictionary definitions to make its claim. These definitions, which have not changed from the time of the posts to this writing, are as follows: for 'gender dysphoria', "the condition of feeling one's emotional and psychological identity as male or female to be opposite to one's biological sex," (Tumblr 2018) and for 'transgender', "denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex" (Tumblr 2018).

This author may be tempted to turn to the American Psychological Association's definitions for gender dysphoria and transgender. However, The WPATH may provide a broader (albeit still western-medicalized), definition. WPATH defines gender dysphoria as: "Distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth (and the associated gender role and/or primary and secondary sex characteristics)"⁸³ (Coleman, Bockting and Botzer 2012). Whereas the Google Dictionary definition depends on and reinforces a male-female binary, which one can only cross, but never transcend, as one's biological sex is defined always in relation to an "opposite," the WPATH definition allows for broader categories of gender identity and sex assigned at birth that aren't binarised, and furthermore consider the way that gender roles play into a person's experiences of gender dysphoria.

Further, WPATH defines transgender as an "adjective to describe a diverse group of individuals who cross or transcend culturally-defined categories of gender. The gender identity of transgender people differs to varying degrees from the sex they were assigned at birth."⁸⁴ Both definitions consider birth sex, or sex assigned at birth, which may be two different things, but for

⁸³ Coleman, Bockting and Botzer 2012

⁸⁴

our purposes here may be collapsable into one another, but WPATH's definition of transgender allows for transcending as well as crossing categories of gender, which it sees as being "culturally-defined."

One transmed-transgender individual writes of "truscum" as being "the side of the trans community that believes you need to have gender dysphoria to be considered transgender," and of "tucute" as being people who believe that, "you don't have to experience gender dysphoria in any way and can still identify yourself as transgender" (Tumblr, 2018). According to this transmed-transgender individual, tucutes believe that, "if you *are* transsexual or pass as the 'gender conforming' version of your gender identity, you are *transphobic*" (Tumblr 2018, emphasis original).

This seems to clearly be a strawman argument of what tucutes or transtrenders believe. While it may be true that *some* tucutes or transtrenders have beliefs that absolutely align with this definition and characterization, it cannot be generalized. Furthermore, this strawman takes a conception of gender dysphoria and weaponizes it against other transgender individuals, or at least against other *potential* transgender individuals. It seems likely that tucutes or transtrenders use WPATH's broader conception to think of gender dysphoria, if not using a broader definition still. Under this broader definition, some, if not all, of transtrender-transgender individuals may be plainly transgender.

The post goes on to say that tucutes "from Tumblr" give "legit trans-folk a bad name."

On Passing

Leslie Feinberg, in hir book, *Transgender Warriors* writes, "We have not always been forced to pass, to go underground, in order to work and live. We have a right to live openly and proudly. When we are denied those rights, we are the ones who suffer that oppression. But when

our lives are suppressed, *everyone* is denied an understanding of the rich diversity of sex and gender expression and experience that exist in human society” (Feinberg 1996).

Ze continues to write, “I have lived as a man because I could not survive openly as a transgendered person. Yes, I am oppressed in this society, but I am not merely a *product* of oppression. That is a phrase that renders all our trans identities meaningless. Passing means having to hide your identity in fear, in order to live. Being forced to pass is a recent historical development. It is *passing* that is a product of oppression” (Feinberg 1996).

Here Feinberg argues that passing is not a means to liberation, instead, passing is produced by oppression. A need to pass can only come about in a society that cannot accept those living openly as transgender individuals. A need to pass necessitates that individuals look like either men or women. Transgender identity must be made meaningful, and this can be done, according to Feinberg, through abandoning passing, and refusing to hide our identities or living in fear.

How many genders are there?

There are some transmed-transgender individuals who believe that there are only two genders. One post from a Tumblr user who identifies as a “former non binary sjw,” writes that, “yeah so anyway being gender nonconforming isn’t trans and there are two genders” (Tumblr 2017). This post is tagged with “nonbinary,” “agender,” and “genderfluid” - gender identities the poster seems to be speaking specifically against.

Meanwhile, other folks write about parsing out their non-binary gender identity. One thread finds the original poster (OP) asking if there was anyone else in r/NonBinary (a subreddit for non-binary individuals) who identifies as demigirls or demiwomen. The responses on the thread included a comment from someone who had previously identified as “binary trans” but

felt at the time of posting that “the NB/demigirl representation fits me more” (r/NonBinary 2019).

Demigirl is a term for anyone who identifies, “partially, but not wholly” as a “woman, girl or otherwise feminine, whatever their assigned gender at birth. They may or may not identify as another gender in addition to feeling partially a girl or woman” (Trans* Wiki).

Another commenter on this post writes that they are contemplating what demiwoman means for them, “I’m non-binary genderqueer, identified as genderfluid for maybe the first two years of my exploration before I settled on Not a Man or a Woman” (r/NonBinary 2019).

One commenter responded that they “went through a period of thinking I was binary trans, then completely agender” before settling on demigirl “more or less” (r/NonBinary, 2019).

What constitutes Non-binary?

In a post where the OP questioned if they could call themselves non-binary if they use “gendered terms” to refer to themselves, they write, “I feel like I can’t identify with womanhood and female empowerment if I’m non-binary. But in a lot of aspects I do and I don’t want people to think that my being non-binary has anything to do with a desire to distance myself from womanhood or internalized misogyny” (r/NonBinary 2019).

The poster isn’t sure how they can “reconcile” their being non-binary with “a desire to be a part of the feminist movement and prove women can do anything and be a women’s rights advocate with my gender identity” (r/NonBinary 2019).

One user recommended to the OP a BuzzFeed article by Laurie Penny on “How to Be A Genderqueer Feminist,” that resonated with the OP. Another user, who identified in their “flair” that they are “Bigender: Male and agender,” suggested the OP check out @Mr_Rebecca on Twitter. The commenter identifies “Mr. Rebecca”, Rebecca Maughan, as an “AFAB, nonbinary, feminine person”; however, the commenter also identified “Mr. Rebecca” as using she/her pronouns, but

at the time of this writing they use they/them pronouns, according to their twitter (r/NonBinary 2019; Maughan 2019).

One redditor on the subreddit r/RightwingLGBT writes that people *aren't* non-binary, that there is, "NO 76 flavors of Gender you are born male or female and transition to male of [sic] female" (r/RightwingLGBT 2019).

One of the commenters on this thread believes that the conundrum faced by the LGBT community, if not society at large, is how we treat people fairly while not "impinging on the rights of others." The commenter uses transgender women as an example of the conundrum, "transwomen [sic] parading their 'lady penises' around women's change rooms and competing unfairly against women in sport." This commenter goes on to insist that "Outside of Intersex people..." that non-binary and genderfluid identities are "just Tumblr bullshit, no more worthy of recognition than 'otherkin' or 'demisexual' or the rest of their nonsense" (r/RightwingLGBT 2019).

While reading the rest of the thread in r/RightwingLGBT, it is worthwhile to consider what has been established by Feinberg above. The thread continues to question gender dysphoria, which the thread seems to agree is a mental disorder that should be treated. Is therapy enough, should hormones and surgery be considered? Are calls for hormones and surgery *ideology* driven and thus based on faulty science? This thread is interesting for the way the participants mainly seem to want to talk about science and policy, without ever directly citing anything on either; the thread does this while also being interested in the testimony of a singular transgender woman, "Also, do you think you are able to put into words why do you feel the urge to become a woman for the sake of your happiness and mental health? What you need to become a woman to do that you can't as a man and a surgery can achieve?" (r/RightwingLGBT 2019).

Why ask the individual when the Williams Institute survey or the 2015 US trans survey may, for instance, shed light onto motivations behind hormonal and surgical transition? Indeed, without mentioning any psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists (one might read Alicia Garcia-Falgueras), neurobiologists, or even evolutionary biologists when a commenter writes about “evolutionary history,” (one might read Joan Roughgarden’s work here), the thread participants seem to dismiss *all* science on the matter, save that gender dysphoria has to do with a hormone imbalance in the womb. This comes from the only openly transgender person in the conversation.

One Tumblr post insists that a non-binary brain doesn’t exist, but that “trans brains do.” The poster goes on to write, “Stop lumping NB and trans, you are not trans 1) without dysphoria and 2) if you believe gender is a social construct AND 3) if your gender is based around some sort of object/disability/gender role” (Tumblr 2017). The first point is well timed, and obviously a, if not *the*, central debate of transtrender-transgender and transmed-transgender discourse. The second point seems to lack any of the nuance that conversations of the social construction of gender require - one might see Kessler and Fausto-Sterling’s work, respectively, for consideration of *sex* as socially constructed, and for gender as socially constructed on top of it.

That gender is a binary, as well as what goes *into* gender, that x gender would equal y gender expression, are all social constructions. And while the third point, on its face, may seem to make sense, between the DSM and the WPATH SoCs, there seems to be at least some possibility that part of gender is *gender roles*. It is forfeiture to essentialist ideas and argumentations to suggest that there must be something *more* to gender than expression and roles. Otherwise, what does it mean to have an “experienced/expressed gender” without reference to roles? What might it mean to be “treated as a gender” without reference to roles?

And what might it mean to have the “typical feelings and reactions” of a gender without reference to roles (The International Foundation for Gender Education n.d.)?

Who are transmed-transgender people?

There’s been some evidence and speculation in the literature review and the image analysis as to who makes up the transmed-transgender community. Specifically, it seems arguable that it is predominately made up of transgender men. A post written by a self-identified transmed and truscum posits first that male socialization exists (Tumblr, 2018). With this stated, the author then writes that, “Now, the most violent trans people are trans women. Atleast from what I have encountered so far. The most entitled trans people are trans women. Again, Atleast from what I encountered so far” (Tumblr, 2018).

After asserting this and stating that “men and trans women are more prone to violence,” the author goes on to write, “The truscum community is a place where entitlement doesn’t exist. We preach non violent behaviour. We are aware sex based oppression exists, we don’t cater to anyone’s feelings by lying and denying science. And I firmly believe this lack of entitlement is based in our biological sex and our socialization” (Tumblr 2018).

One self-identified transmedicalist on Tumblr insists that their gender is a “medical phenomenon” and not a “political statement” (Tumblr 2017). This post alone might at first glance be seen as a personal statement, and one that as a personal statement may be best left out of discourse analysis. However, the post is tagged with, among other things, “transtrender” and “tucute,” making it exactly a part of the discourse this thesis is concerned with, and moreover, a political statement. If one wanted to ignore or disown the political work of Stone, Stryker, Prince, Bornstein, Serano, Feinberg and others, which problematize notions of what gender is and what it means to be transgender in the late 20th and spilling over into the 21st century, one might still wish to attend to political realities that exist for transgender people. At the time of this

writing, in the United States it remains political as well as personal to be transgender. From trans-antagonistic state legislatures to a trans-antagonistic federal administration, to the everyday violence on the street and in homes, transgender people in the United States face religio-political opposition, regardless of how they choose to view the situation and regardless of what they choose to do about it. Even the medicalization of the transgender body, from the formation of the medical model of transsexualism, to the medical model of transgenderism, to the gatekeeping of resources, is not apolitical. Even the transgender-body-as-medical-phenomenon is political.

What defines transition?

A comment on a Reddit thread laments that transition should be defined as a medical process (r/truscum 2019). Should it? The WPATH definition for transition is as follows, “Period of time when individuals change from the gender role associated with their sex assigned at birth to a different gender role. For many people, this involves learning how to live socially in ‘the other’ gender role; for others, this means finding a gender role and expression that is most comfortable for them. Transition may or may not include feminization or masculinization of the body through hormones or other medical procedures. The nature and duration of transition is variable and individualized” (Coleman, Bockting and Botzer 2012).

Transition *may or may not* include feminization or masculinization of the body through hormones or other medical procedures. It seems that there is at least some recognition even in medical literature that transition doesn’t have to be a medical process. What does that mean for the transtrender-transgender and transmed-transgender conversation? What does that mean for the transgender community?

On a thread called “What does the average trans person think about the gender dysphoria / tucutue vs. truscum debate,” a user who identifies as MTF (male-to-female) writes “I actually had *tons* of dysphoria. I didn’t realize it qualified as dysphoria, which I assumed always took the

form of phantom limb syndrome, trying to take a knife to unwanted body parts, and ‘I know as an explicit semantic statement of fact that I am actually [true gender]’” (r/AskTransgender 2019).

Much as truscum, may in some ways act as a synonym for transmed-transgender individuals, so may tucute act as a synonym for transtrender-transgender individuals. Like these three terms, tucute is not well-defined and like “transtrender,” it doesn’t seem to be a term of self-identification. Generally, tucutes are defined by their belief that gender dysphoria isn’t necessary to be transgender.

The conversation about whether there are or can be *different kinds* of dysphoria is of much contention within the transgender community. The same user continues to write later in the post, “As for whether it’s technically true, I think that’s ultimately just a matter of what you consider ‘dysphoria’. A lot of people draw a distinction between gender euphoria and gender dysphoria, but to me they’re two sides of the same coin; ‘I feel better as X than as Y’ and ‘I feel worse as Y than as X’ are two different ways of phrasing the same truth. After all, when all you’ve known is dysphoria, it’s easy to just treat that as the baseline ‘normal’, which is why you only notice gender euphoria as the ‘other’” (r/AskTransgender 2019).

What’s the role of academia in this conversation?

On a thread about a Reddit user being banned from r/asktransgender for “asking why nobody calls out tucutes” a user writes, “I feel like academic speaking points in regards to gender have gone out of control and now people think every variance of female and male as if you don’t ‘feel’ 100% one or the other at all times that must make you trans” (r/truscum 2019). Beyond this, there is no indication which positions, or who, make up the academics or who create and perpetuate the academic speaking points. What does make a person trans? If one might take Kate Bornstein as a non-academic, popular gender theorist, then her ideas about gender identity and what makes someone transgender may be useful here. In *My New Gender Workbook* Bornstein

writes that gender identity, “answers the question ‘Am I a man or a woman or something else entirely?’” (Bornstein 2013).⁸⁵ Bornstein published her first book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* in 1994 and along with Leslie Feinberg is often considered a leader in transgender political thought.

Feinberg, like Bornstein, is not an academic. A communist and a transgender activist, Feinberg wrote several books, including the popular novel *Stone Butch Blues*. For Feinberg, “We are a movement of masculine females and feminine males, cross-dressers, transsexual men and women, intersexuals born on the anatomical sweep between female and male, gender-blenders, many other sex and gender-variant people, and our significant others. All told, we expand understanding of how many ways there are to be a human being” (Feinberg 1996).⁸⁶

In *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg writes, “I’ve been called a he-she, butch, bulldagger, cross-dresser, passing woman, female-to-male transvestite, and drag king. The word I prefer to use to describe myself is *transgender*” (Emphasis original, Feinberg 1996).⁸⁷

Feinberg continues to write that there were at least two “colloquial” meanings for the word transgender at the time. The first is as an umbrella term and the second is as a marker between those who pursue gender reassignment surgery and those whose gender expression is “inappropriate” for their sex (Feinberg 1996).⁸⁸

For Feinberg all people have the right to explore gender expression without facing condemnation (Feinberg 1996).⁸⁹ Additionally, Feinberg advocated for the creation of new words and concepts for saying “who we are, not who we aren’t” (Feinberg 1996).⁹⁰ This call to

⁸⁵ Kate Bornstein, *My New Gender Workbook*, (Routledge, 2013), 51.

⁸⁶ Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1988), 5.

⁸⁷ Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, (Beacon Press, 1997), x

⁸⁸ Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, x

⁸⁹ Feinberg, *Trans Liberation*, 25.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27

language creation culminated in a need to break beyond gender binaries (Feinberg 1996).⁹¹

Feinberg's rhetoric here doesn't seem like the sort of rhetoric that would or could be weaponized against tucutes or so-called transtrenders. This foundational transgender text seems, in fact, an exact response to the call-to-action put forward in Sandy Stone's 1992 *A Posttranssexual Manifesto*.

In the 20th anniversary edition of *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg writes that the way that the word "transgender" is used has changed over the two decades since the original publication of his novel. "Since that time, the term 'gender' has increasingly been used to mean the sexes, rather than gender expressions. This novel argues otherwise" (Feinberg 2014).

How much is the academy to blame, or credit, for the state of gender language in 2019? It seems at least that to invoke the academy due to the anti-academic, anti-intellectual, anti-leftist sentiments that are tied to the academy is a disingenuous way to participate in a conversation or discourse.

What is trans? Who gets considered to be trans?

In a thread on how the forum feels about tucutes, non-binary individuals and transvestites using the term trans, one of the respondents writes that "trans" should be reserved for those who "actually" transition (r/GCdebatesQT 2019).

The questions of transition are at the center of this conversation for many people. For one user in this thread, those who do not transition are not the same as those who do. "If someone claims to be trans but they don't hate their body enough to need and I mean need to change it, then we shouldn't be called the same thing because they are making a fashion choice while I am addressing a mental issue. It's apples and oranges" (r/GCdebatesQT 2019).

⁹¹ Ibid., 28

On a thread on r/truscum, a user lamented about tucutes and their being grouped with them, “I 100% believe you need dysphoria to be trans, I’m open to the idea of two ‘nonbinary’ identities, bigender and agender” (r/truscum 2019).

The poster writes about themselves, “I’m actually agender, myself, which is what seems to get me lumped in with these groups. If I don’t express my ‘truscum views’ for fear of ridicule, but say I’m agender, I often hear ‘well, you don’t need dysphoria to be trans’ despite having gender dysphoria. Or I hear ‘it’s okay to be a gnc cis girl’ which is perfectly fine! I agree! But I’m not one. Wish I could be though. And if I still couldn’t be cis, as bad as it might be to say, wish I could at least be a trans man so I’d be more understood and accepted” (r/truscum 2019).

One might argue that this is a form of internalized enbyphobia. The poster identifies as agender but wishes that they could be cis or “at least” a trans man. Non-binary individuals shouldn’t be made to feel as if they should aspire to being cis- or trans- men or women. Arguably wanting to be cis may be an internally phobic way of coping with gender dysphoria, but wanting to be a trans man, in this case, is about external understanding and acceptance.

The Curious Case of Virginia Prince

If transmed-transgender people are onto anything, they may be onto something they never expected, and certainly, this is something this author never expected at the beginning of the research of this thesis. Virginia Prince, a sexologist and organizer, wrote and thought prolifically about gender and the need to separate sex and gender out as distinct phenomenon. If one takes Virginia Prince’s writing, one can see a history dating back at least to the 1960’s and 1970’s that does suggest that those who were thinking about sex, gender, and how communities of people talk about themselves as communities *did not* include transsexuals and other gender non-conforming individuals under the same umbrella category. In their essay on Virginia Prince, Richard Ekins and Dave King write about the “Foundation for Full Personality Expression (FPE

or Phi Pi Epsilon)” which Prince helped found (Ekins and King 2005). Membership into FPE required an interview, and interviewers were “cautioned against accepting bondage or masochistic people, amateur investigators, curiosity seekers, homosexuals, transsexuals or emotionally disturbed people” (Ekins and King 2005). This was to keep out those who “were not seen as ‘real’ transvestites” (Ekins and King 2005).

It cannot be overstated that this author does not hold up Prince as a role-model of how to treat either transsexuals or those who seek gender affirmation surgeries. Instead, as ever, there is a hope to provide a fuller picture - etymological, historical, and complicated - to better inform intra-transgender community dialogue. This author would not live up to Prince’s ideal of a femmiphile and would certainly appear to Prince as a “pseudo woman” (Ekins and King 2005).

And therein lies a worthwhile point. No more than Prince should dictate to this author how to be a woman, or what this author’s womanhood should or shouldn’t look like, nor should anyone else dictate how anyone’s gender should manifest! In the same way that transmed-transgender people now might envision transtrenderism, to be a “communicable disease” (Prince 1978), if I may be permitted such a term⁹², so did Prince conceive of “sex reassignment surgery” in 1978, arguing that, “susceptible transvestites are seduced - by the publicity given to the topic - into thinking it is the solution to their problems” (Ekins & King 2005).

⁹² See Lisa Littman’s “Parent reports of adolescents and young adults perceived to show signs of a rapid onset of gender dysphoria” (PLOS ONE, 2018) for an example of pro-transmed arguments of transgenderism, or transtrenderism as a “communicable disease.”

Image Analysis



Figure 1

Visual communication is an important part of both internet culture and transgender culture. From drag to memes, visual communication is unique. And much as drag can be for fun as well as for making statements, so too are memes known for both being humorous, but also at times providing commentary.

While one certainly may be able to gain a full understanding of the discourse between transtrender-transgender and transmed-transgender individuals *without* a focus on conversations that happen in the form of images, memes and comics, an exploration of these elements provides unique vantage points into the conversation. With the above image, let us assume that we know nothing about the internal conversation happening. Let's also, for the moment, ignore the

floating hashtags. Let's look at the person in the picture. What we see here is a person with pink hair (and pink armpit hair), the side of their head shaved, a flower in their hair, pink eye shadow, blue eyes, black-rimmed glasses, thick eyebrows (there's an argument to be made that they are drawn or painted on, let's set that aside for the moment), one blue earring (let's set aside for the time being what the earring may be a symbol of), pink lips (possibly painted), pink neckwear, a green shirt, a pink skirt, dark purple leggings and pink heels. The person also has visibly hairy legs.

Based on the above alone, one might be able to assume that this person is some sort of punk, shaving their head and dyeing their hair in protest of fashion norms and standards. It could be assumed that the combination of a shaved head, armpit hair, and leg hair with a skirt and leggings is a rejection of gender norms. One may assume that the person themselves is doing a bit of drag. We do not yet know, so we look deeper at the signs and symbols available to us.

We might be able to start with the blue earring then, though based on one's ideas of gender norms, one may choose to start with the shaved side of the head. Or, still, one's orientation may have them starting with the heels, or the leg hair. The blue earring is a symbol commonly understood to be a symbol for manhood. Similarly, the pink neckwear reads "boi."

While a queer viewer, particularly a white queer viewer, might view this word as an indication of queer masculinity, even more particularly, female queer masculinity, as Michelle Ann Abate writes in her essay "When Girls Will Be Bois: Female Masculinity, Genderqueer Identity, and Millennial LGBTQ Culture," "the first incarnation of the term 'boy' reimagined as 'boi' occurred in the realm of mainstream, even hegemonic, masculinity: via the music industry in general and hip-hop culture – which often promotes a macho form of male gender expression – in particular" (Abate, 17).

Abate is writing about Outkast's Big Boi. A viewer can't know, based on the image alone, whether the image's creator knows of this etymology, nor can we know if the character themselves is supposed to know this etymology, let alone the imagined creator of the neckwear. The text of the shirt says plenty, but most of it isn't useful to the conversation here. The worthwhile part about the shirt for this conversation is that it is low-cut and that it allows for the midriff to show. Accepting this new information, with the information we already have about the person in the picture, we can make new assumptions. One may be able to assume with all this information that the person in the picture is attempting to queer masculinity. One may also assume that this person is attempting to queer femininity. One may further assume that this person is attempting to embody androgyny. The current information allows, I believe, for all these possibilities.

At this point it would be appropriate to look at the hashtags. The presence of the hashtags may be to mimic the way, if the person in the image had posted a picture of themselves, that they would've tagged the picture. From the top left (again, one's orientation can influence their reading of this image) the first hashtag is #transmale. This hashtag, one may be able to assume, is to indicate that the person in the photo is a transgender male. The next two hashtags are #they/them and #he/him. These two hashtags can be taken to indicate the fictional person's personal pronouns. There's then the hashtag #boy, further indication that the person pictured identifies as a man. There's then #smol gay boi and #femme boi. There is a lot to be said about the word "smol" in the LGBT and particularly the transgender community, but for the purposes here, what is significant is an affirmation of boihood and an affirmation of gayness. Then there's the #femme boi hashtag. An indication of an embracing of both femininity as well as boihood. Could this be a way of queering femininity or queering masculinity by bringing femininity to

boihood? It remains contextual, and we still do not know enough about the person in the image. The next two hashtags, if we allow ourselves to bounce back and forth as we make our way downward, are #transman and #ftm. #transman could be read to be an indication that the person identifies as a trans man, and likely as a transgender man. Similarly, the acronym ftm in this context might be read to mean female-to-male. The next hashtag is #i look so masculine. Up to and including this hashtag, the viewer can assume, rightly or wrongly, that the image is representing an autonomous individual expressing their gender as they see fit. Reading the image becomes more complicated once the rest of the hashtags are incorporated.

The hashtag #being trans is a choice clearly shifts the meaning of this image from any previous interpretation that may have been allowed for. Suddenly, now, one must reconsider the implications of every part of the image. Before that, let us keep pushing forward to look at other hashtags. The next one is #truscum do not interact. This hashtag is, then, not the person in the image talking about himself, but him talking outwardly toward a possible audience. What does it mean to ask truscum not to interact in this way? Why is this request necessary? What does it say about the interaction between the person in the image and those who may be the “truscum” who aren’t supposed to interact? Do truscum so identify, and if not, how are they to know not to interact? If one identifies as truscum, but wants to compliment the person’s hair, may they? If one *doesn’t* identify as truscum, but interacts to critique the gender identity or expression of the person pictured, have they broken the spirit of the request?

The next hashtag is #look mom imma real yaoi boy. This hashtag does allow for the possibility that there’s more to explore about the relationship between anime fandom and gender expression than this author is equipped to address here, so we’ll move on to the last two hashtags. The first of them is #non-dysphoric. This one pairs with #being trans is a choice, so we

shall return to that one now. The medical model of transgenderism indicates that there is something bio-psychological about being transgender, that there can be a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and that gender dysphoria can be treated, if not cured. Most often, this treatment includes hormone replacement therapy, living, as it is often said, as the “other gender,” and, in some cases, receiving gender affirmation surgeries. If one is treating one’s gender dysphoria, and is living as the “other gender,” it may be expected that they want to “pass” as that other gender. If one wanted to “pass” as a trans male, as a boy, as a trans man, as ftm, as masculine, one might, conventional gender norms may say, choose to bind their chest instead of wearing lowcut shirts, not wear shirts that show one’s midriff, not dye one’s hair pink, not wear heavy makeup, not wear chokers, not wear skirts, leggings or heels.

A further implication is that one would only dress and present oneself this way while identifying as a man or boy if one wasn’t “really” transgender, if one thought that being trans was a choice, if one felt that being transgender didn’t require feelings of dysphoria. Why would there be a concern about transcum at all, and why would that concern involve that language, unless the person posting was themselves not transgender, but a transtrender? This meme is a clear example of anti-transtrender rhetoric. As it attempts to imagine a correct way to be transgender, it also insists on a wrong way to be transgender, and in that way, this meme is also a clear example of pro-transmed rhetoric.

Autoethnography

In preparation for this project, I attempted without any luck to get into my old AOL account. AOL was my first online account, with Yahoo and Myspace following. My parents were very much the sorts of people who were concerned about the types of people that may be encountered online. Though I probably got the talk about “strange men online” less than my

sister, I was much more enthusiastic about getting online, so I did get it to some degree. Anyone can be anyone, the threat went, most often it was specifically that “old fat men” could be pretending to be young girls online. I don’t think my parents ever used the term “catfish;” I don’t think it’d entered the cultural zeitgeist yet. All the same, the threats loomed. As such, my accounts were limited. I had a prohibitive account for teenagers on AOL. Because of this, it wasn’t uncommon for me to violate the rules of chatrooms, which could be done by speaking about gay rights. I only remember one of the people I ever met on AOL Instant Messenger (AIM). Her name was Janine. It’s very true that you can meet nasty and predatory people online, but it’s also true that you can meet some very patient people. I can’t remember what all I told Janine about my gender identity. I might have been brave enough to tell her, “Sometimes I feel like a girl;” it’s just as likely I didn’t tell her anything about my gender identity beyond my love of Shania Twain.

Janine did also try to help me figure out my sexual orientation. As a seventh grader at the time, I was very confused about my orientation. I knew that I liked girls, but I wasn’t sure if I was also attracted to guys. Janine, not being a professional by any means, and only being three or four years older than me at the time, devised her own specialized test to try to help me determine my sexual orientation. She asked me if I’d ever seen *That 70’s Show*. I told her that I was pretty sure that I had. She asked me if I thought Michael Kelso was attractive. As I thought about it, I wasn’t certain. He wasn’t *unattractive* I thought to myself, but did that make him *attractive*? I ultimately told her that I thought he was kind of attractive. If I thought he was attractive, there was at least a chance that I was bisexual, and attracted to guys, Janine thought.

If I could talk in a private message about my sexual orientation but would get kicked out of moderated chatrooms for talking about gay rights, maybe the problem was structural, and not in who people did or didn't pretend to be online.

When I came out to myself as a transgender woman, once I *finally* had that language, I was living in a small rural town in North Georgia. So, I turned to the internet again; I created a Tumblr, and I found a community of all sorts of transgender people. What I would like to do here is to use my Tumblr posts as a way to organize my writing about my history of gender expression online since 2011.

To do this, it is important to contextualize who I was and where I was when I started my Tumblr in December of 2011. I was 19, I had graduated from high school, I had decided to take a semester off from college. It was while volunteering on a 2012 presidential campaign, while helping with social media outreach, that I came across the website Tumblr, and created an account. Until March of 2012, I used it exclusively to share about the candidate I supported. It wasn't until March that I started to write and share posts about being transgender.

2012

In my first gender-related post, in March of 2012, I write about how I'd felt "confused, scared and [...] alone" for twelve years because of my "sexuality, or my sexual orientation, or my gender." I recount the story that I've told so many times since, of when I came out as gay in fourth grade, how I was told it was a phase, and how I continued to dress up in feminine clothes in secret. I wrote about how I came out as a crossdresser in the seventh grade because I'd found the term online, and I thought that maybe it fit me. I recount how coming out had, up to that point, always been a *miserable* experience for me, but how I refused to give up. "But despite all of that, I won't, I CAN NOT, keep living a vicarious, half life. Either people will support me, or they won't," (Author's personal blog). I wrote that I am a woman, that I am transgender, writing

at the time that, “I guess you would call me a Transgender,” and writing that, “And I am Lesbian with hetero-curious tendencies.”

This first post wasn’t much more than any other journal entry I’d ever written up to that point, typed up and posted online.

Later that March, I decided to go back to therapy. I’d been going to therapy on-and-off since I was 14 or 15. I wrote about how I wanted to go to a gender therapist and how I wanted to see someone who would be able to write the letter I needed so that I could start hormone therapy (Author’s personal blog). The journey from that point was a difficult one. I didn’t have a support network for queer transgender gender exploration at home. I didn’t come from a place where the efficacy of HRT or GAS was understood, much less accepted.

If my homelife is one theme that can be seen through my gender journey as portrayed through my Tumblr posts, another is the change over time in the ways I talked. I no longer referred to she/her/hers pronouns as “traditionally feminine pronouns,” and, with varying degrees of softness or hardness, I might try to explain to others why they shouldn’t either. Meanwhile, at home, there was a conviction that I would always be a man. I wasn’t supposed to paint my nails, and I wasn’t supposed to wear any “feminine” clothes outside of the house.

For Barnett’s case of Riverdale, HRT and a photographic sequence were important parts of unhinging “both sex and gender,” which Barnett notes “must remain stable” to “maintain their hegemonic role in society,” it seemed that painting my nails was always enough, at least on the micro-level of the offline spaces I occupied, to unhinge ideas of sex and gender (Barnett 2015).

During this period, while I was in my first semester of college, and trying to understand myself better as a transgender woman, I was also struggling to get a job. It was getting to a point where I was saying openly on Tumblr that I didn’t want to be at home. It was hard to find a job

in part, because I didn't have a license or a vehicle. I wrote in one blog entry, "and I'd spend nights alone. Out in the middle of nowhere. No where to go. No one to turn to. I spent a lot of nights with everyone from Slayer to Fergie. My journal and my knife were my best friend. [...] I could even live with the fact that I was born in this man's body, whoever the hell he is. [...] And then at night, shaking with nervousness, I'd dress myself up in the bathroom. For a moment I would be happy. But it would be limited to the bathroom. I was limited. [...] so now I introduce myself as Jessica. And if someone shakes their head and says, 'That's not your name.' I say yes it is" (Author's personal blog).

It was through Tumblr that someone suggested to me for the first time that having periods and being able to get pregnant were not indicators of womanhood. While it would be some time before I would start using the phrase "period dysphoria" to express the feeling I was attempting to convey, that anonymous message helped me to better understand womanhood and my relationships to womanhood and my body as a woman's body. This sort of information exchange is just one small part of the "community making and information sharing" that Barnett noted as being a "particularly important" part of online spaces (Barnett 2015).

I was also learning at this time about how feelings of gender dysphoria and attraction can come from the same source. For those who experience gender dysphoria, having access to that language is infinitely important because otherwise it's very easy to see someone who you imagine looks the way you want to look, who sparks in you gender dysphoria or a desire for gender euphoria and think that what you're experiencing is attraction. While it might not be sexual or romantic attraction (and while it might be) it could be aesthetic attraction. The transgender and LGBTQ communities remain divided on the importance of distinguishing aesthetic attraction, but for transgender people, especially newly out-to-themselves transgender

people, understanding aesthetic attraction as a separate type of attraction may be useful for navigating both their gender identity and their sexual orientation. Due to the issues mentioned above, understanding one's sexual orientation after coming out as transgender can be a complicated process that others hope to muddle.

Furthermore, I often experienced situations offline wherein it was suggested to me that the only reason I thought I was or thought I wanted to be a woman, was because I wanted to be gay, but I wasn't attracted to men (Author's personal blog).

I have always struggled with whether someone of my size and stature can be seen as feminine. A combination of gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia has made it difficult for me to accept myself as a truly feminine person, even though I identify as feminine. Conversations about femininity continue. Is femininity a product to be consumed by men? Is femininity a tool of misogynist oppression? Is femininity useful at all as a model of gender expression by anyone, particularly women? For my part, I still believe in the usefulness of femininity.

If I came out to myself as a transgender woman in spring of 2011, then it didn't take me very long to start further questioning my gender identity. I wasn't sure, in spring of 2012, if I might be a "lesbian transgender," an "asexual genderqueer," or a "pansexual genderqueer." I may, at the time, still have been struggling with the idea that I could be both asexual and pansexual. Of course, this is the whole point; I was using Tumblr to teach myself what I could and couldn't be, and while others worry about doing and being first and worry about language second, I was fascinated with language, and lived in a small rural southern town, so I focused on language first, and being and doing second. What's peculiar is that the post where I wrote about this identity confusion was never made public. Was I worried about what people would think if I was identifying as asexual, as pansexual, as genderqueer? Certainly, antagonism to asexuality as

an identity category exists, but as far as non-binary gender labels go, genderqueer is one of the more generally accepted. Still, it seems that the genderqueer label didn't stick, and I may have abandoned the idea of my being non-binary for another two or three years.

I paired this post with one that was public about how I didn't want to be seen as transgender, that, while I'm not ashamed to be transgender, I was "jealous" (Author's personal blog). "I'm tired of saying that I want to be a woman, I am a woman." I was very upset at this time in my life about the fact that I hadn't ever had anyone to teach me how to be a woman. I was being told that my hygiene made me less of a woman, and I was mad no one had ever taught me what it means to be hygienic like a woman. I was being told the way I wore my clothes made me less of a woman, and I was mad no one had ever taught me what it means to dress like a woman. I was being told that how I wore make-up made me less of a woman, and I was mad no one had ever taught me what it means to do my make-up like a woman.

While it would be futile to attempt to make a general case about rural transgender women based on my situations, what is useful about the autoethnographic data of my situation is in thinking in part about the case of rural transgender women and in part about the case of rural transgender youth who use the internet.

When I first started thinking about this project, there were a lot of questions, both me questioning myself, and others asking if there really was that much to Tumblr use. Some questioned if it could've been as bad as I made it out to be for a rural transgender woman in the early 2010's. Going through my blog, I realize now that, in fact, I had forgotten just how bad things were. Tumblr provided a place where I would make a post, and even one like, or one positive comment, or one affirming anonymous message, was a little bit of encouragement to keep going. That cannot be downplayed. Not for all the depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and

gender dysphoria I was living with. If my offline world was attempting to keep me in line (to borrow from Ahmed) as I contend that it was, then it was on Tumblr where I was able to live up to the fullness of my queer self, as out-of-line as she was/I am. The computer desk, the computer, Tumblr itself, were the device(s) I was using to orient myself.

I wrote at one point that I wanted my family to call me Jessica, and that I didn't want them to have to work at it because I didn't want them to see anything other than Jessica. Judith Butler writes, "I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable" (Butler 2004).⁹³ Being recognized as I was offline, as a cisgender man, as a heterosexual man, as my birth name, as male, and so on, made for an unlivable life, and, to resist "models of assimilation" (Butler 2004)⁹⁴ I turned to Tumblr, to fortify myself as the person I knew I was, a queer transgender woman.

So much of my gender journey in these early days had to do with thinking that my gender was dictated by my body. Because of socialization, I was upset at the realities of my body. A main, reoccurring example of this was my frustration with any and all facial hair, leg hair, and to a lesser extent, hair on my torso. A problem that also affects cisgender women, for pre- and non-HRT transgender women, the presence of body hair can be a great source of dysphoria.

Like a lot of transgender people come of age in the age of the internet, with access to an internet version of the SAGE test, I took the test, and shared my results on Tumblr. It was simultaneously affirming in some ways and not in others. My results from 2012 included that I was "overall" androgynous, that my appearance is "Quite Masculine," that my "brain processes are mostly that of a Androgynous person," that I "appear to socialize in a feminine manner," and that I "believe" that I have "major conflicts about" my gender identity.

⁹³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2004), 4.

⁹⁴ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 4.

In offline spaces, I had to deal with events such as when I got my first feature for my community college paper. I wanted to write about being a transgender student. The advisor of my paper refused to let me publish under my chosen name, and insisted I continue to publish under my legal name, arguing that this made me more accountable to the student body I served as a journalist. There was space for me to *write* about being a transgender student, but there wasn't space for me to *be* a transgender student.

2013

One of my first posts of 2013 was me exclaiming how ready I was to start medically transitioning and asking how I could afford hormones. I've been in that same state of agony and financial confusion, probably since I came out to myself as transgender in 2011. If it weren't for online resources, like Tumblr, I don't know if I would've ever learned to love myself as a transgender woman not on HRT (or pre-HRT).

It was popular for people around this time to tell me that they didn't care about labels, they cared about the person, the individual. I care about labels, as is probably evidenced by the presence of this very thesis. If one cares about labels *too much* they may be accused of being a victim or a co-conspirator of neoliberalism. That is to say that identity categories are increasingly seen as perpetrators of the individualizing nature of neoliberalism. Similarly one who tries to reduce everyone to their basic humanity and erase difference might be accused of the same. Attempting to speak beyond any sort of finger-pointing, and acknowledging both that I am susceptible to neoliberal frameworks and also that I always hope to work past them, I believe, from a linguistic and communicative potential, in the efficacy of labels, or as I could classify them now, identity categories.

It doesn't seem that the so-called "naturally-occurring" identity categories, i.e. woman, black, female, man, white, male, etc. are the only identity categories that are *useful*. One might

feel that all females, all individuals who are perceived by the world from birth as being *female*, or as Oyeronke Oyewumi calls them “anafemales,” (Oyewumi 1997)⁹⁵ have similar shared lived experiences. The notion then is, buying into biological dimorphism, that all others are males, who are perceived by the world from birth as being *male*, such that all those males have similar shared lived experiences.

Maria Lugones writes that biological dimorphism is a part of the modern/colonial gender system, specifically it is part of what she calls the “light side of the colonial/modern organization of gender”.⁹⁶ When writing of the coloniality of power, Lugones writes that gender is “not itself placed under scrutiny” and describes this framework of gender as “too narrow” as it is “overly biologized as it presupposes sexual dimorphism, heterosexuality, patriarchal distribution of power”.⁹⁷ On the “dark side” as Lugones calls it, individuals were not “necessarily understood dimorphically”.⁹⁸ Further, Lugones writes of biological sex as being socially constructed, pointing to the process of intersex infants being surgically and hormonally assigned a sex after birth (Lugones, 2007).⁹⁹ In thinking about the western gender system, it is necessary to understand the coloniality of gender. Thinking of Lugones’ coloniality of gender helps destabilize the supposed givenness of gender and sex. Oyeronke Oyewumi posits that the creation of “women” as a category was “one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state.”¹⁰⁰ Oyewumi also argues that Christianity and “Western education” were “critical to the stratification of colonial society along both class and gender lines” (Oyewumi 1997).¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making An African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 1997), 34.

⁹⁶ Maria Lugones, “Heterosexuality and the Colonial / Modern Gender System,” (Hypatia, 2007), 190.

⁹⁷ Lugones, “Heterosexuality,” 193.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 195

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 194

¹⁰⁰ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making An African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 1997), 124

¹⁰¹ Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 128

According to Oyewumi, it is a “mistake” to put “females together in a category called ‘women’” based on anatomy, writing that, “Females, like males, have multiple shifting roles from one moment to the next and from one social setting to another” (Oyewumi 1997).¹⁰²

Oyewumi is concerned about the privileging of “biological explanations” in understandings of gender, race, or class.¹⁰³ Oyewumi’s concept of new biologies of difference¹⁰⁴ is useful in thinking about the ways in which chasing scientific justification for the existence of transgender people is chasing a moving goalpost. These new biologies won’t lead to equality or equity. They won’t lead to tolerance or acceptance because they are designed to explain disadvantage. New biologies, like old biologies, are constructed to explain disadvantage. Finding “new” transgender or non-binary genes, hormones, brains, proteins, etc. cannot contribute to equality or social progress because these biologies inherently are biologies of difference and disadvantage¹⁰⁵.

Considering the arguments of Lugones and Oyewumi, is it not possible, for example, that there are those who are agender, for example, who share similar lived experiences as being agender, and that category, while not being assigned at birth and while not being seen as natural, may still be a useful category?

In 2013, as best as I can tell, was the first time that I encountered the word transtrender, when I shared without comments or tags, a post of ten images called “Transtrenders and you: a guide.”

The guide included definitions, starting with a definition for transtrenders: “transtrenders is defined in several different ways. Some definitions overlap in the minds of even more close

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 160

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 8

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 8

minded ppl.” These definitions included: “people of non-binary gender identity (anything other than male/female, ex. genderqueer, agender, etc),” “feminine trans* men / masculine trans* women,” and “people who do not experience bodily dysphoria.” The definition slide concludes by stating, “if there are others don’t worry they’re all bullshit just like these” (Author’s personal blog).

The guide says of social dysphoria, “social dysphoria is a very real and painful phenomenom (sic). When your gender is constantly denied existence, or when the cissexism of society refuses to acknowledge your gender based on the way you express it, or when your pronouns aren’t used or when the wrong name gets thrown out – this is very heartbreaking and painful to people.”

The second time I shared a post that used the word “transtrender” it argued that the term could keep people from exploring their gender identities (Author’s personal blog).

2014

2014 was the start, I believe, of my using Tumblr less for personal posts. There hasn’t been a point when I’ve completely stopped using Tumblr for personal posts, but in 2014 there definitely seems to be a tonal shift. I thought there might be a clear distinction marked by when I started at Kennesaw State University (KSU) in August of 2014. But the shift starts earlier than that, it seems. Part of that shift was because I was finishing up my associate degree and preparing to transfer to a four-year institution. Moreover, part of this shift was because I was writing in more and more academic ways. This *would* be furthered by my transferring to KSU, where I would take gender studies classes, as well as upper-level English classes. I didn’t have time to write fiction and/or long or multiple vent posts because I was writing academic papers and to some degree, in probably 2014-2015 I was moving over to posting more on Facebook. Though that is a harder platform to mine for autoethnographic data, and thus outside of the scope of this

project, it would no doubt provide a fuller picture, both autoethnographically, and in the study of transgender digital embodiment; where does the digital transgender body move and when and why?

2014 – KSU

I wrote a blog post that, even though it never uses the word “transtrender,” could be read as a rant against transmedicalist ideologies, at least in part: “because we do crave validation and when we’re accused of ‘creating our own gender’ - it isn’t something being applauded but something being punished. Saying we can’t create our own genders is like saying we can’t make up words - and that’s some deeply embedded socialized bullshit that’s toxic as hell. Reminds me of 1984 - they’re trying to make that dictionary smaller - I’m trying to make mine bigger and bigger” (Author’s personal blog).

Continuing, “And if it’s all just a phase - *if* - if I wake up one morning and decided I’m something completely different - a raging manly-man or a genderfluid cornucopia of every gender I’ve ever encountered - then how will that phase have invalidated me? Here’s a hint, it doesn’t. Any phase that allows me to learn and grow and live and thrive - and sometimes just *SURVIVE* any phase that validates me and gives me a place to belong is a phase that means I get to wake up tomorrow and continue to love and be loved and to continue to follow my heart and make my dreams a reality.”

And then, near the end of 2014, Leelah Alcorn committed suicide. Countless (despite best efforts to count) trans women are murdered all the time, and countless (despite best efforts to count) trans women commit suicide all the time. Why did I hyperfocus on this one girl then, and why do I hyperfocus on her now? I do have my reasons. For one, it was all over my social media at a time when I didn’t have anything else to do but be on social media. Leelah had parents who were controlling of her computer and social media use, like mine had been when I was a minor.

Leelah and I share deadnames. Leelah was also able to do something that transgender people who are murdered are not able to do; she was able to leave a note. The note, published on Tumblr and screen-grabbed, even if it was eventually deleted by her parents, or by Tumblr, couldn't be erased or taken away. Leelah's request, Leelah's call-to-action, Leelah's plea that we "fix society," is going to live on forever. This has been a motivating and driving force for me and shapes the way that I think about transgender digital embodiment and the importance of digital spaces.

2015

Around this time, I wrote about the phrase "truscum." I believe this is the first time that term appeared on my blog, "I hate that the phrase truscum exists, but I hate more that there are assholes who would fit the label" (Author's personal blog). Truscum is an identity label used sometimes by transgender identified people who also subscribe to the medical model of transgenderism and transsexuality.

I also wrote of transtrenders: "wow it's those 'trans trenders' who are making it hard for those of us who feel dysphoria and want to transition and fit into v'traditional narratives of being trans? here i thought what was fucking us all up collectively was narrow-minded, western, patriarchal, cisnormative, judeo-christian, imperialist, colonialist, dichotomous thinking. but you're probably right. the real enemy is that 'trans trender' - carry on" (Author's Personal Blog).

Finally, we get to a moment, a post where I suggest I feel agender, "Now more often than not I feel simply like a genderless blob. I think sometimes that I could identify as Agender" (Author's personal blog). I know that I experienced hesitation about identifying as agender, and I know that this is because of enbyphobia and anti-transtrender rhetoric.

Enbyphobia, or non-binary-phobia, is a word used to talk about the discrimination that non-binary folks face for being non-binary. This ranges from the belief that everyone is either a

man or a woman, to the idea that someone only identifies as non-binary because they haven't gained confidence in their identity as a man or a woman, to the idea that non-binary people only identify as non-binary because they are attention-seeking. Due to the pervasiveness of enbyphobia, even in spaces like Tumblr, I had internalized it. Because of this internalized enbyphobia, it was difficult to name the ways in which I felt non-binary, and it was difficult to speak about it in any public or semi-public manner.

It's unfortunate that while working on this autoethnography, there was a feeling of validation in seeing all my old posts about suffering with dysphoria, especially bodily dysphoria, because I haven't reached a state of identifying as an agender non-binary transgender woman through *not* experiencing dysphoria. Instead, I've reached this state and it has been informed every step of the way by my dysphoria. Anything I write about transtender-transgender people and transmed-transgender people is informed by my experiences as a dysphoric transgender person as much as it is by my understandings of the medical model of transgenderism.

It was in 2015 that I first discovered the words 'libragender' and 'librafeminine,' and have used them to talk about my gender since, though I do not use them as often as 'agender' or 'transgender' or 'trans woman' (Author's personal blog). Libragender is a gender identity term for a person who feels "mostly agender, but with a particular connection to another gender" (Nonbinary Wiki). Similarly, librafeminine is a gender identity term for a person who "experiences little attachment to being feminine/female, but mostly feels agender" (Nonbinary Wiki).

Conclusion

The ethnographic work done here couldn't reveal much about forum participants demographics aside from their being trans. The online forum doesn't reveal, without interviews,

the race, ethnicity or class of participants. This, unfortunately, doesn't allow for an intersectional analysis, which could be useful to talk about western gender construction in a decolonial manner. However, what is clear, from the available information is that there isn't one homogenous transgender experience, here in the west, under western gender systems, which this thesis has concerned itself with. Nor, can it be found, that attempts at narratives of homogeneity have been efficacious or long-lasting.

Decolonial approaches to western gender construction are necessary in this moment, as the transgender community continues to find itself. Westerners should not collapse our gender system in with other gender systems around the world. Ours, like all gender systems, is unique. To conflate them is to contribute to conservative narratives of essentialism as well as to colonially use non-western gender systems to western ends. That is, in the west it is sometimes argued that if the hijra have "always existed", if two-spirit people have "always" existed, if the travesti have "always" existed, then maybe western gender systems have always, naturally, had third gender categories. In the research presented here, this is not yet founded, nor should it *have* to be founded for third gender categories to implement themselves into a western gender system. Questions of the history of gender systems and gender identity categories remains important work, but acceptance and equity should not depend on the answer. Transgender people in the west may wish to consider which goalposts we wish to meet, especially if those goalposts seem to ever move in a more conservative direction.

It seems that the transgender community has often, if not always, grown against itself. All the while trying to decide who are the real and true trans- individuals, all the while trying to decide who is really transgender. There doesn't seem to be any answer in the history that can satisfy the contemporary moment, save that transsexuals identify as transgender, as do

transvestites and crossdressers. To ignore, demonize and cast out transvestites and crossdressers now, given that Virginia Prince is the one who coined the term “transgender,” is as ironic as it is fruitless. From transgenderal, to transgenderist, to transgendered, to transgender, to trans (see Serano), walls built to keep some in, and others out has not worked, and it does not seem to be working in the current moment. Sixty years at least, starting with Prince, and attempts at exclusion have failed at every turn. Whoever or whatever the transgender movement is, it owes an etymological debt and more to a McCarthyism-era sexologist in Prince, who simultaneously took hormones and underwent electrolysis and wasn’t interested in transsexualism. Sexologists, biologists, communists, historians, activists, and others - those who are transgender and those who aren’t - have and will continue to try to understand the intricacies of sex and gender, and at the very least, if one wants to join in on that conversation, they should aim to do so from a place of being well-informed. Hopefully this thesis contributes to a better-informed conversation. This thesis has worked to show that conversations about gender and being transgender exist prolifically outside of the academy, and that the outside-the-academy work promotes an idea of being transgender that is much closer to what transtrender-transgender people are being accused of perpetuating than what transmed-transgender people are advocating for.

Though there is much more to be explored concerning transgender digital embodiment, what this thesis has been able to accomplish is to note conversations happening in digital spaces, and in digital ways. From the use of forums, to the use of memes, from the use of screen names and flair, to the ability to hyperlink sources into posts and comments, the way that conversations happen is different online than offline. Future research that can follow individuals online use, as I was able to follow my Tumblr use in the autoethnography, will be able to better map transgender digital embodiment. My Tumblr use allowed me to be a queer transgender woman,

and the ways in which I navigated my gender in that space were unique from how I was able to navigate it offline. Tracking others use in this way could provide invaluable understanding to transgender identity formation. Whereas the ethnography here traced conversations and the lives of forums, it is in tracing individual experiences and lives that transgender digital embodiment will be more fully understood.

Identity formation within the transgender community is a communal process of negotiation, as seen in the ethnography. Those forming their identities search for language and validation from others. In communities like r/NonBinary, there can be seen moments of the “transtrender” counterpublic. It is likely that a “transtrender” counterpublic will never identify as such. Instead, it will be found in threads of individuals speaking about their identities as demigirls and demiwomen, for example. And these sorts of identities, and the places where they are validated, will continue to be antagonized by transmed-transgender and truscum individuals. Whereas there is no transtrender subreddit, r/transmed and r/truscum both exist. Those who advocate for a strict interpretation of the dominant medical narrative feel comfortable to self-identify with monikers that identify them as such, whereas those who either do or are accused of flouting those medical narratives do not.

Hopefully the work here helps to dispel ideas of division between the virtual and the analog or offline world. For people on all sides of intra-community transgender debates, the consequences exist offline, and the online consequences are material. Supposed “online” genders are the genders of individuals who have lives offline, as we all do. Supposed “online” genders come with complicated relationships with bodies, digital and analog, as all genders do. There is an obvious concern about access to transition healthcare and resources, a supposed “offline” concern, that consumes the online life of those it concerns.

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