Trans* Journeys

Trans* Journeys

Illustrated Essays of Trans Persons Autobiographies

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Contents

Licensing and Attribution Information vii

Introduction 1

Amanda Lepore's Disruption of Trans-narrative Respectability Politics in Doll Parts 5
A.M.

Joyful Resistance: Cultural (Un)intelligibility in Trans* Life Writing & Sexuality 14
Ariana Revnic

The Monster That I Choose to Be: An Analysis of Non-Binary Resistance 22
Cas

Conundrum and the Trans* Pain Narrative: Denouncing a Dialectic of Trauma 31
Charlie Sutherland

Fiction fights back! The Use of Fiction in Creating Nuanced Representations of Trans* Women to Resist Transnormativity 39
Elsa Kono

Vivek Shraya's I'm Afraid of Men and the Fear of Femininity 49
Lindsay J

An Examination of Lili Elbe Through Many Eyes 55
Mia Libbey

In the Spotlight: Famous Trans People and Trans Representation in Media 64
N.B.

Religious and Trans Identity 73
Sol Reyes

Navigating Transgender Identity in Japan: Transnationalism and Transmedicalism in Japanese Cultural Context 84
Yasuko

Contributors 93

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Digital Transgender Archive

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1. Digital Transgender Archive. (2024). Policies. Retrieved from https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/about/policies

Introduction

Welcome to *Trans* Journeys – Illustrated Essays*!

This collection of essays was developed by students in CSIS 301 – Intro to Trans* Studies at the University of British Columbia – Vancouver Campus. These essays are the outputs of a course assignment using a set of teaching and learning practices known as open pedagogy that involve open educational resources and students-as-creators.

The CSIS 301 – Intro to Trans* Studies course introduces students to the field of Trans Studies through various conceptual and theoretical frameworks. This collection of essays is a culmination of the students' learning throughout the course and their effort to openly share what they have learned in a visual and textual format.

The course was project-driven. The students worked on a single project by completing scaffolding assignments throughout the term. The assignments often involved peer review and support. Considering that this was a diverse group of 33 students who arrived at this course with very different lived experiences and knowledges, as an effort to centre trans voices and experiences in the projects they were tasked with creating an illustrated essay introducing, analysing, and contextualising a memoir or autobiography written by a trans person. The assignment also required them to situate their chosen books within a longer tradition (or genre) of trans autobiographical writing as identified by Trans Studies scholars such as Juliet Jacques, Evan Vipond and Kit Heyam.[1] They were also asked to be conscious of and careful with their citation practices, as suggested by Katja Thieme and Mary Ann S. Saunders[2], and to adhere to the Digital Transgender Archive's Harm Reduction guidelines.

The students had the option of only submitting their work privately through the Canvas platform or also publishing it publicly in this collective publication. Overall, the 33 projects beautifully reflected one of the tenets of the course: that trans* experiences and stories are diverse and multiple.

The ten essays that comprise this collective digital publication provide a sample of the wide range of book titles and topics covered in the projects. A.M. uses respectability politics and deviance as resistance as frameworks to analyze Amanda Lepore's *Doll Parts* (2017). Through Elliot Page's *Page Boy* (2023), N.B. explores trans representation in media. Charlie Sutherland takes us to a foundational text in trans auto-biographical writing by articulating the "dialectic of trans pain and sorrow" in *Conundrum* (1974) by Jan Morris. CAS finds inspiration in the work of Tumblr artists to analyze non-binary resistance in *None of the Above: Reflections on Life Beyond the Binary* by Travis Alabanza (2022). While Ariana Revnic's examination of Mx. Sly's *Transland: Consent, kink & pleasure* (2023) finds joyful resistance in trans kink practices, Elsa Kono shows how fiction can serve as a way to resist transnormativity in Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* (2016). Lindsay J. looked at the "broader systemic issues facing anyone expressing femininity" by using the lens of femmephobia, transmisogyny, and the construction of masculinity in opposition to femininity to analyze Vivek Shraya's *I'm*

1. Jacques, J. (2017). Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing. Life Writing 14(3), 357-370; Vipond, E. (2019). Becoming Culturally (Un)intelligible: Exploring the Terrain of Trans Life Writing. a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, 34:1, 19-43; Heyam, K. (2022) Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender. Seal Press.
2. Thieme, K. and Mary A. S. (2018). How do You Wish to be Cited? Citation Practices and a Scholarly Community of Care in Trans Studies Research Articles. Journal of English for Academic Purposes 32, 80-90.

Afraid of Men (2018). While the course was limited by the sources we can collectively access in a course taught in English, some projects asked us to look at trans experiences in other parts of the globe. Yasuko provides a critique of the Western-centred framework of trans autobiographical writing studies and uses homonationalism and homocapitalism as theoretical frameworks to analyze Sōmu Buchō ha Toransu Jendā (The General Manager is Transgender) by Rin Okabe (2018). Mia Libbey examined Lili Elbe's 1933 autobiography *Man Into Woman* through different eyes. Finally, in an exploration of Mario Martino's *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (1977), Sol Reyes looked at the intersection of religion and trans identity, complicating often-held assumptions by asserting that while religion can be an oppressive force it can also serve as a vehicle for self-acceptance and community building.

Individually, these contributions show the commitment of promising young scholars to not only produce academic research but to also share it with broader audiences. Together, they represent the culmination of a 13-week process of community building and collaborative work. It was a privilege and an honour to learn with the CSIS 301 2024 W1 students this term. I would like to thank them for embarking on this journey and for so generously sharing their knowledges with me. I would also like to thank Erin Fields for making this publication possible and Ekatarina Grguric (who has been an amazing partner in previous open pedagogy projects) for introducing us. I also thank Kim Snowden for her guidance and patience as I found my footing in the CSIS program.

Contributors

This collection of essays is a "point-in-time" in the process of students learning, understanding, and engage with complex topics of gender and sexuality identity.

Student contributors signed an author agreement for their work to be shared openly online. Names and identities are protected using pseudonyms; however, positionality statements have been included in many of the chapters to better understand the context and lenses from which the authors engage with the material and construct their essays.

Book Cover

Book Cover Image – Dematerialisation © Bird. Used with permission.

Artist Biography – Bird

To those readers who do not know me personally, who I am does not matter, nor do my demographics or other statistical measures that act as symbolic placeholders for my being. I intend to give you no such heuristic lens to view me through or draw assumptions from. Simply put: like yourself, I too am a person.

As people, we have a love-hate relationship with change. Change is a mutual relationship between the subjective experiencer and the object experienced. Like yourself, I participate in this process. Change things. Deconstruct. Create. Intentionally or through impulse. This is how I created the artwork for this book.

The creative process is deeply subjective, and relies on a constant internal dialogue of decisions. It is proof of

one's ability to tangibly enact their subjective will onto their own experience, if not the experience of others as well. And the product of this process is both symbolic of one's subjective intent, and a symbolic shapeshifter in that its meaning will forever change as the observer does.

Of course this process of creativity is applicable to most every setting in which a person must enact an idea. However, in the case of art, which rarely contributes to our societies increased productivity, efficiency, or other "*line-go-up*" economic metrics, there is something in the process that speaks to love — something one values so deeply that they no longer feel the urge to justify its existence with logic. It allows for an avenue to accept subjectivity as real, and deconstruct the hierarchy in which objectivity and efficiency are held above all else. As such we can understand that our lives as individuals will only ever be experienced moment-to-moment, through one ephemeral and

ever-changing point of view. No human is a machine. We are all a product of our experiences. We all hold biases. We will never know for certain what anyone or anything will do next. Everything is probability. Everything changes. Even science. Even ourselves. Especially ourselves.

It brings me great satisfaction to live in circumstances that allow for my creative expression. Like most things in my life, the people in my life and those who came before me are to thank for creating these circumstances, and for that I am eternally grateful.

As for you, dear reader, thank you for your attentiveness and curiosity.

While I have intentionally remained anonymous in the crediting of my works, I am inclined to share with readers a place to see some of my other works if they wish: https://emersiion.wixsite.com/website

With love, Bird

Amanda Lepore's Disruption of Trans-narrative Respectability Politics in Doll Parts

A.M.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=200#oembed-1

CONTENT WARNING: Photos and videos in this essay include full nudity.

In the video above, Amanda Lepore is seen fully covering her naked body in bright pink M.A.C. lipstick. Done in collaboration with the Heatherette[1] and M.A.C. cosmetics, it is described by Lepore as her favorite piece of her performance art career (Siemsen, 2017). It's campy, sexy, and show-stopping, illustrative of Lepore's[2] life and career which has been filled with fabulous, over-the-top, and naked adventures as a Club Kid,[3] performance artist, model, singer, dominatrix, and, in her own words, "number one transexual". Many of these adventures are chronicled in her memoir, Doll Parts (2017).[4]

1. A fashion brand begun by one of Lepore's Club Kid friends.
2. Lepore, can be seen not covered in pink lipstick in the above photo which is fittingly gorgeous and chaotic.
3. The Club Kids were a group of queer nightlife celebrities in New York City in the 80s and 90s, known for their avant-garde fashion.
4. The cover of which can be seen above.

Amanda Lepore at Hydrate, Chicago, Christopher Macsurak

Despite the conformity of the first half of Doll Parts (2017) to Heyam's (2022) "mad-lib" narrative format, the second half covers Lepore's adult life and follows her to New York City after she runs away from her abusive husband, where she works as a dominatrix, joins the iconic ranks of the Club Kids, and woos a long list of gorgeous men, to name a few of the many stories she tells.

"Mad-libs" Trans Narratives

Trans historian and writer Kit Heyam explains that many trans memoirs follow a "mad-lib" formula wherein an author fills in a general framework that tracks the trans person's life from a dysphoria-filled childhood that leads into a "long and traumatic struggle" in accepting themselves or coming out, and concludes with medical transition that then enables the person to live a "conventional, gender-conforming and heterosexual life" (18). The first half of *Doll Parts* takes a "mad-libs" approach to depicting Amanda's childhood struggle with femininity that inevitably results in her having vaginoplasty at 17 (Lepore & Flannery 8). However, a truly "mad-libs" trans narrative would then likely follow Lepore into a quiet, domestic, and heterosexual life (as was conventional for white girls growing up in the 1970s).

In this paper, I argue that Amanda Lepore's Doll Parts (2017) defies the "mad- libs" trans narrative by rejecting respectability politics as she refuses to follow the script of what trans women should want in their adulthood, expectations that delineate which trans women are deserving of respect. As Black queer feminist activist and scholar Cathy Cohen explains, this type of deviance from norms can be understood as a legitimate avenue for social change (p. 33).

Story of My Life (February 15, 1953), Christine Jorgensen, Digital Transgender Archive

"I had sold myself short with my marriage": Rejecting Domesticity

Lepore rejects what Black historian Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham (1993) calls politics of respectability and therefore the "mad-libs" trans narrative through her resistance to domesticity. Women, especially trans women, are expected to be domestic, find a husband, and disappear into the private sphere. Historian Emily Skidmore illustrates that by presenting themselves as domestic, such as through marriage, trans women's conformity to norms of (white) womanhood allows them to be culturally accepted as women (p. 271).

Politics of Respectability

This concept is from Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1993) analysis of Black women in the Baptist Church, who used it to describe how Black women adhered to norms of dominant white society as a way to subvert stereotypes of Black people, and women in particular. By presenting themselves as excessively moral and respectable, these women challenged stereotypes of Black people as amoral and incompatible with "respectable" white society. However, by highlighting these traits in the Black community, these women simultaneously naturalized these values, denouncing other Black people who did not conform. The discursive practices of Black women in Higginbotham's work appears similar to the practices of white trans women in media as described by Skidmore, as they conformed to standards of white womanhood as a means of seeming respectable and legitimate which simultaneously condemned trans women who were non-white or otherwise did not conform while also strengthening these norms of what an acceptable and respectable trans woman is like.

For example, Christine Jorgensen's[5] profile in a 1953 issue of American Weekly included photos of her and her mother cooking together (see above) (Jorgensen, 1953, p. 5), implying the passing down of wifely or motherly duties to Jorgensen as a sign of her integration. The conformity to this assimilationist expectation grants respectability to these trans women but also further entrenches expectations of domesticity as one of the few means by which trans women can gain respect and acceptance. In a 2009 interview, Lepore explicitly rejected the expectation that trans women should strive for domestic assimilation, explaining that in the past trans women "[wanted] to blend in [...] it was more about meeting a straight man and getting married" and clarified that she "was the opposite of that" (Azzopardi, 2009, p. 29).

Lepore defies this aspect of trans respectability politics through highlighting her divorce and subsequent decentering of romantic relationships in Doll Parts' (2017) narrative. When Lepore leaves her husband, she explains that she "realized I had sold myself short with my marriage" (Lepore & Flannery, 2017, p. 140). Here we see a departure from the expectation that trans women, in order to be respected, need to find a husband and settle down. Instead, Lepore saw something different for herself, framing a domestic life as wrong for her.

5. Jorgensen transitioned in the 50s, being one of the first trans woman to be widely covered by American media and therefore putting her in the position of setting standards for what a trans woman should be like.

Amanda Lepore, Dean and Dan Caten – Life Ball 2013

Lepore left her husband by running away to New York where she spends the rest of the memoir focusing on herself and her career. In fact, in Doll Parts (2017), Lepore's growing up/coming into her own is framed through her realization that she actually didn't have to live a domestic, private life; she could go off and live mostly in the limelight (rather than at home) with little mention of men, other than as arm candy (as demonstrated to the left) or sexual partners. This picture is quite stark compared to how Jorgensen is represented above. This is a clear rejection of the expectation that trans women need to strive for a respectable, invisible existence by settling down into domestic life.

"How happy I am to be transsexual": Embracing Queerness

Lepore's rejection of heterosexual domesticity in Doll Parts (2017) is complemented by her wholehearted embracing of queerness. This challenges poltics of respectability for trans women, who are expected to distance themselves from queerness in order to assimilate into cishetero womanhood. Law scholar Yuvraj Joshi explains that what he calls "queer respectability" within dominant society relies on hiding actual queer practice in private spaces (p. 415). As respectability politics largely relies on appeals to dominant conceptions of morality (Brooks Higginbotham, 1993, p. 187), queer people are only seen as respectable when they present a palatable, conformist self in the public eye. This expectation is seen in practice through Christine Jorgensen, who was able to gain mainstream acceptance as a respectable woman by "illustrating her repulsion to homosexuality" (Skidmore, 2011, p. 277). In order to be taken seriously and respected by dominant cishet culture, trans women need to distance themselves from queerness and associate with heterosexual standards. While Lepore is seemingly heterosexual, she makes no effort to distance herself from. This puts her mainstream acceptance at risk. Thankfully, the acceptance of cishet people seems to be entirely uninteresting to Lepore.

Doll Parts (2017) highlights Lepore thriving in explicitly queer spaces. This is most clear in the many chapters spent chronicling her time as one of the Club Kids (pictured above). Lepore's job as a nightlife celebrity in mostly

queer clubs (Lepore & Flannery, 2017, p. 167) is framed as an exciting and promising venue for Lepore's ambition, especially in stark contrast to the banality and depression that mark her descriptions of her marriage. In a 2024 interview, Lepore reflected on her place as a queer role model given her influence in New York's queer scene, explaining that "It's such an honor and a privilege" (Brandon, 2024). Her allegiance to queerness is also clear in the fact that she does not feel the need to state her sexuality at any point in Doll Parts (2017), neglecting to associate herself directly with heterosexuality despite only textually expressing desire for men. Lepore's time spent on her queer night club work in Doll Parts (2017), and her reflections on her role in the queer community defy expectations of heterosexual conformity.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=200#oembed-2

The above video exemplifies not only the essence of the Club Kids, but Lepore's disregard for conformity to respectability politics. In fact, Lepore draws explicit attention to this interview in Doll Parts (2017). She explains that "Joan wanted nothing to do with us until the cameras were on" (166). Lepore presents herself explicitly as a member of the Club Kids, as one of "us," contrasting the group to Joan, a cishet woman. Lepore's association with queer culture and separation from cishet culture is unambiguous as she rejects the construction of a 'respectable' image in the interview. While Lepore explains that she dresses as a male fantasy and embodies many aspects of white womanhood that are central to the respectable trans woman (Skidmore, 2011), she rejects the version of heterosexuality that is tied up in trans respectability politics as she is far from domestic and cishet.[6] The Club Kids explain that they just want to look good and have fun; a far cry from the expected goals of "respectable" young straight people. The flamboyant appearance and attitude of the group are on full display in the photo above. Lepore's presence in this interview, and her subsequent attention to this instance in Doll Parts (2017) illustrates Lepore's rejection of any expectation to assimilate into cishet society.

"Being a dominatrix was a great career": Defying Modesty

Finally, Lepore resists respectability in her memoir through an emphasis on her sexuality. This challenges the undesirable and nonsexual image that garners mainstream acceptance and is seen as most deserving of respect for trans women. Skidmore (2011) explains that the construction of an acceptable trans woman in the media included adherence to dominant norms of sexuality (p. 277). She explains that this was notably done by Christine Jorgensen who disparaged prostitution which "served to assure readers that her public presence was not motivated by a political agenda seeking to challenge the sanctity of heteropatriarchy" (p. 277). Jorgensen was able to be seen as respectable by conforming to dominant morals regarding sexuality, and in doing so established a norm of trans respectability as separated from overt sexuality. Joshi elaborates on the exclusion of sex and overt sexuality from conceptions of respectability, arguing that as sexuality and sex are considered to be private and have "no place within a respectable public sphere," queer sexuality is pushed further out of public life. For queer people at large, and for trans women specifically, being openly sexual is not compatible with a politics of respectability that seeks mainstream acceptance through appeals to dominant cishet morals.

6. Lepore's presence as a member of the Club Kids makes her comments come off as a bit tongue in cheek as she is seated with her coworkers who's avant-garde appearance and lifestyle are unlikely to attract cishet men.

Lepore also disregards norms of trans women's sexual expression in Doll Parts (2017) by exploring her time as a dominatrix. When Lepore first moved to New York City, she got a job as a dominatrix at a dungeon. She states that "being a dominatrix was a great career for me: it was easy work and the money was fantastic" (Lepore & Flannery, 2017, p. 148). She spends most of chapter 7 on this job, and while some of it is certainly presented as scary (such as when her coworker was murdered by a client), she presents her time at the dungeon as overall positive, including have a long-lasting friendship with the woman who ran the dungeon. The visibility given to sex work, and the mostly positive experience that Lepore had as a dominatrix is far from the type of modest, heterosexuality that would garner any type of normative respectability. Additionally, Lepore has not attempted to hide her past as a sex worker, highlighting it in not only her memoir but in her photographic work with LaChapelle, and continues to draw on sexual and kink imagery in her photos (as seen to the above). Cohen (2004) explains that for marginalized groups, "everyday life decisions challenge, or at least counter, the basic normative assumptions" of dominant society (p. 33). I contend that that is done by Lepore, who's everyday choices of embracing sexuality, promiscuity, and nudity challenge societal ideas that trans women are only deserving of respect or success if their enactments of sexuality conform to a modest heterosexual standard that affirms trans body's undesirability.

All of this brings us back to the Heatherette/M.A.C. video: a weird, queer, sexy performance that breaks the rules of what is considered respectable and is therefore so essentially Amanda Lepore. While of course she is marginalized as a trans woman, Lepore has been able to leverage her position as a passing, white,[7] successful artist, using her platform as an opportunity to challenge norms that limit the acceptance of a diversity of trans women. As Lepore explains in Doll Parts (2017), she overtly celebrates being trans, and loving being trans in order "to give a voice to all the girls who don't have one" (p. 9). The latter half of Doll Parts (2017) diverges from the "mad-libs" trans narrative through its refusal to adhere to dominant morals and norms surrounding domesticity, queerness, and sexuality that mark only certain trans women as respectable. As Cohen (2004) argues, the accumulation of repeated deviance to norms, in this case of respectability, can make room for conscious resistance and a politics of deviance (p. 43), rather than of respectability. Lepore's deviance from the politics of respectability has the opportunity to make room for more non-normative, and non-respectable trans experiences. Trans people are allowed to want to be visible, to be queer, to be sexual, to be naked, and we do not have to be respectable in order to be able to exist and to thrive.

Author Positionality Statement – A.M.

I am a fourth (and final!) year sociology and GRSJ student at the University of Brit

ish Columbia. I am currently working on my undergraduate honours thesis. I hope to continue on to graduate studies, but only after a much-needed year off. I currently live, work, and study in "Vancouver," on the unceded land of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil'Waututh Nations.

7. While there is a whole other paper that could be written about how Doll Parts upholds norms of white femininity, that is outside of the scope of this essay.

I approached this project as a trans person, but also specifically as a transmasculine person, putting me in both an insider and outsider position relative to Amanda Lepore's transfeminine experience. I have tried to both see myself in her story to pull out threads of shared trans experience, while also recognizing the unique experiences and oppressions of trans women. My experiences as a trans person means that as a trans person, I want to uplift the stories of fellow trans people. I find that this has led me to a positive account of Lepore's memoir; while there are certainly many places that she could be critiqued, I have chosen to highlight ways in which Lepore defies norms that restrict trans people.

Further, I find that my position as a white person us relevant to my use of the works of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Cathy Cohen. Both are Black feminist scholars who created the concepts that I am borrowing in the context of Black feminist thought. I am a white person using these concepts outside of their original context/audience and applying them to another white person. I feel that these concepts best explain the dynamics I explore in my paper and have worked to properly credit and contextualize their origins but am also open to and aware of the possibility that those more well versed Black feminist theory (and/or experience) may take issue with my borrowing of concepts and am therefore fully open to a reworking of this piece.

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Joyful Resistance: Cultural (Un)intelligibility in Trans* Life Writing & Sexuality

ARIANA REVNIC

Content Warning: Readers are advised that discussions may include references to sexuality, consensual non-normative sexual practices, and their intersections with trans* identities that some may find sensitive or triggering. Reader discretion is advised.

Dematerialisation by "Bird"

> "Over dumplings, Evie said that the Japanese word for having an orgasm is iku, but iku actually means to go somewhere. So, while on one continent our lovers come, on the other side of the world, our lovers go. Held in the hands of lovers who make the world feel smaller, I'm coming into myself and beginning to go somewhere new."

-Transland, p. 55.

Introduction

Transland: Consent, Kink & Pleasure (2023) is a memoir by Mx. Sly, a non-binary writer, performer, arts producer, and flight attendant (Sly, n.d.). Sly beautifully illustrates encounters during their time in BDSM/kink communities, in which they delve into understanding their own gender articulation, sense of belonging, and "testing the limits of sensual experience" (Sly, 2023a, back cover).

Transland exemplifies the disruption of cultural intelligibility's bounds, a concept introduced by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and further in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). Its alignment with "open normativities", or the "challenging of homogeneity in the "transnormative narrative"" (Shotwell, 2012, as cited in Vipond, 2018, pp. 21, 33, 36) is apparent in its illustrated transsubjectivity at the cross sections of namely gender non-conforming identity and non-normative sexuality practices.

(Un)intelligibility & Trans* Life Writing

Evan Vipond offers the concept of becoming culturally (un)intelligible in trans* life writing. According to Vipond, hegemonic trans* narratives—those that align with dominant cultural norms—often emerge from the systemic pressures to meet the expectations of cisgender audiences, ensuring cultural intelligibility. These narratives are shaped by the constraints of *legibility*, some being the use of recognisable language, repetition, and linear timeline frameworks in storytelling. Such strategies resonate with *mainstream* audiences (predominantly cisgender and heterosexual) and provide access to *legitimacy*, which, within the perception of dominant culture, is equated with cultural intelligibility (2018, pp. 19–36).

Trans* life writers are often pigeonholed into constructing this 'coherent narrative' to gain the capital associated with being regarded as 'real' —or the ability to pass within dominant culture as their experienced gender. However, trans* persons who do *not* pass, and in turn are not regarded as 'real', are deemed culturally *un*intelligible because they are not *legible* to dominant culture, and in trans* life writing, its dominant audiences (Vipond, 2018). In this view then, culturally intelligible trans* life writers are revered for their instrumentality, usually as a result of diluting, or omitting topics that are 'hard to conceptualise' in their storytelling for the sake of being *legitimized* (Shahjahan, 2019, p. 791) to fit a mould that realistically not all trans* persons fit. Building on this view, non-binary people that consider themselves to exist within the trans* galaxy would be perceived as culturally unintelligible with their departure from the cisnormative binary (that being, 'female' or 'male') system of gender expression, and subsequent life writing.

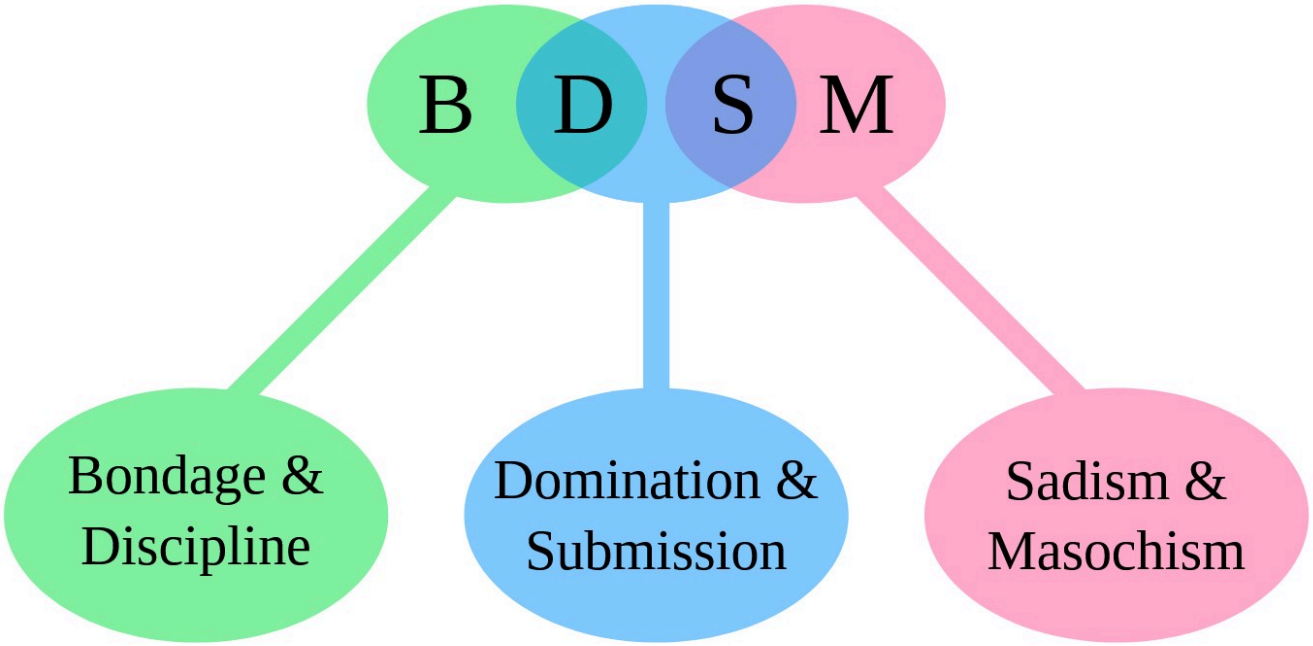
Through *Transland* by Mx. Sly, I'd like to begin a discussion regarding the simultaneously joyful and repercussive resistance in embracing cultural unintelligibility within trans* life writing and the kink community. I will illustrate how *Transland* exemplifies the culturally unintelligible intersection between non-binary identity and kink through Sly's written narrative surrounding play spaces and practice as fantastical pathways to self exploration and expression.

(Un)intelligibility & Non-Normative Sexual Practice

Intelligibility relies on its proximity to whiteness (Vipond, 2018, pp. 21, 25), and in turn the structures that uphold

whiteness, like that of the cisheteropatriarchy (that is: the cisgender, heterosexual patriarchy). Following this understanding, sexual practices that exist outside of heteronormative binary sexualities (e.g. communities forming around kink subcultures) misalign with cultural intelligibility by virtue of non-normative practices falling outside of a cisheteropatriarchial purity and respectability (Skidmore, 2011, p. 276, as cited in Vipond, 2018, p. 35). This is further supported in Vipond's reading of gender non-conforming writer, performer and activist Kate Bornstein's "anti-autobiographical" (and accordingly culturally unintelligible) *Gender Outlaw* (1994), in that: "As a practitioner of sadomasochism, Bornstein [also] refuses to capitulate to heteronormative, middle-class respectability" (Vipond, 2018, p. 35). This aligns with depictions of kink practices explored by a gender non-conforming persons in *Transland*.

Kink spaces and practices act as a pathway to self-expression outside the bounds of cultural intelligibility, involving avenues for gendered and non-gendered expression and articulation in a multitude of flavours. Across *Transland*, Sly discusses encounters in play spaces akin to self-exploration within kink, and consequently outside what is deemed culturally intelligible: "kink is a way to subvert the existing power dynamics of society in order to imagine other ways of being" (2023a, p. 120).



The Magic of Space

With the establishment of valid ethical consent between participating parties —meaning it is informed, voluntary and competent (Bullock, 2020, pp. 85-94)— a trusting dynamic can be created. Through the concept of "consent as magic" which reframes typically "immoral actions into moral ones" (Archard et al., 2020, pp. 174-184), space is created for fantasy, allowing ethical play to ensue. Play spaces, like dungeons used for BDSM practices (with acronym subsections depicted in the diagram above) have the ability to transform; Trans scholar, activist and artist Susan Stryker in "Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism" describes this as an act of artistic creation—a *poesis*—when trans* persons exist in dungeon spaces and practice

sadomasochism (2008, p. 39). The enacting of *poesis* breaks down the barriers separating: "the embodied self, its world, and others", allowing for composition of "specific place" in their crossover (Stryker. 2008, p. 39). This sort of fluidity between play space, practice and practitioners is further referenced by Stryker through Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1994) as a blurring between the "'duality of subject and object'" that becomes "'iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions'" (Stryker, 2008, p. 39). Sly's sentiments reflect something comparable to the creation of *poesis* and the liminality (and accompanying buzzing potential in shared transformation) of play spaces: "We who search for ourselves and for our place in the world come and go from these settings, while the setting itself barely notices" (2023a, p. 114). This sort of 'place' does not come about in a way that is 'tangible', or easily comprehensible by dominant audiences or culture, and as such does not exist within intelligible bounds for transnormative narratives or normative sexuality. Yet such concepts hold space in Stryker's and Sly's descriptions in their self reflection and storytelling. The meaning attached to these types of spaces for gender non-conforming individuals is not singular or uniform, highlighting a missed opportunity for greater nuance in trans* life writing which is often not captured in conventional storytelling due to factors like safety and the demands of legibility.

The Magic of Practice

In addition to play space, Stryker remarks on Bachelard's interest in "reiterative temporal practices –habitual movements– through which we inhabit those sites", with particular focus on the "fluctuating movement between the 'real' and the 'unreal' whose dynamic interlacings produce the shimmering iridescence of poetic reverie, or common daydreaming" (2008, p. 39). Particular practices and their practitioners in kink/BDSM dynamics can allow for this stepping into a reality beyond what is intelligible that Sly illustrates in *Transland* through most notably rope bondage.

Sly's enacts intelligibility-challenging storytelling through what they describe in an interview about their memoir as the employment of magic (Sly, 2023b, 34:44), and touch (Sly, 2023b, 44:23). Particularly, Sly employs magical and sensorial storytelling in various descriptions of rope bondage *scenes* —planned and consensual interactions between participating parties— for both gendered and non-gendered self exploration and expression, which harmonise with the idea of blurring between the "duality of subject and object" (Belchard, 1994, as cited by Stryker, 2008, p. 39). Sly allocates considerable attention to describing the delight of jute rope (pictured above) against the skin and body as "the universe reminding me where I came from" (2023, p. 37), and the resulting feelings of interconnectedness between the rope as your immediate world, your embodied self, and the person who is tying you, composing a sort of "specific space" (Stryker. 2008, p. 39) within a rigger (the person tying)/rope bottom (the person being tied) dynamic. Sly expresses in *Transland* that: "When tied, I am very aware of how connected everything is—in the body, between the body and the mind, between the mind and the eternal, and between the eternal and ecstasy." (2023, p. 37), and that "Rope reframes everything." (2023, p. 37).

Who Gets Access?

Conversations surrounding cultural intelligibility in trans* life writing and non-normative sexual practices as a gender non-conforming person opens the door to a lot of topics, but cannot go without the recognition of pleasure politics; Who gets to have access to pleasure? Especially when communities that form around non-normative sexual practices can allow for a spectrum of gendered and non-gendered personal exploration and expression. While its problems do not negate its potential for innovative transformation, exploration and expression, kink communities are not immune to exclusionary "rules, expectations, and hierarchies" (Sly, 2023a, back cover) mimicking limitations in mainstream society. Sly remarks on this in BDSM communities: "When a subculture is built around the idea of being shunned and shamed by mainstream society, popular figures in that community become synonymous with the subculture itself. It makes it hard to critique or call out abusive behaviour because it is seen as a betrayal or an attack on the subculture as a whole." (Sly 2023a, p. 159). Kink community discourse should celebrate the fostering of connection in all of its facets but also reflect on what could be at stake for the sake of community cohesion, and what this can do to accessibility to pleasure and said connection.

Joyful Resistance

These brief *scene* excerpts showcased from Sly's memoir do not privilege the narrative structures equivalent to intelligibility for readers, and instead fall into a natural resistance of mainstream understandings of legibility by centering the documentation of joy in sexual exploration unabashedly. This type of joy is visually captured in *Dematerialisation* by "Bird" *(personal communication, December 3, 2024)*. While detailing aspects of their gender articulation through non-normative sexual practices is explored throughout *Transland*, Sly's storytelling does not snap back to narrativising their own personal embodiment of their gender with every single opportunity for the sake of 'making themselves clear' as a trans* life writer.

Extending from Shajahan's article, "On being for others': time and shame in the neoliberal academy", one could parallel conceptualisations of dominant temporalities in neoliberal academia with intelligibility in trans* life writing. Narrative structures akin to temporality as linear and outcome-oriented (Shahjahan, 2019, p. 793)—that is, clearly progressing in one direction (e.g. reduction to before and after "coming out" or "growing up" (Vipond, 2019, pp. 21, 36)) with a predictable ending (e.g. physically embodying "the gender you always knew you were")—perpetuate a "Being for Others" existence that expectedly precipitates disconnect from *personal* authenticity for the sake of *legitimised* authenticity (Vipond, 2019, p. 24; Shahjahan, 2019, pp. 787-788) in contributing to neoliberal performativity in trans* life writing as part of academia or culture more broadly. In our case, this extends to a 'legible', clear-cut, 'unmessy' representation of self as per Vipond's sentiments (2018, pp. 20-24), which we can apply here to Mx. Sly and *Transland*.

Conclusion

Transland by Mx. Sly provides a beautiful illustration of what I consider to be joyful resistance to cultural intelligibility in trans* life writing within the arena of non-normative sexual practice and subsequent self exploration and expression. Sly's storytelling illuminates the magic of kink space and practice while documenting the navigation of these subcultures as a non-binary person through a rightfully critical lens. Even communities that exist beyond cultural intelligibility are not immune to their own set of pitfalls paralleling exclusion in mainstream society and normative culture. As such, joyful resistance to cultural intelligibility in

both written accounts and existence more broadly do not come without simultaneous repercussive elements, especially for trans* persons.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Visit https://www.whose.land/en/ to learn about the land you reside on.

I'd like to thank Dr. Isabel Machado for her mentorship and guidance in the development of this research, my mom for supporting and believing in me, and my dear friend, "Bird" for their beautiful artwork and conversation.

Author Positionality Statement – Ariana Revnic

I identify as a white cisgender woman, and am a second generation Romanian-Canadian. I have the privilege of existing in and around queer community through multiple facets of my life; these aspects of my identity inform my scholarship with privileged perspectives. However, I urge readers to consider the inherent biases I may hold and express as a result of my positionality when engaging with my analysis of this intersection in trans* studies.

Author Bio: Ariana Revnic (she/her/hers) is a student, artist, and avid trivia night enjoyer. She has studied at the University of Calgary and the University of British Columbia. Alongside school, she is an advocate for sexual education reform, and the fostering of community in third spaces.

Notes

1. Note on the use of "Trans*" versus "Trans": Trans* (with an asterisk) has been used historically to acknowledge identities aligning with trans as an identifier that exist outside the binary in a multitude of ways, and to generally be more inclusive to a wider variety of experiences that may be taken into consideration for the topics discussed in this essay. I use trans (without an asterisk) when I am referring to narrower contexts such as direct quotations.
2. The illustrated "'being for others' and temporality mirror" diagram in Shajahan's article (2019b, p.788) is a helpful metaphorical visual aid in understanding the politics surrounding the existential (the awareness of being) and embodied (the physical/corporeal being) self, and could be broadened to represent an individual's dissonance in selfhood. Specifically, between the *maintenance of cultural*

intelligibility (or “Being for Others”), which is sustained by an institution, concept, or idea (in place of “Academics” as a label in this figure) that exists under dominant normative structures, and *the internal self* (or “Being for the Self”, which is done with the simultaneous repercussions and joy of resistance).

3. Due to a limited word count, I cannot go into as much detail as I would like in regards to accessibility in the kink community. However, I reflect on the history of leathermen prioritising ritual, tradition and protocol as a means of community and cultural preservation, especially during times of heightened vulnerability (e.g. the AIDS epidemic). While undoubtedly important, the preservation upheld by leathermen in kink came with the establishment of inclusion boundaries and hierarchy that, while with exceptions, left vulnerable individuals —including trans* persons— on the margins. A group of leathermen discuss the past, present, and future of the kink community with a trans community member (On Guard, 2023) providing important first hand dialogue about this evolution.
4. As a means of engaging ethical citation practices detailed in “How do you wish to be cited?” (Thieme & Saunders, 2018), I’ve tried to include excerpts from *Transland* and other sources by trans* persons that I felt are appropriate for contextualising their works, while remaining mindful of scholarly care in harm reduction. While this source has worked mostly in the background of this essay’s creation, it has been crucial in my writing as a cisgender author on trans* topics.
5. *Trans bodies, Trans selves* (Erickson-Schroth, 2022) discusses sexuality with a chapter introduction paralleling discussions surrounding cultural intelligibility. It details how sex-related information tends to centre cisgender heterosexual audiences which can cause trans* people, like everyone, to “internalize and believe implicit messages about the kinds of sex we are “supposed” to be having” (p. 719). Along with detailing different aspects of the intersection between sexuality and transness, what really struck me in this chapter was explaining embodiment as the opposite of dissociation (p. 738), and how this conversation could be a meaningful continuation of the magic of space and practice in kink for trans* persons as a way of exploring different pathways to embodiment, which I believe strengthens the joyful potential in its practice for gender and non-gendered exploration and expression.

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The Monster That I Choose to Be: An Analysis of Non-Binary Resistance

CAS

Content Note: Please be aware that this essay contains words that some may find offensive. This is done intentionally – by members of the groups against which these words have been originally used – for the purposes of reappropriation.

Introduction

> To choose a life of gender non-conformity not only opens you up to the powerful community of people you may meet in the basement bars of London, but in many ways it puts you instantly into an equally powerful relationship with yourself. I say 'choose', and I understand the contention in that word. I know for many it is not a word that will fit. Yet for me, choice is a word that crops up again and again within my own journey of gender… (Alabanza, 2022, pg. 67)

Travis Alabanza's *None of the Above: Reflections on Life Beyond the Binary* (2022) autobiographical memoir follows a Black transfeminine performance artist and writer from Bristol, England. In *None of the Above,* Alabanza discusses their lived experience of gender, transition, and living as gender non-conforming. Their memoir does not fit the "Mad Lib" trans memoir narrative – a term coined by Jacob Tobia in *Sissy: A Coming of Gender Story* (2019). Heyam explains this in *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (2022):

> The 'Mad Lib' trans narrative begins in childhood, with the trans person articulating their early, stable sense that they were 'in the wrong body', and conforming to stereotypes 'opposite' to those of the gender they were assigned at birth. After a long and traumatic struggle with themselves, they come out, medically transition to male or female, and live a conventional, gender-conforming and heterosexual life (pg. 17).

While representative of the stories of some, this narrative imposes binary notions of transness, excluding the experiences of many gender non-conforming (GNC) individuals. It creates a proscriptive expectation that if one is trans, one's transition must follow this narrative. As a GNC non-binary person, Alabanza's transition does not.

I will use the theory of "Critical Gender Kinds" by Robin Dembroff (2020) to argue that the embodiment of non-binary genders can be a form of situational defiance to gendered binary systems as well as one's internal feeling of gender.

> **Critical Gender Kinds:** For a given kind X, X is a critical gender kind relative to a given society if X's members collectively destabilize one or more core elements of the dominant gender ideology in that society (pg. 12).

Alabanza's memoir can be viewed through the lens of Critical Gender Kinds, showcasing the ways in which Alabanza – and other non-binary individuals, by extension – destabilise the dominant gender ideology through their embodied resistance of transmedicalism, definition of gender as a situational reaction, and reappropriation of derogatory terms. The "dominant gender ideology" that Debroff references is the gender binary axis that enforces two genders, man and woman, that correspond to two sexes, male and female. I will be using the terms "non-binary" and "non-binary genders" to refer to those who are gender non-conforming (GNC), genderqueer, gender-expansive (GE) or identify as something other than binary trans/cis. This is for the sake of simplicity, although I recognise there are important nuances between these identities (Erickson-Schroth, 2022).

Gender Non-Conformity in Resistance to Transmedicalism

Transmedicalism awards legitimacy to trans people who have transitioned both socially and medically from one binary gender to the opposite binary gender, while invalidating gender identities that do not adhere to the "binaristic medical model of trans identity" (Johnson, 2016). This is based on transnormative gender ideals that men must adhere to within standards of hegemonic masculinity, and women within dominant femininity (Daniel, 2020; Johnson, 2016).

Hegemonic masculinity: practices of masculinity that justify and reproduce men's dominant position in society – traits such as emotional suppression, competitiveness, aggression etc. that are the cultural ideal of masculinity.

Dominant femininity: practices of femininity that exist in conjunction with hegemonic masculinity to justify and reproduce men's dominant and women's subordinate position in society – traits such as grace, sensitivity, warmth etc. that are the cultural ideal of femininity.

Non-binary identities are inherently incompatible with transnormativity. As they fall outside of binary gender categories, non-binary identities are delegitimised by the standards of transnormative medical transition (Daniel, 2020; Darwin, 2020). Non-binary people are held accountable to both cis and trans standards of embodiment – where it is dictated that they either embody their birth sex, or fully transition to the other binary sex (through gender-affirming medical care). While some non-binary people desire gender affirming medical care, it is problematic when viewed as compulsory to be part of the "real trans community" – when authenticity calls for medicalisation (Murawsky, 2023). Through the rejection of both cis and trans conventions, non-binary bodies can uniquely highlight the pervasive issues of transmedicalism within the trans community through their defiance of binary gendered body standards.

Transnormativity: a hegemonic ideology that structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon a binary medical model and its accompanying standards, regardless of individual transgender people's interest in or intention to under-take medical pathways to transition (Johnson, 2016).

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Alabanza positions their discussion of transmedicalism based on those who are "proper" trans and those who are not. Alabanza references an instance in which someone invalidated their transness on the basis that they were gender non-conforming, deeming them "improper" (pg. 31). Proper here can be understood as one who is binary trans, and has accessed gender-affirming medical care, reinforcing the Mad Lib trans narrative. This is an attempt to constrain gender identity further by establishing yet another binary between "proper" transness and transness that is outside of binary gender conceptualisations – and thus unrecognised. It flattens the complexity of transness for the cisnormative understanding and creates a precarious conditional acceptance of "proper" trans people, thereby legitimising dominant gender ideology (Daniel, 2020; Dembroff, 2020).

Alabanza discusses the idea that non-binary identities sit in an uncomfortable place of unrecognition. With this discomfort, society wants to further divide binary trans people and non-binary trans people into "proper" and "improper" respectively, based on "a cisgender idea of completion" (pg. 37). Binary systems are incompatible with any form of nuance. By rejecting the constraints of transmedicalism, Alabanza positions their gender as outside of the binary of gender and dichotomies of "proper" and "improper". To this, they report feeling "like an imposter" in the trans community, where people base their acceptance on whether or not you "attempt to pass". One is "deemed a legitimate identity only if [they] are medicalised" (pg. 35). This kind of prejudice is present within the trans community, reflecting a greater transnormative understanding of transition that permeates societal assumptions.

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Being a non-binary person who embraces gender non-conformity both visually (through dress and appearance) and physically (through rejection of binary body standards), Alabanza intentionally subverts the ordinances of transmedicalism. Through their rhetoric and embodiment, they problematise the distinction between "proper" (binary) trans and "improper" (non-binary) trans, challenging the idea that there is a proper way to be trans. This serves to disrupt transnormative gender ideology, suggesting evidence for non-binary being a Critical Gender Kind.

To Gender, On Purpose

To speak of gender as an intentional act is problematised because it disrupts the cisnormative idea of how gender works: that it is inherent to one's identity, that one can describe it in simple terms (man, woman), and that it is a stable construct (Butler, 1990). Alabanza rejects this idea:

> I believe my transness is a reactionary fact, not an innate one. I am trans because the world made me so,

> not because I was born different. I am trans because the systems the world operates through *force* me to be so, not because of genetics (pg. 26, emphasis added).

Even in trans spaces, Alabanza's is a radical idea, as many binary trans people feel that their gender is inherent to their identity (notably, this aligns with the Mad Lib narrative as well).

Gender has similarly been theorised as performance by West & Zimmerman (1987), and Butler in their seminal work (1988; 1990; 1993) – argued as far from an innate construct. Butler defines gender as constituted through repeated actions and aesthetics that serve to create the illusion of gender as natural – yet gender only exists through these actions performed, and is unnatural, forced into existence by the binary gender system (1990). Dembroff's theory, born from this theoretical framework, similarly positions gender as a social performance (2020).

While many trans people feel that their gender is an inherent part of them, gender can also be an external (re)action, disrupting dominant views of gender as innate. Being non-binary is simultaneously an intentional act – "in proximity to having a skill" (Alabanza, pg. 65) – as well as a reaction forced upon us by the omnipresent gender binary (pg. 26). Alabanza discusses the process of being trans – it is forced upon us by systemic gender binaries, which one can accept, or choose to perform "something else" (pg. 26).

We can see instances of the GNC trans people choosing something else: performance of non-binary genders can be observed in online trans communities such as Tumblr, Reddit and YouTube. For example, Reddit user mmv_98 identifies as "a girl in a man way", while user indecisivepear claims their gender as "bowling alley carpet" (r/NonBinary, 2021). A Tumblr user claims that the "first rule of gender is to have fun :3" (nando161mando, 2024). I would say my gender is whatever is funniest at a given moment. As the options of "man" and "woman" are inaccurate in categorising non-binary individuals, we are free to define our own labels and direct our own gender performance.

Non-binary people thus "perform" non-binary genders by way of dress, pronoun choice, embodiment and labels that emerge from this choice to live beyond the binary. Reflecting upon Alabanza's "situational reaction" of choosing non-binary, we see the commonalities of non-binary people in choosing creative genders beyond those of "man" and "woman", and determining our own unique gender labels.

sweatermuppet's pieces exemplify the re-appropriation of derogatory terms for artistic expression and empowerment.

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Trans Monsters

Reappropriating words and concepts is a powerful tool in redirecting stigma against one's group. It is an act of empowerment for oppressed groups that can change the connotation of negative words (Galinsky et al., 2017). One salient example is "queer", which has been reappropriated by many members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community for this reason (and perhaps because it is easier to say).

Trans people have long been called "monsters", "freaks", "aliens", or worse for the fact that we dare to defy nature's ordinances, choosing to alter our bodies in ways that align with our gender ideals. We are seen as desecrating our natural bodies through acts of mutilation (Stryker, 1994). In response to this, many trans people embrace a kinship with the odd, freaky and misunderstood (Sharp, 2024; Stryker, 1994; Wang, 2021). Are we not Frankenstein's monster ourselves? If having a body that rejects gender conformity makes us a freak of nature, then freaks we shall be.

> **Monstering**: to identify oneself or others as "monsters" or "monstrous". Generally refers to the reappropriation of the term "monster", or the action "to monster" – which is to identify with symbols, aesthetics and labels that are monstrous, freakish and dangerous.

Alabanza embraces this act of othering, defining themself with labels like "monster" (pg. 48), "something beyond" gender (pg. 12), "bearded femme fag" (pg. 70) and "man in a dress" (pg. 101). They discuss enduring violence and exclusion as backlash for their daring to be gender non-conforming in public, and their subsequent choice to embrace their freakishness as a demonstration of power (pg. 65).

Art by transmonstera and toyb0y-tboy represent trans-monstrousness and identification with 'the dangerous transsexual'.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=405#h5p-6

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=405#h5p-7

This strategy of "monstering" is well known in the trans community, most famously from Stryker's classic text, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" (1994), and discussed in countless theories in queer academia since (Pierce, 2020; Sharp, 2024; Wang, 2021). Monstering means transcending the limits of nature to resist the violent enforcement of normative binary embodiment (Pierce, 2020). Monstering reappropriates derogatory terms; to be a freak is an act of resistance and a monster can exemplify ideals of gender euphoria.

Here we see how Alabanza simultaneously rejects the forces of traditional gender conceptualisations and embraces the strength of trans-monstrousness; "why am I caught up in what type of monster I may be?" (pg. 48). We can connect monstering to previous examples of non-binary gender performance: non-binary people claim the act of naming themselves, from genders of "bowling alley carpet" (r/NonBinary, 2021), to monsters and freaks (Alabanza, 2022; Stryker, 1994). Through the identification with monstrousness and the reappropriation of derogatory labels, non-binary people can transcend traditional gender categories and engage in resistance against dominant gender ideology.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of *None of the Above: Reflections on Life Beyond the Binary* by Travis Alabanza, I have identified ways that non-binary identities destabilise dominant gender ideology – as defined in Dembroff's theory of Critical Gender Kinds (2020) – and have explored how their memoir diverges from the Mad Lib trans memoir genre. Alabanza's resistance of binary ideologies manifests in their rejection of transmedicalism, assertion of their gender identity as a situational reaction to binary gendered systems, and their identification with monstrousness. Commonalities exist between theirs and others' experience performing non-binary genders, unveiling alternative existences that challenge traditional gender hegemony.

Acknowledegements

Thank you to artists (@sweatermuppet, @toyb0y-tboy, @transmonstera on Tumblr) for generously granting me permission to use your beautiful work in my analysis.

Author Positionality Statement – Cas

Cas is a white first-generation university student from a working-class family, born in so-called "Canada". They have Irish, Welsh and British heritage. They identify as queer non-binary and use they/them pronouns. Their analysis of *None of the Above: Reflections on Life Beyond the Binary* by Travis Alabanza involves themes of queer defiance to gendered systems, the harm done by transnormativity, and radical reappropriation.

There are some ways in which my positionality may bias my analysis, due to differences in my identity. Travis Alabanza identifies as Black, transfeminine/GNC, and uses they/them pronouns. They live in the UK, where they were raised by their African-American immigrant mother. They have Filipino, British, French and Mexican heritage. They write their memoir for an audience of other trans people, deliberately renouncing the expectation that trans memoirs are an explanatory project for cis people.

I am white and have been raised in societal structures founded on principles of white supremacy. My racial identity causes a power differential between myself and Alabanza and biases me towards certain types of thinking. In this paper, I will think critically about the knowledge I am producing and how I am producing it, while engaging in anti-racist practices – such as questioning my assumptions and seeking diverse feedback (Lane, 2019). My experiences in academia have fostered a hierarchy of knowledge that creates a disparity between myself and the author. With this in mind, I aim to challenge the teaching of hegemonic pedagogies and recognise the value in learning from individuals outside of academic institutions. I will be analysing the memoir of a Black transfeminine person, an intersectional identity which contains complexities that a privileged white transmasculine person cannot fully understand. Through my analysis of Alabanza's memoir, I will be sensitive, acknowledge the role of my assumptions, biases and ways of knowing, and be critical of how I portray Alabanza in my writing. I aim to centre kindness, community-building and harm reduction in all of my academic work.

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Conundrum and the Trans* Pain Narrative: Denouncing a Dialectic of Trauma

CHARLIE SUTHERLAND

Introduction

> "...rather than go mad, or kill myself, or worst of all perhaps infect everyone around me with my profoundest melancholy, I would accept Dr. Benjamin's last resort, and have my body altered" (Morris, 2002, p. 90).

Conundrum, by Welsh historian, travel writer, and author Jan Morris, is a groundbreaking memoir originally published in 1974, detailing her life and initial transition as a trans woman in the 1970s. Focusing on her often tumultuous and storied experiences with sexuality, marriage, childrearing, and employment, Morris documents the "progression" of her gender dysphoria, describing a lifetime of embodied suffering and self-hatred that "culminates" in her mid-life gender-affirming surgery. Morris's retelling reinforces the mad-lib trans narrative, as introduced by Jacob Tobia in their memoir *Sissy: A Coming-Of-Gender Story*, and contextualized by Kit Heyam (2022) as "a story with a pre-written skeleton format, where the teller fills in the specifics from a limited list of options" (p. 18), a linear history recording a consistent ideation of being "born in the wrong body" stemming from childhood, eventually resulting in a gender-conforming, heterosexual, "respectable" life achieved through gender-affirming surgery. As trans* theorist Juliet Jaques (2017) notes, "many of these [trans* life-writing] conventions were codified in its most famous exponent, Conundrum" (p. 359), which Morris exemplifies by noting "I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl... it is the earliest memory of my life" (2002, p. 1). Thus, Morris's work, going beyond merely enforcing the "mad-lib" narrative, fundamentally helped *shape* the creation of the genre. Therefore, I assert that the "mad lib" trans* memoir genre, as reflected throughout Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974), both naturalizes and constructs trans* pain as a requirement for cultural intelligibility within a cis-centric society, depicting transhood* as inherently indicative of a lifetime of suffering and self-hatred.

The construction of the trans* pain narrative

Conundrum's narrative of trans* livelihood as depletion-centred is further contextualized by the work of Unangaŷ scholar Eve Tuck (2009), and her focus on what she calls damage-centred research – research, regardless of intention, which amplifies minority voices only to extract their stories of pain – and its role in constructing marginalized communities as one-dimensional victims of oppression. Morris, through comments like "I wondered sometimes if it were all a punishment" (2002, p. 14) directly contributes to this sorrowful depiction of trans* life void of joy and vitality, fetishizing minoritarian pain, encouraging complacency, and documenting deficit without celebrating possibility or enacting change through a future-based philosophy. *Conundrum* publicizes these depictions of suffering to a larger cis mainstream, situating the role of continuous trans* pain narratives in actualizing the "mad-lib" memoir genre. Interrogating Morris' formative work, and drawing from Tuck's (2009) theorizations on desire-based paradigms, becomes crucial in (re)imagining self-

depictions of trans subjectivities by "[(re)]consider[ing what] the long-term repercussions of *thinking of ourselves as broken*" (p. 409) are on conceptualizations of trans* joy as possibility, and the constitution of trans* vitalities, or "that which makes lives worth living" (Edelman, 2020, p. 109).

Morris' sensationalization and large-scale (re)production of the dialectic of trans* sorrow constructs joy as a phenomena inherently reserved for the amorphous cisgender onlooker. As Black scholar Lindsey Stewart (2021) notes in her discussion of the hegemonic master/slave relationship, "the laughter of the enslaved invokes a power shift, whereby the enslaved partake of something that the slave masters presumed was firmly in their domain" (p. 36). Within a trans* scholarly context, Stewart's analysis is a means of understanding how cis desires to view trans* pain (re)produce the naturalized power structure of cis/trans* gendered power relations, contorting the image and eventual representation of the transsexual. Seeing the trans* subject as inherently damaged becomes fundamental in a construction of cis identity, in which cis embodiment of joy becomes legitimized through the suffering of the trans* Other, instating joy as a fluidly shifting "product" inaccessible to the gender-defiant subaltern. This is echoed throughout *Conundrum*, where Morris's hyper-reliance on documenting her pain in relation to her trans* identity is marketed to a cis audience: quotes like "science has elucidated some of the mystery of *their condition*" (2002, p. ix, emphasis added) show a purposeful use of the they pronoun to invoke a cis audience, wherein Morris becomes an "objective" third person, removed from her transfeminine identity. Morris thus assuages the cis consciousness, (re)producing an expected portrait of dismal and marred transhood* that validates the external cis identity, whilst attempting to displace herself from her own trans* subjectivity.

The alienation from the trans* self, evoked in conjunction with the stereotypical, corporeal narrative of trans* trauma to appease a cisgender audience, is furthered through former-Olympian-turned-media-personality Caitlyn Jenner's 2017 memoir, *The Secrets of My Life*. As Jenner (2017) notes, "Imagine denying your core and soul…You can't imagine it" (p. 10, emphasis added), paralleling Morris through her continued refusal to imagine or evoke a trans* readership. Through this presumed reality, Jenner's (2017) reproduction of trans* pain, an account of "a body that I fundamentally loathe" (p. 9), takes on an entirely different meaning, defined by the naturalization of the cis perspective and a violent (re)Othering of trans* subjectivity(ies). It becomes obvious that this precedent of pain as the only valued narrative of trans* life, largely codified by Morris through *Conundrum*, has become the dominant frame for the cis conceptualization of transhood*, displacing extant trans* vitalities (Edelman, 2020).

Cultural Intelligibility: Dominant Culture's Determiner of Subaltern Humanity and Disposability

To further nuance *Conundrum*'s construction of cultural intelligibility, it is crucial to understand how it becomes weaponized to define the parameters of what is meant by "human." As Butler (1990) notes, "humanity" is determined through a normative expression of gender roles occurring along stratified racial, cultural, and economic lines, wherein one's ability to conform to expected gender presentations defines worth and personhood. Their intelligibility to the dominant culture becomes both a question of legitimacy and survival (Butler, 1990). Furthermore, Butler (1990) asserts that gender itself is (re)constructed through repetition, becoming legible to others (particularly the cis public) through continuous reiteration. When Morris (2002) repeats the image of her gender as fundamentally tied to her suffering, she codifies a space wherein the cultural intelligibility of the trans* subject to the cis observer is reliant on a declaration of depletion. Comments like "By my mid-thirties my self-repugnance was more specific, and more bitter, and I began to detest the physique that had served me so loyally" (Morris, 2002, p. 77) weave a dialogue of pain into the fabric of trans*

life, reinforcing a trans* necropolitics at the cost of emergent trans* vitalities, demoting the trans* subject to a one-dimensional victim stripped of individual agency and validated through their ability to perform self-hatred.

Cultural intelligibility: Following trans* scholar Judith Butler's theorizations in their seminal work Gender Trouble (1990), cultural intelligibility will be defined as the process of repetition used to idealize and cement understandings and (un)doings of gender, and construct "what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be 'real'" (p. xxiii).

WHEN MY FATHER CHANGED SEX

In 1972, James Morris became Jan Morris. Here, MARK MORRIS reflects on the implications of this change for his own life

I FIRST knew that my father was going to change sex when walking down our front drive on a frosty January evening. That some momentous transformation in our lives was imminent came as no surprise; that my father was now going to be a woman was somewhat more unexpected.

It is now 10 years since the publication of 'Conundrum,' which described how James Morris became Jan Morris. I was then at Oxford, and the reaction of those I knew varied widely. A few shied away, crossed to the other side of the street, as if I was touched by leprosy. Others rang up, excited, exclaiming that they had no *idea*. There were those who, perhaps troubled by their own sexuality, were suddenly pleased to be in one's company, as if some curious magic would somehow rub off.

But almost everyone, with the exception of a few (always male) who wanted to shudder at every knife cut of the operation, was far less interested in the details of the change than in how it affected the family — my mother, my brothers, my sister, and myself. The questions have not abated in those 10 years, nor their tenor—for the subject is still regarded as not quite suitable for polite conversation. Sex changes are now more commonplace; but they continue to raise moral hackles, especially in these conservative times: while they may answer an individual's personal fulfilment, they are thought to be destructive to those around.

There had always been something different about our family. We had been lucky enough to live all over the place, from Venice to the States, from the French Alps to Egypt. We led an unusual and transitory life, with little sense of physical roots, but with the instinctive ability to adapt to a foreign culture. As strangers passing through strange lands, we became a close-knit and self-reliant family, and if my brother and I of necessity relied on our parents for stability and reassurance, they also relied on us for emotional response.

It was at my prep school that I first realised that it was not just our nomadic existence that set our family apart. My father had been more than just a father—he had been a hero. He had climbed Everest, perched on trucks across the Arabian desert, been catapulted off American aircraft-carriers, brought back tales of barely perceived places. Yet, with a child's instinctive reaction, I knew that there were flaws in my picture of father-as-hero, that the person didn't match with the masculinity of the image, even if I was too young to understand.

It was at Eton that I started to put these feelings into concrete thoughts. Not only had I reached the age when I could analyse, but he had started on the long, long process of changing sex. I can't claim that I noticed the changes — they were too gradual — but it became apparent that, however subtly, my father was bodily different from other fathers.

> **"When I first saw him dressed as a woman, it seemed perfectly natural"**

School-friends also noticed. My father looked younger (the effect of the hormones), and wore casual clothes—the jeans of the unisex revolution, not the pin-stripes of the average Eton father. Occasionally, someone took him to be my elder brother; my housemaster simply assumed that all writers looked like that.

My father was, I think, embarrassed for me on such occasions, but he needn't have worried. His appearance seemed to make no difference to the relationships within our family, and if I drew any conclusion it was that he might be a homosexual who, in an age when the persecution of homosexuals was abating, had decided not to worry about hiding it. I never asked my father, though I suggested it once to my brother, who poured scorn on the idea.

By the time I did discover the cause, the masculine appearance of my father had slowly turned into something more nebulous. The swelling breasts had become too obvious to ignore, but by then it was difficult to recall what he *had* looked like. This slow rate of change, like someone gradually growing old, greatly eased acceptance by the family, so that when I first saw him, well before the operation, not only as a feminine figure but dressed as a woman, it seemed perfectly natural.

With no pronounced changes in my father's personality, the adaptations were practical rather than emotional. It was difficult getting used to the change of pronoun, but when I accidentally slipped into 'he' I was pounced upon by my little sister, and this corrective quickly succeeded. Jan had suggested a *modus vivendi* — that I was to introduce her as my aunt, and I tried it once, but it was as if I were denying my own parentage, so instead I simply introduce her as 'Jan.'

These were superficial adjustments. The only experience of real poignancy came when I drove my father to Heathrow Airport to see him onto the plane to Casablanca where he was to have the operation. He was nervous, as well he might be, and so was I, neither of us quite knowing what might go wrong, whether this might be the last time we saw each other — like seeing someone off to the front. But there was happiness, too, and anticipation, that the long slow journey to fulfillment was a plane's flight from its end. I could hardly fail to react to that hope. Some of my father's courage and personal anguish had rubbed off on me.

But of course there was, for me, also a sad, almost nostalgic side to this farewell. I was aware that a huge chain of continuity, of which Jan and I were only two small links, was being knocked out of joint. Superficially I was losing a father, saying good-bye to the physical attributes that had given me birth and had shaped my genes. A fundamental part of my origin was going to disappear, while its originator was not. I had a sense of fatherhood being handed down the generations, and of the nature of that descent being irrevocably altered. I was being parted from those generations, like a relation sent forth on his journey.

If my mother or the two elder children had objected to Jan changing sex, I'm sure she had no such objections, for we understood the anguish of the dilemma, and its causes seemed to me then, as they do now, not only unresolved, but totally irrelevant to the realities of day-to-day existence. Similarly, we were all agreed on Jan writing about her experiences. She was well known as a writer, and what she had to say would be listened to; she had the advantage of a supportive family and a circle of friends who, for the most part, would be liberal about such matters. It seemed to her a duty to relate her story. Doing so might help chip away at the myths and ignorance surrounding the subject, and help dispell the unthinking attitude of society. She would also show others in the same position that someone who had much to lose not only shared the same feelings, but was prepared to put them to the test.

The enduring consequence of the publicity about Jan is the constant curiosity. Its most annoying feature (and one that other children of well-known figures must have experienced) is that some people are only interested in me because I *am* the son.

I was recently asked, for example, after writing the words for a new piece of music, whether I would mind the promotion for it mentioning that I was Jan Morris's son. The suggestion got short shrift, since my parentage had no bearing on the words, the music, or the performance. Such requests are a knock not so much to one's pride as to one's sense of individuality—fame at one remove being regarded as more important than one's own contribution.

Nothing has otherwise changed to upset those values of love and respect that continue to bind our family together. For me personally the change only had two major consequences. The first was short-lived: after Jan had actually changed sex, I was haunted not by thoughts of what had been cut off, but of the vagina that replaced it. It symbolised the break in continuity I had already experienced, and it was but a short step to transfer that symbolism to the women with whom I had relationships. The result was failure, even though sexually excited, to achieve erection.

But such situations are often less embarrassing than might be expected. My girl-friends were concerned, sometimes amused (always a good tonic) and patience brought its rewards and happy conclusions — the image died away.

Doubtless psychiatrists would recognise a fear of

Newspaper article written by Morris' son, highlighting how Morris became culturally intelligible to a cis public through a normative narrative of self-hatred culminating only through surgery.

Moreover, as Vipond (2019) notes, trans* life writers utilize the repetition of these accepted tropes of transhood* (i.e. the "born in the wrong body" narrative), dependent on a portrayal of the trans* body as damaged, to assimilate and gain proximity to a normative idea of gender. The "accepted" trans* life-writing trope of cross-gender childhood identification crucial to the "mad-lib" categorization is exemplified throughout *Conundrum*, as Morris (2002) notes: "I have had no doubt about my gender since that moment of self-realization beneath the piano" (p. 21). Affirming the "validity" of her trans* identity (Vipond, 2019), Morris' construction of gendered "authenticity," whilst "protecting" her from cis suspicion through a *politic of respectability*, not only displaces expressions of trans* vitality, but produces a standard of legibility that is reliant on the ability of the trans* Other to perform normative, white idealizations of gender that (re)produce the damage-centred trans* pain narrative.

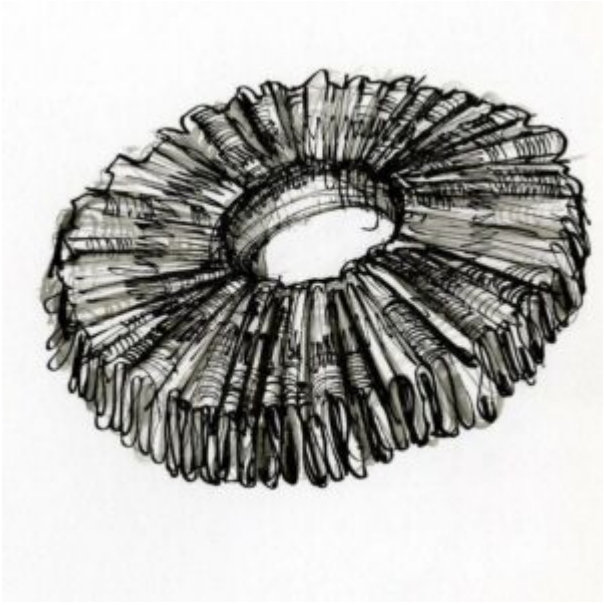
Morris on the Dick Cavett Show, demonstrating how she made herself visible through the lens of the "good," respectable transsexual.

This narrative of visible trans* pain as a requirement for cultural intelligibility, and its subsequent construction, consumability, and fetishization to affirm a cis politic of domination, is further embodied by Josh Greenbaum's 2024 documentary *Will & Harper*, following Harper Steele, former head writer on *Saturday Night Live*, and American actor and comedian Will Ferrell on their cross-country Americana road trip. Steele's coherence and cultural intelligibility as a trans woman hinges on the continuous exploitation of her pain, constructing her as depleted and helpless, and thus, in need of cis pity and saviourism. Mirroring Morris, she laments "I just hated myself so much...I just felt like a monster" (Greenbaum, 2024, 1:37:01). This self-hatred is reiterated so frequently that it becomes a framework through which the cis people in her life conceptualize her transness, with Ferrell noting "I had no idea the kind of despair that Harper had for so long" (Greenbaum, 2024, 1:44:03). Through this process of repetition, Harper's suffering becomes an inherent aspect of her transfeminine identity, and a requirement for cultural intelligibility to the cis audience to which this film is addressed. Ferrell confirms this by directly speaking to an assumed cis viewer, stating "so many of us don't know what the rules of engagement are" (Greenbaum, 2024, 10:17, emphasis added), facilitating a linguistic frame of exclusion that establishes a naturalized cis audience at the cost of presencing dynamic trans* subjectivities. Steele's humanity and "validity" within the constraints of her transhood thus rely wholly on her ability to regurgitate a "respectable" portrait of the "good transsexual" (Skidmore, 2011), a narrative of suffering to assuage the cis consciousness and (re)produce a hierarchy of cis hegemony.

Trans* joy as cultural (un)intelligibility: Visibility beyond a politic of respectability

In line with the theorizations of Tuck (2009) and Stewart (2021), it remains crucial to look beyond the pathologization of the dispossessed trans* body codified by *Conundrum*, instead highlighting complex legacies of joy, hope, and wisdom whilst simultaneously making space for loss and despair – *refusing* narratives of depletion and embracing possibility. To express narratives of transhood* as impassioned metamorphoses

instead of dismal embodiments of depreciation is to (re)construct a culturally (un)intelligible, counterhegemonic discord of subaltern subjectivity, fundamentally rejecting the normative "mad lib" narrative.



A ruff collar, the singular costume piece worn by the Orlando(s), representing trans collectivity.*

Here, I draw from transmasculine* visionary, philosopher and curator Paul B. Preciado's *Orlando: My Political Biography*, a documentary/memoir/art piece that is both genre, gender, and time-bending – any attempt to categorize it is a disservice to its profound critique of sexual and chronological binarism. Actively (re)producing the varied yet collective trans* subject, *Orlando* (re)constitutes trans* corporalities, noting that "every individual life is a collective history" (Preciado, 2023, 00:24:15), rejecting a construction of personhood and humanity measured by one's ability to become culturally intelligible and "respectable" by creating a trans* sovereign space that actively Others the cis onlooker. In highlighting the vast diversity in the trans* experience whilst concurrently noting the shared ontology of (un)doing gender that presences a continuity of intergenerational defiance, *Orlando* celebrates trans* vitalities, critiquing yet holding space for the role of hegemonic memoirs like Morris' *Conundrum*. *Orlando* questions the foundational idea of a memoir/biography itself, stating: "Life is not at all like a biography… it consists in the metamorphosis of oneself, letting oneself be transformed by time, becoming not only other but others" (Preciado, 2023, 00:11:55).

Decentring the convention, form, and function of trans* life writing, Preciado (2023) refutes Morris' self-hating and dysmorphic narrative: when Orlando is asked if they consider themselves "born in the wrong body" by a psychiatrist, they reply: "What an obsession with the binary. No, I am a living body trapped in a normative regime" (Preciado, 2023, 00:17:42). Crucially, Orlando does not dismiss the validity of individuals' experiences of being "born in the wrong body," – in fact, Orlando gives space to an Orlando who subscribes to this means of understanding their own subjectivity – rather, *Orlando* critiques its liberal application to a generalized Trans* Other, particularly as it is constructed through a narrative of pain and self-hatred. Morris (2002), as an Orlando of her own, would thus not be rejected for centring this narrative in her own trans* journey, but rather for her role in popularizing it as a critical requirement of inhabiting a culturally intelligible space with the "transsexual condition" (p. x). Thus, in daring to "walk toward life, brave, happy…proud and joyful…I'll…love myself" (Preciado, 2023, 1:29:45), Orlando rejects a narrative of trans* depletion, instead constructing a demonstrable path forward for trans* vitalities free of violent dehumanization and limitation of trans* identity and possibility through gendered "respectability politics" and depersonalized ideals of cultural intelligibility.

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An interview with Preciado (2023) that further nuances Orlando's critique of binary, normative representations of the trans* life narrative.

Conclusion

Whilst imperative to critique the profound impact that Morris's *Conundrum*, and "mad-lib" trans* life writing at large, have had on the codification of trans* subjectivity(ies) as inherently damaged, this does not suggest that the validity of Morris's lived experiences of pain, struggle, and pathologization should come into question. Instead, I ask what it means to combat a blanket narrative of homogenous trans* suffering, presencing "spaces of care within death worlds" (Edelman, 2020, p. 125) that constitute emerging, (un)intelligible trans* vitalities. Moving beyond a hegemonic politic of respectability through a revolutionary expression of joy becomes crucial in uplifting trans* sovereignty, self-determination, and agency, refuting the ability of the cis Other to define the constraints of our humanity. Whilst this assertion of radical joy must make space for the intricate nuances of trans* rage, grief, and a multitude of other trans* ontologies, the importance of (re)imagining the trans* subject as something more than damaged cannot be overstated.

Author Positionality Statement – Charlie Sutherland

I am a transmasculine, genderqueer and disabled white settler living on the stolen Lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, səlilwətaɬ, and sḵwx̱wú7mesh Nations, majoring in Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice with a minor in First Nations and Indigenous Studies. In keeping with an ethical standard of praxis, I find it is crucial to both acknowledge and contend with my own lived realities and positionality and the profound ways it impacts my knowledge synthesis, whilst simultaneously highlighting the role of Western academia in the process of subjugation of the minority "Other" within a landscape of colonial power. This is especially true when writing about/for/with minoritarian communities, as is evidenced in this paper. As a trans* person myself, more specifically, a transmasculine person that exists outside the Eurocentric gender binary, my lived experience of (un)doing gender has indelibly shaped the inherent ways that I understand and interact with the (largely binary transfeminine) knowledge and experiences presented and analyzed in this piece. Despite a shared trans* identity with much of the creatives I have chosen to discuss, our experiences of transhood* largely diverge, as I lack a transfeminine* lived experience, and thus, being aware of this difference is particularly important when touching on themes of transmisogyny and heteropatriarchy. Moreover, as a white settler, particularly one working within Western academia, I also wish to draw attention to the fact that I have been brought up and socialized within a settler colonial society that privileges binary, individualist, and white-centric epistemologies that have intrinsically shaped the way I interact with, value, and produce knowledge. This acknowledgement is notable as I engage and discuss scholarship created by BIPOC academics, many drawing from Indigenous temporalities (see Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck's work).

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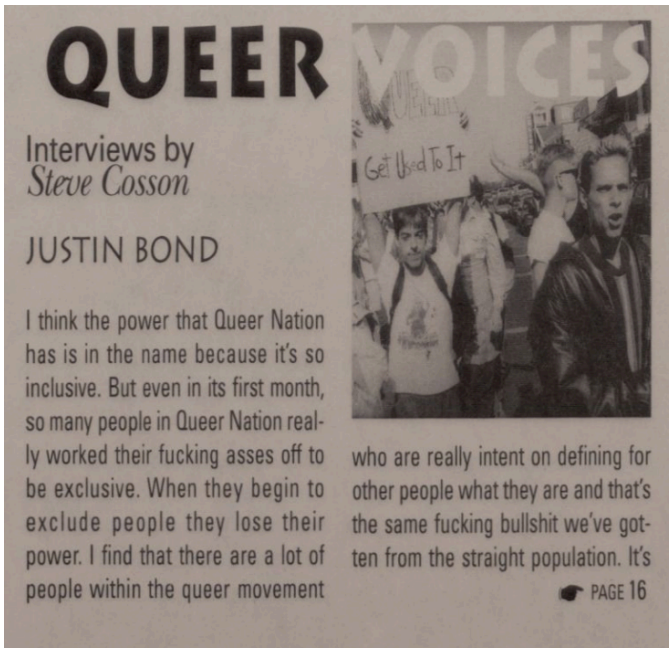
Fiction fights back! The Use of Fiction in Creating Nuanced Representations of Trans* Women to Resist Transnormativity

ELSA KONO

“I don’t believe in safe spaces…I do, however, believe in dangerous stories”. Thom’s opening line to her memoir prepares her readers for a captivating story that defies what her audience expects from her. Kai Cheng Thom, a trans* woman, wants you to know that her writing is not like the other trans* memoirs out there, “which are regurgitations of the same old story that makes us boring and dead and safe” (Thom, 2022, p. 3).

Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars, a memoir written by Kai Cheng Thom, is an exciting memoir that blends fiction and memoir together, creating a union that allows her to reach new heights and expand the typical trans* memoir genre. As Thom states, many trans* memoirs are repetitions of the same story, with a pre-written format, or what Heyam calls the “mad-lib” narrative. This narrative entails a “story with a pre-written skeleton format, where the teller fills in the specifics from a limited list of options” (Heyam, 2022, p. 17). More often than not, this narrative reiterates the idea that trans* folks feel as though they were born in the wrong body, and assumes a medical transition to be what every trans* person desires, as well as the final stage in their transition. However, Thom’s memoir defies these standards. Her incorporation of fiction allows her to break the “mad-lib” narrative by incorporating numerous characters, allowing her to explore the complexities and nuances of trans* experiences. Jaques (2017), explains that using fiction allows trans* authors to resist social and structural limits that come with trans* life writing (p. 358). Additionally, it breaks the mold of what trans* authors are assumed to be capable of doing. The traditional trans* memoir genre confines trans* authors to one genre and universalizes a singular experience. Therefore, through the incorporation of fiction in her writing, I argue that Thom breaks away from the typical “mad-lib” narrative by incorporating different characters. The use of fiction, which allows Thom to include several characters, provides her the ability to explore a wide variety of trans* experiences, rather than being confined to, or reiterating one. Using a framework of transnormativity, I am going to demonstrate how Thom’s incorporation of nuanced narratives combats transnormative conceptions of what it mean to be a trans* person.

To illustrate this, I am going to provide three examples in which Thom demonstrates the complexities in trans* experiences in her memoir. First, I am going to examine an example in which two of the characters have different approaches to resistance. This example illustrates the multifaceted aspects of trans* communities that can arise in conflict. The second example I am going to provide demonstrates the complex emotions that come up within trans* communities, such as jealousy. This example demonstrates how transnormativity and pressures to pass as cisgender create conflict amongst trans* women. Third, I am going to demonstrate the importance of building communities for trans* folks, by trans* folks. Illustrated in Thom's memoir through a scene in which all the femmes join together to express their identities and experiences through art, the significant of trans* communities are portrayed. Overall, Thom's break away from the typical trans* memoir genre, allows her to explore the layered and entangled aspects of trans* experiences and communities.


QUEER VOICES

Interviews by *Steve Cosson*

JUSTIN BOND

I think the power that Queer Nation has is in the name because it's so inclusive. But even in its first month, so many people in Queer Nation really worked their fucking asses off to be exclusive. When they begin to exclude people they lose their power. I find that there are a lot of people within the queer movement who are really intent on defining for other people what they are and that's the same fucking bullshit we've gotten from the straight population. It's

PAGE 16

Queer Interview by Steve Cosson

Transnormativity

A framework developed by Austin H. Johnson, transnormativity can be described as "a regulatory normative ideology that structures interactions in every arena of social life" (Johnson, 2016, p. 466). Transnormativity assumes that there is a correct way for a trans* person to transition. This 'correct' way, centers on a medical transition, deeming a transition valid only once undergoing gender reconstruction surgery. The focus on a medical transition, continues to uphold the gender binary. It assumes only two genders, needing trans* folks to conform to one of the two assumed genders in order to be considered legitimate (Johnson, 2016, p. 467). The need to be confined into a binary system of gender upholds cis-heteronormativity as well, which dictates that it is correct and right for a person's gender to align with their assigned sex at birth (Vipond, 2015, p. 24). Overall, transnormativity is used to force trans* people to continue to conform to colonial, neo-liberal discourses and uphold binary conceptions of gender.

Complexities in Trans* Communities

Different Approaches to Resistance

As I stated above, the deviance from the traditional trans* memoir genre allows Thom to move away from transnormative reflections of trans* folks through her ability to incorporate several characters. In this example, Thom uses conflict to demonstrate that there is no universal trans* experience. In her memoir, a trans* woman is killed and two characters, Kimaya and Valaria, the goddess of war, argue about the right approach to resistance. On one hand, Valaria, the goddess of war, encourages fighting back and using violence. On the

other hand, Kimaya encourages a peaceful way of resistance, centered on communal love and support. These two approaches reflect the multiplicity

Taken at the Trans Rights protest in London's Whitehall on Saturday 21 January 2023

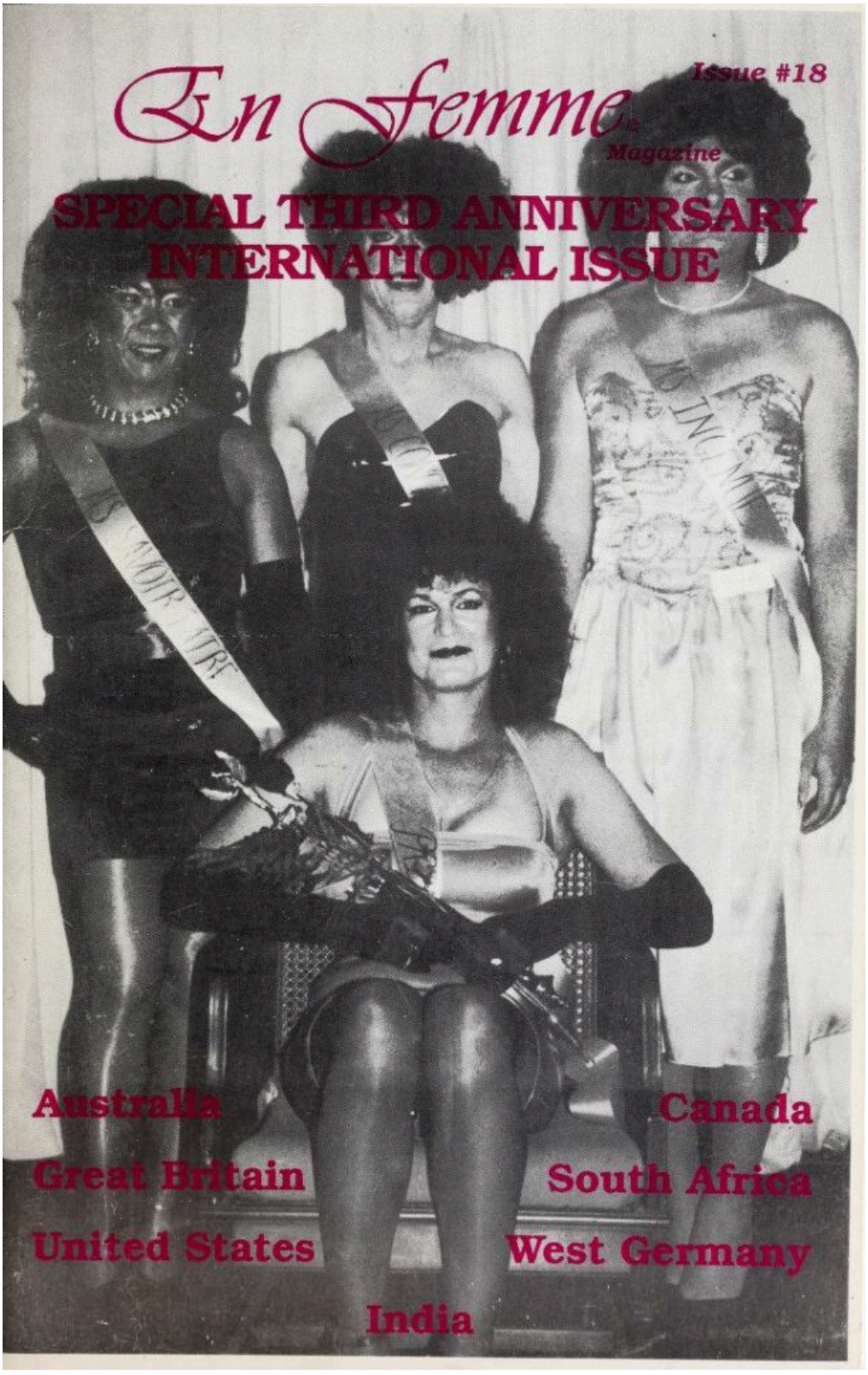
of trans* experiences. In this example, neither character is right or wrong in their approach, as both approaches to resistance are valid. Valaria, the goddess of war, advocates for fighting back, for trans* folks to be able to live, rather than survive (Thom, 2022, p.73). This echoes many scholars and activists voices that view anger as an important tool to be utilized in protest. Malatino (2021) explains that trans* rage plays an important role in infrapolitical work (p. 834). Rage, often being policed and subdued amongst trans* folks, is only allowed to be expressed within trans* communities (Malatino, 2021). Therefore, within trans* communities, rage acts as a tool to build solidarity and encourage acting as a group. Moreover, Lorde (1981) describes that "anger is loaded with information and energy (p. 280), and can act as a conduit for creating social change. In Thom's memoir, the anger the trans* femmes feel after the death of one of their own, springs them into action, acting as a catalyst to fight back. However, other scholars, including Thom herself, value an approach to resistance more similar to the character Kimaya. As Thom (2024) describes, to combat transphobia, it is necessary to engage with those who spread it. Similarly to Kimaya, Thom (2024) advocates for engaging in education, coalition building and solidarity work. In doing so, targeted communities are better able to respond to transphobia by those spreading it (Thom, 2024). The different approaches to resistance that the two characters have, allows Thom to show the complexities in trans* experiences and the different approaches to activism. A tactic perhaps harder to convey through the traditional "mad-lib" memoir that situates trans* experiences within a cis-heteronormative and transnormative framework.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=289#oembed-1

Jealousy and Envy Amongst Trans* Women

The second example I am going to look at demonstrates the expansive spectrum of emotions that can come up within trans* communities. In an interview with Metonymy Press, Thom (2016) explains her motivations for her memoir, in which she explains wanting to show the complexities and mixed emotions of joy, love, anger and envy within trans* communities. Specifically, she also mentions the way in which trans* women, like all women, are driven to compete with one another, a theme that comes through in the present example. In her memoir, there is a moment when the protagonist is with the character Kimaya, who tells her she has feminine

features, and strangers would not be able to tell that she is trans* (Thom, 2022, p. 60). Kimaya tells her this with jealousy and envy in her eyes, and tells the protagonist of the privilege she has in being able to pass as a cis person. This example establishes that trans* women are driven to compete with one another because of wider transnormative ideas that deem it necessary for trans* people to pass as cis in order for their experience to be validated.

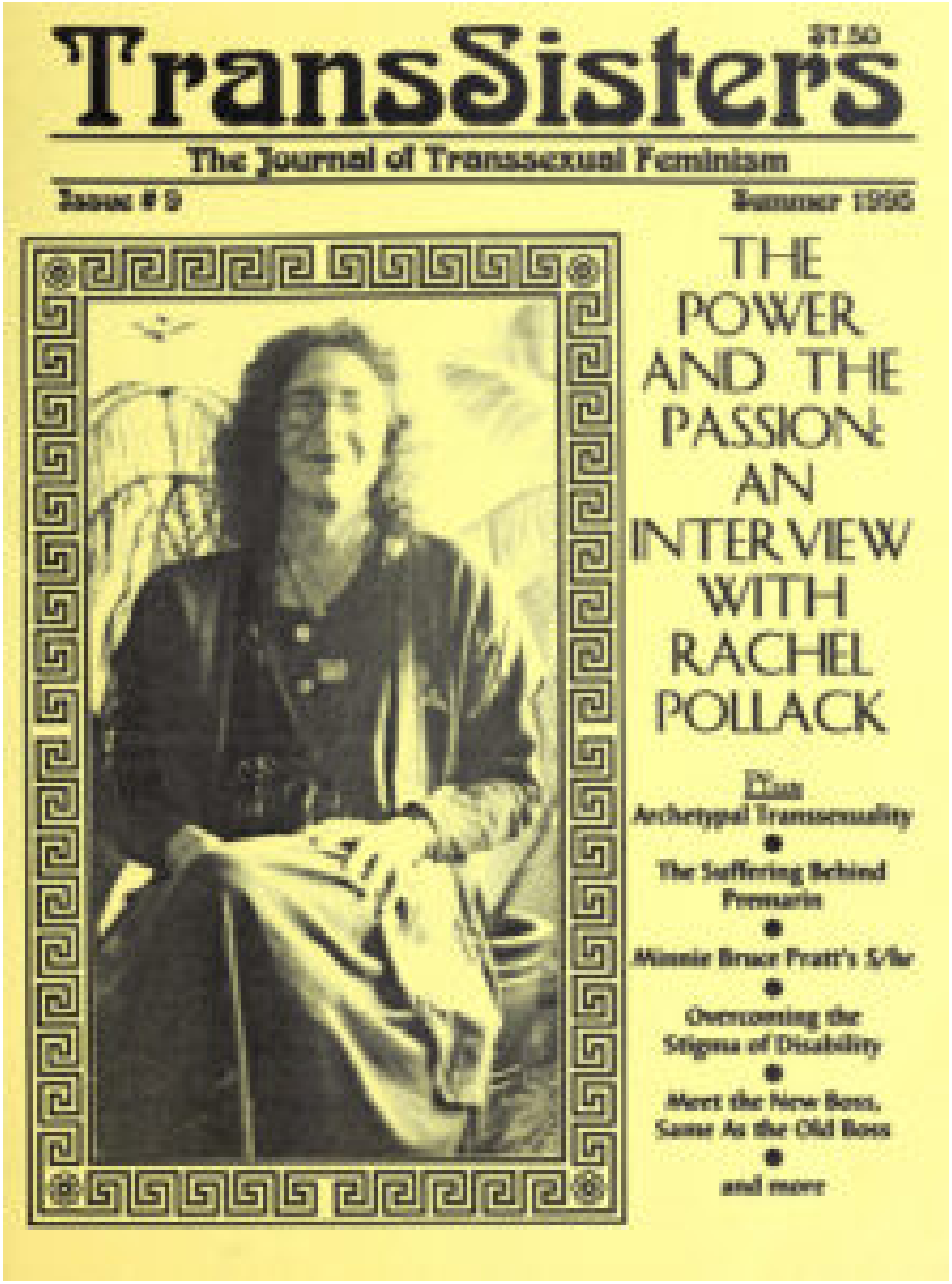


En Femme Magazine No. 18 (June 1990)

The pressure for trans* people to pass is rooted in transnormativity and feed into wider binary conceptions of

gender. Trans* folks must conform to cisgender standards in order to be validated, reinforcing the idea that being cisgender is normal, and thus, that being trans* is abnormal. Additionally, transnormative narratives encourage and enforce a medical transition. In order to keep within a binary framework of gender, it is deemed necessary for trans* people to undergo medical reassignment surgery for their experience to be legitimate, thus upholding the equation of sex with gender. Anderson (2020) explains that a trans* persons transition is considered complete if a stranger can pass them and not identify them as trans (p. 53). The goal to pass as cisgender is assumed to be something all trans* folks want within a transnormative framework. Rooted in colonial, neoliberal discourses, trans* folks must assimilate into the gender binary and assume gender norms to be a legitimate trans* person (Vipond, 2015, p. 28).

What I truly appreciate about this part in Thom's memoir is, not only that she makes visible the complex feelings brought up in trans* communities, like envy, but the fact that she includes a character whose narrative does align with transnormative ideas. Thom includes this narrative without blaming, undermining, or invalidating this character or her experience. This narrative is included because a medical transition is what some trans* folks desire. It is justs not what all trans* folks desire. Instead, Thom attributes her feelings of jealousy and envy to structural issues that make Kimaya jealous of the protagonist's feminine features.



TransSisters: The Journal of Transsexual Feminism No. 9 (Summer 1995)

Importance of Trans* Community Building

The third topic that emerges in Thom's memoir is the importance of trans* communities in fostering a community and building solidarity. The relationships the protagonist builds with other trans* women culminate in a scene in which the community comes together to express their love, struggle and solidarity. Although I have demonstrated the conflict and complexities of trans* communities, what is more significant is the positive impact of trans* communities. Networks and communities for trans* folks are particularly important

because they are a marginalized group that do not feel understood by non-trans people (Stone, 2020, p. 237). Since we live in a cis-heteronormative society, "existing organizations and agencies routinely fail to meet transgender people's needs" (Greene, 2021, 932). It therefore becomes necessary for trans* folks to create their own organizations and communities. Historically, and in present-day, marginalized groups create communities for survival (Le Vay, 2019, 203). Continuously excluded

Florida Anti Trump Protest

and demonized in main-stream society, it is critical for marginalized groups, like trans* folks to have a place to exist safely. These communities often emerge and are described as kinship bonds and chosen families. These connections, which entail "complex patterns of emotional, cognitive and practical interdependencies beyond the nuclear family", exist not only to create bonds and love for trans* and other marginalized groups, but can also act as a way to resist cis-heteronormative structures like the nuclear family (Greene, 2021, p. 932). Kinship bonds act as a way to extend beyond biological ties and provide alternative intimacies as legitimate family forms. This is demonstrated in the documentary Paris is Burning, a film that demonstrates the ball culture in the 1980's amongst primarily black and Latino gay men, drag queens and other queer identifying people. Within ball culture, houses were created to form new families, which had a 'mother' and her 'children' in which the mother would act as a mentor to teach, care and shelter her children (Le Vay, 2019, p. 203). The environment demonstrated in Paris is Burning, is similarly constructed in Thom's memoir. The femmes create a Femme Alliance Building as a safe environment and space of resistance. This space is used for leaders, such as Kimaya, to provide support to the other femmes.

Moreover, creating communities specifically for trans* people, by trans* people is important. Stone (2020), explains that even amongst LGBTQ+ communities, trans* folks still feel isolated and unrecognized at times (p. 240). Therefore, communities made by trans* people, for trans* people are crucial in giving them a space to feel a sense of connection, shared identity and support among people they are able to relate to. Additionally, this also makes room to resist transnormativity. Having a space for trans* people to come and express themselves allow nuanced experiences to emerge, rather than being suppressed or overlooked. It

becomes a space for conversation and increased awareness to be raised by providing more than one narrative of transness. As demonstrated in Thom's memoir, the femmes come together and share a multitude of experiences through dance, art and poetry in a setting where they can be vulnerable and raw. In this scene, there are several experiences of transness being expressed that are not identical, but multifaceted. In this way, community and kinship bonds become not only important for trans* folks, but alsoact as a tool to resist transnormativity.

Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars is a memoir that breaks the mold for trans* authors. Thom's use of fiction to expand reality creates a space to explore the vastness of what transness can look like. Her use of multiple characters acts as a way to critique the "mad-lib" narrative and the singular, universalizing trans* experience. Through her inclusion of conflict and jealousy alongside love and solidarity, Thom is able to challenge transnormative narratives.

John Goodwin, Doug Wilson, and friends in drag

Positionality Statement – Elsa Kono

I am a fourth year student majoring in GRSJ at the University of British Columbia.

I was raised on Vancouver Island. My mother is an elementary school principal who is extremely dedicated to moving away from colonial ways of learning and making learning more inclusive for diverse identities. This is a faucet of inspiration for me as I continue to acknowledge and unpack my own positionality as a cis person and settler in so-called Canada. As a cis woman, I will never fully understand what it is like to be a trans* person or gender non-conforming person. Therefore, I continue to be conscious of my own reading of the memoir as a cis person.

As I am writing from a theoretical lens, it is important that I do not reduce trans* experience to a theory, but situate them as real people with real lived experiences. Additionally, I use the word trans* with an asterisk, which is used to be radically inclusive. It is used to allude to all gender-variant people, to expand the boundaries of what it means to be trans*.

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Vivek Shraya's I'm Afraid of Men and the Fear of Femininity

LINDSAY J

Introduction

"Excuse me, this is the women's bathroom" is a phrase I often hear as a six-foot-tall cisgender woman with a barbered fade and button-up shirts. While this amounts to a moment of discomfort for someone like me, for too many trans women, these encounters escalate into a matter of safety and survival as patriarchal standards of femininity and womanhood exclude and dehumanize them through the overlapping and compounding factors of misogyny, sexism, and femmephobia. The following analysis of Vivek Shraya's aptly titled memoir, *I'm Afraid of Men*, is both an exploration of Shraya's reflections on being a feminine-presenting trans woman, as well as a probe into the ways in which she is writing about broader systemic issues facing anyone expressing femininity. In this essay, I will discuss the three core perspectives through which Shraya does this, beginning with femmephobia – which I will also use as a theoretical framework throughout my discussion. Next, is the overlapping and compounding effects of transphobia and misogyny, known as transmisogyny. Finally, the ways in which masculinity is constructed in opposition to femininity, making it a delicate identity in need of constant reaffirmation. By exploring these topics in Shraya's memoir, I aim to unpack how our patriarchal construction of a gender hierarchy marginalizes and threatens those whose gender expression challenges rigid binaries, especially trans women.

Femmephobia

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=425#h5p-8

"I'm afraid of men because it was men who taught me to hate and eventually destroy my femininity" (Shraya, 2018, p.1). With this striking opening, Vivek Shraya introduces the central concept of her memoir: *femmephobia*. As defined by Hoskin (2020), femmephobia refers to the devaluation and subjugation of femininity, distinct (though not unrelated) from the marginalization of women as a gender class. Femmephobia forms the infrastructure upon which Shraya's memoir is built, as each vignette offers glimpses into her experiences navigating a patriarchal society that harbours deep disdain for femininity.

Sex: refers to your biological sex, assigned at birth (male, female or intersex).

Gender identity: refers to the gender you psychologically align with or embody (man, woman or nonconforming).

Gender expression: refers to how you align your outside appearance with your identity (masculine, feminine or androgynous).

Each of these has an oppositional and marginalizing force.

Sex: **sexism** is the societal belief that maleness is inherently more valuable than femaleness.

Gender identity: **misogyny** is the societal belief that women are less valuable than men.

Gender expression: **femmephobia** is the societal belief that femininity is less valuable and less aspirational than masculinity.

Vivek Shraya

Shraya recounts large-scale observations, such as the powerful correlation between her increasing femininity and the sharp decline in her desirability to men during the early days of her transition, as well as smaller, more personal moments, like the fear and discomfort of wearing lipstick in public, knowing that existing as a visibly feminine person makes her vulnerable to ridicule, threats, and violence. These anecdotes underscore the pervasiveness of femmephobia as a lived reality for women and gender-nonconforming individuals like Shraya. Building on this, Hoskin et al. (2023) argue that a critical tenet of femmephobia is the inextricable link between femininity and women. This conflation creates opposing pressures for women: to embrace femininity due to socially imposed gender norms while simultaneously rejecting it to gain respect in a culture that devalues the feminine. Shraya's experiences exemplify these pressures, particularly as she encounters how femininity is weaponized against her, notably by other women who want to let her know that she is not one of them. It is in these moments that we see the function of femmephobia as a mechanism of maintaining a gendered hierarchy wherein masculinity is respected and dominant and femininity is subordinate and weak (Hoskin, 2018). This hierarchal and binary view of gender is so deeply steeped in our culture and our art that we can see it unknowingly and unintentionally perpetuated in some more traditional trans memoir styles, such as the format that Jacob Tobia (2019) referred to as the "Mad Lib" memoir in which the stories follow the same linear path from being born in the "wrong body", to the eventual medical transition from "one" to "the other". These stories, while valid, can reinforce a traditional masculine/ feminine binary for their cis audiences and further marginalize women like Shraya, who do not strictly adhere to traditional gender norms. Using the format of her own memoir to push back against these expectations, Shraya places the devaluation of femininity at the center of her memoir, externalizing much of the conflict and turmoil and challenging the sometimes femmephobic norms of trans life storytelling. Shraya's memoir is, above all, a reflection on society's pervasive devaluation of femininity—an unseen force shaping her interactions with men, dictating the choices she makes to stay safe, and manifesting as the internalized fear and shame she must ultimately confront and overcome.

The Role of Femmephobia in Transmisogyny

"How cruel is it to have endured two decades of being punished for being too girly only to be told that I am now not girly enough" (Shraya, 2018, p. 80). As Shraya highlights throughout her memoir, trans women's expression of femininity comes under greater scrutiny and faces more violent and dangerous rejection because femmephobia underpins the disproportionate policing of their identities through transmisogyny.

In her seminal work, *Whipping Girl* (2007), Julia Serano explains that "[w]hen the majority of jokes made at the expense of trans people center on 'men wearing dresses' or 'men who want their penises cut off,' that is not transphobia – it is transmisogyny" (p. 15). Much of Shraya's memoir are vignettes of transmisogyny, from being spat on for wearing her mother's coat to experiencing violence while marching at a Toronto Pride event; her reflections on being punished for both embodying femininity and failing to meet social standards illuminates a larger, historical pattern: the policing of femininity as a tool of control. As I touched on earlier, a patriarchal society's rigid construction of the categories masculine and feminine serves to maintain and reinforce a hierarchal gender binary, and any transgressions from that binary are viewed as threats to established power structures. Throughout history, these threats have been met with violent suppression; as historian Jules Gill-Peterson (2024) highlights in *A Short History of Trans Misogyny,* European colonizers systematically targeted gender-diverse Indigenous people – asserting a Western binary and using the perceived transgressions as justification for violence and erasure.

Transgender Pride Flag, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

These exact mechanisms of control persist today, as evidenced by the disproportionate rates of violence against trans women. Contemporary transmisogyny has recycled colonial tactics of punishing transgressions of the binary through both overt violence and systemic discrimination. Perry (2001 [as cited by Colliver, 2021]) refers to these attacks as "message crimes," which suggests that much like the colonizers, modern-day violence against trans folks is meant to enforce conformity, signalling that deviation from gender norms will not be tolerated in a patriarchal society. Shraya's personal accounts of violence and rejection as a trans woman illuminate the broader systemic forces that render femininity—particularly trans femininity—a target of pervasive discrimination. Notably, rather than presenting these experiences as things that happened to her and are on the page for the reader to absorb and feel absconded of any responsibility, Shraya ditches a traditional trans memoir format for the powerful and intimate use of second-person narrative. This places the reader in the position of the perpetrator during each vignette and calls on the audience to evaluate their own complicity in femmephobia and transmisogyny (Shraya, as reported by Jivran and Pedram, 2018). By presenting her experiences to the reader through her second-person narrative, Shraya demands a reckoning not only with her story but with the ongoing societal complicity and acceptance of transmisogyny. In this way, her work weaves lived experience with a broader social critique and situates her narrative within a continuum of systemic violence against trans women in the form of transmisogyny.

Masculinity as a Rejection of Femininity

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In the memoir, Shraya describes an incident she experienced while waiting for the bus in her mother's jacket. While she buries herself in a book to avoid confrontation with a boy from school, she begins to feel small flecks hitting her back and hearing the boy, and a young woman with him, laughing. When she arrives home, Shraya confirms what she had feared while standing at the bus stop – that the young man had been spitting on her and the jacket. "...I will never wear her jacket again... it was to blame for what happened. But I am also to blame. Had I, a boy, not worn it, I wouldn't have been sullied." (Shraya, 2018, p. 21) Having examined Shraya's experiences of femmephobia and transmisogyny, I want to finally focus on the internalized dimension of this fear. For several formative years, Shraya was socialized to embody masculinity – which taught her to not only reject her femininity but also to despite it. Kimmel (1997) argues that traditional masculinity is largely constructed as a reaction against femininity and homosexuality, which in turn makes masculinity a tenuous and fragile identity requiring constant validation through the rejection of anything deemed feminine or weak. Halberstam (1998) builds on this, noting the paradoxical nature of masculinity in society. Observing that while it can be challenging to clearly define it, society has no problem identifying it and devoting resources and effort to endorse and sustain the forms we value and trust. Both of these works underscore how unstable masculinity is on its own, requiring both individual performances of rejection (such as a young man spitting on a boy wearing a woman's coat) and larger social systems of reinforcement to maintain its narrow definition and socially dominant role.

The notion of a hegemonic masculinity was popularized by Connell (1995) as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (p. 77). Which is to say, masculinity is shaped as a justification of the existence and maintenance of the patriarchy by reinforcing men's power and women's subordination. While much of the memoir is written to 'You', the reader of the book, the final 35 pages belong to a section titled 'Me'. In a powerful narrative turn, Shraya excavates her own participation in these systems of harm and in a sense, aligns herself with the audience to whom she eventually issues a call to action. Turning inward and confronting the 'oppressor within' Shraya can clearly explore the ways in which we define masculinity as a narrow, singular type through her own personal experience. Through her reflections in *I'm Afraid of Men,* Shraya illustrates how the fragile nature of the accepted masculinity harms not only those who embody femininity, but also those socialized to enforce its narrow ideals. "[Y]our fear is not only hurting me, it's hurting you, limiting you from being everything you could be. Consider how often you have dismissed your own appearance, behaviours, emotions, and aspirations for being too feminine or masculine. What might your life be if you didn't impose these designations on yourself, let alone on me?" (Shraya, 2018, p. 85). Shraya's work reckons with our collective construction of masculinity and reveals how the rejection of femininity lays the foundation for both individual acts of harm as well as the broader systems that sustain patriarchal masculinity.

Conclusion

Shraya's memoir, while a deeply personal account of the experiences that have shaped her fear of men and masculinity, is also a profound critique of the patriarchal society's subjugation of the expression of femininity. Using personal insight, social commentary and subversive formatting, *I'm Afraid of Men* transcends our expectations for a personal memoir, serving as a compelling interrogation of the patriarchal systems that devalue femininity, enforce transmisogyny, and sustain the fragile yet oppressive construct of masculinity. Her innovative use of subversive narrative structure and second person writing transform the work into a call to action, urging her readers to not only assess their complicity in these systems of harm, but to dismantle them and envision a world where femininity is not subjugated and masculinity need not be feared. "What if you were to challenge yourself every time you feel afraid of me – and all of us who are pushing against gendered expectations and restrictions? What if you cherished us as archetypes of realized potential? What if you were to surrender to sublime possibility – yours and mine? Might you then free me at last of my fear, and of your own?" (Shraya, 2018, p. 85)

Author Positionality Statement – Lindsay J.

I am a third-year psychology major with a family studies minor who returned to school in my mid-thirties after spending over a decade working in factual and reality television. My passion for using narrative techniques to explore broader systemic issues has fueled much of my late-in-life academic career, and this project was the perfect embodiment of that.

As this memoir deals with the real-life experiences of a trans woman of colour, I feel it necessary to place myself in the context about which I am writing. I am a cis-gendered, visibly queer, white, able-bodied woman working and studying on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

I am writing this essay with no lived experience of transphobia or transmisogyny; however, I stand in allyship with my trans siblings as a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. My allyship means I am dedicated to listening to, learning from and elevating the voices of trans writers and their stories and leveraging my privilege as a cis woman to do so.

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An Examination of Lili Elbe Through Many Eyes

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What is a trans narrative? What does it mean to express transness? Does a literal embodiment of our modern sense of transness need to be present? Need the narrative be presented by someone who has the embodied experience of transness? How do we as readers, both cis and trans, take in and understand some ineffable gendered existence? Is this merely done by a literal explanation of the material experience of being trans, or is there something more fundamental we can gain from more expressive and less literal works? What are the values of the two styles of story, and what do we prioritize when we discuss trans narratives? My background comes from a place of artistic critical interpretation; so what stories we tell, how we tell them, why we tell them, and when we tell them is both of specific interest to me, and firmly within my academic wheelhouse.

In order to explore this question I will be examining Lili Elbe's autobiographical work Man into Woman*. This book is one of the first modern era examples of a trans memoir we have, written by the first woman recorded to have received a form of sex reassignment surgeries (SRS) in Berlin in 1930, less than a decade short of a 100 years ago. The text was written by Elbe and compiled postmortem by the researchers and clinicians who had worked with Elbe up to that point. It is a very interesting piece full of incredible imagery and specific metaphors for the feelings that accompany Elbe's journey. We do, however, have to ask the question: are these metaphors true to Elbe's lived experience or does she add them to her work in order to find a level of cultural intelligibility. Elbe's writing is, after all, one of the first modern accounts of transexuality written for public consumption. In Vipond's article; Becoming Culturally (Un)intelligible: Exploring the Terrain of Trans Life Writing, Vipond discusses the pressure on trans authors to convey their experiences in a 'culturally intelligible way.' When the vast majority of people who will be reading your work will be cis, especially in 1930, one may be inclined to write in a way that one imagines their audience to be more responsive to. Elbe especially had to lay a lot of ground work. This article mentions Christine Jorgeson would've had a great deal of difficulty making her experiences understandable to a mainstream audience, whose book was written more than 20 years after Elbe's death, so one must imagine that Elbe would have had an even grander difficulty being culturally intelligible to a 1930s audience. A metaphor that comes up time and time again within Elbe's work is that of dual identity and the 'death' of one of these identities. While these feelings certainly aren't absent from other trans narratives they are heavily emphasized in Elbe's work, to the point that I, as someone with my own trans experience, question if this emphasis is for the benefit of a cis audience who may not have a great understanding of gender identity or transition. Using the idea of another person within oneself may be easier to grasp than someone assigned male simply not aligning with that identification and evolving into womanhood. Join me now, as we explore what it means to craft a trans narrative, and how these methods of crafting paint different pictures for different purposes.

**Note within this piece I do not use the deadnames of the trans subjects even when those names are present in academic scholarship or titles of works. This is a measured choice I have made in order to fit our modern sensibilities when it comes to trans identities and to do my best to be respectful of the identities expressed by the subjects of my writing. Especially given the time in which many of these subjects were writing of themselves, the idea of having privacy over one's deadname would not have been a conceivable option in literature. This is not a condemnation of other authors who may use these names, as it is perfectly reasonable to also accept the terminology one uses to explain themselves in historic texts, this is not a moralistic argument but*

one of comfort.

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https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=477#h5p-10

Man Into Woman, is an autobiographical work comprised of the writings of Lili Elbe. he book, however, was not compiled, edited, or finished by Elbe; She had passed away suddenly during a medical procedure. Thus the book was completed and compiled by Niels Hoyer, a friend and member of Elbe's support team while receiving treatment for her gender dysphoria at the Institute of Sexology.

When we look at Elbe's book we see the metaphor of a dual identity and the death of the masculine identity in order to free the female within, explaining the internal reality of her transness. Elbe's writing is filled with beautiful prose and metaphor. One such selection is as follows;

"I am condemned to die. The question is if the other being living inside me, when it is freed of all the disguises of the body and soul, will be able to live life and take up the fight against it."
-Elbe (1933).

In this quote we can see that Elbe considers her transition to be the death of her male self, to allow life to her female self. It can not be, in my opinion, easily assumed however that this is necessarily how Elbe understood her transition internally. Although death of the male self is a recurring theme within the book, we must problematize this assumption for two reasons; the first, rather simply, is that the book was not completed by Elbe and we have no possible way of knowing how much was edited in its completion. The second, and more compelling reason is that Elbe may be using this metaphor to allow herself and her story to be culturally intelligible (Vipond). Elbe may be using this metaphor to allow for a wider audience to better understand her story, or it may arise from Elbe's own need to put into words the ineffable experience she finds herself in without any preexisting cultural touchstones to guide her.

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The Danish Girl is a 2015 film put out by Universal Studios and Focus Pictures. It is a dramatization of Elbe's life, though it does not adapt directly from Elbe's work, but rather from the exaggerated novel of Elbe's life The Danish Girl by David Ebershoff. We will not be discussing this novel much but it's important to note that it was written by a cis man attempting to create a more compelling and modern rendition of Elbe's (a transsexual woman) life. This film was directed by Tom Hooper (another cis man) and stars Eddie Redmayne (another cis man) as Elbe and Alicia Vikander (a cis woman) as Elbe's wife Gerda. Immediately a difference between Elbe's book and the film is the loss of pseudonyms. Elbe only referred to her companions, friends, and doctors by

pseudonyms in her book, but the film does away with this. Given that Elbe was worried about their safety and the film came out 85 years after this is an inoffensive change. Another massive change is inventing a 'homosexual' lover and male childhood friend for Elbe and the film often frames this relationship as a place of early development of the Lili identity, this plays into the conflation between homosexuality and transsexuality. The film also is much more from Gerda's perspective than Lili's, the title in fact is a reference to Gerda who is within the text of the film referred to as 'the Danish girl' by an art collector. With this shift in perspective the film invents a large amount of conflict between Gerda and Lili, painting Gerda as reluctantly supportive. Making Gerda mourn her husband as she helps Lili self actualize, as demonstrated in the clip above. Lili's first hand account paints a very different picture, one of support, love and sisterhood. Of course Lili's account may be biased but I am inclined to trust it over a film made by people who were not there and have no first hand knowledge of that relationship. I would put forward the idea of following the emotional journey of the cis character Gerda rather than Elbe, was made to make the film more culturally intelligible to a majority cis audience, and the change from supportive sisterhood, to reluctant support was made in order to placate fears and anxieties around transness such audiences may be experiencing.

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https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=477#h5p-9

These paintings were done by Lili Elbe's former wife and fellow painter Gerda Wegener. The paintings allow us to explore how Gerda depicted her once husband with care, capturing the same unabashedly real depiction of the inner life of Lili as she does the cis women she paints. Due to this we lack explicit trans themes in these works which in our modern landscape we might expect. To me, this expresses a lack of acknowledgement of the 'transgressive' nature of trans identities. Treating a trans subject as one would a cis subject is honestly refreshing. It is common in depictions of trans subjects by cis artists to see overt signaling of their subjects' transness as well as that often transness being sexualized, sometimes to the point of the art feeling exploitive. In Gerda's work however, we see Lili treated as normal, yet not commonplace. Beauty and ethereality are common to Gerda's work and can be felt in these paintings. These are traits Gerda attributes to all of her female subjects; she captures the ethereal in the normality of the female existence. Elbe's transsexual status is never exploited or focused on. Even in the nude work Gerda did, it focuses on the beauty of the curvature of Elbe's body, but she is positioned facing away from the audience and thus no genitals need be painted onto her body. In this narrative we see a normalization of a trans figure, but a non-explicit one. We see a trans woman captured with the same ethereal complexity and beauty as cis women by the same painter. Without the context of the work depicting a trans subject, these paintings may not communicate much about transness, however with this context the paintings become a precious expression of radical acceptance of the status of Lili as a female, deserving of the same level of artistic depiction as any other.

Poplars Along Hobro Fjord by Lili Elbe

Through these examples, we can see a variety of methodologies can express trans narratives, though each style may fit specific purposes better than others. Elbe's book may help an undereducated populace understand her journey and sense of self. Hooper's work is designed to sell a story to a cis audience and to aid their comfort with trans people. Gerda's work finally expresses the beauty and presence of a trans woman and treats her equally to her other female subjects. These methodologies all have their drawbacks and their benefits.

Hooper's, for instance, may be the most culturally intelligible and mainstream telling of Elbe's story but lacks authenticity, taking Elbe's story and making it one of a cis woman losing her husband. No trans people worked on this film and it shows. In my opinion, the piece has connected with many cis audience members and even won an Oscar; however as a trans woman I find the film to feel alienating and fetishistic. The film is a viewing of my ordinary life as novel, strange, exotic, and other.

Gerda's is perhaps the most normalized of the work. It presents Lili just as part of the world. No special attention is given to her transness and Lili is depicted beautifully and with dignity, in the same way Gerda paints her cis subjects. It is a refreshing view, to say the least. With tensions so high in our current political moment and the

constant red herring question ‘what is a woman’ being asked by anti-trans figures, Gerda a hundred years ago offers a response. What is a woman? Lili is. These paintings are warm and fill me with optimism.

Man Into Woman by Lili is the most connected to the embodied experience of a trans person as it was written by one. It is, however, no longer as culturally intelligible as it may have once been. The idea of killing the old self to release the new is perhaps referenced in modern trans terms such as deadnames, but is now generally considered to be a harmful framing of transition. When I came out as trans my mother was incredibly worried she was going to lose me, that she’d have to mourn me. I reassured her; I am not dying and being reborn, I am continuing, changed. I had to reassure her that all the basic facts of myself were not going away, I was in essence the same person, just living in a new body. The harmful rhetoric of ‘mourning’ a trans person’s previous identity can also be seen all throughout The Danish Girl; it is arguably what the film is about. Lili’s book however, being much more focused on the self, gives us the view that Lili is thanking her old self for sacrificing his life so that she might live, a unique framing that is quite touching throughout the book.

Through looking at these pieces, their goods and their bads, I met three different Lili’s. I experienced the life of this woman thrice through a small keyhole, gazing into the ineffable experience of another human being. We have seen a trans narrative as told by a trans person, have seen them created by those who love trans people and those who, while sympathetic, do not know trans people. Each piece has a different value and certainly all have their weaknesses. It is possible that perhaps the very idea of turning all of one’s human experience into narrative is an impossible task. That every attempt to do so will have different flaws and intracrasies; perhaps then, we can say that trans narratives should be as varied as the trans lives and experiences they seek to explain. Ineffable on one hand, yet deeply relatable on the other, intimate yet broad and unabashed. If culture is fluid so too should our approach to intelligibility be. We will never fully understand the experiences of each other no matter what methods we use when attempting to communicate them. We never truly know one another; merely the outlines we leave behind.

So who was Lili Elbe? How do we properly tell trans stories? Who am I to say?

Positionality Statement – Mia Libbey

Mia Libbey is a queer performance scholar currently perusing her second undergraduate degree. She holds a bachelors degree from Brock University, in the field of theatre and performance studies and completed her honours thesis on the topic of queer art and subversion. She is now working to achieve a BA in psychology from the University of British Columbia.

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In the Spotlight: Famous Trans People and Trans Representation in Media

N.B.

Elliot Page reading at the 2023 National Book Festival

March 2022, Netflix announced that Vanya Hargreeves, one of the main characters (and a cisgender woman) on its popular series The Umbrella Academy would come out as a trans man (Viktor) in the upcoming 3rd season of the show, a deviation from the character's storyline from the comics (Maas, 2022). This decision was taken to reflect Elliot Page's (who portrayed the character) public transition as a trans man (right). Page had been recognized as an acclaimed actor and out lesbian for several years prior to their recent public transition, particularly after his role in the film Juno, which earned him a nomination for an academy award (Hattenstone, 2023). Although they had been well known as an out lesbian prior to their public transition (Hattenstone, 2023), their coming out to the world as a trans man shifted Page's position in the limelight. In Page's 2023 book 'Pageboy: A Memoir,' he discusses how it felt experiencing this change in perception, and his journey coming to terms with his gender and sexuality. Previously reluctant to write a memoir, Page highlights how their decision to finally write one was a response to growing transphobic sentiments, especially in the US (Page, 2023) and felt that sharing their experience would be a way of helping to "to dispel the constant misinformation around queer and trans lives" (Page, 2023, pp. 5).

Page's memoir can therefore be seen as an attempt to help educate a (mostly cis) public about trans lives and experiences through their own, to advocate for greater acceptance of trans people in society. I see this effort as a reflection of their status as a famous trans person, who may be among the few or only trans person some people know of, due as a popular figure. By actively talking about their experiences as a trans person and sharing them with the world, Page can be considered to be taking on a responsibility of representation, of being a trans person in the public eye to help cis people accept and understand trans experiences. As such, their memoir can be considered to reflect the idea of the 'Mad-Lib' trans narrative coined by Jacob Tobia (Heyam, 2022), where transgender people present their experiences in a way that aligns with cis peoples expectations and understandings, such as feeling they were in the wrong body as a child, or acting in ways that would stereotypically be 'opposite' their assigned gender. This does not represent the varied and unique experiences of all trans people, but instead represents a narrow and generalised understanding of trans people's experiences, from a cis perspective (Vipond, 2019).

However, I argue that Elliot Page's choice to present his memoir in ways that align with the 'Mad-Lib' narrative, is a form of activism, and that he and other trans people in the public eye, may do so to make trans experiences more **culturally intelligible** to cis audiences and therefore more accepted in society. While this is not a step taken by all trans people with a public following, I explore how some trans people may leverage their fame in this way, as a response to shifting historical landscapes of trans representation, from (largely stereotypical) representations in media, to a focus on individuals representing the trans community through their personal

experiences, to the present day, where representations in media are informed by both the character and story, and the actor portraying them.

Cultural Intelligibility
How an avenue for trans people to be accepted by a largely cis society can be to fit into cis understandings of what it means to be trans (Vipond, 2019). This could lead trans people to reframe or even omit certain experiences that don't fit into the mainstream cis conceptions of what it means to be trans, so that they may be more easily understood and accepted.

Historical Trans Representation

Representation is complex to understand, as it a broad concept with various meanings. According to Stuart Hall (1997), we understand the world through representations. We see an object or person, and we combine our previous understanding with what we see or hear about them, in order to form an understanding of the world. Hence, both what is presented, and how is presented, can greatly affect how we construct meaning from it (Hall, 1997). This provides a basis for understanding how trans representation in media has changed over time, and why trans people like Elliot Page had, and continue to, advocate for better representation. Historical representations of trans people in media were usually stereotypical, played as a joke, or used to add 'shock' value. This could include sensationalising the trans character (Skidmore, 2011) or villainizing them. Historically, trans characters were presented through a cis perspective, effectively being 'othered' through this lens (Miller, 2023). This created distance between the (presumed to be cis) audience, and dehumanized trans characters as seen, rather than affording them nuance and agency.

A notable example of this is The Christine Jorgensen Story (poster below), a movie released in 1970, based on the story of Christine Jorgenson, a former GI who underwent surgical transition in Denmark, and returned to America to be one of the prominent examples of public transgender representation at the time (Skidmore, 2011). Elements from the poster promoting the movie itself, highlight the sensationalization of trans people at the time, with the dichotomy of "a women or a freak?" This exemplifies how trans people were othered from the general public as well, less often seen as individuals, but objects of spectacle, or even 'freaks.' The popularity of Christine Jorgensen's story also emphasises how the **intersectionality** of identities, particularly race, influenced and continue to influence how trans individuals are perceived (Skidmore, 2011). Jorgensen, as a white, heterosexual transwomen, had proximity to the white cis womanhood, and hence was more culturally intelligible to the cis public at the time, and more widely accepted than other trans people that did not share these privileges (Skidmore, 2011). Therefore, Trans representation in the past were largely created for and by cis people, as opposed to authentic representations of trans people, as 'acceptable' trans representation had to be depictions that highlighted trans people at the extremes of different and othered, or as close to white heterosexuality as possible.

Intersectionality
How the experiences of discrimination between intersecting identities, can differ from those

without them, coined by the law scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in 1991. The term attempts to highlight how the experience of a Black transwomen for example, may differ from a white transwoman or a Black woman, as they don't experience the overlapping identity (and hence discrimination) of being both Black and trans.


"I couldn't live in a man's body."
Sex with a woman was strange and impossible
Dresses and dolls were my world as a boy
"Did the surgeon's knife make me a woman or a freak?"
But I had to make it as a woman. There was no return.
Could I ever love a man physically?
EDWARD SMALL presents
"THE Christine JORGENSEN STORY"
THE FIRST MAN TO BECOME A WOMAN
introducing JOHN HANSEN
Screenplay by ROBERT E. KENT and ELLIS ST. JOSEPH
Based on the book by CHRISTINE JORGENSEN
Directed by IRVING RAPPER
Produced by EDWARD SMALL
COLOR by DeLuxe
R
RESTRICTED
United Artists
THEATRE

"The Christine Jorgenson Story" Movie Pressbook

Modern Trans Representation

Trans representation today, however, tends to not just be about how a character is portrayed, but also who is playing them. This marks an improvement even from a decade or so ago, where trans characters were often played by cis actors, who were then lauded for their portrayal, even though trans and other LGBTQ actors were often shunned. Elliot Page remarks on their observations of this change, and how "[they were] being told to lie and hide. It puzzled [him] to watch cis straight actors play queer and trans characters and be revered. Nominations, wins, people exclaiming "How brave!"" (Page, 2023, pp. 76). Page himself has worked to improve trans representation on-screen, from his own appearances on talk shows and other media as himself, to the characters he plays. In an interview with Seth Meyers in promotion for The Umbrella Academy, Page talks about how they worked with the show runners and writers to shape the storyline about their character, Viktor's, transition in the show, and how it was received by the other characters [Late Night with Seth Meyers, 2022].

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=324#oembed-1

Talk shows and interviews as a medium also offer trans actors and personalities a vehicle beyond their representation as characters and highlight their own experiences and ideas directly. Laverne Cox, a well-known trans actress, and Janet Mock, best known for her memoirs about her experiences as a trans woman of colour, provide examples to explore how some trans people in the public eye use interviews to influence public perception of themselves and trans people as a whole, to advocate for greater societal acceptance. Cox and Mock have often appeared on television shows and interviews as a part of promotion of their own works, as well as a part of their advocacy (Glover, 2016). An illustration of their framing of trans people for a cis audience comes from a Huffington post panel with both Cox and Mock, where they refuse to debate their identity as women, unequivocally stating that they are women (Glover, 2016). In doing so, they propose a clear boundary in the discussion of trans people's identities, conveying to cis people that trans individual's understanding of their own gender is as concrete and innate as cis people may understand their own gender to be, appealing to an idea of transnormativity. At the same time, this can be seen as reinforcing the gender binary and may even be understood as suggesting that trans people simply 'fit in' to cis people's conceptions of gender. Hence, it is important to note that such presentation of trans experiences, that are constructed to fit cis understandings, can be harmful, as it obscures the experiences of many trans and gender non-conforming people who don't fit into the gender binary. At the same time, work by famous trans people like Lavrne Cox, Janet Mock and Elliot Page can be seen as an important first step, in establishing lines of similarity between trans experiences and cis people's understanding.

Janet Mock Book Reading Washington DC .

Laverne Cox takes the stage at the Missouri Theatre

Trans Representation and Trans Audiences

While there may be a general notion that trans representation has improved over time, becoming more common over time (GLAAD, 2024), the question of what is considered 'good' trans representation, or even what is considered trans representation in media, is variable, and can change over time. Rather than being determined by solely by the producer of the work, representation is created through negotiation between the producers and consumer of a work. Largely, the arbiters of 'good' representation fall on the community being represented (Miller, 2023), which in the case of trans representation, falls on the trans audiences. With the advent of social media, young trans people especially show critical engagement with media highlighting trans

representation (Humphery, 2016). Ranging from condemning stereotypical representations, to praising more nuanced ones, trans youth have become a key voice in shaping trans representation in media (Humphery, 2016).

Kimberly Pierce on The MacGuffin

However, a key element of the dynamic interaction between consumers of the work and the work itself, allows for reception of the representation in a piece of media to change over time. Stuart Hall's theory of reception frames this idea in terms of the encoding of meaning into a work by its producers, and the decoding of meaning from that work by its consumers (Hall, 1973). Notably, the encoded meaning, and that which is finally decoded by the consumer, is not necessarily the same, and can vary widely, based on the context in which the work was produced, and in which it was received. The film Boys Don't Cry (1999) was largely positively received in terms of trans representation soon after its release, and recognized as a bold step forward, as the first example of a "credible masculinity in a transgender male form" (NYU Florence, 2017, 18:35-18:40). However, when the film was screened at a college in Oregon in 2016, attended by the director Kimberly Pierce (right), students protested the showing, arguing that it was transphobic in its portrayal, partly as the actor nor the director were trans (NYU Florence, 2017). This highlights how representations of trans people evolve over time even being seen negatively.

In contrast, the determination of representation by the viewer, also allows for media that was intended to be trans representations, to be decoded as such. Following Elliot Page's public transition, many individuals looked to his work pre-transition, understanding it in a trans context. Some viewers for example, drew similarities the physical changes and stigma faced by Page's titular character in *Juno,* with similar experiences some trans people have when on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) (Gow, 2020). This can be yet another avenue in making trans experiences more intelligible to cis audiences, by parallelling them with cis experiences. Therefore, trans representation is not only a top-down process, but trans viewers and audiences actively seek out or create representations through intentional interaction with media and are not just passive consumers.

Changing landscapes of transgender representation have reflected growing acceptance for trans people over time, from a shift from sensationalization, villanization (Skidmore, 2011) or caricature (Miller, 2023), to becoming more realistic portrayals informed by the experiences of trans individuals creating the works (Glover, 2016). In framing their own stories, trans people in the public eye have taken on a responsibility of activism, constructing narratives aimed toward cis people as a form of activism, to educate these audiences and familiarise them with trans experiences to further acceptance of trans people in society. While this may not be representative of all trans experiences, and arguably erases the experiences of trans people outside the gender binary, it can also be seen as bridging the initial gap between cis understandings and trans experiences by focusing on ways they can be understood by cis people, and is therefore not without merit. Additionally, their work is supplemented with a 'bottom up' approach of trans consumers of media identifying and sharing not only explicitly trans representation, but cis experiences that may parallel their own, and in doing so themselves taking on the responsibility to help cis audiences understand trans experience (Gow, 2020). While these efforts recognize the perseverance and agentic choices of the trans community to help cis people understand and accept them, their need to do so highlights the institutional failings and lack of effort on the part of cis people to offer that acceptance and encourage greater trans representation in media (Miller, 2023).

Author Positionality Statement – N.B.

I am a 4th year undergraduate student studying Sociology at the University of British Columbia, currently living on the unceded ancestral lands of the Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh people. As an immigrant to Canada and my identity as a cis, gay man, I recognize that my perspectives greatly influence the approach and conclusions of my work and remain conscious of my positionality in work on this project.

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Religious and Trans Identity

SOL REYES

Introduction

To be trans means to present as cisgender as possible. This notion, while harmful and untrue, is one that is prevalent in many early trans autobiographies. In this way could the authors appeal to an unaccepting cisgender society by performing gender in normative ways. However, this also led to the perpetuation of such normativities if one desired to be accepted in terms of their trans identity. This theory of cultural intelligibility, belonging to Judith Butler, is outlined by Evan Vipond in his article "Becoming Culturally (Un)Intelligible". Here, he describes this theory as the idea that gender is socially and forcibly reproduced in order to confine trans individuals within a binary understanding of gender (Vipond, 2019). He argues that, as a result, trans authors often feel inclined to become culturally intelligible in their life writing, since autobiographies can be a way to justify one's existence to a broader audience. Some of these methods of intelligibility that are common in trans autobiographies include emphasizing being "born in the wrong body" as a way of proving transness, as well as the belief that medical transition solidifies a successful transition (Vipond, 2019, p. 22). These mechanisms ultimately come together to create a cisgendered, homonormative, and coherent view towards gender as a whole, which makes it understandable to cis audiences. In their memoir Sissy: A Coming-Of-Gender Story, Jacob Tobia compares these repetitive constructions of trans autobiographies to the Mad Lib games, suggesting that trans authors tend to fill-in-the-blanks of a static autobiographical format with snippets from their own lives. Many factors in a trans author's life can affect how they choose to become culturally intelligible using this Mad Lib structure. One of these factors is religion, an understudied concept in Trans Studies that indeed affects self-perception. In this essay, I will analyze how religion and transness intersect to create culturally intelligible understandings of gender in Mario Martino's memoir.

Martino's Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography is an early trans memoir from 1977 that follows his transition and tracks the factors that affected his personal gender expression as a trans man. More specifically, growing up Italian and Catholic heavily influenced the way Martino chose to affirm his masculinity, and these identity markers were vital to his methods of becoming culturally intelligible. Because the Catholic church–and Abrahamic religions in general, the focus of this essay–hold firm beliefs about traditional gender roles, it is important to consider how these religions inform trans identities. For instance, in his memoir, Martino uses the framing structures brought up by Vipond and Tobia in order to assimilate himself into cisgender society. This is done by adopting heteronormative standards in his adult life and relationships to further normalize his otherwise outsider identity. Therefore, using Martino's memoir as a foundation, it can be seen how religion may act as a force that encourages trans individuals to adopt heterosexual and cisgender standards into their identities as a method of assimilation. This intersection between religion and transness only serves to perpetuate homonormativity, but it can also be employed as a mode for survival in cis society.

Homonormativity: What Is It?

Homonormativity is the adoption of heterosexual and cisgender ideals onto one's queer identity, usually as a means for survival. In their paper "Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity", Schilt and Westbrook define heteronormativity as the "cultural, legal, and institutional practices" that enforce heterosexual beliefs and gendered roles onto individuals (2009, p. 441). Not following such expectations may result in violence and discrimination, especially for trans people who are expected to pass as a binary gender (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). Because social power is dependent on sex, trans people must adhere to cisgender structures of self to maximize safety.

Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) is an annual observance on November 20 that honors the memory of those whose lives were lost in acts of anti-transgender violence.

When exploring the intersection of religion and transness, one must acknowledge how certain religious beliefs can contribute to the maintenance of homonormativity. As aforementioned, homonormativity can assist a trans person in becoming culturally intelligible, because it mimics heterosexual perceptions of gender. In the book Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities, authors Martínez-San Miguel and Tobias explain how homonormativity manifests in trans communities. One way would be acceptance from cis people by emphasizing "sameness" (Martínez-San Miguel & Tobias, 2016, p. 11). By molding one's identity to fit cis structures of gender, normative genders are therefore encouraged, which further marginalizes those who do not conform. Additionally, Trans Studies scholars have noted the privilege that results from "normative expressions" of gender, which potentially adds an incentive to assimilate (Martínez-San Miguel & Tobias, 2016, p. 6). In Martino's memoir, he similarly attempts to equate his identity to that of cis folk in a way that is backgrounded by his

religion. Before transitioning, Martino (1977) became a nun in order to fulfill what he felt was his womanly duty and suppress his gender struggles, something expected from his faith. After transitioning, when getting his marriage sanctioned by a priest, Martino affirmed his belief that "man's first duty" is to family in order to present as any other Catholic husband (1977, p. 223). These instances each portray how Martino adapted to a combination of religious and cisgender expectations of self. In these ways could he both feel intelligible to those around him and legitimize his marriage–and masculinity–in the eyes of the church.

This form of assimilation is present in many interactions between queer identities and religion. In Sumerau et al.'s (2015) study of LGBT Christian churches, researchers observed how patriarchal patterns were present within the church's organization. Pressured from other churches to be perceived as a "real church", the members sought and prioritized male sources of leadership (Sumerau et al., 2015, p. 315). This is because, historically, male figures lead religious services. Thus, to become culturally intelligible, the church had to maintain patriarchal ideologies–like Martino, who had to essentially prove his maleness to be granted access to what cisgender individuals do not have to struggle for. Then, in Siobhan M. Kelly's (2018) literature review, they discuss other trans authors that used religion to affirm their genders according to their faith. For example, Pauli Murray and Michael Dillon, who used "religious roles"–priesthood and monkhood, respectfully–to "[confirm their] maleness" (Kelly, 2018, p. 12). Embodying gendered religious roles can therefore serve as a way to validate themselves, but also to become intelligible to other members of the same faith. With this in mind, the dependence on religion as a way of appealing to cisgender society can then be used to analyze how religion can enforce normative standards onto trans individuals.

Marsha P. Johnson at a Demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral, 1970.

Religion Encouraging Homonormative Standards

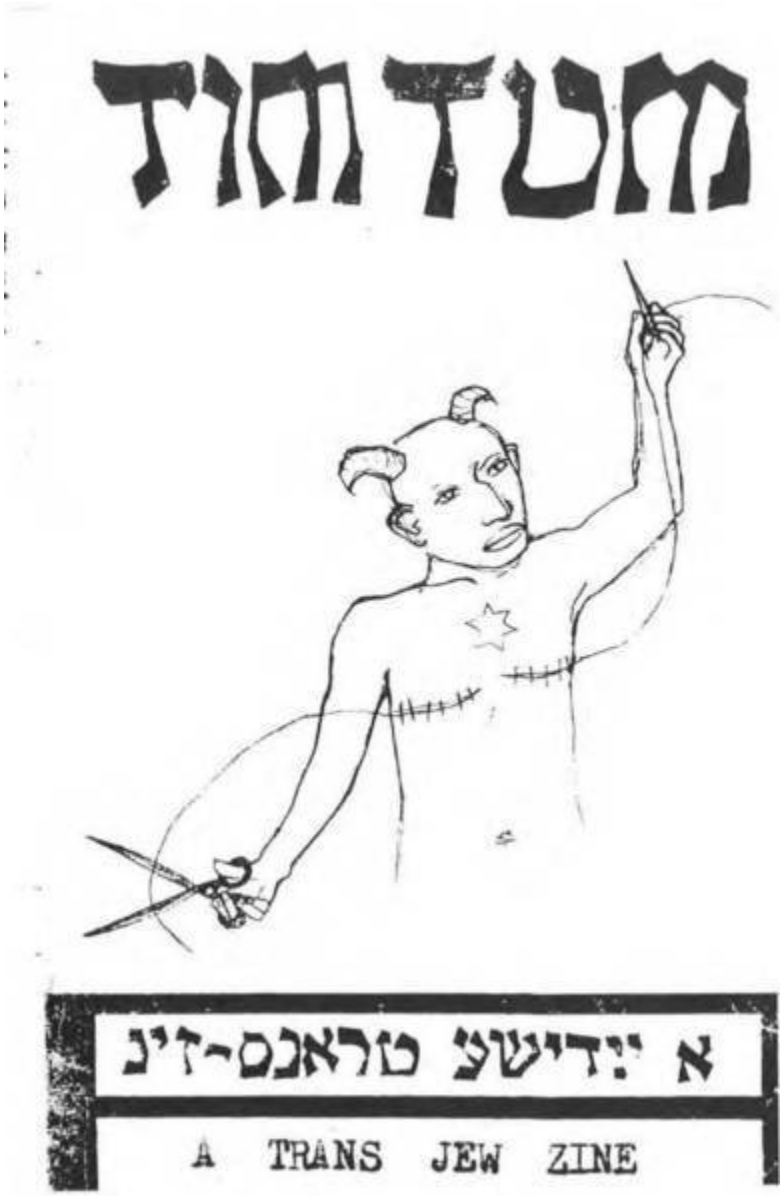
Oftentimes, people turn to religion to provide a guideline for their behavior. Looking at Abrahamic religions with a trans lens, these faiths usually encourage binary expectations for gender. In turn, this motivates the adoption of homonormative behaviors by trans people. In Martino's memoir, he idealizes traditional male-female roles in marriage when he expresses discomfort about his wife providing for him. According to him, "a man [works] for his wife" (Martino, 1977, p. 151). He therefore wishes to embody the typical "man of the house", who provides for his household as a strong, patriarchal figure (Martino, 1977, p. 108). Martino echoes this sentiment in a 1979 newspaper interview with Steve Clark, where he states that trans people "'want the same things in life'" as cis people–meaning, a stereotypical heterosexual family (p. 1). Expressing these desires in a public medium, Martino seems to attempt to satiate public fears about trans people by equating their existence to cis people's. Though

well-intentioned, this implies that trans people will mold their identities around cis expectations. Moreover, Clark describes Martino as "no different from most men", yet subtly implies his transness is a flaw that inhibits his supposed would-be male authenticity (1979, p. 1). This perception of Martino forces him–and trans people in general–to further adhere to binary understandings of gender in order to affirm their existence in cis society.

Martino seems to draw upon his religion when considering the type of man he presents as, which indicates how religion can be used to inform narrow conceptualizations of gender. In the TSQ's volume on religion, Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza (2019) discuss how the social "regulation of sexed embodiment" is explained by theology–namely, through God's creation of two sexes (p. 287). They use theology to approach whether trans autobiographies are influenced by "Christian notions of the self", and that by centering these notions, non-Abrahamic genders are made less visible to Western cisgender audiences (Strassfeld & Henderson-Espinoza, 2019, p. 289). Observing Martino's memoir using this theory suggests a reliance on religious notions of self to become culturally intelligible, like when he integrates religious conceptions of maleness with his identity. Therefore, religious constructions of binary gender can inform how one chooses to embody such expectations, as well as how others perceive them. While Sumerau et al. (2018) similarly describe how religious trans folk interpret their gender in relation with their faith, they show how it is not always oppressive. In their interviews with trans Mormons, participants expressed disdain for the traditionally gendered structures of their religion (Sumerau et al., 2018). They instead chose to interpret their religion in ways that affirmed their transness, such as stating how "'God wants us to discover who we should be'" (Sumerau et al., 2018, p. 437). So, while religion can encourage trans folk to present in certain digestible manners, it can also work to challenge normative expressions of gender in other instances.

What is an Abrahamic Religion?

Abrahamic religions–also known as Western religions– consist of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These faiths believe in a common monotheistic God with some variation in practices. These religions, for the most part, all share similar views and expectations towards male-female roles in society. This is because, in Abrahamic sacred texts, men are placed in positions of power while women are seen as sinful. Over time, these associations bled into what behaviors were expected of men and women. These beliefs are not shared by every member of these faiths, but are historically associated with them. Therefore, it is fair to group them together in discussions of religion-based sexism.



Tim Tum – A Trans Jew Zine

Grace and Lace Letter

A Christian Journal
For Crossdressers, Crossgendered,
and Transsexual Persons

Post Office Box 31253
Jackson, MS 39286-1253

Self-Acceptance Through Religion

Religion–even in cases where binary genders are encouraged–is not always oppressive. In fact, religious circles during Martino's time were not completely unaccepting of trans people. For instance, Transsexualism: Religious Aspects from the Erickson Educational Foundation is a 1978 pamphlet with letters from clergymen defending the transgender community. One clergyman expresses contempt for the "misuse of the Bible" to stigmatize trans people, while another affirms that queer people have "always been part of the human scene" (EEF, 1978, p. 8, 11). This support was vital, as it offered religious acceptance to trans folk despite the conservatism of many religious communities in this initial era of trans activism. The pamphlet itself also defines gender as a spectrum, which exemplifies an early challenge towards theological, binary notions of gender (EEF, 1978).

Religion can also serve as a path towards self-actualization. In Martino's memoir, he interprets his transness in relation to religion as God giving him the tools he needs to "[become] the man [he] was meant to be" (1977, p. 168). He also states how being trans meant being "true to Him and to myself", suggesting self-acceptance through faith (1977, p. 96). Similarly, Henderson-Espinoza proposes "transing religion", which deconstructs theological gender binaries to allow for unrestrained self-expression (2018, p. 90). In doing this, religion is no longer oppressive, but instead allows the trans body to stay in motion past binary normativities (Henderson-Espinoza, 2018). Simply put, by using one's religion to reify their identity like Martino did, trans individuals can then work against religious expectations of gender by shedding those expectations completely. In creating trans conceptualizations of religion and gender, harmful normativities have less power. Moreover, Cragun and Gull's (2023) study looks into how religion affects conceptualizations of gods' genders, working off of the idea that people relate their gods' identities to their own. The results showed that nonbinary individuals were more likely to perceive their gods as nonbinary, allowing them to "sacralize" their gender (Cragun & Gull, 2023, p. 201). Additionally, many trans people reported their belief that binary genders would exist in the afterlife, perhaps as a way to ensure that their identities would be legitimate even past death (Cragun & Gull, 2023). Thus, a subjective view on religion is beneficial in that trans people can interpret it as needed to validate their identities. Religion can factor into trans identity by giving space for different understandings of gender that allow for a greater spiritual connection with one's faith.

Transgender Day of Remembrance, Washington DC USA.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Martino's memoir displays the ways in which religion affected his transition and interpretation of gender. It is important to note that there is not just one way that religion informs one's gender identity. Observing the transgender experience through a religious lens can spotlight how the intersection between these two identities has the potential to place homonormative standards onto trans individuals. The expectation for trans people to sustain cisgender expressions of self and to maintain binary definitions of gender is backgrounded by theological ideologies, and these structures ultimately limit what trans bodies

can do in relation to their faith. Simultaneously, religion can provide a way for trans folk to self-actualize and interpret their identities in affirming ways. Binary or not, perceptions of gender differ by individual; these nuances are important to acknowledge when studying trans understandings of self. Lastly, though trans and religious communities have historically butted heads, open discussions are necessary in order to destigmatize the relationships between trans identity and religion. Only by fostering community, open-mindedness, and acceptance can unfairly gendered expectations and notions of opposition be left in the past.

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Navigating Transgender Identity in Japan: Transnationalism and Transmedicalism in Japanese Cultural Context

YASUKO

> "If I could ask one question, is this thing called sex or gender something that can never be changed and that one must carry for the rest of one's life?"
> (Okabe, 2018, p.215[1])

Click to view: *Author Rin Okabe's profile in Out in Japan*

The book I chose to study about trans memoirs is Sōmu Buchō ha Toransu Jendā (The General Manager is Transgender.[2]) The author, Rin Okabe, originally enjoyed "cross-dressing" as a hobby. However, as she continued to engage in cross-dressing, her desire to live as a woman gradually grew stronger, and in her mid-40s, she realized that her gender identity was female. She accepted her identity as a woman and decided to present as a woman in the workplace. As Chief Producer of the Business Promotion Department, she was concerned about how her workplace standing would change. The author is married and has one son, she came out to her wife regarding her new identity, but her reaction was negative and she could not understand. Additionally, she has not yet come out to her son. After leaving home, she changes clothes and puts on makeup in a storage unit, living an extreme double life where she switches between the face of "father" and the face of "woman" in her relationships with her work and family. Her emotional turmoil, as she oscillates between self-actualization in society and her relationships with her family, symbolizes the quest for identity in modern times.

1. Translated by me
2. Translated by me

Homonationalism, Homocapitalism

Homonationalism is a concept that critiques how the acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights is utilized by nations to project a progressive image while reinforcing nationalistic ideologies. It suggests that queer rights can become a measure of a nation's modernity and fitness for sovereignty, often marginalizing other groups in the process. As noted in the text, "the acceptance of liberal LGBT rights has become a barometer of a nation's fitness for sovereignty, a new element in the contemporary standard of civilization in international relations."(Rao 2020) This highlights the way queer rights are co-opted to assert national superiority, often at the expense of other marginalized communities.

Homocapitalism, on the other hand, refers to the intersection of queer identities with capitalist frameworks, where LGBTQ+ inclusion is framed as economically advantageous. It emerges from the collaboration between elite LGBTQ+ activists and international financial institutions, promoting the idea that embracing queer rights can lead to economic growth. The text states, "Homocapitalism names a strategy of persuasion operative in a moment in which the postcolonial nation has not 'yet' or has only ambivalently accepted the case for queer inclusion." (Rao 2020) This indicates that economic arguments are often prioritized over moral discussions in advocating for queer rights, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

Introduction

While transgender studies have extensively explored Western contexts, the Asian framework remains underexplored. This paper uses Okabe Rin's memoir to examine the complexities of navigating transgender identity in Japan, contextualized. I specifically mention Asia because in *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TQS)*, *Trans-in-Asia, Asia-in-Trans* emphasizes that which often neglects the complexities of Asian contexts. (Chiang & Leung 2022) I contend that "trans-in-Asia does not simply or primarily function as a nonnormative identity... but as a critical force that highlights how scholars have amalgamated spaces, cultures, communities, and bodies into units of analysis."(ibid) and the importance of understanding trans experiences is shaped by local cultural and historical factors. The need to contextualize transgender memoirs within different cultural and historical frameworks will enrich the discussion on gender diversity. So, what is Japaneseness? Ruth Benedict describes Japanese culture with these two cultural examples: A culture of sin, which is when morality is treated as an absolute standard, and individuals regulate their behaviour based on their conscience, and a culture of shame is where people regulate their behaviour out of fear of criticism or ridicule from others. (*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* 1946) Also, Shintaihappu[3] means "Our bodies, including our hands, feet, hair, and skin, are all gifts from our parents. In a sense, our bodies are the remains of our parents. We should take

3. It is said to have been written by the disciples of the Chinese thinker Confucius, and the Zengzi school. It is said to have been established during the Warring States period (770 BC – 221 BC). There are two versions, an ancient version and a modern version. Most of them are in the form of a dialogue between Confucius and Zengzi, and they use filial piety as a theoretical foundation and preach morality centred on the family in feudal society. The Japanese translation is used here and Translated by me.

good care of these precious remains and try not to injure them unnecessarily. This is the beginning of filial piety." (Hayashi, 1929) Japaneseness can be understood through the social norm where it is considered good to live within a pattern, so it could be said that trans people fall outside of that framework. I argue that the external and internal cultural stress experienced by transgender individuals in Japan, reveals the complex dynamics of identity formation within this unique cultural landscape with the implications of the family register law, transnationalism, transmedicalism, homonationalism and homocapitalism.

Japanese Cultural Context: The Tension Between Trans Identity and Cultural Conformity

First, Okabe's challenges reflect the broader Japanese cultural emphasis on conformity. The rigid frameworks of gender and interpersonal roles within the koseki system and the workplace exacerbate the tension between personal authenticity and societal expectations. For example, Okabe, unable to suppress her desire to live as a woman, confessed to her colleagues by email that she wanted to work as a transgender person, and Okabe shared her Gender Identity Disorder certificate, affirming her desire to live as a woman without requesting special treatment[4]. (Okabe 2018) Societal expectations, whether implicit or explicit, can shape individual experiences. This tension between personal identity and societal expectations is further complicated by cultural conformity. In Japan, work culture is compulsory to maintain harmony and not cause confusion. Referring to *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Tsutomu Hoshino explains Japanese culture as follows: "In the family and interpersonal relationships, each person's appropriate position, determined by age, generation, sex, and class, dictates his or her appropriate behaviour.[5]" (2007) According to this context, it's based on an idea of functionality where a general manager must conform and adjust with their coworkers as a way to function in the company. There is much less importance placed on individuality, creativity or innovation. If I apply this to the transgender context, it is likely to confuse the workplace if someone who previously presented as a man suddenly starts working as a woman.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/transmemoir/?p=336#oembed-1

Furthermore, the *koseki* system, which serves as Japan's family registry, imposes additional challenges for transgender individuals by reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting legal recognition of gender identity. Systemic barriers like the koseki, the Japanese family registry system, reinforce traditional gender roles and marginalize those who deviate from established norms, thereby complicating their efforts to navigate both personal authenticity and societal acceptance. According to *Kosekiho(Family Registration Act*[6]), (*Law No. 224 of*

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6. Japan's family registry system serves to record and certify an individual's identity and family relationships on the basis of family law. A family register (koseki) is an official document that records and certifies the identity and family relationships of Japanese citizens on the basis of family law. The principal items recorded and certified in a family register are (1) an individual's full name; (2) gender; (3) birth date and birthplace; (4)

1945) is a public record that registers and certifies the personal status of Japanese citizens from birth to death. Family registers include an individual's name, date of birth, relationship to parents, and marital status. In the family register, only male and female can be listed as gender. When people get married, they are registered in the same family register, and children belong to the parents' family register. However, in Japan, where same-sex marriage is not recognized, marriage is not considered to be a marriage unless the couple is registered in the same family register, and identified as a man and a woman. The law clearly defines who it belongs to. It is possible to change one's gender in one's family register, but the conditions for doing so are quite problematic, so I want to discuss this point together with transmedicalism.

Transmedicalism: The Complexities of Gender Change in Japan

Unfortunately, gender reassignment and transmedicalism go hand in hand. It is possible to change one's gender on the family register[7], but various conditions must be met for each case. To change gender on one's family register, a hearing is required at a family court following *the Act on Special Cases for the Treatment of Gender Identity Disorder* (Gender Identity Disorder Special Cases Act in Japan). In judgment on change of gender status, a diagnosis of gender identity disorder requires the consent of the family and, after a doctor's diagnosis, a gender determination meeting. Even though changing one's gender is a personal choice regarding one's body, being transgender reflects a situation in which individual behaviour is not tolerated within the family community. In practice, the author's wife refused to accompany Okabe to medical appointments, saying, "I was so shocked I didn't know what action I would take.[8]" It is the moment that Okabe's wife shows confusion. These laws encourage transmedicalism since it is said that the reason that surgery is required to change gender is to prevent social unrest.

Here we would like to confirm where the problem lies. Organizations and politicians who support transmedicalism are concerned about the confusion that may result. *The Association to Protect the Gender Identity Disorder Special Cases Act*, has a statement, "We stand firmly in defence of special laws and surgical requirements and in firm opposition to so-called "self-ID"[9]. Politicians belonging to the Parliamentarians for "the Safety and Security of All Women and Fairness in Women's Sports" submitted a statement to the Minister of Justice. They expressed concern that "if the surgical requirement is found to be unconstitutional, it would cause great confusion, such as the fact that a woman could be a biological mother after becoming a legal male (because it would allow her to change her gender to male while maintaining her female reproductive capacity)."(Asahishinbun 2023) In contrast, these claims have a lot to do with eugenics, and Lowik criticizes

parental relations (names of parents, relations to them, etc.); (5) spousal relations (name of spouse, date of marriage, date of divorce, etc.); (6) data related to the death of an individual (date, time, place of death); (7) name of legal custodian or legal guardian; and (8) data related to inheritance, such as the disinheritance of a presumed heir.

7. The article 3,A family court may make a ruling to change the gender status of an individual with gender identity disorder who meets any of the following requirements 1 to 6. Be 18 years of age or older. Not currently married. Not currently having minor children. Have no gonads or have a permanent lack of gonad function. Have genitalia that resemble those of the gender to which you have changed. To meet these requirements, you must be diagnosed with gender identity disorder by two or more doctors with specialized knowledge and submit a medical certificate. (effective from July 16, 2004) https://www.courts.go.jp/saiban/syurui/syurui_kazi/kazi_06_23/index.html
8. Translated by me
9. Translated by me

eugenics for trans people, "these sterilization/surgical requirements are examples of a eugenic strategy deployed against trans people" (2017) Ironically, while *Shintaihappu* promotes keeping the body intact, it urges surgery for those looking to cross gender boundaries. This law is outdated and was recommended by the WHO in 2018, "Eliminating forced, coercive and otherwise involuntary sterilization" (3 May 2014), a statement by the *WHO (World Health Organization).* Gender identity disorder has been removed from the disability category and gender incongruence has been added. In response to these trends, in February 2024, "Japan court approves a trans man's request for legal recognition without needing surgery. The court found that the hormone therapy Takahito Usui received made him eligible for gender affirmation." (NBC News 2024) In addition, July 10, 2024, the Hiroshima Prefectural High Court approves a trans man's request for legal recognition without needing surgery. In contrast, *the Association to Protect the Gender Identity Disorder Special Cases Act*'s statement, "The vagueness of the standards in this ruling is likely to cause social confusion and harm future discussions on revising the special cases law.[10]" (NHK news 2024) To borrow the words of Bassi and Lafleur, "their ideology is that the trans-exclusionary dogma is the political quicksilver of our moment."(2022) The thoughts of people undergoing forced gender reassignment surgery are toxic.

As previously discussed, Japanese law, influenced by transmedicalism, often pathologizes transgender identities. This, coupled with the cultural concept of haji (shame), can create a particularly challenging environment for transgender individuals. This emphasis on conformity can lead to internalized shame and self-doubt for those who deviate from societal norms. Societal norms and expectations shape our understanding of gender, and what transgender individuals often face. However, the company where the author Okabe works is also running "Diversity Equity & Inclusion" campaigns, and there is a movement to understand trans people.

Transnationalism: The Complex Journey of Transgender Identity in Japan

I explore the concept of transnationalism, which involves the movement of people, ideas, and cultural practices across borders. In the context of the memoir, it highlights how the author's transgender identity is influenced by both Japanese cultural norms and global queer rights movements. "They do so while recognizing that oppression can happen because of the consequences of changing gender or contesting gender categories as well as being categorized as a member of the 'second sex'." (Stryker 2017) This evolution highlights the importance of recognizing multiple identities and experiences within feminist discourse, particularly as it relates to gender identity and expression.

The company the author works at while supporting intersectional feminism in principle, also uses it as a capitalistic trend for generating profit, but it is conditional. This framing underscores the tension between genuine advocacy for intersectional feminism and the commercialization of feminist principles in the corporate world. This situation can be likened to homonationalism, whereby the acceptance of liberal LGBT rights has become a barometer of a nation's fitness for sovereignty, a new element in the contemporary standard of civilization in international relations" (Rao 2022) and homocapitalism is a strategy of persuasion that pressures postcolonial nations, which have only "ambivalently accepted the case for queer inclusion," (ibid) to conform to modernity under Western influence. The relationship between homonationalism, homocapitalism, and transnationalism is particularly significant. In this context, homonationalism enforces Western LGBTQ+ values globally, while "homocapitalism names a strategy of persuasion"(ibid) pressuring postcolonial nations toward queer inclusion under modernity's dominance. This concept resonates strongly within Japan's capitalistic society, where the surface acceptance of social movements often hinges on their profitability. In Japan's

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capitalistic society, a lot of surface acceptance of social movements is based on the condition of that movement being profitable.

In particular, when the author came out with her decision to live and present as a woman at work, her workplace had already started a diversity and inclusion campaign. At the same time, homocapitalism operates as a strategy of persuasion within Japan's capitalist society, where the surface acceptance of social movements is often contingent on their profitability. Corporate diversity campaigns, such as the one initiated by the author's workplace, exemplify this dynamic. While these campaigns promote values like diversity, equity, and inclusion, they often serve as tools for enhancing a company's public image and marketability, rather than addressing systemic inequalities.

In Conclusion

Navigating transgender identity reveals a complex interplay between personal authenticity, societal expectations, and systemic barriers. Rin Okabe's memoir exemplifies the tension between self-actualization and the constraints imposed by Japanese cultural norms. These challenges are further compounded by transmedicalist policies. Moreover, while corporate diversity campaigns signal progress, their conditional nature often reflects homocapitalist motives rather than genuine advocacy for systemic change.

Okabe's story illustrates how transgender individuals must navigate a path fraught with cultural, legal, and institutional obstacles, underscoring the urgent need for more inclusive and equitable practices that recognize the diverse realities of gender identity. As Okabe poignantly questions, "Is this thing called sex or gender something that can never be changed and that one must carry for the rest of one's life?" (2018), her lived experiences invite a re-examination of the societal frameworks that shape and often limit identity formation.

Click to view: *Okabe wins Forbes Japan Women Award 2018*

Author Positionality Statement – Yasuko

Yasuko's spouse is transgender, so she is taking classes to learn more about transgender people. She

understands that there are as many transgender histories and stories as there are transgender individuals, and learning one aspect won't provide a complete understanding. However, she believes it's a significant step forward. While transgender research in Japan has advanced, the absence of gender studies faculties at universities reflects the country's male-dominated societal structure. This lack of academic focus hinders the systematic study of transgender issues. As an adult immigrant to Canada, she carries unconscious cultural baggage from Japan. While she cannot completely shed these influences, she recognizes her marginalized position within Canadian society. She aims to study transgender issues from an intersectional perspective, leveraging her unique vantage point.

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Dr. Isabel Machado is a Brazilian cisgender woman who is living, working and playing on the unceded and traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil Waututh) and sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish Coast Salish) peoples. Entrusted with teaching this course while conducting an oral history project with gender-diverse people in different parts of the globe she is very conscious of the responsibility to approach her research and teaching with respect and to honour and centre trans* voices.

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