RADICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TRANS* LIFE NARRATIVES

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores how trans* individuals narrate their lives within a culture that does not view *trans** as a viable social category. I show how life narratives created by trans*-identified people (transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, and other non-binary identities included in the term's asterisk) imagine new categories by re-working familiar stories; trans* life narratives are thus indispensable for comprehending how gender, identity, and self shape each other across social contexts in relation to dominant cultural narratives and embedded epistemologies.

Prevailing U.S. ideologies (created and maintained through medical and media discourses) conceive of trans* identity through a binary formation, reinforce trans* people as objects who exist for nontrans* consumers, and rationalize trans* people as trapped within improper bodies or liberated within surgically constructed new ones. In opposition, twenty-first century narratives by filmmakers Jules Rosskam and Gwen Tara Haworth, autobiographers Jennifer Finley Boylan and Alex Drummond and YouTube digital storytellers Ky Ford and Skylar Kergil imagine trans* identity as productive – the goal is not to explain or justify gender diversity but to embrace it and to continue to widen its collective scope. The twenty-first century narratives I analyze reconceptualize

trans* identity as viable with or without medical intervention and articulate a whole, continuous subject rather than a subject split between pre- and post-transition. Evoking a new historical moment, these life writers and media producers celebrate their identity *in spite of* or even *because of* the transphobia they experience. In so doing, radical trans* life narratives exemplify how medical models and popular media fail those who they purport to protect and represent.

Gender is an identity as well as a social and historical process, which is constantly open to investigation. If laying claim to an identity *makes* subjects, as Michel Foucault argues, the process also occurs bi-directionally: identities come into existence through the act of naming and narrating them. As more individuals articulate what it means to be trans*, personal and collective knowledges will expand to include a range of diverse subjectivities, some of which have yet to be narrated into existence.

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For those who fearlessly and radically share their life stories
and those who might never have the ability to do so.

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CHAPTER I

CONTEXTUALIZING RADICAL TRANS* EPISTEMOLOGIES

Time Magazine's May 24th, 2014 issue features a bold and provocative image of Laverne Cox in a skin-tight, dark blue cocktail dress. Next to Cox's image, the text proclaims: "The Transgender Tipping Point: America's Next Civil Rights Frontier." *Time Magazine* portrays Cox, a trans*-identified actress and activist most prominently known for her role in the Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black* (2013), as the symbol of a new era of gender politics. In her cover story, Katy Steinmetz suggests that because trans* images and narratives proliferate in contemporary media, the concept of "trans*" (transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, two-spirit and other non-binary identities included in the term's asterisk) is becoming more understandable for nontrans* Americans. From *20/20* exposés and talk shows, to reality television and bestseller book lists, trans* stories are more visible than they were even ten years ago. Though Steinmetz shows how trans* stories have become much more mainstream, she doesn't analyze the types of representations available or the detrimental effects simplified and sensationalized stories can have on individual trans* people. Instead, Steinmetz erroneously suggests that heightened trans* visibility inevitably leads to heightened trans* acceptance.

In reality, most mainstream representations tell a homogenous trans* story, which makes visible only a sliver of those of us who identify as trans*. Popular representations reinforce a history of degradation by displaying trans* people as objects who exist for the consumption of nontrans* consumers. What's more, as Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook show, simplified and sensational trans* representations can produce increased

levels of real world discrimination, violence, incarceration, and death. Though art may imitate life, it also strongly affects how individuals experience and navigate their world.

My dissertation, "Radical Epistemologies in Twenty-First Century Trans* Life Narratives," harnesses the energy of our cultural "tipping point" yet takes up the immediate need for representations that foreground the diversity and viability of trans* lives. Though mainstream media represents trans* people as one-dimensional, trans* people's life narratives tell a radically different story. In relation to dominant ideals and medical institutions, twenty-first century trans* life narratives reveal epistemological changes on both macro and micro levels of society. Trans* life narratives post-2000 illuminate a distinct cultural moment, in which individuals are breaking from *and* reworking prevailing trans* knowledges.

To make this argument, I engage in several distinct yet interconnected discussions in each chapter: first, I explore dominant ideologies and representations of trans* individuals throughout the last seventy-five years. With an emphasis on "wrong body" narratives, rather than a spectrum of trans* subjectivities, mainstream media explain trans* people as "trapped" within incorrect bodies, which must be fixed by medical technologies. In Steinmetz' article, for example, she claims that many trans* people feel that "the body they were born in is a suffocating costume they are unable to take off," which encourages some trans* people to "go so far as to get facial feminization surgery and speech therapy." Steinmetz suggests that trans* people who engage in medical interventions represent extreme and—in her words—"fascinating" examples of body modification. Steinmetz' language pathologizes and "others" trans* people while it simultaneously suggests that nontrans* people are comfortable in their bodies and do not

similarly modify themselves in "extreme" ways. As I discuss in Chapter II, this narrative references an extensive history of pathological theories of trans* people as "inverts," which is damaging to those who do not identify as such yet who find solidarity in trans* communities. Highlighting this narrative as the only trans* story denies and erases alternative knowledges and experiences.

Second, to historicize contemporary trans* life narratives, each chapter then examines texts—documentary in Chapter III and literary autobiography in Chapter IV—produced by *transsexual*-identified people between 1954 and 1999. By understanding their experiences through the scientific and psychiatric discourses of their time, twentieth century *transsexual* life narrators similarly justify and normalize trans* existence. Written for a white, straight, cisgender readership, *transsexual* life narratives complicate and expand what it means to live a normatively gendered life at the same time as they constrain trans* identity.

Third, I investigate texts produced by *transgender*- and *trans**-identified filmmakers, writers, and digital storytellers (in Chapters III, IV, and V, respectively) published between 2000 and 2014, which stray from the previous century's normalizing framework. In contrast to earlier narratives, twenty-first century texts reconceptualize trans* identity as viable with or without medical intervention. Rather than viewing themselves as in need of an external fix, contemporary trans* individuals who incorporate radical knowledges view social and political systems as in need of change. Analyzing life narratives elucidates how trans* people understand their lives and imagine new categories by re-working familiar stories.

To subvert dominant understandings of trans* selfhood, radical narratives articulate a whole, continuous subject rather than one that is split between pre- and post-transition existence. Unlike hegemonic twentieth century texts, many contemporary narratives do not mourn a "previous" self. Instead, they illuminate the ways that all individuals are constantly changing in relation to personal and societal contexts. Further, the trans* individuals I highlight refuse male/female identifications. Rather than moving from one gender to another, radical trans* texts articulate gender as fluid. In so doing, radical texts articulate visions of difference for future generations of trans* people.

As indispensable as these radical trans* knowledges are, they do not necessarily reflect radical social change. U.S. culture still subjugates, oppresses, and denies trans* people in systemic and institutional ways. U.S. judicial systems still refuse to protect trans* people thereby making an already vulnerable population even more vulnerable.[1] Trans* people are still more likely than nontrans* people to be arrested, spend time in jail, and experience police brutality.[2] Trans* people experience much higher rates of physical and sexual violence, and trans* people (particularly trans* women of color) are much more likely to experience attempted or completed murder.[3] The medical institution still regulates trans* identity, unequally granting access to economically privileged individuals and those who fit wrong body models. These and other lived realities affect trans* people on a daily basis.

Marilyn Frye's metaphor of a "birdcage" is a helpful visualization of how dominant U.S. culture, popular media, and medical legitimation discourses work together to constrain trans* people. In this metaphor, Frye invites us to think about systems of oppression as a cage with interlocking bars. If we look at the cage up close, one or two

bars may become apparent and we might ask, why doesn't the bird merely fly around those bars? If we imagine a birdcage as a metaphor for the oppression trans* people experience, it might be appealing to argue that if only media representations would change, or if only the medical field would expand understanding, or if only politicians would champion trans* people, etc., trans* people would be liberated. However, looking only at the micro aspects of the birdcage fails to account for how the bars reinforce one another on a macro level. If we take a step back and view the cage as a whole—as what Patricia Hill Collins calls a "matrix of oppression"—we more adequately see how intersecting oppressions are interdependent. The combination of individual prejudice and institutional power, which co-constructs the birdcage, is often a toxic recipe.

Nevertheless, throughout "Radical Epistemologies," I work to understand *how* trans* life narrators epistemologically create new conceptualizations of gender, which fundamentally change the shape of the oppressive systems in which they exist. To see the big picture, it is crucial to analyze trans* people's micro resistances in relation to macro systems. In Gloria E. Anzaldúa's understanding, trans* individuals—like others who are caught between two cultures—negotiate two or more realms and thus develop a kind of "double or multiple 'seeing'" (*This Bridge* 547).[4] By cultivating the "capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface," trans* people incorporate "double or multiple seeing" to challenge the micro and macro forces in their lives. This type of radical seeing encourages trans* people to differently define the self and identity.[5] In light of these notions, radical trans* texts reveal a moment in a history of change rather than an end point. Undoubtedly, it is unclear what new trans* knowledge activists, authors, filmmakers, and artists will

produce in the coming decades; it is possible that future trans* narratives will prove early twenty-first century texts obsolete. Radical texts subvert dominant narratives but they do not necessarily create new discourses out of thin air. As such, in each chapter, rather than solely investigating what texts represent, I also use them to think about the cultural frameworks in which they exist.

Though the texts I analyze promote radical *gender* epistemologies, they do not evince radical *racial* knowledges. I began this research with hopes of centering articulations of trans* identity that situate themselves outside dominant categorization, which I imagined would include a plethora of narratives by white and nonwhite trans* people alike. However, in over two years, I have been unable to locate more than a few life narratives by trans* people of color, though I spent an exorbitant amount of time searching for, reading, and watching materials produced by and about trans* people.[6] Though *Time Magazine*'s cover features Cox, a trans* woman of color, trans* life narratives by people of color are decidedly uncommon and white people produce an overwhelming majority of trans* texts.

While there are countless explanations for why I was unable to locate more than a few narratives by trans* people of color, justifications tend to fall into one of two camps: access and identification. In the first logic, white people are simply more likely to be able to publish the texts they generate: they are more likely to have the leisure time and support to create life narratives and are more likely to be otherwise financially secure. Though a disproportionate number of trans* people spend time in jail, white trans* people are much less likely than trans* people of color to experience jail time or legal discrimination. They are more able to receive a post-secondary education, middle to

upper-class employment, and adequate and safe housing. White trans* people are much less likely to experience physical and sexual violence, as well as attempted or completed murder. Because of their skin privilege, white trans* people who publicly declare a trans* identity might not—to the same extent—risk the social, political, and legal repercussions that many nonwhite trans* people face. All of these factors aid (or at least do not deter) white trans* people who want to create and publish life narratives. In these ways, it is possible that more white trans* people produce and publish their narratives simply because it is a more doable and beneficial endeavor.

At the same time, it is certainly not that simple: in addition to issues of access, there are significant issues related to identification. I suggest that more gender-diverse white people identify with the term *trans** and understand their experiences through dominant epistemologies that validate their existence. Though this line of inquiry is perhaps unverifiable, it is possible that because white gender-diverse people have more access to higher education, community resources, and counseling, all of which encourage (and sometimes require) a *trans** narrative, white people are more likely to identify as *trans**. If so, trans* identity is co-constructed by whiteness and thus a trans* framework might erase or render unintelligible other identities and epistemologies that do not call themselves *trans** or *white* at all. For example, in the 2006 documentary *The Aggressives,* Daniel Peddle and Jenny Tsai follow a group of gender-diverse African Americans who might in dominant terms fall under the trans*-masculine or female-to-male category. However, these individuals do not identify as male, female, or trans*. The members of this group—which becomes a chosen family—express themselves and identify in public settings (such as work, school, church, and with extended family) as women and in

private settings as men, "aggressives," or "studs." Though some aggressives choose to physically transition, they often share hormones with others in their community who might not have access to testosterone or who might not be able to pay for doctor's visits and prescription costs. In sharing hormones, physical transition becomes a much slower and yet more communal process. In these ways, an identity like "stud" or "aggressive" may not be as comprehensible within a *trans** framework since "aggressive" is co-constructed by blackness.

Furthermore, throughout this dissertation, I strongly critique ideologies that rely on fixed conceptions of gender as consistent over time and individual in nature. Those of us who are intelligible within this system inevitably benefit from its continuance and those of us who are not coherent inevitably disrupt it. At the same time, binary epistemologies perpetuate white privilege; U.S. cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity rely on ideals of *white* masculinity and *white* femininity, though whiteness is rarely emphasized. By definition, then, people of color interrupt cultural gender categories, which are colonial and supremacist in nature.[7] According to Matt Richardson, "the Black female body has historically been irreconcilable to white society in relation to notions of womanhood" (7). In these racist formations, which seek to categorize individuals by sex, whiteness goes unnoticed and privilege remains unchecked.

At the same time, white individuals who experience institutional discrimination or violence based on their gender might find the experience shocking and, in light of new knowledges, may decide to create narratives that more adequately reflect their life story. Trans* identity becomes a more salient part of white individuals' conceptions of themselves, and white trans* people work to develop radical epistemologies in light of

new experiences of discrimination. For trans* people of color, however, institutional discrimination and violence are not novel occurrences. As *The Aggressives* shows, trans* people of color have more experience combating racist, transphobic institutions and thus may make sense of their gender identities in even more radical, less clearly *trans** ways.

In *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution,* Richardson offers a critique of trans* and queer histories and draws attention to the ways that Black queer individuals are not legible within a (white) trans* archive. And yet, Richardson argues, Black individuals have always used queer forms of sexuality and gender diversity as "method[s] of resistance to oppression" (6). Creating what he calls a "counternarrative of history," Richardson documents how "sexual and gender variance" is a central part of a "repertoire of everyday acts of pushing back against the overwhelming epistemic violence that situates Blacks as nonhuman Other" (6). Black queers "reinvent our bodies, renaming ourselves according to the genders we create, regardless of anatomy" (Richardson 2). Because "queer history" scholars do not adequately incorporate gender diversity, Richardson shows that there is a "queer limit to how we understand our history and ourselves" (3). In other words, because "the politics of respectability" structures dominant representations and rememberings of Black people, Black gender-diverse individuals are either erased or driven toward a "narrative of resolution and normativity" (Richardson 5). Black trans* people are either wiped from the collective consciousness, or reimagined in normative ways.

Even when gender diversity is the main focus, academic research consistently foregrounds narratives written by white trans* people, which allows white people's narratives to stand in for a universal trans* experience. In *The Transgender Studies*

Reader, for instance, which scholars widely regard as the first comprehensive collection of trans*-related scholarship, only two articles out of fifty focus on race.[8] Though Susan Stryker speaks to this issue in the collection's introduction, the fact that a "comprehensive" trans* publication does not fully explore race is indicative of the widespread lack of intersectional trans* approaches and perspectives. In other words, many trans* scholars implicitly allow whiteness to go unmarked. For example, the cover of Jason Cromwell's *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities* (1999) shows three white trans* men though Cromwell offers the text as an exploration of *all* trans* men. Cromwell fails to see the exclusive nature of his research though the cover image betrays his "universal" intent.

Because more white individuals create *trans** life narratives, the texts I analyze are by white trans* people. Rather than imagining my focus as restrictive, however, I explore what we can learn from the texts white trans* people produce, given authors' shared identity categories. I ask, how and in what ways are whiteness and trans* identity co-productive and co-dependent categories? How do white people experience trans* identity, and what narratives do they use to tell their life stories? Studying whiteness through a critical lens helps to cognize how dominant categories go unmarked in research as well as how dominant identities are invisible to those who experience privilege through them. "Race, like gender, is 'real,'" Ruth Frankenberg argues, "in the sense that it has real, though changing, effects in the world and real, tangible, and complex impact on individuals' sense of self, experiences, and life chances" (11). In *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness,* Frankenberg develops a framework to more adequately understand how whiteness affects one's perspective. As she shows,

whiteness is both a "location of structural advantage" as well as a "'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society" (Frankenberg 1). At the same time, whiteness "refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenberg 1). To name whiteness is to fundamentally "question" and "delimit" its authority (Frankenberg 234). Because it is often unmarked, critically analyzing whiteness can be difficult; nevertheless, it is necessary. If trans* studies scholars do not study whiteness, race becomes the property only of those who are marginalized by it, which further perpetuates systems of white supremacy.[9] As a white, queer-identified trans* ally and scholar, I work to consciously use my privilege to foreground trans* voices and narratives while nevertheless paying attention to the ways that my privilege might prevent me from fully comprehending the lived realities of trans* people.

At the same time, I acknowledge that critics of my work might argue that because I do not identify as trans*, I am appropriating trans* people's stories for my own betterment, which continues the violent cycle I mean to question. This critique is valid, particularly because nontrans* individuals have spoken for and continue to speak for trans* people. At the same time, it is important to remember that while trans* people may be visibly "doing gender" work, everyone "does gender" (Lorber 125) and to imagine trans* liberation as a job for only trans*-identified people is disingenuous and tokenizing. Although trans* experience is an integral part of gender destabilization, "it is neither fair nor realistic to lay the task of being a revolutionary vanguard at the doorstep of those who are already marginalized" (Calhoun Davis 125). Anti-racist movements should not rely on people of color to teach and help white people, just as trans* liberation movements

should not expect trans* people to educate nontrans* individuals. In reality, in anti-racist movements, it is white people who need to take responsibility for and reject their unearned privileges. Similarly, I believe that it is nontrans* academics and activists who must take responsibility for and reject privileges associated with being cisgender. My goal is not to co-opt the narratives I analyze but to draw attention to the systems that allow nontrans* people's benefits to continue at the expense of trans* individuals' lives.

A good first step for nontrans* people who want to create a more just world is to take accountability for the gender privileges they experience. As a white nontrans* scholar who identifies as a queer woman, my social position comes with a lot of privilege as well as glimpses of discrimination. Though I don't identify as cisgender, others read me in this way and I am afforded many unearned benefits because my physical body "matches" my gender expression. I can walk into any public restroom and know that my gender presentation will not be cause for expulsion or violence. Aside from identifying and presenting as a woman in a patriarchal society, I can be reasonably sure that my job application materials will not be rejected outright because I check the "F" box. I can be reasonably sure that others will not question my experience and ideology on the basis of my gender, though my social position as a woman may negate some of this privilege. The list of gender privileges I experience is endless, and I recognize my position in this regard. Still, nontrans* academics should question why trans* people bear the responsibility for "subverting the gendered status quo" when all people have the capacity to do so (Calhoun Davis 125). If more nontrans* scholars took up these goals, the burden of responsibility would not fall so heavily on the shoulders of trans* people.

In the following sections, I articulate my dissertation's frameworks. First, I discuss my use of language and vocabulary to show how practices of naming directly affect dominant as well as radical epistemologies of gender. Second, I explore *epistemology,* which is a methodology and analytical tool I use throughout all five chapters. I explain what epistemology is and how it works in my analyses, as well as what it can do for future trans* scholarship. Third, I investigate the most common problems associated with trans* representations in contemporary media. Focusing on how these depictions do not satisfactorily portray trans* people, I illuminate how trans* life narratives offer new and viable stories, which our cultural moment so desperately needs. Finally, I offer brief descriptions of Chapters II-V.

Language and Vocabulary

Language is an influential and necessary tool, which has the capacity to encourage or prohibit social change. How an individual thinks about hirself and the world corresponds with how ze uses language, both in the syntax of hir speech patterns as well as in the identity terms ze has and can create. Because identity terms are not merely imposed by others nor completely chosen, they have the capacity to connect and divide populations in powerful ways. Contemporary media's continual emphasis on the "realness" of bodies and identities, an individual's "legitimacy" to "claim" a trans* existence, or the widespread use of "*the* trans* community" as if it is one homogeneous group (among many other language issues, which I discuss in Chapter II), greatly influences how nontrans* people understand and treat trans* individuals as well as how trans* individuals understand their own identities. Language also divides like-minded

academics who engage in oppositional rather than solidarity tactics. In these ways, language and knowledge are interconnected and should not be separated. Because I believe that new systems of knowledge require new languages, in this section I explain the terms I incorporate.

While individuals and discourses use the terms *transgender, transsexual, transexual, genderqueer, cross-gender, third gender, bigender, agender, multi-gender, genderless, two-spirit, gender non-conforming, gender-variant,* and *gender-diverse* in different contexts to mean different things, I use *trans** as an umbrella expression that refers to all of these categories, which "cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries" (Stryker, "My Words" 254). Of course, not all who fit in the *trans** category name themselves as such; when I refer to these persons, I use the terms and pronouns they prefer. In the 2008 edition of *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Stryker lobbies for *trans-* as an all-inclusive term, which could link with other suffixes: national, racial, generational, and able, among others (11).[10] *Trans-* allows for theoretical movement. Unlike *transsexual* or *transgender*, it is not closed off from definition but instead represents the intersectional need to see gender categories as "potentially porous and permeable, spatial territories arguably numbering more than two" (Stryker, "Trans-" 12). *Trans-* does not "signify a static identity category or specific ways of being" and thus it can be used to engage in "multiple modes of analysis" (Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges" 7). Stryker's definition concurrently moves beyond a "rights-and-representation based framework" ("Introduction" 7).

For similar reasons, I use *trans**, which is a descriptor of one identity vector rather than a closed referent. *Trans** is a term that directly opposes mainstream media's

tactics, which consistently use incorrect pronouns and names and refer to trans* people as "transgenders." In our politically correct culture, it is preposterous to refer to African American women, for example, as "blacks," just as it is unacceptable to refer to individuals with walking disabilities as "cripples." Instead, we tend to afford people of color and individuals with disabilities their humanity by using "black" and "disabled" as descriptors rather than terms that stand in for the whole. Trans* people, however, are consistently identified by their gender status or lumped together as a homogeneous group. In this way, an unknowing nontrans* reader may think that one trans* person's story can stand in for all trans* people's realities. To resist this custom, I use the phrase "those of us who identify as trans*" as well as *trans*-identified* and *trans** to emphasize individual agency and draw attention to the fact that gender is one of many personal attributes. These terms and phrases stress the fact that some people may not be visible as trans* but may still identify as such. "Those of us who" is also an inclusive rather than exclusive phrase, which moves away from "them" versus "us" language traps. If U.S. media outlets regularly used this phrase rather than "transgenders," and did not consistently refer to trans* people as "them" in opposition to an invisible "us," our cultural understandings of trans* identity might shift; language, in and of itself, is a powerful tool for social change.

T*rans** suggests that there are multiple ways to understand the term and that the term itself is historically and culturally situated in twenty-first century America. While *trans* typically refers to trans men and trans women, *trans** makes special note to include individuals who may not identify in this way but who might be read by others as gender-diverse or who do not express traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity.[11] As Hugh Ryan explains, "by removing –gender, which instinctively brings to mind women

and men, *trans** might help transcend the gender binary and provide more space for people who are in the middle, who move back and forth, or who don't identify with the binary at all." The asterisk also highlights the fact that individuals and groups may no longer use this term (as well as *transgender*, *transexual*, etc.) within a few years time. In all likelihood, by the time I finish this dissertation, *trans** may be an outdated—or even offensive—word. At the same time, the narratives I analyze problematize the very category and vocabulary that attempts to define them and I agree with Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura who anticipate "a future in which our own visions will be eclipsed by new imaginaries that might not even call themselves transgender at all" (10). Because of the fast-paced nature of the field, the asterisk that modifies *trans* points to these potential limitations and ambivalences.

Throughout "Radical Epistemologies," I also use *trans** to demarcate historical, medical identity categories, which fit under the *trans** umbrella, though doctors and psychiatrists did not use the terms *trans*, transgender* or even *transsexual* until well into the twentieth century. I risk historical inaccuracy as a political gesture, which acknowledges what Leslie Feinberg in *Transgender Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (1998) calls a radical "transgender genealogy." Still, claiming a *trans** genealogy doesn't come without risk: it is possible that using *trans** to describe individuals in the early twentieth century could erase the realities of those who no longer have the opportunity to speak, if they ever did.[12] It also risks pitting identities against one another, eliding the very real distinctions between individuals who claim (or are given) different labels. For instance, to refer to an individual in a 1910 sexology "case study" as *trans** where the term was not used could downplay the ways that sexologists did not adequately

differentiate homosexual, queer, intersex, and trans* subjects. It also does not address the ways that early conceptions of *trans** identity relied on racist, classist, and ableist conceptions of "normal" bodies and roles.

Though I believe that the benefits of this political gesture outweigh the risks, anachronistically mapping *trans** may project current conceptions of sex and gender onto a cultural moment that produced different conceptions of bodies, identities, and roles. As such, I will sometimes use *transsexual* and *transsexuality* to refer to understandings of trans* as biological inversion or cross-sex identification, which requires a dualistic understanding of gender and inevitably relies on medical intervention. At the same time, *transsexual* identity is not entirely out of date; many trans* people continue to use and rally around this term. When apt, I will draw attention to its contemporary usage, which continues to frame gender as dichotomous. *Gender-diverse* will refer to a range of understandings, which change throughout time and culture but which consistently refer to individuals with female-typical bodies who do not conform to feminine standards and individuals with male-typical bodies who do not conform to masculine standards. *Gender-diverse,* in this conception, includes trans* identity. *Gender-diverse* also includes individuals who reject the gender binary altogether. I sometimes use *transgender* to refer to the more recent understanding of *trans** as an identity one claims without desire for intervention at the level of the body. In all other places where these historically accurate terms do not seem applicable, I use *trans**, which in this schema includes all forms of gender diversity. Scholars contentiously discuss these language problems and, similarly, I will grapple with the fact that the language issues of our contemporary moment may not time travel as neatly or productively as I would like.

Finally, *cisgender* describes an individual whose gender identity and expression align with hir sex as assigned by doctors and midwives at birth. It describes, for instance, an individual who has a body with a uterus, vagina, and breasts who grows up to identify as a girl and woman and who typically finds the behaviors and appearances of femininity to be comfortable most of the time. *Cisgender* combats "normal" and "natural" conflations of sex and gender and downplays the notion that anatomy is destiny. This attention to *cisgender* identity is more inclusive of trans* identity, because it suggests that trans* people are not abnormal but simply not cisgender. However, several theorists argue that *cisgender* is not a productive term and can be quite harmful if used unconsciously. For instance, A. Finn Enke criticizes its use (particularly in liberal, white classrooms on college campuses) as part of the "neoliberal rights" discourse, which "promotes the sense that people are *either* transgender *or* cisgender" (235-37). Further reifying what trans* identity can be, *cisgender* demands that "trans must never have been or become cis but instead be consistently trans across all time and in all spaces" (Enke 242). In other words, a trans* person could not declare a *cisgender* identity, even if hir body and identity "match" through access to hormone treatment and surgery. Because the categories "woman" and "man" assume a cisgender status, the widespread use of *cisgender* actually "forces transgender to 'come out' over and over through an ever-narrower set of narrative and visual signifiers" (Enke 243). By reinscribing an equally limiting binary, Enke argues, white, middle class academics who unthinkingly use *cisgender* dismiss issues of race, ability, sexuality, and class.

Though I understand and agree with this argument, particularly in the sense that the term's use by nontrans*, white, middle class, straight college students and professors

holds heightened "cultural capital," which one can use to claim rather than resist privilege (Enke 243), I nevertheless think it is a useful term if used conscientiously. Using c*isgender,* above all else, prevents the use of "normal," "real," "true," or "biological" in reference to cultural prescriptions of nontrans* gender. Taking the term's limitations into account, I will sometimes use *cisgender* to refer to people whose physical bodies and gender expressions match dominant ideals. More often, however, I use *nontrans** to designate those who identify in ways that are not encompassed by *trans**. By using *nontrans** instead of *cisgender*, I center trans* identity as the focus of my arguments rather than as the exception to the cisgender rule.

I acknowledge these difficulties and limitations to draw attention to my language and pronoun use, which will not follow academic norms. First and foremost, I consistently use the terms and pronouns individuals choose when I am aware of those preferences. Otherwise, I take liberties to incorporate new pronouns in reference to gender-diverse individuals about whose identity terms I am ignorant. Most often, I use *ze* (pronounced "zee," which replaces she, he, and they), *hir* (pronounced "here," which replaces her, his, and their) and *hirs* (pronounced "heres," which replaces hers, his, and theirs).[13] Like S. Bear Bergman in *Butch is a Noun* (2006), I urge readers to notice the moments of hesitation or frustration with these potentially new pronouns, to "stumble" over them in the same way that trans* individuals stumble over being misidentified as "he" or "she." I use these terms because "it seems congruent to use language that has the most possibility inherent in it" (Bergman, *Butch is a Noun* 17), and the constricting and oppositional language we currently have does not fit the bill.

Epistemology: What Is It and What Can It Do?

Throughout this dissertation, my primary goal is to search for and validate radical, alternative trans* epistemologies. Epistemology is the study and theory of knowledge with particular attention to knowledges that we tend to imagine as truthful or valuable. Using an epistemological framework begs several questions: as a culture and community, what do we know? How do we come to value certain understandings of the world over others? How do we collectively decide what is constant knowledge—which might exist outside of our ability to theorize it—and what is socially constructed? How do individual explanations influence collective knowledge and vice versa? By asking these questions, what it means—what we imagine it to mean—to narrate a gendered life becomes clearer.

Epistemology also highlights how an individual's experience relies on hir social location—or position in a stratified society, which affords privileges to some at the expense of others—as well as how ze identifies. Both macro and micro forces influence how individuals behave as well as how they are inculcated in a system that may or may not value their identities. Because of these factors, a trans* life narrative illuminates one's standpoint epistemology as well as social epistemologies that circulate within one's culture. As feminist philosopher Naomi Scheman explains, "knowledge is socially created, under historically specific conditions…[and thus] there can be no valid epistemology that is inattentive to the conditions [and] politics under which and in response to which knowledge is created and judged" (185). Following Scheman's claim, I document the knowledges trans* people create and illuminate the social realities that exist to allow those knowledges to flourish.

Furthermore, s*tandpoint epistemology* allows me to situate twenty-first century trans* life narratives that expand notions of gender. Standpoint epistemology—what Adrienne Rich and bell hooks call a "politics of location"—defines how one understands oneself and the world from a particular perspective. In conjunction, Collins maintains that the individual can change how identity is understood on the micro level, which may affect how policy makers regulate categories on the macro level.[14] Individual trans* people expand personal ideologies of gender, which, taken collectively, have the capacity to influence macro systems of control. At the same time, similar to how hooks and Collins understand race intersectionally, gender must be analyzed in relation to race, sexuality, class, ability, and other factors, which co-create gender. Gender is always racialized, for example, just as race is always gendered.[15] Gender is thus an identity and a historical process, which is constantly open to investigation.

In relation to standpoint epistemology, hooks also argues that racial categories and bodies hold traces of historical trauma. Her mantra in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics,* "our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting," works to "reclaim a past" so as to not forget the "legacies of pain" her black ancestors endured at the hands of white masters and politicians (hooks 147). For hooks, race itself changes shape and image over time in ways that reflect fluctuating racial formations. Concurrently, trans* identity and trans* bodies also hold traces of historical trauma based on the "legacies of pain" trans* people have endured at the hands of dominant systems of control, which punish trans* people. Nevertheless, the historical and generational "legacies" of trauma hooks theorizes are not present in the same familial and cultural ways with gender diversity. Most trans* individuals' families have not been subject to

histories of transphobia, and trans* identity is not written on and through the body in the same ways as nonwhite identity. Though hooks' idea that one can resist legacies of trauma by incorporating personal perspective influences how I use epistemology, there are stark differences between the material conditions that influence one's standpoint based on racial, familial, and historical trauma.[16]

By centering standpoint epistemology, I question how trans* experience becomes known or recognized as valuable as well as who is able to influence the conversation. In answering these questions, I turn away from an epistemology that privileges knowledges produced by medical experts and mainstream media and towards one that privileges the lived experience of trans* individuals themselves. In making this move, I also turn from an epistemology that generalizes based on studies of large groups to one that focuses on the diversity and range of individual experience. I track dominant and historically specific cultural ideologies so as to explain how common beliefs and frameworks inculcate and influence trans* people as well as how trans* individuals negotiate these established knowledges. In so doing, I argue that trans* life writers and creative producers create new gendered knowledges in radical ways.

The most influential framework of gender, which sexologists solidified in the early twentieth century, is the notion that only two, opposite categories exist: male or female, girl or boy, man or woman. A century later, there are still no institutionally recognized gender categories outside of these rigid statuses. Though many sexologists presented "evidence" that many forms of gender existed (invert, for example, being a kind of gender variant), they continued to insist on the binary nature of "normal" gender. Common binary distinctions—black/white, wealthy/poor, man/woman, and so on—can

be visually represented with the image of a seesaw (see Image 1.1). Though this image and idea is simplified, it is nevertheless a good tool to assess lived experience in relation to macro systems of privilege and oppression.

Image 1.1: This simplified image exemplifies how binary distinctions relationally privilege some at the expense of others. ("Life's Binary Code")

This binary concept illuminates how identities are relational; one side of a binary always exists in a higher state because of the other side's lower state. Tom Wise rightly argues that though we tend to say that some people are "under-privileged," we do not tend to say that others are "over-privileged," for we tend to gloss over the oppression privilege causes. Though U.S. culture tends to recognize that white, heterosexual, wealthy, able-bodied, and cisgender people receive privileges (and that nonwhite, queer, poor, disabled, and trans* people experience discrimination), the relationship between privilege and discrimination is not as clear-cut. In dual epistemologies of gender, not only must individuals position themselves on one side of the spectrum or the other (with little

possibility to maintain a position closer to the center), the effect of the seesaw's pull hierarchizes and divides, thereby granting privilege to nontrans* people at the expense of trans* people. In other words, *trans** does not exist without *nontrans**.

This dominant understanding structures the way individuals live and limits possibilities for other viable realities. From the time of conception, we inculcate babies as one or the other sex, which influences everything from how parents name their children, to how adults hold infants, to acceptable styles of dress, hobbies, and so on. These experiences create and mold the "seeming naturalness" of "biological" females and males into "girls" and "boys" who will later become "women" and "men" (Martin 511). In her study of preschools, Karin A. Martin finds that teachers use "hidden curricula" to differently speak to, instruct, touch, and control preschoolers based on gender. The teachers in Martin's study (who are all women) permit boys to speak at louder levels and about different topics, and to use larger amounts of physical space. Relationally, teachers encourage girls to be quieter and to use less space, which communicates to little girls that they need to "tone down their physicality" (Martin 504). Teachers are much more likely to reprimand, struggle physically, and "negatively interact" with boys (Martin 506). Teachers socialize boys to associate physical interaction with resistance and anger, and thus boys are "more likely to be aggressive or disruptive" later in life (Martin 508). In Michel Foucault's words, these socialization processes are "productive" in that how teachers treat preschoolers actually produces differences in behavior. Encouraging girls to take up less space and be more soft-spoken actually creates timid, apologetic, passive young women. These practices happen in such unconscious ways that preschool teachers themselves (as one example of many) do not recognize them. They become a "normal"

way to distinguish girls from boys and, subsequently, to treat them differently based on culturally defined gender assumptions.

These socialization processes not only train and discipline individuals, they also force all people to be one way *or* another. Children who do not follow societal prescriptions associated with being male or female are bullied by schoolmates, policed by family members, teachers, and friends, and often made to feel that something about them is wrong. Because we imagine a binary gender system as natural or inevitable, we also deny individuals the right to claim an existence that would destabilize that binary. To disrupt a binary ideology of gender would be to call the entire system into question. Those who do not or cannot fit within this conception are silenced or quite literally forced back within its confines. In this understanding, individuals spatially move from one side of a spectrum (in terms of social location and identity) to another. Disregarding how gender continually changes, a linear conception tries to capture diverse experiences in simplified ways (see Image 1.2).

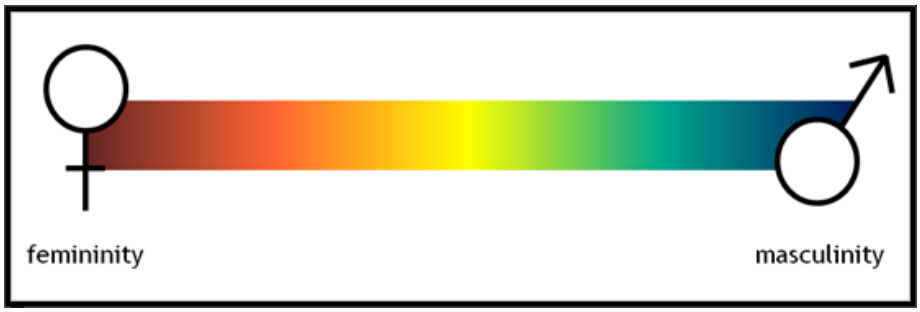

Image 1.2: In this *linear* gender spectrum, individuals fall on one point of the line. This conception provides only two gender options (where falling closer to the "middle" is a blending of masculinity and femininity rather than something that exists outside of feminine/masculine). ("Gender Based Analysis Plus")

Nevertheless, because we socially construct gender, gender can change as individuals question and rework its definition; "Radical Epistemologies" therefore explores how trans* life writers use what Michel Foucault calls "subjugated knowledges" to resist binary and linear conceptions of gender.[17] Subjugated knowledges represent alternative ways to understand oneself and the world, which dominant ideologies cannot adequately encompass. Within the U.S., individuals in power tend to trivialize and deny subjugated knowledges, writing them off as insignificant or preposterous. Detrimentally, individuals in power generally deny subjugated knowledges based more on the voices that articulate them than what the knowledges destabilize. For instance, if a white individual articulates anti-racist ideologies, ze is generally not disregarded (without at least some consideration) as aggressive, self-interested, or subversive. If a person of color articulates the same anti-racist ideologies, however, ze might be characterized as militant or angry, and thus hir ideas are more easily trivialized or denied by those in power. Similarly, woman-identified feminists who speak out against sexism are met with decidedly stronger and more vitriolic backlash than are man-identified feminists, even when the ideologies they tout are the same. I will take these considerations into account as I mine radical trans* life narratives for meaning.

The subjugated knowledges trans* people use spatially remap how we understand, experience, and express gender – not as a seesaw or linear spectrum but as a multi-dimensional field (see Image 1.3). Though Irene Gammel argues that subjugated knowledges must be legitimated through authoritative recognition,[18] gender-diverse identities can be equally confirmed through collective perception. The knowledge that one is not alone or unique—that others share experiences, feelings, and identities—is a

powerful tool for personal and political resistance. If we consider Foucault's notion of power, that it is "everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere," it becomes easier to see how trans* people *claim* power rather than fight for the right to *be given* power (qtd. in Pullen 14). Identity is thus both redemptive *and* constraining; individuals reclaim power from institutional control and yet the identities that are institutionally recognized are fraught with an extensive history of violence, pathology, and subjugation.

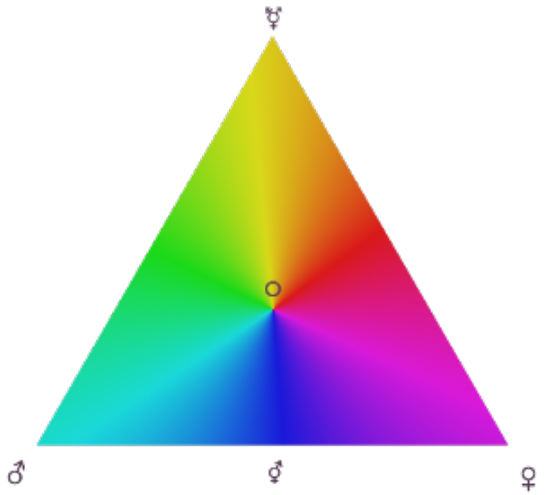

Image 1.3: This image represents gender as a two-dimensional map, which encapsulates the diverse identities trans* people incorporate.

"Wrong Body" Epistemologies in Mainstream Media

> If I have the wrong body, whose body do I have and where is my body?
> -Jason Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMS*

Reinforcing dominant ideals, mainstream media unrealistically represent trans* people through the linear, hierarchical, and limiting methods I discuss above. Talia Mae Bettcher illuminates the ways that mainstream narratives represent trans* people as, on one hand, victims of patriarchal stereotypes, and, on the other, pretenders who dupe

cisgender people. For instance, films like *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), among many others, feature sadistic killers who are trans* (which the movies illuminate in a moment of "reveal," suggesting that trans* identity correlates with or causes the sedition). In disturbing clarity, Bettcher, Kristen Schilt, and Laurel Westbook show how these types of fictional narratives actually produce heightened levels of real world discrimination, violence, incarceration, and death.

Representations imitate life, but they also strongly influence and affect how we live in and understand the world. In their research on how mainstream news outlets report instances of violence against trans* people, Schilt and Westbrook find that journalists tend to "depict violence as resulting from private, sexual interactions in which the perpetrator feels 'tricked'…by 'gender deceivers'" whose bodies do not correspond with the perpetrators' imaginations (452). Unsurprisingly, this coverage parallels sentencing patterns, even for those who confess to the killings: judges and jury members alike suggest more lenient punishments for perpetrators who use deception as a motivating factor. In this and other examples, the discourses surrounding trans* identity privilege nontrans* people's narratives, even when it is clearly unethical and unfounded. Of course, these media representations and real world reflections are far from new: for over a century, nontrans* voices have replaced the voices of trans* people.

Rather than explaining trans* identity in a way that acknowledges diverse subjectivities, dominant U.S. institutions rationalize trans* people as trapped within improper bodies or as liberated within surgically constructed new ones. The implicit assumption within this framework, which also characterizes trans* people as deceptive, contributes to the notion that trans* people are partially responsible for the violence they

experience. In this understanding, trans* people whose minds do not "match" their bodies must change themselves or risk exclusion, discrimination, or illegibility. This narrative does not address how social expectations limit and control how *all* individuals understand gender or that violence against trans* people is always unacceptable. Instead, wrong body narratives place the burden of change on trans* people.

Mainstream representations that use wrong body narratives tend to connect images of young, normatively attractive trans* women with "proof" of political or social change. In one review of Laverne Cox's *Time* interview, for instance, a writer for the *Examiner* proclaims: "Times, they are a changing. A person's sexual orientation is no longer a taboo subject. The way a person decides to define his or her self whether gay, straight or transgender has become part of main stream society." Though gramatically incorrect, the *Examiner* article's use of "main stream" is representative of how nontrans* individuals capitalize on trans* realities. Separating trans* experience from the "main stream," first and foremost, reifies how popular ideologies erase trans* people. Further, this author's use of passive voice—that "transgender *has become* part of main stream society"—glosses over exactly how this movement occurs. Not only does ze imply that the "main stream" merely incorporated trans* people, which essentially praises the "open-minded," "kind-hearted" liberals who produce *Time Magazine,* it also rests on the notion that incorporation is a good thing. Trans* activism becomes invisible in light of the positive movement of mainstream culture.

Moreover, confusing sex, gender, and sexuality, the *Examiner's* review exemplifies the ways that dominant discourse views *trans** as a marker of sexuality rather than gender. Placing trans* people within the "queer" category conflates gender

and sexuality and fails to acknowledge the important roles trans* people have historically played to make queer activism possible. Because "main stream" narratives imagine trans* activism *as* queer activism rather than separate and distinct, U.S. histories of homophobia and "subsequent" resistant projects become the foundation for trans* acceptance. This narrative invokes an utterly false history. Stryker, Jack Halberstam, and David Valentine—among others—clearly show how trans* activism existed both in relation to and separate from queer activism. Trans* women of color, for example, were at the forefront of the 1950s and '60s queer activist movements, holding sit-ins and fighting back against police brutality even before the infamous Stonewall Riot. Nevertheless, *trans** becomes the added-on component of the LGBT movement, existing in an unstable place within queer groups (which may or may not fight for trans* individuals). Trans* people, in these conceptions, are either invisible or invalid.

Nevertheless, many trans* activists resist wrong body ideologies. For instance, in "Transgender Media: Why I Dislike 'Trapped in the Wrong Body,'" Janet Mock argues that the wrong body narrative "is a blanket statement that makes trans* people's varying journeys and narratives palatable to the masses." Rather than representing the complexity of trans* experience, wrong body justifications offer only a "*soundbite of struggle*" (Mock, "Transgender Media"). Though it is possible that individuals and institutions might understand trans* people through this lens in an attempt to humanize those of us who are trans*, these efforts are misdirected. Wrong body narratives implicitly recognize trans* people as "alien, as freaks, as less-than-human and other" (Mock, "Transgender Media"). Further, as S. Bear Bergman clarifies in *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You* (2009), "*I have never really felt like a girl* is not the same as *I have always felt like a*

boy" even though medical discourse and popular media represent these feelings as inseparable (97). Calling the wrong body narrative the "destination model of transition," Bergman jokingly explains in hir essay "I'm Just Saying" that the gender binary "will suck you right back in to its uncompromising orbit without remorse," no matter what narrative one uses to combat its importance (*The Nearest Exit* 97). As I discuss in Chapter II, the wrong body "destination model" is harmful to those who do not identify in this way yet who find solidarity in trans* communities, as well as to individuals who do not have access to the bodywork they desire. Ultimately, the wrong body narrative reinforces the notion that nontrans* identity and experience is somehow more natural and diverse. Rather than encouraging true acceptance, wrong body ideologies underscore the "otherness" of trans* people.

At the same time, it is important to note that many trans* people find the wrong body narrative compelling or closest to their experiences and represent themselves using its associated rhetorical tropes. Wrong body conceptions are not always restrictive or harmful: some trans* individuals view their bodies as incorrect and seek medical intervention to fix this problem. Because it is so pervasive, some trans* people find it helpful in coming out to friends and family, even if it doesn't match one's history. Still others find the narrative to be useful in psychiatric and medical facilities to receive care. Whatever the reason, some individuals employ this narrative and thus a blanket rejection of it is unwarranted.

Twenty-First Century Trans Discourses*

In opposition to these limiting representations, the twenty-first century has seen an influx of radical trans* knowledges. Some mainstream media feature an array of trans* narratives, characters, actors, and themes. What's more, trans* representations receive a tremendous amount of attention from all sides of the political spectrum.[19] It seems, in 2015, that everyone is talking about gender diversity. For example, after the release of Mock's autobiography, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (2014), which *People* magazine featured in its popular books section, social media exploded with trans*-related content and discussion. Mock, a trans*-identified woman of color, fashion correspondent, author, and activist, appeared on countless television talk shows, from *Huffington Post Live* to *Piers Morgan Tonight.* In one popular interview from January 2014, Mock iconically schooled Piers Morgan after he derogatorily focused on her "becoming" a woman through undergoing sexual reassignment surgery—more correctly called gender reassignment surgery—after "being" a man for eighteen years. The interview went viral and outraged viewers overwhelmed Morgan with tweets, emails, and phone calls. Morgan later publicly apologized to Mock and, soon after, MSNBC's producers offered Mock her own show, *So POPular!*

Other recent examples of mainstream trans* representations include but are not limited to MTV's *TransGeneration,* a two-season reality show that follows four diverse individuals as they medically and socially transition while also navigating college life, family strife, issues of disability and deafness, and language barriers; *Transparent, Southern Comfort, She's A Boy I Knew, Against a Trans Narrative, Call Me Malcolm,* and *Becoming Ayden,* among dozens of documentaries, which center an assortment of

trans* stories that expand the wrong body narrative; reality television shows that feature trans* contestants, like *America's Next Top Model*'s Isis King from the eleventh and seventeenth seasons, *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s Carmen Carrera from season three and Monica Beverley Hillz from season five, *The Glee Project*'s transgender-identified Tyler Ford and genderqueer-identified Alex "Unique" Newell, who went on to play hirself in *Glee*, and *Dancing with the Stars'* Chaz Bono; and, finally, mainstream movies and television shows, which include fictional trans* characters (for example, *Transamerica, Itty Bitty Titty Committee, Better Than Chocolate, Degrassi: The Next Generation, Orange is the New Black, Orphan Black,* and *Transparent,* among others). In conjunction with this influx of representation, the twenty-first century trans* life stories I analyze have the capacity to expand cultural ideologies of gender.

One way trans* life writers illuminate new knowledges is by putting their gender-diverse identities into context; in one representative example, in Bergman's *The Nearest Exit,* ze writes, "Gender is an à la carte arrangement, even though the macroculture rarely realizes this and doesn't usually act accordingly. We are all, I firmly believe, in charge of our own genders" (91). Within the same essay, "The Field Guide to Transmasculine Creatures," Bergman complicates hir original statement: "When we live in a world that leaves only the tiniest sliver of room for the least complicated among us, it's difficult to find a place for all our complexities" (94). Instead of reading Bergman's statements as contradictory—that gender is self-fashioned yet controlled by "macroculture"—these statements demonstrate the complex ways twenty-first century life writers negotiate mainstream recognition. In these ways, trans* life writers expose how gender is externally imposed *and* internally chosen.

Bergman assures hir trans*-positive audience that gender is unimaginably expansive, and, in the same essay, ze uses hir own experiences to show how we cannot control how others (mis)read gender cues. Bergman recounts moments where others incorrectly gender hir, identifying hir variably as a straight man, gay man, butch lesbian, dyke, and trans* man. Recognizing hir ability to relationally change how others identify hir by performing gender differently, Bergman consciously "fucks" with gender: ze lowers hir voice while buying jewelry and engages in stereotypically feminine behaviors at the local Jiffy Lube. Bergman shows how recognition is dependent on accepted "schemes" (choosing from an "à la carte menu," as ze puts it, which only offers two items) and yet, in hir ability to put on or take off these "schemes," ze suggests that influencing others *is* possible. Recognition becomes a powerful site in which trans* identity relies on *and* invalidates hegemonic conventions.

Creating a trans* life narrative within a system that denies trans* existence is a political act of survival. Deidre McCloskey explains in the preface to her autobiography, *Crossing: A Memoir* (1999), that gender-diverse individuals write stories so that they are "heard and talked about and might even be imagined as one's own" (xvi). For individuals with institutionally unrecognizable identities, life writing can be "the difference between shame and life" (McCloskey xvi). Additionally, John Paul Eakin contends that "narrative is not merely an appropriate form for the expression of identity; it is an identity content" in and of itself (*How Our Lives* 100). In Eakin's view, narratives do not merely describe selves but actually produce them. As more trans* people share their stories, and as representations become more realistic and diverse, cultural epistemologies of what it means to live a trans* life expand.

Nonetheless, it is too easy to imagine contemporary trans* life writers as revolutionary vanguards who create systems that defy gender categorization; in conceptualizing this dissertation's goals, I might have made this claim. Though I believe that this notion is true in some cases for trans* life writers who are privileged by other identity vectors (being white, middle class, or conventionally attractive, for example), it is not true for the vast majority of those who produce life narratives and completely untrue for those who cannot and will not publish. To be sure, moving between subject positions requires a tremendous amount of challenging work – work that some theorists disguise by uncritically reading textual moments of happiness as gender liberation. Trans* life narratives are not liberatory in and of themselves; they are liberatory because they offer new and different ways to narrate and understand trans* lives.

Many trans* life narratives reveal radical knowledges through rewriting familiar stories, which exposes cracks or openings within dominant ideology. These resistant moments can be both devastating and transformative for those who experience them. These moments also illuminate how trans* people are inculcated within a system that does not recognize their trans* identity. For instance, a familiar life moment many trans* life writers recount is one in which one's elementary school teacher asks the class, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Because most Americans who were born in and after the 1940s share this experience, the non-normative responses trans* writers include in their narratives are profound. In her autobiography, Mock recalls that when her teacher asked her this question in front of her classmates, she said she wanted to be a secretary (37). Similarly, in *The First Lady* (1974), April Ashley remembers when her first grade teacher posed the same question; in this fraught moment, Ashley enthusiastically blurted

out that she wanted to be a princess. Written forty years apart, Mock and Ashley's narratives similarly focus on how they did not know their responses were "wrong" until peers and teachers responded with laughter, in Mock's experience, and outright punishment, in Ashley's. These memories *become* resistant in relation to a culture that prescribes strict gender roles and punishes those who do not follow the system's rules.

These moments of resistance theorize how U.S. society limits individual expression by fixing what is socially normal. Initially lacking cultural terms and models with which to identify, Mock and Ashley are shocked and humiliated by these experiences. Rather than reinstating dominant paradigms or dwelling in sorrow or defeat, however, these resistant moments layer one upon another to produce a new understanding of trans* identity. These examples epitomize how the simple, popular narratives in mainstream media create a climate in which transphobic laughter, derision, and punishment are socially acceptable and, in fact, necessary for the system's continuation.

What's to Come: Chapters II-V

The cultural life narratives "Radical Epistemologies" considers span several genres: memoir, essay, autobiography, documentary, and digital storytelling. Though the texts differ in form, they nevertheless similarly politicize personal experience. In Chapter II, "Simple, Sensational, and Pathological: How Dominant Discourses Misunderstand Trans* Lives," I continue to investigate how U.S. systems produce and perpetuate negative understandings of trans* individuals. I explore the ways that late nineteenth and early twentieth century sexologists created a gender diversity framework that was fundamentally unconcerned with individual trans* experience outside dominant and

historical understandings of binary gender. Engaging with these debates as well as their contemporary psychiatric successors—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's "Standards of Care"—I argue that though medical discourse has and continues to place itself within a politically neutral terrain, trans* life narratives uncover the ways that medical discourse, in its ability to regulate bodies, is neither neutral nor apolitical. By tracing the damaging epistemologies sexologists created – epistemologies which continue to flourish – I illuminate how contemporary medical discourse must be reevaluated so that it reflects the diverse narratives trans* people produce. Subsequently, in Chapters III-V, I investigate how trans* life narratives expand, reject, deny, claim, and radicalize historical, medical ideologies.

Chapter III, "Against a *Single* Trans* Story: Destabilizing Dominant Narratives through Documentary," explores films that feature trans* individuals. In contrast to documentaries produced by nontrans* people, autobiographical documentaries produced by trans* filmmakers emphasize identity processes and communities that share in the production of meaning rather than a closed-off identity product. Specifically, Jules Rosskam's *Against a Trans Narrative* (2008) and Gwen Tara Haworth's *She's a Boy I Knew* (2008) expand trans* representational horizons by telling diverse stories. Complicating the wrong body narrative, these films offer expansive and sometimes contradictory stories. Rather than focusing on *how* someone might come to identify as trans* or what procedures and tactics one uses to transition—though "medical issues and transition may be included"—the stories Rosskam and Haworth represent reject the medical model as the "be-all and end-all of the narrative" (Ryan, "Diversifying" 11).

While *Against a Trans Narrative* is an experimental film that explodes conventional notions of identity, community, and visibility, *She's a Boy I Knew* is a first-person look at one trans* woman's experience within a conservative, white, middle class family. In reclaiming agency over their narratives, these documentarians exemplify the democratization of new digital technologies and radical means of production.

Chapter IV, "'Bear Witness and Build Legacies:' Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Trans* Autobiography," shifts in focus from film to literary works. In Chapter IV, I examine the historical tradition of *transsexual* autobiography to contextualize the radical epistemologies contemporary *trans** texts employ. Similar to how contemporary theorists think about gender, scholars such as Egan and Sidonie Smith show how definitions of autobiography change over time as individuals narrate new and different life stories—in other words, as cultural knowledge evolves. Because autobiography "creates and reinvents the self through writing" in relation to an imagined discourse community (Hall 96-7), trans* life narratives have the capacity to "provide witness for others, create a community of affirmation, and encourage social transformation" (Hall 104). Specifically, I analyze Alex Drummond's theoretical autobiography, *Grrl Alex: A Personal Journey to a Transgender Identity* (2012), and Jennifer Finley Boylan's literary autobiography, *I'm Looking Through You: Growing Up Haunted* (2008). In contrast to earlier writers, Drummond and Boylan representatively show a new era of trans* epistemology, which does not rely on the wrong body model as the foundational aspect of trans* existence. Boylan remembers her haunting male past, which inevitably leads her to seek personal and social acceptance through medical transition, while Drummond situates her trans* identity in opposition to medical discourse.

Though their stories differ, their embedded epistemologies reflect radical conceptions of gender. Because Boylan and Drummond narrate continuous subjects rather than subjects split between discordant pasts and the present, these writers put forth a new way to understand trans* identity: it does not demand one narrative nor does it require that individuals feel disturbed by their prior selves. Instead, Boylan and Drummond illuminate how gender is neither "stable" nor a "locus of agency" but rather "an identity tenuously constituted in time" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 519). Drummond and Boylan explore rather than explicate trans* identity and experience.

Finally, in Chapter V, "Collective Archives of Resistance: Trans* Digital Storytelling on YouTube," I build on these arguments yet shift to digital storytelling, which is a uniquely twenty-first century form of life narrative. On user-generated digital platforms—like LiveJournal in the early 2000s and contemporary sites like Tumblr, WordPress, and YouTube—diverse trans* voices, narratives, and images proliferate. By documenting seemingly mundane activities, trans* digital storytellers expand conceptions of what it means to transition in twenty-first century America. Blurring the boundaries between individual and collective knowledge of the self, digital storytelling offers some trans* youth the possibility of sharing life stories in personal and political ways.

Chapter V focuses on two white, straight-identified trans*-masculine vloggers: SkylarkEleven, a twenty-three year old musician and activist who has documented his transition since the age of seventeen by posting more than 200 videos, and KyFord23, a twenty-four year old trans* man from Iowa who similarly documents his changing identity and body throughout his twenty-four videos. Because SkylarkEleven and KyFord23 use digital storytelling to document their changing bodies and, at the same

time, to resist medical legitimation, they use digital storytelling as a reflexive survival tool, which helps them negotiate the societal oppression they experience in safe ways. Instead of merely acknowledging the nightmares of contemporary transphobia and heterosexism, these digital storytellers perform new ways of being.

Conclusion: What Might Trans "Liberation" Look Like?*

> We get to determine how and when to explain ourselves, bodies not reduced to medical histories and issues but rather belonging fully to us, doctors playing only small, bit roles. A politics of self-determination…discards the notion that our bodies are medical curiosities, scientific theories, social burdens and perversities. It is a simple, matter-of-fact, and entirely profound politics. By valuing self-determination, we invite many different kinds of bodies to the table. We reach toward liberation rather than privilege.
> -Eli S. Clare, "Body Shame, Body Pride: Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement"

According to Leslie Feinberg, who identifies as a "human being" yet is read variably as a lesbian woman and trans* man, "trans liberation" involves the emancipation of all people from rigid gendered stereotypes. In hir conception, "trans liberation" would include everyone who does not follow normative guidelines: for example, women who do not want to have children as well as men who like to wear pink or who do not understand aggression as a component of success. Building off of the women's liberation movement, of which Feinberg was an integral part, "trans liberation" movements acknowledge that trans* people's lives "are proof that sex and gender are much more complex than a delivery room doctor's glance at genitals can determine, more variegated than pink or blue birth caps" ("Works in Progress" 195). This goal is worthwhile and I avidly fight for "trans liberation," as Feinberg conceives of it.

Nevertheless, Feinberg's conception of "trans liberation," which would equally empower nontrans* individuals, does not sufficiently take into account dominant epistemologies. While men who like to knit may be oppressed by the cultural conception that they are not "fully" men, they are not daily stripped of their humanity or rendered unrecognizable under the law. They are, instead, seen as harboring "secret" longings or imagined as queer. As Cressida Hayes argues, Feinberg's understanding of trans* identity as a "freedom of individual expression" relies too heavily on choice, blanket toleration, and "no rights and wrongs in the ways people express their own gender style" (Hayes 205). Hayes' critique shows how Feinberg's "trans liberation" model might theoretically condone masculine violence or control by all genders, which comes from the "willingness to treat gender expression as an individual matter, rather than as a web of relations in ongoing tension and negotiation" (Hayes 206). Though I support Feinberg's idea of "trans liberation" in all the widespread ways it might come to fruition, I focus on the factors that affect trans* people specifically. Instead of judging Feinberg's arguments as misdirected, I imagine "trans liberation" as a tactic that illuminates viable modes of living that are *already* available rather than one that points to the ways that all people can live less binary-oriented lives. These are similar political goals: to expand what it means to identify as trans* also expands what it means to identify as a woman or man.

Because U.S. dominant ideologies in the twenty-first century do not recognize gender diversity, it is first and foremost necessary to show how trans* people flourish in spite of hegemonic misrecognition. The future fight for trans* "liberation," based on this project, would inherently be more about recognition and anti-assimilation strategies than toleration or acceptance. Future trans* movements must address the need for social

systems to change rather than certain individuals gaining rights over others. Once U.S. culture values trans* lives in the same way as nontrans* lives, breaking down the gender binary and expanding "trans liberation" to include all people will be inevitable. It is this crucial middle step that Feinberg skips, and which this dissertation articulates.

Notes

[1] For a comprehensive look at U.S. law, which prohibits discrimination based on gender, see transgenderlaw.org. As of April 2015, only sixteen states (and Washington D.C.) protect trans* people from discriminatory treatment.

[2] In the National Coalition for Anti-Violence Programs' (NCAVP) 2013 report, of those who reported incidences of violence, "transgender survivors were particularly likely to experience physical violence at the hands of the police." What's more, NCAVP found that "transgender survivors were 3.7 times more likely to experience police violence…and 7 times more likely to experience physical violence when interacting with the police." Not only are trans* survivors of violence less likely to report, they are more likely than nontrans* survivors to actually get arrested when they do (NCAVP).

[3] According to Alexandra Bolles, Communications director for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), gender-diverse people are 27% more likely than "people who are gender normative" to experience "physical violence." As Bolles claims, violence against gender-diverse people is on the rise and 87% of this violence is committed against trans* people of color. More specifically, according to the NCAVP's 2013 report, 72% of "homicide victims were transgender women and more than two-thirds (67%) of homicide victims were transgender women of color." Disproportionately, black trans* women are most likely to be assaulted or murdered: of trans* people of color killed in 2013, 78% were black trans* women (AVP).

[4] After all, Anzaldúa herself plays with notions of gender diversity: she has a "Shadow Beast" or gender rebel living inside of her and is literally "*mita*' *y mita*'" or "half and half" (*Borderlands* 41). Anzaldúa calls gender-diverse people "divine warriors" who have to fight to assert that they are not "sick" and that society is wrong and they are right (*Interviews* 122). Anzaldúa claims, contrary to medical legitimation discourses, that trans* people do not suffer from a "confusion of gender" but from an inability to inhabit a rigid, binary system in a culture that disallows "two in one body" (*Borderlands* 41).

[5] Change becomes possible when subordinated subjects recognize one another as allies, which expands the borders that control or cage in trans* lives. Living without borders requires that subjects enact activism. As Anzaldúa maintains, it is not enough to be born a "racialized, gendered *mestiza* in the borderlands," one must fight to earn consciousness,

forge “the ultimate rebellion” to “uncove[r] the lie” of culture and “fight hard to resist stasis” (*Borderlands* 12).

[6] The life narratives produced by trans* people of color, which I could locate include Janet Mock’s 2014 autobiography, Max Wolf Valerio’s *Testosterone Files* (2006), one part of MTV’s *TransGeneration*, which features Andrea Gabrielle Gibson who identifies as a Puerto Rican, deaf transsexual woman, and several of Laverne Cox’s recent interviews. There have also been four contestants on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and *The Glee Project* who identify as trans* people of color. Apart from these somewhat limited representations, a majority of which nontrans* people produce, trans* life narratives to date come most significantly from white trans* people.

[7] For an extensive discussion of how binary institutions of gender are colonial, see Michael Hames-García’s argument in *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity.*

[8] These articles include Viviane K. Namaste’s “Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space,” in which she discusses race in relation to street harassment, violence, and prostitution, as well as “Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?: The Unspoken Racism of the Trans Inclusion Debate,” in which Emi Koyama emphasizes how whiteness is assumed in feminist spaces, particularly in regards to womyn-only and trans*-exclusive groups. In the *Transgender Studies Reader 2,* eleven out of fifty articles focus on race, which is certainly a slight improvement. Nevertheless, a majority of these eleven texts explore trans* identity and experience in non-U.S. contexts. Though the second edition improves on the first edition’s lack of race, it seems that writing about trans* people of color “elsewhere” is more viable or at least publishable than writing about trans* people of color in the U.S.

[9] At the same time, it is possible that the winds are shifting in terms of trans* representation. There is something significant about the fact that two trans* women of color (Laverne Cox and Janet Mock) have become the mainstream faces of trans* activism. In relation to these shifting representations, perhaps we will see a wider range of trans* lives and narratives in the coming years. Though Cox and Mock are conventional in their appearance, youth, and binary identifications, they nevertheless provide “possibility models” (in Cox’s words) for other trans* people of color to share their stories.

[10] For a discussion of the dangers in using one trans* term over another, see David Valentine’s argument in *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (2007).

[11] Though there isn’t one consensus about where or when the term *trans** originated, many trans* scholars point to the fact that it may come from computer language. In any common search function, to type an asterisk at the end of a word makes that word a “wildcard.” An asterisk also stands in for a blank. For instance, one could type “women who * like to *” in a Google search and come back with millions of websites – the

asterisks, in this example, act as placeholders, which could be filled by any word or set of words. Using trans*, then, means that the search will bring back all relevant materials related to "trans" but also to its possible suffixes (transnational, transgender, or transcultural, as examples). Historian Cristan Williams argues that individuals she interviewed in the early 1980s would use *t** on early message boards "as a way of sidestepping an ongoing debate in part of the trans* community about the origins and uses of the terms *transsexual* and *transgender*" (qtd. in Ryan). It is quite possible that the asterisk associated with "t" or "trans" has been appearing and disappearing for decades. In terms of the term's pronunciation, those of us who use this term in academic scholarship, activism, and/or as a personal identification do not tend to pronounce the asterisk, though some do draw attention to it by saying "trans asterisk" or "trans star."

[12] For example, Jacob Hale in "Consuming the Living, Dis(re)membering the Dead in the Butch/FTM Borderlands" explores how scholars and journalists address Brandon Teena after his death. According to Hale, Teena's unstable, shifting gender identity and variable self-naming practices were fixed and curtailed by his killers and, at the same time, those who fought over Teena's identity and name might have colluded with his killers.

[13] As I discuss in more detail in Chapter II, I acknowledge that there are many other viable gender-neutral options. In *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, for example, Kate Bornstein suggests variations on the singular they by shortening it to "ey, em, eir, eirs, and emself." Others suggest using new terms such as zhe, zhim, mer, thon, yo, ve, per, and hu, among others. I do not believe that ze and hir are more beneficial than any other pronoun; apart from "they/theirs," "ze/hir" are simply the pronouns I have most often come across in trans* media, literature, and online forums.

[14] Throughout *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* Collins uses standpoint epistemology theory to position herself as a Black Feminist woman with particular "lived experiences" that "stimulate a distinctive consciousness" (23-4). Through recognition of shared experience and relations to power and privilege (which she terms an "outsider-within social location"), she explores black "women's" epistemology (Collins 10). Collins suggests that if black women could recognize shared experience as allies rather than competitors, black women could more productively resist white supremacy and institutional racism while enacting a "recurring humanist vision" (42). In these ways, Collins' project is two-fold: she relies on strategic essentialism to posit that there is a definable category of "black women," and she configures race as categorical, which relies on macro conceptions of visible identity and kinship. However, as she specifies, her racial project opposes the larger racial formation that allows "democratic promises of individual freedom" to categorize, hierarchize, and discriminate against women of color, poor people, and other oppressed groups (Collins 23). Her goal in using this dual racial project is to eradicate discrimination but not difference. I find these goals to be incredibly productive and similarly work to eradicate trans* discrimination but not difference.

[15] For an eloquent and extended discussion of how gender, sexuality, and race are co-productive and co-dependent rather than additive, see Hames-García's *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity*.

[16] hooks clarifies how trans* people of color (particularly black trans* women) experience multiple and interconnecting forms of racial and gender-based trauma, which one should not imagine as separate. Though the texts I consider are produced by white individuals, in future work I intend to analyze how notions of "trauma" differently affect trans* people of color in ways that *trans** may not encompass.

[17] Social constructionism encourages us to see how all facets of culture—individual understandings of the body and personal identification, medical-scientific standards, stereotypical representations, and public policy—infuse *trans** with meaning. Considering the ways that identity is socially constructed forces us to question where knowledge comes from—who can speak, about what, and in what ways—as well as why certain discourses work (or perpetuate themselves) more fruitfully than others. Cultural meanings that "work" preserve "a hierarchy…that determines the distribution of privilege, status, and power" (Garland Thomson 6). In this way, social constructionism explains more than just the way things are; it also explains how individuals unwittingly allow detrimental practices to continue.

[18] Irene Gammel argues that "the confessional speech act is characterized by an imbalance between the confessor's power" and the "confessant's impotence" (5-6). In other words, as Gammel maintains, "the confession has little authority of its own, but needs the voice of an authority—religious, medical, psychological, or legal—to legitimize it and assign it a truth value" (5-6).

[19] At the same time, in the political realm, trans*-focused legislation is currently on the docket for at least half of all states, which would expand housing, education, and employment anti-discrimination laws to gender-diverse people. According to the Human Rights Campaign's website, nine states already include the right to change gender and name on documents, including identification cards and birth certificates, while another twenty-two states allow trans* individuals to change gender on birth certificates or driver's licenses. Six states have all-inclusive trans* health care laws, and at least as many specify "gender" in their anti-discrimination laws relating to education, employment, and housing. Though the passing of pro-trans* bills does not necessarily correlate with better treatment for trans* individuals, the fact that local, regional, and national U.S. governments are beginning to address trans* issues is a significant cultural change.

CHAPTER II

SIMPLE, SENSATIONAL, AND PATHOLOGICAL:

HOW DOMINANT DISCOURSES MISUNDERSTAND TRANS* LIVES

Trumpeted as the masculine "ex-GI" who sailed overseas to transform into a feminine "blonde beauty," Christine Jorgenson forced everyone in 1950s U.S. culture to newly consider gender—what it is, what it looks like, how it affects us, and how we affect it. Days after Jorgenson returned to the U.S. after undergoing gender reassignment surgery (GRS), *Time Magazine* touted her as a "national sensation" (qtd. in Steinmetz). Appearing on the front cover of every magazine in the country, Jorgenson became the symbol of a new gender epistemology. For decades, U.S. media obsessed over the fact that her mere existence destabilized dominant understandings of sex as fixed and natural.

With gaping mouths and flashing camera bulbs, American media transfixed its ravenous gaze on Jorgenson. Against her wishes, newspaper outlets, television talk shows, writers, and photographers relentlessly stalked her even after she hid from the public eye. Decidedly, as her 1967 autobiography makes clear, Jorgenson did not want to be the poster girl for transsexuality and thought the attention was preposterous and downright terrifying. In *Christine Jorgenson: A Personal Autobiography* (1967), Jorgenson recalls being unprepared for the media frenzy that began the moment she stepped off the plane onto American soil. Calling reporters "the enemy," Jorgenson explains, "My arrival was fully reported, sometimes in a friendly and sometimes hostile way: what I wore, what I said, what I looked like, my behavior, all with varying degrees of accuracy…If I sneezed, it was duly reported as an event" (60-1). Reporters commented

on everything from her fashion sense to how she held her hands, while discussing whether she was "really" now a woman. Because of the overwhelming and stifling media coverage she endured, Jorgenson went into hiding at her parents' home, refusing to declare her whereabouts. Though she never released her address, she was so infamous merely for transitioning from a socially masculine category to a recognizably feminine one that the post office continued to deliver her mail even though senders addressed their letters to "Christine Jorgenson" or "Miss Jorgenson" with no address (60). In the years following, Jorgenson spent much of her time reading the "twenty thousand letters [she] had received," which were largely penned by other trans* individuals who were desperate for Jorgenson's help: in her bewildered words, "I seemed to represent some sort of guidepost for accomplishment" (63).

Jorgenson's astute realization turns out to have been an understatement; for decades, media representations and medical discourse exploited Jorgenson's story as *the* example of "successful" transsexuality. Both Harry Benjamin—who wrote the original version of the "Standards of Care," a newer version of which medical practitioners still use—and Alfred Kinsey, famous for his research on sexual fluidity and behavior in men, used Jorgenson's story as the prototypical example when counseling other individuals seeking GRS. Trans* histories scholar Joanne Meyerowitz marks Jorgenson's notoriety as the watershed moment wherein the American public began to seriously consider transsexuality as a viable (though abnormal) life course brought about by surgical technologies and psychological research, which began to separate sex and gender.

If Jorgenson's notoriety contradicted her desire to simply become a "normal" American woman (as she articulated in her autobiography), we must question why she

became and, more than fifty years later, continues to be the poster girl for transsexuality. Why did journalists publicly and relentlessly hound Jorgenson? What was it about her or her narrative, in particular? One explanation might be that her story—from "ex-GI" to "blonde beauty"—represents an acceptable rendition of a trans* life. Before undergoing surgery, Jorgenson epitomized white masculinity: she joined the military, married a woman, and was widely known as a handsome "ladies man." After surgery, Jorgenson returned to the U.S. as the demure, feminine lady headlines promoted. Though other trans* individuals successfully transitioned in the 1950s and '60s, it is perhaps unsurprising that Jorgenson "represented some sort of guidepost for accomplishment": instead of signifying fluidity, Jorgenson's story reinforced binary gender ideals. In contrast to headlines, her iconic narrative did not destabilize cultural epistemologies or disrupt commonly held notions of what it meant to be a woman or man. Rather, her story (in particular, the way journalists reported it) established visual and conceptual frameworks, which mark trans* people as unnatural, pathological, and deceptive.[1] These instances of sensational journalism—reinforced by dominant medical paradigms—illuminate a familiarly othering story. Jorgenson's notoriety sets the stage for how contemporary dominant narratives continue to exploit trans* individuals. It will be useful to keep in mind the persistence with which Jorgenson's story echoes today; her nonconsensual popularity points to contemporary obsessions with stereotypical gender at the same time as it illuminates how mainstream media deny the desires of trans* people.

This chapter explores the historical frameworks that contextualize twenty-first century trans* narratives by focusing on three key discourse systems: practices of naming, medical legitimation, and popular media. First, I historicize contemporary

language to show how collective and individual practices of naming are intimately linked with conceptions of trans* legitimacy and political efficacy. Second, I explore the major historical texts and moments that influence current medical understandings of trans* identity. Through nineteenth and early twentieth century sexology, the "Standards of Care," and the latest versions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals for Mental Disorders,* I analyze how medical discourse has misunderstood and continues to misunderstand trans* people. Third, in light of these models, I consider the film *Let Me Die a Woman* (1978) to articulate how media texts incorporate medical ideologies by similarly sensationalizing and simplifying trans* lives. Along with Chapter I, this chapter frames what the rest of the dissertation argues: because of the transphobic culture in which they are produced, trans* narratives have been and continue to be liberating *and* constraining for the subjects who create them.

What's in a Name? Language Systems and Common Issues

According to Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1997), gender is "omnirelevant" (qtd. in Lucal 783). From the categories and pronouns we use to how we relate to others, gender influences our every interaction. In its omnirelevance, gender permeates all realms of cultural production most significantly through language. In the English language, it is very difficult to abandon gender when referring to individuals who fall outside normative, binary ideals.[2] If English-speakers incorporated gender-neutral pronouns, we might not feel such a strong need to gender others with whom we come in contact on a daily basis. D.G. Allen illustrates the detriment in not having more pronoun options: "description is the creation of difference, difference entails classification, and

classification involves power" (66). This dearth in descriptive language and classification is deeply dangerous. In naming others, we also unwittingly place them within a social system of privilege and oppression and, in turn, position ourselves in relation. This difficulty "creates an obvious problem for those people who do not wish to be labeled as male or female, as well as a difficulty for those who wish to address or refer to gender-diverse people with respect" (Merryfeather 142). Relying on binary gender and thus gender-specific pronouns is a glaring problem in academia and popular culture and yet the English language continues to offer few alternatives.

Though some individuals lay claim to the pronouns ze/hir/hirs and incorporate them in their everyday interactions, most English-speakers do not recognize them as intelligible options. As *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* clarifies,

> the project to supplement the English pronoun system has proved to be an ongoing exercise in futility. Pronouns are one of the most basic components of a language, and most speakers appear to have little interest in adopting invented ones. This may be because in most situations people can get by using the plural pronoun they or using other constructions that combine existing pronouns, such as he/she or he or she.

This explanation completely erases the lived experience of trans* individuals who cannot "get by" in most situations without trying to pass as one gender or another (which may or may not be how ze identifies). This explanation also relies on dualistic distinctions of male/female in its insistence on "he/she or he or she." Though some trans* people have more than "a little interest in adopting invented" pronouns, *American Heritage* is

unfortunately right in that it is an anomaly to see nontrans* people use radical gender-neutral pronouns even when trans* people request their usage.

In addition to challenges surrounding pronoun use, academic divisions have occurred in relation to identity terms. In 2002, defining "both/neither" as a *transgender* position that refuses to "fit within categories of woman and man" whereas "either/or" refers to a *transsexual* imperative to "pass convincingly as either a man or a woman," Katrina Roen addressed yet perpetuated problematic language formations (505).[3] Similarly, in 2006, Eli R. Green argued that someone who identifies as *transgender* "lives as a member of a gender different than that expected based on anatomical sex" (Green 9). Green's use of "different" highlights the fact that there are more than two viable gender categories. In contrast, one who identifies as *transsexual* "identifies psychologically as a gender/sex opposite from the one to which they were assigned at birth," and hormonally and surgically transforms hir body to match hir internal self (Green 10). Green's use of "opposite" assumes that there are only two, widely dissimilar gender options. Judging from these contradictions, it is not shocking that theorists who privilege one term over another conceptually clash in their goals and perspectives.

Unfortunately, trans* theorists sometimes purport that *either* transsexual *or* transgender people are the "real," "authentic" or "political" gender rebels, which defames the other term (and those who identify as such). For example, Jack Halberstam, Susan Stryker, Leslie Feinberg, and Kate Bornstein (among others) purport that those of us who claim a *transgender* or *trans* identity are more political. Others, like Erin Calhoun Davis, Viviane K. Namaste, and C. Jacob Hale (not surprisingly, all self-identified transsexual writers), argue that emphasizing transgender fluidity "insufficiently recognizes the

embodied experiences and implications of compulsory gender performance" (Calhoun Davis 98). The dichotomies that flourish in these debates (between stable/fluid, hegemonic/subversive, and stealth/out, for instance) pervade trans* theory to a ruinous extent: to focus on hegemony's control is to neglect to see the power trans* people have over their lives. As AnaLouise Keating argues, "when we base identities and alliances on oppositionally defined categories, we establish and police boundaries—boundaries that shut us in with those we've deemed 'like' 'us' and boundaries that close us off from those whom we assume to be different" (247). Eli S. Clare expounds these contentious issues: "in trans communities we talk a lot about disclosure, but so often that talk is full of misunderstanding and accusation. Folks who choose to be 'stealth' are accused of shame, and folks who choose to be 'out' are told they'll regret it later" (263). This damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't narrative does not adequately represent the multi-variant lived experiences of trans* people with diverse perspectives. These tense debates divide like-minded people who could work together towards a common goal, whether or not their chosen identity terms are the same.

Though a shared vocabulary is necessary, most scholars are divided on how to go about producing such a vocabulary. In 2000, Namaste proposed that separations between the terms are necessary so that transsexual (but not transgender) individuals can survive in a violent world (*Invisible Lives* 105). During the same year, Halberstam and Judith Butler pushed for inclusivity and the political advantages of identifying as transgender rather than transsexual. In 2008, Lucas Cassidy Crawford advocated for prying open the terms *transgender* and *transsexual* "in a way that might allow more people to belong to them or to desire them" (130). In essence, Crawford called for the definitions of these

terms to change but not the terms themselves. In contrast, in 2009, Calhoun Davis argued: the "postmodern positioning of transgender as disrupting gender regulations, transcending gender boundaries, and revealing the artificiality of gender identification tends to overlook transsexed individuals' subjective experiences of gender realness" (123). These dialogues exemplify how complicated and inflammatory these debates can be in that they consistently rely on the very humanity of the scholars and individuals who debate them.[4]

What these deliberations show is that all identity terms are fundamentally flawed and carry with them so much baggage that they "often require individuals to downplay or obscure parts of their experiences or history" (Elliot 8-9). In this regard, A. Finn Enke has helped me to understand the stakes of not having any good words. I agree and follow Enke's line of thinking in my own work: "I am humbled by the extent to which we exceed the English language. Words fail utterly, as do all conventions of naming the variety of ways we live with gender" (244). Like Enke, I have a "vested interest in keeping the categories woman, man, and trans* wide open, their flexible morphologies blending into one another and becoming accessible in more ways than we can even imagine" (244). Heeding Enke's suggestions, I will consistently stress the flexibility of language and, above all, keep these categories open rather than fixed.

Moreover, within academia, scholars sometimes use *trans** as a metaphor, example, or case study—something to incorporate for the betterment of an argument and then abandon—with little consideration of the realities of trans* people. Halberstam documents the various ways scholars take up "transgender": "the transgender body becomes a symbol par excellence for flexibility" as well as a "form of rigidity, an

insistence on particular forms of recognition" (*In a Queer Time* 120). As a theoretical category, "transgender" symbolizes a "different form of temporality" or spatiality, which renders trans* people as invisible or abstract (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 120). Even trans*-identified theorists sometimes metaphorize trans* identity: for example, Bobby Jean Noble offers "transgender" as a "site" in which the "imperatives" of a binary gender system crystallize. Stryker makes a similar move by posing trans* as "phenomena," which can be mined for meaning ("Transgender Feminism" 253).[5] To treat trans* identity as a metaphor unethically represents the lived reality of flesh-and-blood individuals. Resisting this tactic, I highlight the ways that trans* writers narrate and represent their lives in their own words and images.

A Deviation Rather than a Difference: Historical Constructions of Trans Identity*

For more than 150 years, sexologists, psychiatrists, and social workers have characterized trans* people as classifiable objects in need of intervention. Sexology, "the study and classification of sexual behaviours, identities and relations," developed as early as the 1870s throughout Britain, Europe, and North America. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Magnus Hirschfeld, among others, "displaced the old view of sexual practices as sinful—and hence under the jurisdiction of the church—and imposed a new view of sexual perversions as disease and/or manifestations of degeneracy, and thus under the jurisdiction of medicine" (Bland 2). Undoubtedly, sexologists did not adequately take into account the actual stories of their trans* patients. In their "case studies," doctors re-narrated patients' experiences as evidence of an "abnormal" personhood. In these instances, doctors uncritically classified patients using sexist, racist,

and classist criteria. In this section, I outline several of the most ubiquitous theories of the early twentieth century with special emphasis on those theories that continue to inform medical discourses. To make these claims, I investigate how U.S. medical models have constructed trans* identity throughout the last 150 years.

Throughout the last two centuries, cultural narratives of gender diversity and queer sexuality construct trans* identity as a deviation—rather than a difference—from an idealized norm. In other words, social epistemologies construct transsexuality through ideas of (ab)normalcy. According to Lennard J. Davis, "normal" is a relatively recent term, appearing in English discourse in the late nineteenth century (10).[6] Davis argues that the use of "normal" paralleled rising interests in "compiling information about the state" (11). As scientists compiled data, "normalcy" began to define individuals whom they deemed "physically" and "morally average" (Davis 11). This new construct scientifically justified a middle class in America and Europe through capitalist markets, which sought consumers through fear-laden discourses: "abnormality" could be "cured" through conspicuous consumption. Sexologists understood gender diversity as falling outside "normal" constructions of selfhood, which they themselves defined.[7]

Sexologists relied on biological determinism and heteronormativity to explain "normal" forms of gender, sex, and sexuality (Bland 13). In his 1894 essay "Man and Woman," for instance, Ellis classifies human sex characteristics as "zoological fact," which rooted biology in a (culturally conceived) procreative milieu (24). In a subsequent 1899 essay, Ellis repeatedly refers to women as "the female animal" while referring only to men as "the male" (34). In his conception, female individuals (who would later be referred to as women) are responsible for perpetuating the human species and little else.

Because Ellis does not similarly conceive of males as "animals," he affords men a level of humanity, which is unavailable to women. Ellis creates a system of hierarchy that relies on significant differences between male and female sexes. Similarly, Ivan Bloch relied on evolutionary language and progress narratives, declaring that men and women are different "species" (30). In these views, all men were above all women just as all humans were above all chimpanzees or rats (Bloch 30). Further confusing gender roles and characteristics (as well as sexual desire and behavior), Otto Weinenger in "Sex and Character" (1903) argues, "the female principle is…nothing more than sexuality; the male principle is sexual and something more" (25). Relying on Plato and Aristotle's theories of gender hierarchy, Weinenger claims that "the male principle is the active agent, the female principle the passive matter on which the form is pressed…Woman is the material on which man acts…Woman is matter, is nothing" (27). Not only does Weinenger reduce biological sex to heterosexual relations, he also renders the female form as a lack. Female-bodied women in this formation are nonexistent without male-bodied men.[8]

In classifying sex characteristics, sexologists also documented "deviant" forms of sexuality: non-heterosexual, non-procreative, and overly carnal proclivities. Any activity that diverged from the norm was initially labeled "sex inversion." By the early twentieth century, "sex inversion" became synonymous with what we now understand as homosexuality, "denoting a sexuality where sexual desire was directed towards a member of the same sex" (Doan and Waters 41). Nevertheless, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' 1864 writings "gave rise to the paradigm of sexual inverts" as members of a "third" or "intermediate" sex "between male and female" (Terry 43, 16). In this discourse,

sexologists "collapsed" sex, gender, and sexuality (Terry 36). As Jennifer Terry shows, sex "inverts" who desired same sex partners were not rationalized as homosexual in the contemporary sense of the term; instead, sexologists imagined them as "characteristic of the 'opposite' sex" based on their abnormal "bodies, conduct, attitudes, tastes, and personalities" (35). Rather than theorize gender-diversity, sexologists aimed to assuage taboos surrounding homosexuality. If inverts' brains did not match their bodies, then they in fact exhibited heterosexual tendencies in "mistaken" bodies: "for a woman to desire a woman sexually, she must have some male characteristics, and for a man to desire a man he must be, in some way, female" (Terry 35). Reinforcing heteronormativity, sexologists understood sex inverts as having been born in the wrong body.

This inversion category was both liberating and constraining to those with same sex desires; though it proved to be a framework for understanding same sex desire as recognizable and viable, theories of inversion reinscribed homosexuality as abnormal, pathological, and, in some cases, criminal.[9] Krafft-Ebing, for example, associated inversion with a "perversion…afflicted with pathologies of the will" (Terry 48). The most prominent theories of the time understood inversion as a symbol for "mental instability, and moral decadence" (Terry 50). Responding to Krafft-Ebing, Ellis assumed that same sex desire was a "predisposition developed in an individual's early embryonic life" (Terry 50). At the same time, instead of imagining same sex desire as pathological, Ellis stressed the "moral fortitude of homosexual men and noted their superior artistic abilities and intelligence" (Terry 51).

Though some sexologists attempted to rationalize sexual diversity and remove the stigma surrounding homosexuality, they actually reinforced the notion that one's

anatomy determines one's desire; in other words, individuals who desired same sex partners were heterosexual *gender* deviants. Ellis, Ulrichs, and Weininger argued that "the homosexual" was someone who "belonged to one sex as far as his or her body was concerned, but who belonged mentally and emotionally to the opposite sex" (Doan and Waters 43). Sexual inversion, then, was not a precursor to homosexuality but rather the predecessor to contemporary notions of transsexuality, in which one's sex, rather than sexual desire, is inverted. Above all, sexologists rooted "inversion" in binary categories of man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, and normal/abnormal.

In one representative study, Ellis documents "Miss D.," who he diagnoses as a "sexual invert." Before an extensive narrative written by Miss D., Ellis introduces hir:

> Miss D., actively engaged in the practice of her profession, aged 40. Heredity good, nervous system sound, general health on the whole satisfactory. Development feminine but manner and movements somewhat boyish…Hips normal, nates small, sexual organs showing some approximation toward infantile type with large labia minora and probably small vagina. Tendency to development of hair on body and especially lower limbs. (91)

Consistent with other case studies, of which there are hundreds, Ellis foregrounds Miss D.'s biological and anatomical characteristics over hir social roles and experiences. Using subjective and assumptive language (for example, "scanty" menstruation and "probably small vagina"), Ellis places himself as Miss D.'s decoder. Ellis sets out, above all, to diagnose Miss D. in order to rationalize her inability to fit into "normal" categories of sex and sexuality. His attention to superficial attributes underscores how culturally biased this

discourse was: though sexologists worked to establish sexology as a hard science (much as craniometry had been in the nineteenth century), sexologists invented sex and gender schema of the "normal" and then measured all patients in relation to it. In this way, Ellis and other sexologists enacted an epistemology of sexuality and gender that figured the individual as an object of study, which could be measured and evaluated based on morphological and psychological categories experts themselves created.

Sexologists' "research subjects," however, sometimes resisted these theories based on their own subjective experience. For example, Miss D.'s personal narrative tells a radically different story, which does not foreground anatomy but, rather, identity and cultural gender roles:

> ever since I can remember anything at all I could never think of myself as a girl and I was in perpetual trouble…When I was 5 or 6 years old I began to say to myself that, whatever anyone said, if I was not a boy at any rate I was not a girl. This has been my unchanged conviction all through my life…When I could only crawl my absorbing interest was hammers and carpet-nails. Before I could walk I begged to be put on horses' backs, so that I seem to have been born with the love of tools and animals which has never left me. (qtd. in Ellis 91)

Miss D. bases hir self-understanding as a boy—or at least "not a girl"—on the fact that ze never desired to do stereotypically feminine activities. Though at one point in the narrative Miss D. writes of the "physical backwardness which nature, probably in mercy, bestowed," ze at no other point mentions menstruation, body hair, hip or vagina size, or any of the other sex characteristics Ellis details (96). This discrepancy between "expert"

opinion and the patient's narrative is a common feature in sexology. Although sexologists often printed patients' unchanged narratives, they did not fully take them into account in their diagnoses and documentation. This practice of re-appropriating patients' narratives continues in medical discourse today and is a topic to which I soon return.

Furthermore, as Elizabeth Reis clarifies, historical understandings of individuals who displayed differences of sexual development (which we now understand as *intersex*) were also wrapped up in cultural constructions of homosexuality. If a patient's body was typical but ze desired the "wrong" sex, then ze was thought to have an intersex brain. If a patient's body was atypical in that hir "genital conformation" was "ambiguous," ze was considered a "potential homosexua[l]" (Reis 55). This link between intersexuality and homosexuality increasingly allowed sexologists to "impose a genital conformation that suited their prejudices against same sex unions" by developing "surgical techniques" to "correct" patients' bodies (Reis 56). Sexologists would later use these same surgical techniques to "correct" intersex infants and transsexual individuals. Relying on heterosexual mandates of penetrative sex, sexologists routinely inspected or guessed the genitals of their patients to determine their "true" sex (as Ellis does in reference to Miss D.'s "probably small vagina"). In this example, Ellis foregrounds Miss D.'s "probably small vagina" to rationalize hir masculine attributes as anatomical and to suggest that ze is incapable of engaging in heterosexual penetrative sex. In these ways, Ellis conflates sex, gender, sexuality, and anatomy to pathologize Miss D., whose body, desires, and social roles Ellis defined as culturally "abnormal."

At the same time, theories of inversion cannot be separated from sexologists' understandings of race and class. Many sexologists, Ellis included, believed that sex

inversion was rampant among "lower races" and "lower classes" (210). Others, like C.G. Seligmann, associated sex inversion with European and "Oriental luxury" or "advanced civilization" (213). Seligmann's 1902 essay, "Sexual Inversion Among Primitive Races," claims that "few details of sexual inversion and perversion are known among savages" because "primitive" peoples were so "uncontaminated by external influences that even white men's diseases had not yet obtained a footing among them" (213-15). Seligmann's use of "savage" emphasizes a colonial epistemology of selfhood and sexuality, which foregrounds detrimentally racist ideologies. As Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien show, "the personage of the savage was developed as the Other of civilization and one of the first 'proofs' of this otherness was the nakedness of the savage, the visibility of its sex" (qtd. in Somerville 5). Whether sexologists associated inversion with Euro-American decadence or nonwhite "savagery," inversion narratives relied heavily on individual sexologist's assumptions of bodily value and cultural meaning. Sexologists' accounts, whatever their intent, must be considered with intense skepticism for "each was inextricable from the ideological biases of the day" (Somerville 21).

In *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture,* Siobhan B. Somerville brilliantly documents how racial and sexual categories emerged concomitantly: "this early work in sexology, poised at the crossroads of anthropometry and psychoanalysis, illustrates the ways in which the development of new sexual categories was mediated by methodologies and conclusions borrowed from previous studies of racial difference" (10). Racialized postulations concerning the "heightened surveillance of bodies in a racially segregated culture demanded a specific kind of logic," which was largely white supremacist (Somerville 10). As Somerville

explores, sexologists "othered" sex inverts and nonwhite people using similar tactics. The anatomical measurements sexologists gathered share a key assumption with the anatomical measurements "race crusaders" gathered: the body, in and of itself, is a classifiable text, with "various keys or languages available for reading its symbolic codes" (Somerville 23). Sexual and racial classifications, then as well as now, should not and cannot be separated.

Further, class assumptions permeated sexology texts. For example, Dan Irving documents how early constructions of trans* and intersex bodies "exemplify the reciprocal relationship between economic regimes of accumulation and sex/gender categories" (18). Not only were sexologists concerned with anatomical "abnormalities" and racial characteristics, they were also concerned with their patients' class, particularly in regards to their family's "occupation and social status" (Irving 18). In the example of Miss D., Ellis begins hir case study by assuring the reader that Miss D. is "actively engaged in the practice of her profession" and that hir "heredity" is "good" (92). Other sexologists similarly focused on the capitalist productivity of their patients, displaying more negative views of those who were incapable of working or who had lower paying jobs. Sexologists disciplined gender-diverse individuals because they imagined them as non-productive citizens and social parasites who were incapable of "contribut[ing] to the growth, development, and global expansion of the domestic economy" (Irving 19).

Even in case studies that feature wealthy, "productive" patients, sexologists tended to see them as more "valuable" if they did not act on their same sex desires or cross-gender identifications. Sexologists viewed inverts as "valuable" if they at least pretended to enjoy reproductive sex and identified as the sex assigned to them at birth.

Consistently focusing on the invert's "dependency"—on parents, extended family, friends, or even alcohol and drugs—sexologists firmly linked cross-gender identification with an inability to achieve capitalistic independence or American morality: "Within a heteronormative capitalist society organized around binary sex/gender and exploitative labor relations, transsexuality did not *work*" (Irving 22).

In relation to their racist and classist undertones, inversion narratives of the early twentieth century clearly inform later articulations of transsexuality, which Harry Benjamin and others voiced in the late 1940s and '50s. Sexology case studies, which narrativize inversion, subsequently "enabled transgendered subjects to speak their stories and give transgendered shape to their lives" (Prosser and Storr 75). At the same time, inversion narratives of the turn of the twentieth century influenced some trans* people to try to "convince physicians that they were, in fact, intersexed, so that they could get the surgery and hormones that they wanted to effect gender reassignment" (Reis 203). Even today, Reis argues, "there is a growing contingent of transsexuals who take the position that their intersex condition is invisible because something atypical in their brain necessitates the need for transsexual surgery" (203). Narration of one's life history became and continues to be a key function of transsexuality.

Individuals who identify in gender-diverse ways are agents of a particular kind of knowledge and yet, at the same time, claiming an identity "places" the individual in a system of classification and control. As Michel Foucault clarifies, "the truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power" (59). "Through a clinical codification of the inducement to speak" (Foucault 65), the confession "I feel like a man" or "I am a man" would become *the* symptom of

transsexuality, “the sex changing of the body utterly dependent on such narrativization” (Prosser and Storr 75). Because current cultural understandings of trans* identity continue to use sexology’s tenets, contemporary trans* narratives repeat these liberating yet constraining tensions.

Contemporary Medical Legitimation Discourses

Though current trans* epistemologies do not solely rely on the pathological rhetoric of the previous century, twenty-first century medical legitimation discourses continue to echo these frameworks. Because the U.S. medical establishment “enforces the duality of gender through definitive sex assignment, intersex sexual assignment surgeries, and reliance on the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care,” there are few “alternative options” (Green 236). The Standards of Care (SOC), more aptly called the World Professional Association for Transgender Health’s (WPATH) “Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People,” is a 110-page document that therapists, surgeons, social workers, and doctors consult when making decisions that affect trans* individuals’ health care. WPATH, an international group that consists of thirty-four scholars, determines when and why doctors should grant trans* people access to hormone therapy, surgery, puberty inhibitors, reproductive options, and other forms of bodywork. Though WPATH specifies that the SOC are “based on the best available science and expert professional consensus,” it is unclear whether members themselves identify as trans* (1).

Throughout the SOC, WPATH touts its respect for trans* individuals yet consistently uses passive and pathological language to describe trans* patients. For example, WPATH outlines its "principles," the first three of which ask professionals to:

> exhibit respect for patients with nonconforming gender identities (do not pathologize differences in gender identity or expression); provide care…that affirms patients' gender identities and reduces the distress of gender dysphoria…[and] become knowledgeable about the health care needs of transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people, including the benefits and risks of treatment options. (5)

Within the same breath, WPATH asks professionals to not "pathologize differences" and, at the same time, incites professionals to "reduc[e] the distress of gender dysphoria" (5), which is by definition a pathology as outlined in the most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-V*). WPATH places medical practitioners in an impossible position: doctors must document a diagnosis and yet not pathologize that diagnosis. Though the SOC indicate that trans* people experience "symptoms" that are "socially induced" and "not inherent," WPATH relies on the *DSM-V* to argue that a "cure" is "medically necessary," thereby reinforcing clinical trans* epistemologies (4-7). A clinical trans* epistemology, then, is one that exclusively understands trans* people through pathological and scientific frameworks. Trans* people who fall outside these frameworks are thus suspicious or invalid.

Furthermore, within a clinical trans* epistemology, though "decisions about hormones" are "first and foremost a client's decision," the detailed and restrictive "eligibility" requirements WPATH outlines suggest otherwise (26).[10] Some of these

guidelines are as follows: before a professional can prescribe hormones, patients must see a therapist and receive a Gender Dysphoria (GD) diagnosis as listed in the *DSM-V*. Based on these referrals, professionals must "assess eligibility" of clients based on "identifying characteristics," the "referring health professional's relationship with the client…[and] the clinical rationale for supporting the client's request" (WPATH 26). Individuals who wish to medically transition must explicitly indicate that they will shift to the "opposite" sex and remain that sex thereafter. In addition, to qualify for GRS, which WPATH defines as "effective and medically necessary," an individual must "liv[e] in a gender role that is congruent with their gender identity," and receive hormones for a period of twelve months (54-60).[11] WPATH specifies that health professionals should "clearly document a patient's experience in the gender role in the medical chart, including the start date of living full time for those who are preparing for genital surgery" (61). In some situations, if needed, health professionals may "request verification that this criterion has been fulfilled" (WPATH 61). In light of these restrictions, trans* people who do not want surgery or who identify in non-binary ways must lie to therapists if they choose to seek bodywork.

Because the SOC outline what doctors should do *and* what patients have to do, C. Jacob Hale argues that WPATH sidesteps the American Medical Association's ethical treatment requirements: "respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice" ("Ethical Problems" 492-94). By specifying how trans* individuals should identify so that they can receive "medically necessary" care, WPATH subjects trans* patients to standards "that no other class of prospective patients is subjected to" (Hale, "Ethical Problems" 493). In this way, doctors grant trans* individuals "far less

autonomy" than any other category of adult patients, which—above all else—is an inherently unjust practice (Hale, "Ethical Problems" 493).

These intrinsic contradictions underscore the ambivalence at the root of the SOC and, detrimentally, at the root of trans* health care. WPATH's recommendations are suspicious of trans* people as experts of their own identities and bodies. WPATH consistently universalizes the conception that trans* individuals exist within incorrect or "wrong" bodies and thus because their identities cannot change, their bodies must. This alienating narrative disregards the important social aspects of trans* experience, particularly for trans* women who negotiate a binary gender system in which maleness and masculinity are more highly valued than femaleness and femininity. What's more, the medical distinction between mind and body "presupposes a self that is claimed as the authentic core of being," which disregards the importance of phenomenological understanding experienced *through* and *with* one's body (Sullivan 107). Inherently, like early sexology texts, the SOC divide people by category, emphasize how bodies should be fixed to conform to cultural (rather than scientific) standards, and condemn those who do not or cannot succeed.

At the root of the SOC, WPATH encourages practitioners to be cautious of trans* individuals' claims, even going so far as to note that professionals "may communicate with individuals who have related to the patient in an identity-congruent gender role, or request documentation of a legal name and/or gender marker change" (61). Even if mental health practitioners do not follow these guidelines, they are still encouraged to determine "whether gender variant prospective patients should be allowed to act on their decisions" (Hale, "Ethical Problems" 502). In this way, providers are allowed to break

the client's trust in order to find out if ze is "telling the truth." Hale argues that these standards "violat[e] the principle of respect for autonomy," since practitioners can breach confidentiality standards by seeking information from patients' friends and family who may or may not know about (let alone support) the patient's transition ("Ethical Problems" 491). Moreover, these provisions do not take into account the fact that some people cannot cross-live without fear of violence, harassment, loss of employment, housing, or child custody, and other extenuating circumstances that may or may not relate to identifying as trans*.

To be sure, part of the reason why WPATH pathologizes trans* individuals is due to the fact that the *DSM-V* includes Gender Dysphoria (GD) – previously called Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the *DSM-IV* – in its diagnoses, even after widespread debate over its inclusion. In the *DSM-V*, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) makes several changes to the previous diagnosis: the APA characterizes GD as a disorder that produces "strong desires to be treated as the other gender or to be rid of one's sex characteristics" (17), whereas the APA characterized GID as "the desire to be, or the insistence that one is, of the other sex" (576). By specifying gender as opposed to sex—and separating gender from "sex characteristics"—the APA takes one small step towards understanding gender as a spectrum rather than a binary. Still, the APA fails to explicitly define sex and gender distinctions and thus the change—however productive—does not rightfully educate potentially ignorant practitioners. In both diagnoses, though the language shifts, the "symptoms" rely on rigid assumptions, particularly in regard to ideal gender roles. The APA maintains that "removing stigma" is an important reason why Gender Dysphoria—a "more appropriate and consistent" term that "removes the

connotation that the patient is 'disordered'" replaced Gender Identity Disorder (576). Though this goal is laudable, the *DSM-V* continues to pathologize trans* people; no matter what the clinical title, the APA reinforces a medicalized understanding of trans* identity as abnormal yet treatable.[12]

Though WPATH suggests that GD causes or characterizes trans* identity, GD and trans* identity are separate understandings of gender diversity. Individuals who experience GD tend to feel persistent, long-term distress due to their inability to inhabit prescribed gender norms. An individual who experiences GD often seeks medical care to hormonally and surgically alter hir body so that it is more in line with hir sense of self. To be sure, some trans* people experience GD and, in these cases, medical intervention is a rightful response. Nevertheless, many trans* people never or rarely experience distress based on gender. Some trans* individuals celebrate their gender and do not believe that medical intervention is necessary or even effective. Because WPATH doesn't separate GD from trans* identity, the SOC suggest that trans* people more often than not experience discomfort and psychological trauma. Conflating trans* identity and GD, WPATH encourages practitioners to pathologize those who do not fit contemporary conceptions of "normal" gender even if they do not experience symptoms of GD.

Many trans* people choose not to follow the SOC by socially transitioning but not medically altering the body. For instance, some trans* people choose not to medically transition to maintain fertility so as to have children of their own. Some trans* men maintain that they do not want to lose their hair by ingesting testosterone, since hair is an important aspect of identity. Some trans* men like their breasts and the pleasure they experience through them and do not want to risk losing this feeling post-surgery. Some

trans* people of all identifications—men, women, and non-binary—find pleasure in the genitals they have and do not desire to alter them to fit cultural assumptions, even if they identify as a gender that does not correlate with their anatomy. Others cite the undeveloped skills of surgeons in fashioning penises that may or may not be able to get hard or penetrate, if so desired. Some trans* people begin hormone treatments and later choose to lower the dose or go off treatment altogether, citing a plethora of reasons from depression and financial burden to queer or trans* invisibility. All of these and many other factors contribute to whether trans* people choose to seek medical care and one narrative or interpretation should not be valued over any other.[13]

Further, the SOC are built around specific ideologies, which may or may not relate to the views of the practitioners who use them. Undoubtedly, medical professionals do not inflexibly follow these requirements, especially in relation to recommendations that encourage doctors to "verify" a patient's ability to pass as the "other" gender. Many physicians rightfully view the SOC as suggested principles rather than required mandates and help their patients in whatever way they see fit, even if that means that they abandon WPATH's guidelines. In my critiques of the SOC and *DSM-V*, I am not suggesting that individual doctors who treat trans* patients are responsible for perpetuating trans* oppression. Rather, the medical establishment's sexist, racist, ableist, and classist ideologies are responsible for disenfranchising and unethically treating trans*, nonwhite, poor, and disabled people.

At the same time, not all trans* people see these medical mandates as negative. Many trans* people find the SOC to be a beneficial document that lays out trans* health care practices, which have for so long been opaque and unreachable, particularly for

patients who are not upper class, white, and heterosexual. Some trans* people find value in receiving a diagnosis that helps them explain (to others and/or to themselves) their experiences and feelings in clearer ways. Some trans* people find solace in being able to tell friends, family, and coworkers that their discontent comes from researched criteria developed by medical experts, which advises cross-living, hormone treatment, and surgery. The SOC and *DSM-V* sanction easier access to bodywork, particularly in the states that allow insurance companies to cover or partially pay for these expenses. Disregarding these responses also erases poor trans* people and trans* people who live in rural areas who would not otherwise be able to access the care they need. At the same time, some trans* people critique WPATH's health care directives yet support doctors' practices, particularly for individuals who seek bodywork to feel more comfortable in social situations. To say that the SOC and *DSM-V* are always detrimental or limiting does not take into account the diverse and wide-ranging responses trans* people exhibit.

I emphasize the problems associated with the SOC so as to open up more possibilities for trans* existence. Because the SOC act as a barrier to self-identification and self-fashioning outside of the gender binary, and because the SOC limit who has access to medical care, WPATH does not significantly address the diversity of trans* lives. Essentially, WPATH erases trans* individuals who do not desire bodywork but who want to (or need to) legally change their names and gender classifications. Above all, trans* people should be able to take hormones, receive surgery, and legally change names and genders without rigid procedures that sometimes give practitioners more control than is medically necessarily.

Because of their widespread impact, we need to question medical discourses that pathologize trans* identity. Why do contemporary U.S. medical epistemologies understand trans* identity as an abnormality in need of fixing when so many trans* people narrate their experiences in alternative ways? How might cultural, legal, and political understandings of trans* identity shift if WPATH and the APA categorized trans* people as gender-diverse rather than gender-deviant? How might trans* health care improve if WPATH rearticulated gender as a spectrum rather than a binary? Taking into account the very real need for trans* health care mandates, particularly for those who seek hormone therapy and surgery, how might medical discourses reimagine gender diversity in ways that do not normalize heterosexuality and sex/gender congruence nor minimize the cultural aspects of trans* identity?

As I will discuss in Chapters III-V, in response to medical legitimation discourses, many contemporary trans* life writers reclaim agency by identifying in ways that depathologize and celebrate trans* identity. Many trans* life writers blatantly defy the SOC in narrative and in practice. Others submit to the medical model's normalizing gaze yet subvert the gaze back onto itself, illuminating the contradictions within an institution that relies on "fixing" trans* bodies that are not biologically disordered. Through these simple yet profound tactics, many contemporary trans* filmmakers, autobiographers, and digital storytellers claim radical epistemologies of trans* identity.

Since contemporary U.S. culture glorifies medical knowledge as objective and universal, medical epistemologies infiltrate and influence all realms of life. Medical discourse impacts a wider cultural landscape than the doctor's office, hospital, or clinic can encompass. In other words, WPATH's recommendations and the APA's inclusion of

GD affect all trans* individuals, whether or not they request bodywork. At the same time, these medical discourses affect nontrans* individuals as well by constricting cultural understanding of what gender is and could be. One common theme, for example, which appears in both medical literature and popular media is an emphasis on trans* bodies to the detriment of trans* epistemologies. By emphasizing bodies, medical discourse and popular media reinforce trans* people as objects who exist for nontrans* consumers. In medical and popular representations, trans* people have the "added incitement to show" and not just to speak, if they are allowed to speak at all (Heaney 18). To more fully illuminate how medical conceptions filter into media depictions, in the next section I explore an outdated though popular documentary film, *Let Me Die a Woman*. Though *Let Me Die* was produced in 1978, many of the ideologies it incorporates continue in quieter or hidden forms within contemporary representations of trans* lives.

Let Me Die a Woman: How Medical Ideologies Filter into Media Texts

Though many films and independent productions before 1978 include trans* characters and themes, Doris Wishman's cult classic, *Let Me Die a Woman,* was the first documentary to do so. Though *Let Me Die* tries to represent trans* identity, it instead shows how medical professionals appropriate trans* people's stories. This film documents how doctors "fix" trans* bodies to be more in line with what a cisgender, heteronormative, white, middle class audience finds comforting. Following the exploitative history of trans* treatment and representation in U.S. public discourse, *Let Me Die* literally and figuratively uses "trans bodies for display as though there was

something to be learned simply by looking" and renders medical discourse the be-all and end-all of trans* identity (Heaney 17).[14]

Dubbed a "proto-documentary" and "exploitation film," *Let Me Die* includes several interviews with Deborah Hartin, a transsexual woman who recently underwent GRS, interspersed with sex change doctor Leo Wollman's views of transsexuality, his "patients'" stories (re-told through Wollman), semi-explicit pornographic scenes, and sensational surgery footage. Throughout the film, Wollman equates trans* identity with anatomy, confuses sex, gender, and sexuality (not unlike sexologists a century ago and WPATH today), and routinely asks his patients to disrobe so that he may display various parts of their bodies for viewers. Because of these tactics, the trans* individuals in the film become interchangeable bodies with no personal narrative.

Let Me Die suggests that transsexuality is a unified category with particular rules and outcomes that are, above all, determined by experts like Wollman. The film tellingly begins with the image of Hartin, a feminine, conventionally beautiful Puerto Rican-American trans* woman, as she wakes in her bed (see Image 2.1), stands in front of a mirror topless, and then dresses (see Image 2.2). Hartin's soft, breathy voice narrates the scene: she explains that she "loves her life" as a woman and "loves clothes," as if these two aspects of her identity are one and the same or, at the least, that being a woman means paying particular attention to appearances. Hartin sits down to paint her nails and slowly applies makeup (see Images 2.3 and 2.4). Hartin's narration continues: "last year, I was a man." She resumes gazing at herself in the mirror when a male voice—which we later understand to be Wollman's—interrupts her and the scene shifts to disjointed images of Greek statues, paintings, 1950s photography, and children playing in the park.

Wollman explains, “we are male or female…but perhaps it is not that simple. Imagine if you will, being a man trapped in the body of a woman…before this, anatomy was destiny [but] we have made genetic men into real women.” As Wollman’s voice speaks, Hartin again appears onscreen reading a magazine; she touches her pleated skirt, fiddles with her hair, and looks at her newly painted nails. These images of Hartin’s silent attention to her appearance, paired with Wollman’s direct address to a clueless nontrans* audience, trivializes Hartin’s identity as a woman and, at the same time, casts doubt on what it means to be a “real” woman in 1970s U.S. culture.

Image 2.1: In *Let Me Die a Woman,* Hartin wakes up in a see-through nightie.

Image 2.2: In the opening sequence of *Let Me Die a Woman,* a topless Hartin gets dressed for the camera.

Image 2.3: In the opening sequence of *Let Me Die a Woman,* Hartin paints her nails.

Image 2.4: In the opening sequence of *Let Me Die a Woman,* Hartin applies lipstick.

The emphasis on Wollman as the ultimate narrator who is more capable of understanding transsexuality than those who experience its "symptoms" sets a medical, colonial tone to an otherwise experimental film. When Wollman's voice eclipses Hartin's, the documentary becomes justifiably *his* narrative, not *hers.* He is, after all, the "expert," which the film clarifies over and over again; in later scenes, Wollman lectures in front of a room of trans* individuals about what it means to transition and what "they" should be doing to prepare. He does not let these individuals speak their own truths, but instead he projects his views of transsexuality onto them somewhat indiscriminately. Though he differentiates between trans* women and trans* men, he still "others" all

trans* people as "disordered" and in need of his intervention. This scene's setting and Wollman's comportment reinforces his control over trans* "patients": wearing black slacks, a white shirt, black tie, and a doctor's lab coat, he stands at the head of the room in front of a wall full of what appear to be his ornately framed medical degrees (see Image 2.5). The looming degrees visible in all shots of him reinforce his higher status in relation to his trans* listeners. In other scenes, the camera consistently places him in the center of the screen, even when this practice causes his trans* patients to be cut out of the frame. He is often the only one standing, even when he is alone in his office, which further reinforces his patriarchal, figurehead status. These scenes clarify Wollman as the ultimate narrator and gatekeeper who has the power to decide trans* people's fates through a medical logic that relies on hierarchical understandings of knowledge.[15]

Image 2.5: In *Let Me Die a Woman,* Dr. Leo Wollman lectures his "boys and girls" while standing in front of a wall filled with his medical and psychiatric degrees.

As the documentary progresses, several pornographic scenes feature trans* women (who Wollman calls "male transsexuals," a term that highlights anatomical characteristics rather than preferred identity) engaged in sexual acts with nontrans* men. Early in the film, Wollman describes two individuals having sex: "here is a man and

another man who thinks he is a woman," he drones. In actuality, one of these individuals is not a man but a trans* woman who has feminized her body through breast enlargement surgery and estrogen therapy but who has not undergone GRS. As these individuals embrace, the camera zooms in on the trans* woman's penis next to her male partner's (see Image 2.6). Wollman's voice explains: the "penis and testicles of both are clearly shown." In other frames, the trans* woman's scrotum is clearly visible (see Image 2.7). Dramatic music amplifies the sense that these images in relation to the sex acts that are taking place are supposed to disturb or perplex the viewer. After the camera zooms in on the trans* woman's penis, her partner is shown sucking her nipples as her head falls on the pillow and she emits a pleasurable sigh. Immediately after, the camera again zooms in to focus on her genitals and the accompanying music reaches a screeching high note. This scene's emphasis on the penis of a socially perceived woman reinforces Wollman's and the film's view that she is *really* a man—or at least, *really* male—after all. She is really a man, that is, unless Wollman intervenes to produce a "real, heterosexual woman" of her, as he later does onscreen in the first ever recorded GRS operation.

Image 2.6: In *Let Me Die a Woman,* a trans* woman and nontrans* man engage in sex acts as Wollman narrates.

Image 2.7: In *Let Me Die a Woman,* the camera emphasizes a trans* woman's genitals as she kisses her partner.

Consistent with the above scene, *Let Me Die* regularly shows trans* women's naked bodies to emphasize that one's body reveals the "truth" behind one's identity. For example, after the sex scene, the same trans* woman takes a shower. She soaps her body, rubbing her hands up and over her breasts to her face. The camera lingers on her breasts then her typically male genitals and then back to her face; her eyes close and her mouth parts, suggesting a moment of pleasure (see Images 2.8, 2.9, and 2.10). She is a contradictory though sexualized trans* body with no personal narrative.

Image 2.8: In *Let Me Die a Woman*, a trans* woman is shown in the shower as she soaps her feminine body.

Image 2.9: In the same sequence in *Let Me Die a Woman,* the camera lingers for several seconds on a trans* woman's male-typical genitals.

Image 2.10: After the camera moves from her body to her genitals, it zooms in on her face in a moment of pleasure.

These unsettling scenes, which depict trans* women engaged in sexual acts, undressing or getting dressed, and experiencing pleasuring (specifically as the backdrop for Wollman's narration), illuminate injurious medical theories that pathologize trans* women as parasitic homosexual men or sex-craved heterosexual women. According to Ray Blanchard and J. Michael Bailey, trans* women fall into one of two categories: the homosexual, who seeks GRS to attract heterosexual men's desire, and the autogynephilic, who seeks GRS because ze is supposedly aroused at the idea of occupying (and touching hir own) normatively feminine body.[16] Reinscribing sexological ideologies, Blanchard

and Bailey render trans* women as sexually deviant and perverse males whose bodies "betray" their true selves. *Let Me Die* similarly imagines trans* women as exhibiting sexual abnormalities, which are literally written on and through their bodies as they touch themselves and are touched by men. In another alarming scene, Wollman examines a black trans* woman's body (whom he calls Angela) using a pointer stick. He points to Angela's body parts—her small breasts, genitals, and buttocks—while commenting on how her body has changed due to hormone therapy (see Image 2.11). Again, the camera lingers on Angela's genitals as Wollman uses the pointer to touch her penis, pushing it to one side to reveal her testicles (see Image 2.12). The camera remains as Wollman explains that her "scrotum is normal in size" though she is "clearly not circumcised." Not once in this scene does the camera show Angela's face and Angela never speaks. She is simply a black trans* body that exists for Wollman's objectification. This scene is completely unnecessary; not only does it reference sexology's extensive racist history (tellingly, in a similar scene with a white trans* woman, Wollman does not use a pointer stick nor emphasize the white trans* woman's testicles), it also reinforces the notion that nonwhite trans* bodies are incapable of subjectivity without expert explanation.

Image 2.11: In *Let Me Die a Woman,* Wollman examines Angela's developing breasts.

Image 2.12: In the same scene in *Let Me Die a Woman,* Wollman examines Angela's penis and testicles.

At the same time, Wollman refers to his patients as "his girls and boys" and consistently emphasizes his empathic desires to "help" them in any way he can. In these contradictory ways, the film places Wollman as both the caretaker and gatekeeper of trans* lives; he is the ultimate good Samaritan who must "rectify" God's mistakes, which are literally written on the body of his infantilized patients. Because he later performs GRS onscreen, the film suggests that Wollman saves his patients from ultimate doom by correcting their abnormal and pathological bodies. *Let Me Die* encourages viewers to celebrate Wollman rather than his trans* patients.

Unfortunately, I do not highlight this film as an exception to the contemporary rule or as an outdated paradigm. Though trans* politics became an increasingly common issue within documentary films post-1978, many of *Let Me Die*'s themes continue to flourish. Subsequent documentaries use similar tactics of medical narration, situation re-enactment (in which doctors but not patients speak), and cinema verité-style representation to pathologize yet universalize trans* experience. As polyvocal as trans* representations in documentary films are, a majority of the more than seventy-five films

produced after 1978 tell a conservative, medical story that emphasizes trans* bodies over trans* epistemologies or narratives. For example, the independently produced film *100% Woman: The Story of Michelle Dumaresq* (2005) focuses on Dumaresq's struggles to become Canada's fastest downhill mountain biker. The documentary effectively expands the wrong body narrative to focus on issues other than Dumaresq's status as a trans* woman, includes interviews with her supportive friends, and shows her parents as knowledgeable allies who talk about how proud they are her achievements. Dumaresq discusses her biking techniques and upcoming races with no attention to the added strain of being visible as trans* in the women's biking world.

Nevertheless, the film's narrator, a voice that is not Dumaresq's, uses a wrong body explanation for her trans* identity to show how her outraged competitors are incorrect in their argument that she is not "really" a woman. As the DVD's back cover clarifies, the interviewees express a range of emotions, "from confused ambivalence to a belief that Dumaresq is male and should be barred from competing." This emphasis on Dumaresq's sex and body (which her competitors argue is male) reinforces the notion that her "original" body contradicts her identification as a woman. The transphobic tirades her competitors eschew force a response from Dumaresq: after explaining that she has "always felt female," she goes on to say, "how do you describe identity? You just know." While this documentary complicates medical legitimation discourses, like most other contemporary representations of trans* people, it nevertheless reinforces the wrong body narrative's normalizing tenets. The detrimental filmic depictions in *Let Me Die* and *100% Woman,* among dozens of others, suggest that trans* individuals (particularly trans* women) are medical objects of study who are not allowed to speak for themselves.

Reconceptualizing Dominant Discourses

Two key systems—the medical model and popular media—contextualize the horizon of possibilities open to trans* people who wish to write, film, and represent their lives. As Kate Bornstein reasons, trans* life narratives may represent "capitulation" to these systems, since autobiography is the "only genre" trans* people are able to write "*and get published*" (*Gender Outlaw* 12). To be sure, trans* life writers who do not acknowledge medical and media discourses—in subversive or promotional ways—risk unintelligibility. At the same time, "individuals rely on institutions…to exercise self-determination with respect to what body and what gender to have and maintain, so that self-determination becomes a plausible concept only in the context of a social world that supports and enables that exercise of agency" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 7). Calling attention to dominant epistemologies does not necessarily mean that trans* life writers relinquish power over their narratives; instead, by acknowledging how dominant narratives influence their lives, trans* writers undermine the control these governing systems can have and create new ways to narrate a trans* life. Addressing yet subverting dominant epistemologies, contemporary trans* life writers begin to articulate radical understandings of gender. In Chapters III, IV, and V, I analyze how trans* life narratives reconceptualize yet rely on the medical and media narratives I discuss above.

Notes

[1] Jorgenson's autobiography clarifies that she loathed her public existence; her autobiography, in a sense, encourages scholars and journalists to stop sensationalizing her story, to discontinue representing her as *the* representative transsexual woman. In her words, Jorgenson saw her gender change as a "transition to normalcy," rather than an identification with trans* politics or even trans* identity (72). Reporters, doctors, and scholars, in their continual outing of her, did not allow that reality to come to fruition.

[2] Many other languages do not rely on gendered pronouns; for instance, Korean speakers do not use gendered pronouns but instead rely on meaning based on context. Finnish lacks gendered pronouns and any discernible "grammatical gender" (Wikipedia 2014).

[3] The definitions Roen uses are the most common definitions in trans* theory even though they may not be the most productive. Roen describes transgenderism as "referring to a political positioning that draws from postmodern notions of fluidity (for both bodies and genders)" (501). Transsexuality, then, can be understood "in more modernist terms, as a (psychiatrically defined) state of being that assumes the preexistence of two sexes between which one may transition" (Roen 502). These definitions are confining and problematic to historical and contemporary negotiations of gender.

[4] Though I admit that it is not possible to reject the gender binary altogether (specifically for those of us who identify as transsexual or as men or women post-transition), it is imperative that I stress the fact that *transsexual* and *transgender* identities are both viable and political in and of the fact that they resist normative understandings of gender; to reroute these debates, as I outline in Chapter I, I use *trans** to bridge divides between identity terms and develop broad-based solidarity projects, not to flatten out the lived realities of individuals who adopt these varying identities.

[5] However, though Stryker offers transgender as "phenomena," she goes on to illuminate how trans* lives are not "abstract" ("Transgender Feminism" 67). Through transgender, Stryker "articulates" many gender-diverse lived realities: "misogyny, homophobia, racism, looksism, disability, medical colonization, coercive psychiatrization, undocumented labor, border control, state surveillance, population profiling, the prison-industrial complex, employment discrimination, housing discrimination, lack of health care, denial of access to social services, and violent hate crimes" ("Transgender Feminism" 67). Trans* topics are everyone's topics, Stryker argues: "It is one of your issues" no matter who you are ("Transgender Feminism" 67).

[6] "Ideal," in contrast, which was in use since at least the seventeenth century, connoted "divine" properties or "unreachable" bodies—in other words, ones that "can never be found in this world" (Davis 10). In modern conceptions, "normal" falls more to connotations of "average" whereas "ideals" are traits we imagine as reachable and, in fact, must be reachable for our economy to continue. With the advent of modern technology, heightened beauty ideals, and individualization of neoliberal ideals, perhaps the "ideal" was marketed, in a sense, as the new normal.

[7] Because trans* people fell outside "normal" constructions, sexologists concluded that gender-diverse people were in need of both help and extermination. Perhaps unsurprisingly, early statisticians were also eugenicists who used their data to pinpoint those they considered to be "evolutionary defectives" (Davis 15). Ruth Hubbard explains the scientific underpinnings of the eugenics movement, which later helped justify the mass extermination of all "undesirables" in Germany, including those who were gender

or sexual "abnormals" (188-92). Eugenics, as a school of thought, sought justification for racial, sexual, criminal, and ability-related discrimination and extermination. Constructed in positive language, early movements appealed to the importance of the "social good" and the "alleviation" of suffering (Hubbard 189). In Europe, scientists developed the "selection and eradication" process for the "destruction of lives not worth living," a category which included those who did not fit standards of gender conformity or reproductive capacity (Hubbard 194). Doctors were forced to turn in the names of their disabled and/or gender-diverse patients so that they could be forcibly removed from their homes, bussed to extermination centers or mental institutes, and killed (Hubbard 194). These horrific historical realities were made possible through social constructions of gender-diverse people as sinful, deviant, and inhuman.

[8] These arguments are consistent with other sexology texts of the era, which relied on binary conceptions of bodies and identities, and concurrently understood females as incapable and unimportant. In this dual understanding, those who fall outside of normative sex or gender constructs threaten the entire system upon which these norms exist. Individuals whose bodies have a vagina, uterus, and breasts yet whose gender roles do not correspond with the category "woman," in Weinengen's understanding, are worse than passively nonexistent entities—they are deviant and must be eradicated through pathological indictments and criminal rhetoric.

[9] Following several court cases such as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 in Britain and the "sensational trials of Oscar Wilde" in 1895, sexologists attempted to counter claims that homosexuality between men was a depraved choice that an immoral or unreasonable person makes but rather "an innate, congenital condition over which the individual had little control" (Doan and Waters 42).

[10] A new alternative to this type of "traditional" care is becoming more available throughout the U.S., though it is not yet recognized by WPATH. Alternative care clinics like Chicago's Howard Brown use "Transgender Hormone Informed Consent" models. According to Shay O'Reilly, at these clinics trans* patients can obtain a hormone prescription after "basic laboratory tests, a consultation about hormonal effects, and signing a waiver stating that they know the risks of treatment." Cutting out the "gatekeeper," these clinics offer self-actualization for many patients who would not otherwise be able to receive hormones or who would feel victimized by a process that forces them to jump through "medical hoops" (O'Reilly). Though Informed Consent clinics and providers represent a new and exciting moment in trans* health care, this model is still not the dominant nor suggested model. Nevertheless, I am incredibly excited to see how future narratives written by trans* people who experience Informed Consent care might change in even more radical ways.

[11] Further, clients must also receive recommendations from current therapists. In granting permission, therapists must assess the individual's ability to hold a job or go to school, function in the community, and adequately "pass" as the new gender. To get one's sex changed on a birth certificate or social security card (and also be seen this way in the eyes

of the law and judicial system), one has to live as the "opposite" sex for a period of two years and receive hormone therapy.

[12] See, for example, these well researched arguments surrounding the inclusion of Gender Dysphoria in the *DSM-V:* Randall D. Ehrbar's "Consensus from Differences: Lack of Professional Consensus on the Retention of the Gender Identity Disorder Diagnosis" and Jack Drescher's "Conference Proceedings 'In or Out?': A Discussion about Gender Identity Diagnoses and the DSM."

[13] Anti-medical discourse tends to have a clear-cut outcome: the APA should abandon GD as a disorder, health care practitioners should support all individuals who desire trans* care no matter what the patients' "symptoms," and cultural narratives should stringently separate trans* identity from historical, medical models that label trans* people as abnormal. These are procedural and political outcomes, which can be measured. It is no surprise, then, that many trans* individuals oppose medical legitimation discourses created by WPATH.

[14] At the same time, *Let Me Die* was the first of its kind – not only was transsexuality a controversial topic to cover in a documentary format in 1978, the film also addressed the lack of medical care trans* individuals experience, which dozens of documentaries subsequently took up. Though its use of pronouns, categories, and images are erroneous, if not downright ridiculous, it nevertheless sets the tone for observational trans* representation in documentary film, which I analyze in depth in Chapter III.

[15] The idea of psychiatrists and doctors as "gatekeepers" has been a long-established idea in trans* people's responses to health care. Gatekeepers are individuals, as specified in the SOC and *DSM*, who have the ability to decide which trans* people receive access to hormone therapy, surgery, and other desired bodywork and which trans* people do not. Those who successfully represent their life stories in line with the SOC and *DSM*'s mandates are much more likely to receive care than those whose life stories radically or even slightly deviate from prescribed norms. Though some individuals are using Informed Consent clinics and providers, as I mentioned in a previous note, most trans* patients experience "gatekeeping" at every stage of their transition. Wollman's role in *Let Me Die* can be imagined as the first filmic representation of an expert "gatekeeper."

[16] In many of his articles, Blanchard discusses the fact that early medical texts provide the foundation for his studies. Blanchard cites Havelock Ellis, among others, as having influenced his work. Widely criticized by gender theorists and trans* activists alike, these theories have largely been debunked and are not supported by WPATH or most health care providers. Nevertheless, Blanchard and Bailey's arguments gained traction within select circles to the detriment of trans* people seeking bodywork. *Let Me Die* reinforces these theories by referring to a trans* woman as a "man who thinks he is a woman." The film also reinforces these theories in other scenes, which depict trans* women disrobing, in the shower, or visually receiving pleasure from touching their own bodies.

CHAPTER III

AGAINST A *SINGLE* TRANS* STORY:

DESTABILIZING DOMINANT NARRATIVES THROUGH DOCUMENTARY

> The idealized narrative of what it means to be trans has become so pervasive um that like we're all we're all in process to get to a certain end point and that certain end point is to be passable and read as a man or a woman in the world. And that if you're not passable or read as a man or woman in the world, then you clearly haven't finished yet…Like I wish I could be recognized as trans, you know, I mean I wish that it were possible for me to pass as trans.
> -Participant in *Against a Trans Narrative*

In opposition to the sensational, simplified, and pathological ideologies in twentieth and early twenty-first century documentary—representative in my analysis of *Let Me Die a Woman*—several recent autobiographical documentaries expand representational horizons for trans* images and narratives. Rather than risking their stories' re-appropriation by nontrans* editors and directors, trans* documentarians are increasingly telling their *own* gender stories. Falling in the "new wave" category of documentary, these narratives "eschew the obsession with etiology and causation and take trans* lives as a reality that does not need explanation or rationalization" (Ryan 11). Recent documentarians—for instance, Jules Rosskam in *Against a Trans Narrative* (2008) and as editor of Sam Feder's *Boy I Am* (2006), Gwen Haworth in *She's a Boy I Knew* (2008), Sam Berliner's *GenderBusters* (2010), Kimberly Reed's *Prodigal Sons* (2008), and Laura Jane Grace in *True Trans* (2014)—employ experimental modes of story-telling, combining techniques of the confessional documentary with scripted scenes, animation, slam poetry, photography, and a host of other non-traditional choices. These genre-blending films produce what they promote: they deny neoliberal logics of

individual transgression, highlight more than one narrative, allow individuals to speak for themselves, connect those stories to larger social systems, resist pathological definition, and question what it means to claim a trans* identity.[1]

An analysis of the genre of documentary highlights how historical and political factors influence visual representations of trans* people. In her review of recent documentaries featuring trans* individuals, Joelle Ruby Ryan argues that "while not solely or even primarily responsible for cultural and systemic transphobia, [the media] plays a serious role in the perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination against gender-variant people" (10). Dominant epistemologies filter in to all documentary depictions of trans* people and illuminate who holds cultural and political power. According to Stuart Hall, power should be understood

> not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way—within a certain "regime of representation." It includes the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices. (259)

Until recently, trans* individuals have not had access to the kind of "power" to which Hall refers. Individuals who identify or are identified by others as trans* have historically not been able to create self-representations. The trans* reel is saddled with stereotypes and misinformation, which negatively affects real trans* individuals.

In this chapter, I contextually analyze *Against a Trans Narrative* and *She's a Boy I Knew*. *Against a Trans Narrative* is an experimental film that explodes conventional notions of identity, community, and visibility. *She's a Boy I Knew* is an autobiographical,

look at one trans* woman's experiences and negotiations in relation to her white, conservative, Canadian family members' ideologies of gender. In terms of narrative, genre, and focus, one might imagine that these two films have contradictory goals. However, these films exemplify different but complementary tactics trans* filmmakers employ to radicalize trans* knowledge and reject male-centered, heteronormative, and racist accounts of gender diversity. Rather than focusing on how someone might come to identify as trans* or what procedures and tactics one uses to transition—though "medical issues and transition may be included"—the stories and lives these films represent reject the medical model as the "be-all and end-all of the narrative" (Ryan, "Diversifying" 11). Offering diverse and complex trans* stories, *Against a Trans Narrative* and *She's a Boy I Knew* illuminate how individual trans* people have the ability to shift dominant understandings of gender.

With an emphasis on embodiment and its capacity for collective legitimation, documentary puts forth an understanding of identity not possible through printed, first person media. Though all trans* representations are "historically situated, politically strategic and connected to the operations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability that govern all bodies" (Heaney 17), documentary visually represents the relationship between body and epistemology. What's more, documentary offers a glimpse of what Susanna Egan calls "alternating subjectivities," which emphasize identity processes and communities that share in the production of meaning rather than a finished or closed-off product (85). The documentary form, as Egan explains, is best equipped to "dramatize the intersubjective qualities of experience," by "grounding representation in some prior reality" and displaying the "intimate expression of subjective experience" (85-88).

Highlighting "alternating subjectivities," Rosskam and Haworth question what it means to live a trans* life within a culture whose dominant narratives demand that trans* people exist within or at least in relation to medical legitimation discourse.

These radical representations are possible because of the genre's history and conventions. In light of this fact, I begin this chapter by exploring the forms, functions, and techniques of documentary to contextualize the epistemologies contemporary films employ. First, using scholarship by Michael Rabiger, Christopher Pullen, and Rebecca Swender, I track how documentary film has changed over time in light of political, cultural, and technological shifts. Second, I use Bill Nichols' work, which classifies documentary into six "modes," to explore how a range of films produced within the last fifty years represent trans* people in limiting, sensational, and pathological ways. Third, I develop the seventh documentary "mode," the autobiographical, which blurs boundaries between subjective and objective knowledge and retell familiar stories. Because the filmmaker's identity, body, and agency are inseparable, the autobiographical mode returns interpretive voice to those who have not previously been able to speak for themselves within a genre that was initially created to visually document the "Other." Finally, I closely analyze *Against a Trans Narrative* and *She's a Boy I Knew,* paying particular attention to the ways that Rosskam and Haworth represent their life narratives through embodiment, epistemology, and storytelling.

Documentary: What Is It and What Can It Do?

Filmmakers have used documentary films for various purposes—ranging from nationalist propaganda to experimental representations of lived reality—for at least ninety

years.[2] In 1925, John Grierson coined the term in his review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana: A Romance of the South Seas,* which documents Flaherty's time living with and "studying" a group of Samoan people. Grierson used "documentary" to indicate "the ability of the medium to literally produce a visual 'document' of a particular event" (Wells 169). In the 1920s and '30s, documentary footage captured event-centered, episodic, and mostly "disjointed" images (Rabiger 9) of "everyday" humanity: going to work, feeding a family, and other "mundane" activities (Wells 169). Not only were these early films short and "disjointed," they were also mostly silent, relying on the power of the visual image to make a nuanced argument about the world and its inhabitants. Specifically, early documentarians captured the everyday lives of people they subjectively viewed as oppressed: poor, working class white people in Europe and America as well as non-white "others" who survived in non-Western cultures. For example, the "salvage ethnographic" film *Nanook of the North: A Story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic* (1921), which scholars consider to be the first feature-length documentary, records an Inuk family battling the elements in the Canadian Arctic as a white British filmmaker looks on.

Whether intended for pro-nationalist sentiment or anti-government radicalism (as well as a host of other goals, from exploration and travel to ethnographic field study), early filmmakers employed the documentary to tell a visual story about "reality" from a particular point of view. As film and sound technology developed, corresponding with the onset of World War I and lasting well into World War II, government-sponsored documentary films propagandized nationalism, recorded politicians' speeches and rallies, and re-created historical events from a politically efficacious perspective. For example,

Triumph of the Will (1935)—"the greatest advertising film ever made," according to Rabiger—rocketed Adolph Hitler to infamy by declaring the health and power of the Weimar Republic (16). At the same time, several 1940s independent filmmakers recorded the destruction and horror of war in opposition to the nationalist propaganda in *Triumph of the Will*. Attesting to its powerful and collective nature, some of this independent footage was used to aid in the fall of Nazi Germany and, subsequently, to rebuild Europe (Rabiger 16-17). Documentary films both reflect *and* influence the social and political realities of their time.

Early conceptions of documentary, which strongly continue today, place the genre in a "privileged relationship with the idea of reality (or truth)" (Pullen 57). According to Pullen, the assumed truthful function of the genre "may be partially due to the idea of documentation, which implies some official authorized function, a corollary of which would be that documentation possesses some license to convey reality" (57). If one can visually (and later, aurally) represent an event, idea, or narrative at the moment it is happening, so the story goes, then it must have *actually occurred*. In his seminal essay, "A Manifest on the Subject of Documentaries," Stefan Jarl elaborates on the history of documentary to show that filmmakers originally believed it to be "*objective* and *accurate*. What we see is the truth, filmed by the filmmaker in a certain sequence" (149). Documentarians were not supposed to be seen or heard, films were not to be scripted, and an "objective" perspective should frame the film's sequence of images and sound. Because documentary images hold an "indexical relationship" to some prior reality, it is easy to imagine that they are authentic rather than subjective (Swender 4). This view permeated until well into the 1960s, when Civil Rights leaders, lesbian and gay activists,

and other social pioneers employed the form to deliberately disrupt notions of objective reality and truth. Later films aimed to clarify Jarl's argument that: "there is no such thing as an accurate and objective documentary" (149).

In other words, documentaries are not "constative" in J.L. Austin's use of the term: they do not make true or false claims about the world but, instead, performatively show an "alternative 'honesty'" (Bruzzi 155). Documentary footage is iconic rather than factual. Though "actuality footage," as Swender calls it, "provides trace evidence of the existence of some segment of reality," documentary films feature a tenuous and "mediated rather than pure relationship to the real" (3). Unlike literature, which has the capacity to transport the reader to the past or future, documentary films situate the spectator in a "constantly advancing present tense" (Rabiger 9). In this way, the "reality" represented in documentary film functions synecdochically in that it "stands in for the larger truth claim that the image's original emplotment served to evidence" (Swender 5). Because documentary footage does not literally represent the world as it is, documentaries must be "deciphered" by viewers (Swender 4). This social element is an important part of the genre's function: though unable to objectively represent "reality" in any literal sense, documentary films nevertheless have a "profound respect for actuality, [which] *invites the spectator to draw socially critical conclusions*" of their own making (Rabiger 4). Documentaries affirm and encourage social, dialectic interaction between screen and viewer, knowledge and interpretation.

In the 1960s and '70s, with the advent of lighter, less cumbersome video technology and handheld cameras, more individuals—both amateur and professional—were able to film their and others' lives. Documentary filming no longer had to occur in a

studio or at a pre-planned location; interviews, scene documentation, and other tactics could happen anywhere at anytime. Smaller cameras transformed documentary filmmaking, aiding in the capacity for what scholars call Cinema Verité or "truthful cinema," where the camera unveils a part of reality previously hidden or misunderstood. These advancements were significant changes "in the relationship of the camera to the subject" wherein the camera now had the potential to be both a "fly-on-the-wall" presence as well as an "active observer" (Rabiger 18). Hidden cameras could be used to film unaware individuals and, at the same time, filmmakers could more actively become a part of the landscape of the film, since they were unencumbered by heavy, burdensome technology. Not only were more individuals able to produce documentaries, more individuals were able to access, discuss, and collectively think about them, essentially "democratizing the hands at the controls" and in the audience (Rabiger 23-4). With the introduction and widespread popularity of television sets in the late 1960s and '70s, documentaries were brought in to the comfort of middle class people's homes, and producers such as the British Broadcasting Company and Public Broadcasting Service quickly created hundreds of made-for-TV films on a range of subjects (Rabiger 23-4). Popular documentaries of the '80s tended to focus on individual people and groups as well as identity movements, using documentary's form and clout to spread new epistemologies and ways to see U.S. culture.

At the same time, the growing neoliberal political trend in the U.S. fueled documentary's cultural move towards "exceptional" subjectivity and away from objectivity. Neoliberal economics, characterized by "pro-business activism," aims to dismantle the limited U.S. welfare state, open and deregulate markets, and reduce

government spending "to enhance corporate profit rates" (Duggan xi). To increase corporate profit, money must be "diverted from other social uses," which inevitably increases "overall economic inequality" (Duggan xi). However, neoliberalism is not just an economic ideology that affects corporate markets and regulation; in actuality, neoliberalism filters down to social realms by encouraging individuals to dismiss race, gender, and sexual inequalities "as merely cultural, private, or trivial" (Duggan xiv). Neoliberal discourses in the U.S. disenfranchise poor, working class people of color, and all trans* individuals, though politicians couch these ideals in progressive logics that seemingly support difference, equality, and acceptance. In other words, though they play out on a macro level, neoliberal ideals are deeply felt at a micro level. For example, neoliberalism breeds an individualized understanding of success wherein those in power assume poor people are poor because they do not work hard enough or make bad choices, not because the economic, political, and social system institutionally disadvantages most citizens for the benefit of a privileged few.[3]

Though neoliberal ideals heightened the U.S. government's ability to regulate its citizens, in a Foucauldian sense, neoliberalism also made it more possible for individuals to reclaim power. Neoliberal ideologies that are embedded in media formations open up a space for what Nick Couldry calls "more voice": "more 'reality'-based presentations of social processes, more intense media monitoring of how government works at every level," and more diverse representations of trans* lives (74). If we consider Michel Foucault's notion of power, that it is "everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (93), creating new epistemologies through media allow some disenfranchised individuals the ability to engage in a process of what Andrea

Smith calls “taking power by making power” (6). In other words, resistance to power is viable because of the shifting nature of power. Individuals do not necessarily “acquir[e], seiz[e], or shar[e]” power through media-making, but making new media (particularly forms that are autobiographical) allows filmmakers the ability to resist top-down political control (Foucault 94-5).

Based on the relatively low-budget cost of making a documentary, as well as the heightened ability to share films through online and televisual platforms, documentary films are widely distributed at fairly low costs and thus have the ability to produce a substantial amount of collective change. What’s more, documentary has profound ramifications for social change “since a film may speak in the first-person singular but imply a first-person plural” (Chanan 7). Moving towards a “first-person plural,” according to Michael Chanan, becomes less about flattening out identity categories and more about accessing communal power through recognizing shared experience. Rabinowitz confirms this idea in her claim that social justice documentaries—what Nichols calls “performative” documentaries—of the 1980s and ‘90s illuminate “the varied ways in which cultural representations can have political agency” (2). New images and narratives dynamically resist neoliberal logics and collectively call for social and political movement.

Identity-based films are thus performative in more than one way—not only do they feature individuals who perform certain identities in ways that bring those identities to fruition, the films themselves perform a certain conception of community, which heightens real world experiences. As Zygmunt Baumann explains, communities are always “imagined” and actualized in a metaphorical arena that does not necessarily rely

on physical proximity or national borders (qtd. in Pullen 34). At the same time, "the potential of the imagined community is not that it provides a multivalent context of identification" but, rather, a "platform for a congregation of different voices, if not always singing in harmony" (Pullen 36). In some ways, documentary "carries on the oral tradition" by spreading stories and subjective realities to those who would not otherwise learn about such issues or who find the issues relevant to their lives (Rabiger 117). Michael Renov argues that contemporary documentary films emphasize "open-endedness, empathy and receptivity" (130). In other words, documentaries have the capacity to offer personal legitimation and collective knowledge growth.

The development of communal storytelling and autobiographical practices situates the viewer in unique ways; the viewer becomes "one of the 'us' who are pictured on screen," and thus is directly included in the film's shared identity claims (Renov 130). Viewers recognize their stories in the voices of others, or "as the other from whom this 'we' wishes to differentiate itself" (Renov 130). Interestingly, in many contemporary documentaries, trans* interviewees discuss how various documentary films were the first form of media that helped them link personal experience and desire to a trans* identity.[4] Trans* participants comment on having a "light bulb" moment of shared experience with individuals in documentary films—both in terms of sharing a similar story or experience as well as in visual representation and embodiment. Documentary participants, in other words, are sometimes the first individuals viewers know who identify as trans* or who have non-binary bodies. Family members of trans* people also cite documentary as a media form that helped to convince or educate them about their loved one's identity. In *I'm Just Anneke* (2010), for example, Anneke's mother explains that watching *Middle*

Sexes: Redefining He and She (2006) aided her understanding of Anneke's desire to take puberty inhibitors, which she then helped Anneke acquire.

Because documentaries have the capacity to change individual and collective understandings of trans* identity, the genre is an important form to analyze. As I move now to consider Nichols' six modes, which produce different trans* epistemologies, I will keep these essential questions in mind: what do documentary films say about trans* people? Which narratives are told and which are denied? Who is allowed to make these claims? Who benefits or fails to benefit from the trans* perspectives embedded in contemporary documentary film?

Documentary Modes and Their Political Potential

Bill Nichols, one of the founding scholars of documentary theory, shows that there are six distinguishable types of documentary, which filmmakers have developed over time when one method became obsolete or when new foci demanded new tactics. Though Nichols' six types could be imagined as a linear progression of storytelling modes, filmmakers typically use tactics from more than one "type" in a given film and categories overlap significantly, destabilizing this linearity. Though Nichols' modes may break down when analyzing contemporary documentary film, they are still helpful when thinking about the tactics filmmakers use to highlight certain epistemologies or ways of seeing the world over others. The modes Nichols outlines are the poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. In this section, I briefly define each mode, paying particular attention to the final three, which will be useful for my analyses of *Against a Trans Narrative* and *She's a Boy I Knew.*

The earliest forms of documentary, the poetic and expository, are contradictory in nature. In poetic films, filmmakers display non-linear, puzzling, ambiguous, and avant-garde themes by stressing "mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion" (Nichols 103). As a form, the poetic documentary could be compared to experimental literature and modernist poetry where "alternative forms of knowledge" displace one "particular argument or point of view" (Nichols 103). Poetic filmmakers represent reality "in terms of a series of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations" (Nichols 103). These documentaries accentuate how "the filmmaker's voice gives fragments of the historical world" rather than an objective or argumentative view of a given reality (Nichols 105). In contrast, the expository mode assembles the "fragments" the poetic mode might use in "a more rhetorical or argumentative frame" (Nichols 105). This mode is most consistent with PBS, BBC, National Geographic, and other educational platforms, which adopt an omniscient narrator to explain what is happening in the images onscreen and what the viewer should understand from the film as a whole. Where the poetic mode may reject an outside narrator and emphasize contradiction and a fracturing of knowledge, the expository mode uses "commentary" that is "above" the fray of the film (Nichols 107). This type of "large-scale argumentation" is an ideal mode for "conveying information or mobilizing support within a framework that pre-exists the film" (Nichols 107-9). Where the poetic mode artfully shows alternative realities and open-ended understandings of social systems, the expository mode makes claims about those realities and systems.

In contemporary trans* documentaries, the poetic and expository modes offer limited trans* understandings; poetic films may feature progressive representations of

trans* subjectivity and identity (as in, for example, the 2003 experimental, dialogue-free film, *P[l]ain Truth: A Film from [Female] to [Male]*) but without any appeal to changing those social structures. Striking and emotionally intense, this type of film produces a plethora of interpretations. The expository mode, on the other hand, offers partial understandings of trans* individuals in its appeal to objectivity through the use of voice-over commentary by medical, scientific, and academic "experts." In this way, expository documentary demands only one interpretation.

In the third mode, the observational, which was made possible by 1960s and '70s advances in technology, filmmakers try to witness lived experience at the moment it occurs. Observational films—which Jane Chapman calls "visual journalism"—do not employ voice-over narration, music, sound effects, or reenactments, which the camera could not originally capture. In their "spontaneity," these films document events, rituals, and cultures to which the viewer may not otherwise have access (Nichols 109). The observational filmmaker takes on the position of quiet bystander, which "calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done" (Nichols 111). Though productive in its capacity to capture raw experience as it occurs, the observational mode is nevertheless "ethically ambiguous" (Nichols 111). Though the aim is to visually capture reality, observational films are produced by "outsiders" who film something they imagine as "unknown" or "exotic" (Nichols 112). Observational filmmakers create arbitrary and limiting boundaries of representation and often do not let the participants speak for themselves. The culture or individuals the filmmaker captures on screen become "objects" of study rather than viable subjects who speak their own truths.

Observational and expository documentaries use trans* individuals and their narratives as case studies, regularly incorporate sensational stories of trans* "others," and appropriate trans* voices to center "expert" opinion about what it means to be or identify as trans*. Academic and journalistic voice-overs deny the complexity of gender diversity so as to tell a single story that explicates or legitimates trans* people. Traditional documentary films, which use expository and observational modes, tend to be "exploitative" and do not ethically represent the variability of trans* lives (Ruby Ryan 10). Rather than expanding epistemologies of gender, expository and observational films fix trans* identity in detrimental ways. In these films, several of which I analyze below, trans* identities are "otherized, exoticized, fetishized, and cast as deviant, bizarre, and pathological" (Ruby Ryan 10-11). For example, *Middle Sexes* includes interviews with trans* people, which the film frames and introduces with "scientific and academic experts" (as the back cover explains) who etiologically trace the "cause" of trans* and intersex desires to physiology and biology. Narrated by Gore Vidal—who authored *Myra Breckenridge* (1968), a satirical novel about a sadistic trans* woman who premeditates and carries out the humiliating rape of her male student—this confusing and dramatic documentary reduces trans* identity to a "mistake" that occurs during fetal development as well as an "imbalance" in brain chemistry. Vidal's voice explains that intersex scholar Milton Diamond understands trans* identity as a disorder of the body. Instead of showing Diamond as he explicates his research, some of which actually argues the opposite, the onscreen image that parallels Diamond's aural justifications is of a surgeon removing the brain from what appears to be a middle-aged, white, male corpse. Not only does this scene blur the lines between *intersex* (which is biological) and *trans** (which is cultural),

it also eschews the need for trans* individuals to tell their own stories by reducing trans* people to bodies; in fact, this scene reduces trans* individuals to *dead* bodies, which must be taken apart and studied by "experts" to understand the "truth."

In other observational and expository films, filmmakers and editors emphasize trans* bodies through the notion of "putting on" gender, self-transformation, and bodywork. In these films, trans* peoples' narratives and epistemologies become secondary. For instance, Monika Treut's *Female Misbehavior* (1992) features five stories that, according to the DVD's front cover, "explore the outer limits of female sexuality and behavior." In one of the five stories, Max Wolf Valerio, a self-identified Native American transsexual man (and future author of *The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Sexual Transformation from FEMALE to MALE* (2006)), talks at length about his male identity and trans* experience. The fact that his story is included within this collection of short films is confusing; Treut's emphasis on "female" embodiment and resistance to normative ideals renders Valerio as the sensational and fetishistic addition to an otherwise woman-identified cast. Including his story renders his male identity as inauthentic, and draws attention to the ways that he is "really" a misbehaving female. Apart from this problem, Treut represents Valerio's story as the quintessential wrong body narrative, which she emphasizes by overlaying his interview with still images of him as a little girl, disgruntled young adult, and later, self-identified lesbian. As these images progress onscreen, Valerio explains that he has always thought of himself as a boy and would cry himself to sleep at night because he was forced to wear dresses and engage in feminine activities. He was a rebellious teen who never found his place in life and was constantly in trouble with his parents and school (see Image 3.1). Later, upon

finding a comfortable space in a lesbian feminist community, he was able to play with gender through sadomasochistic sex where he took on the "masculine" role with lesbian women. Through sexual acceptance, he became more comfortable with the idea of full-time social transition and, soon after, he began taking testosterone. At no point in Valerio's narrative does Treut display images of a masculine Valerio. Instead, once Valerio begins to talk about medical intervention—taking hormones and later undergoing surgery to remove his breasts—Valerio's body appears onscreen. The camera pans out and then back in, focusing on his rough hands and then his face as he describes testosterone's effects (see Image 3.2). Treut pays more attention to Valerio's body than his narrative and identity.

Image 3.1: In *Female Misbehavior,* Treut includes an image of Valerio during his rebellious teen years.

Image 3.2: In *Female Misbehavior,* Valerio explains his decision to transition to a male subject position.

At the same time, underscoring the fact that his female-typical body was the problem rather than his inability to find a place as a masculine-identified lesbian, Valerio goes on to explain that "the moment" he injected his first shot of testosterone (or "T" as he calls it) he no longer cried and, after being on T for two years, he now understands "why a lot of men watch porn and why prostitution exists." Valerio characterizes maleness as both biological and cultural; he becomes a man through the act of T injection rather than its consequences or bodily changes. Once this epistemological shift occurs, and he begins to view his body as male, he is more likely to see his masculine behavior as a "natural" offshoot or product of his newfound maleness. Nevertheless, despite what common cultural narratives suggest, men are not biologically more likely to watch porn or seek paid sex work. Because Valerio refuses to question the implicit link between men and hypersexuality, he reinscribes the notion that one's biology changes one's behavior and identity. He suggests that "normal" men (whom he assumes have more testosterone than "normal" women) naturally desire sex and, particularly in relation to the two examples he gives, that normal men naturally desire to engage in sex acts, which

objectify and potentially exploit women. Valerio's trans* identity, then, depends on his ability to control female-typical bodies (others' bodies as well as his own). Valerio's narrative does more than *link* trans* identity to a particular kind of body—his body, featured in Treut's recording and editing techniques, becomes the marker of a legitimate trans* politics.

As polyvocal as current trans* representations in documentary films are, a majority of the more than sixty-five films produced since 1990 craft a conservative, simplified, wrong body story, most often explaining trans* participants as having a female brain but a male body (or vice versa). Emphasizing one narrative as *the* trans* narrative—and emphasizing trans* bodies over trans* stories—fails to take into account the variability and diversity of trans* lives. Nevertheless, as I discuss in Chapters I and II, many trans* people find the wrong body narrative compelling or closest to their experiences and represent their body-biographies using the rhetorical tropes of this narrative, much as Valerio does. The danger in representing only one explanation for trans* identity—and the desire to explain away or rationalize trans* existence in the first place—is that it is disingenuous and harmful to many trans* people. It is, ultimately, a comfort tactic for nontrans* viewers' understanding of the issue. Instead of offering multiple interpretations of trans* identity (by featuring trans* people who do not narrate their lives through wrong body discourses, for example), expository films take the wrong body narrative as the only trans* story and thus seek trans* participants who identify with this narrative.

Several documentaries foreground the wrong body narrative by beginning with hyperbolic statements of trans* identity: *Let Me Die a Woman* (1978) begins with Dr.

Leo Wollman asking, "what does it mean to be trapped in the wrong body?" *Becoming Ayden* (2008), produced thirty years later, similarly launches into what it means to be trans* with a voice-over narrator who explains, "those who feel they were born into the wrong body are called transsexuals. They may feel like men but look like women. And they will go to great lengths to alter their bodies to correspond with their self-image." The emphasis in *Becoming Ayden* on trans* individuals as the "they" to the filmmaker's "we," as well as the narrator's use of passive syntax (they "are called transsexuals"), distances the viewer from trans* subjectivity and emphasizes a nontrans* perspective. This narrative also groups all "transsexuals" into one category and locates the feeling of having the "wrong body" as *the* universal trans* experience.

The wrong body narrative implies that trans* existence relies on external verification and physical change; those who do not want or cannot afford surgery and hormones are represented as not fully men *or* women and thus unrecognizable in any political, social, or medical logic. Joelle Ruby Ryan clearly articulates how this emphasis on trans* bodies and the medical model fails to represent that which it seeks to document: focusing on the medical model "helps to contain gender-variance to the unfortunate experiences of a fringe, socially marginal, minority population, rather than to promote understandings of gender identity and expression that illuminate the ways in which *all* people are policed by oppressive social norms" (11). For example, *Changing Sexes: Female to Male* (2003) represents all trans* people as having been born in the wrong body, particularly in its emphasis on Ryan, a trans* man who is just beginning to take testosterone, and his nontrans* identical twin, Rachel, who feels like she is losing her "sister." Not only does this film consistently use incorrect pronouns—calling Ryan "she"

until he begins to look more masculine—it emphasizes trans* bodies and surgery over identity and experience. Nevertheless, it is important to note the ways that this film exemplifies the cultural moment in which it was produced; in 2003, it was a common practice to refer to transitioning individuals with the "original" gender pronoun. It was also a common tactic to focus on how the body changes during transition; at this time, trans* issues revolved around medical procedures and access to bodywork. Keeping the film's historical moment in mind, *Changing Sexes* still reinscribes the notion that trans* individuals' brains and bodies are antithetical and must be "changed," as the title reinforces. The film—and title—emphasizes changing one's *sex* rather than *gender*, which reinforces trans* bodies rather than individual conceptions of a gendered self.

What's more, observational films like *Middle Sexes* and *Changing Sexes* focus mostly on white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual trans* individuals and when nonwhite trans* participants are featured, the stories consistently focus on prostitution, drug use, poverty, violence, and incarceration. Though these issues are certainly linked to both trans* and nonwhite identities (particularly in relation to the spectrum of trans*-feminine experience), filmmakers often do not politically analyze or represent these individuals' experiences as intersectional or systemic. For example, in *Transgender Tuesdays: A Clinic in the Tenderloin* (2012), which focuses on the first full-care trans* clinic in San Francisco, interviewees who are mostly black trans* women confess their extensive experiences of pain, violence, harassment, and loneliness. Though these confessions productively come from the mouths of trans* people, the film's editors pair these confessions with images of trans* women of color engaging in prostitution on the streets of San Francisco. Though some of these women's stories do not include survival

sex work, the images nevertheless display survival sex work as participants talk about experiences of unhappiness. Not only does this narrative and visual pairing connect trans* women of color with prostitution, it also disregards the many other reasons trans* women experience pain and harassment in finding housing, employment, and social support. Furthermore, the grainy, blurry quality of the film's images of sex survival work suggests the use of low-quality videography in direct contrast to the high-quality technology used in interviews. These low-quality images further underscore the film's emphasis on the individual failure and regret of trans* women of color. By using images that show trans* women soliciting sex on the street, rather than the men who seek them out or who potentially perpetrate violence against them, *Transgender Tuesdays* simplifies the systemic nature of gender and racial violence while, at the same time, skewing and appropriating its participants' narratives.

In simplifying the systemic nature of gender and racial discrimination, expository documentaries tend to put forward a rights- and policy-based politic. This tactic reinscribes capitalism as valuable by arguing that some trans* people are "productive" and should be given the same rights as "normal" individuals. Rather than questioning social structures, filmmakers rely on neoliberal logics of the individual, which reinscribes trans* participants as "others" who do not (and potentially cannot) fit within the current system. In and of itself, a rights-based politic is not counter-productive. Trans* people *should* have access to economic and political institutions, protections, and rights, which the average cisgender person might have. Trans* individuals absolutely deserve access to employment, education, and housing. Still, in expository films that emphasize objective knowledge, the problem with focusing on trans* rights is that nontrans* filmmakers

fetishize and exploit trans* people (the "they" to the filmmaker's "we"), use trans* people as consumable objects of study, and simplify trans* stories.

For instance, in Rachel Nusbaum's *Transcending Gender: Portraits from Inside the Movement* (2009), which features Mara Keisling (acting Director for the National Center for Gender Equality), trans* individuals share their stories of the "transgendered lifestyle" (back cover). Interspersed with these stories is a repeated emphasis on trans* rights; as the omniscient narrator iterates, trans* individuals are merely trying to become "whole people" just like "everyone else." This statement again divides nontrans* and trans* people as fully human and "other," respectively. The film does not question or complicate issues of class, race, sexuality, ability, or other intersectional factors in these participants' lives. Rather, it foregrounds trans* individuals who have, on the one hand, successfully "made it" in society despite their trans* identities and, on the other, those who struggle to receive employment, education, and housing because they are trans*. These films suggest that trans* people who do not have adequate access or "rights" to employment, education, and housing, are partially at fault for not passing as one gender or the other. In opposition to the title's emphasis on "transcending" gender, Nusbaum pushes for the incorporation of binary trans* realities into an already-hostile and discriminatory system of control.

Though these representations show trans* identity as an issue of feeling "trapped" in a body one was not meant to have, which works to reinscribe punitive divisions between what it means to be male and female, I do not mean to denigrate individuals who believe that they were, in fact, born in the wrong body. Above all else, I take individuals' explanations and identity choices at face value. As Jules Rosskam argues, "if people are

merely articulating the terms of their own identities, then we must take caution in how we address our grievances" ("The Ties that Bind" 341). As a subjective, phenomenological understanding of one's experience, the wrong body framework is a viable and potentially liberating rationale for many trans* people. To ethically read wrong body trans* representations, one must tease out how the reliance on a comfortable or "easy" explanation can be detrimental to a collective project, rather than to target individual trans* people who use this narrative. That said, I draw attention to the consequential limitations in documentary film, which only represent trans* people who use wrong body narratives because many trans* people simply do not identify in this way. At the same time, the overuse of this narrative within documentary speaks to the genre's tendency to equate the individual with the collective. As Rosskam succinctly puts it, within documentary, "representation of the individual and representation of the group are often confused" ("The Ties that Bind" 341). When filmmakers subsume or confuse individual and group narratives, it becomes too easy for nontrans* viewers to imagine that one trans* person's story stands in for all trans* individuals' stories, especially when medical and academic experts reinforce this belief. Ethical trans* representations should illuminate the diversity of trans* lives so that individual stories do not become homogenous group narratives.

In contrast to expository and observational films, many contemporary documentaries incorporate more realistic and productive tactics. The fourth mode, which Nichols' names the "participatory," uses similar methods as observational films in that participatory films intend to represent a portion of reality in a given context (19); unlike the observational, however, participatory films show the filmmaker reflecting on hir

experiences and relationship to what ze is filming. The filmmaker or camera is no longer a fly-on-the-wall observer and thus the film is shaped precisely by an epistemology that blurs the line between knower and known. Though participatory filmmakers maintain "a certain degree of potential power and control over events" in that they continue to wield the camera, participatory filmmakers are prominent social actors within the filmic landscape – hir understanding explicitly becomes the film's understanding, which deemphasizes an objective or universalizing framework (Nichols 118). Though no less subjective than expository films, participatory documentaries allow individuals to speak for themselves with little to no outside influence in terms of scene production, lighting, editing, music, and narration. Using open-ended interviews—"a distinct form of social encounter"—participatory filmmakers "bring different accounts together in a single story" (Nichols 121-22). The documentarian no longer relies on expert opinion or objective claims; instead, ze creates a "personal testimony" of what ze films (Nichols 119).

In the fifth mode, which Nichols names "the reflexive," filmmakers directly address the audience and attend to the ways that documentary tries but habitually fails to represent "reality." The focus of reflexive films is the problem of representation itself: filmmakers question "*how* we represent the historical world" as well as "*what* gets represented" (Nichols 126). Challenging documentary's conventions, reflexive filmmakers refuse to "seamlessly provide an account of 'reality'" (Nichols 126). Instead, they highlight multiple stories and open-ended interpretations. Because of these factors, this form offers an exciting opportunity for filmmakers to expand epistemologies and encourage viewers to contemplate social change. Because the viewer already experiences

a form of "heightened consciousness," reflexive films have the opportunity to not only acknowledge the way things are but also "invoke the way they might become" (Nichols 130). Politically reflexive documentaries "point to *us* as viewers and social actors, not to films, as the agents who can bridge this gap between what exists and the new forms we can make from it" (Nichols 130). Instead of asking, "what is the truth this documentary aims to bring to light?" the question becomes, "what is the truth this documentary reveals about the self and about me?" (Nichols 130). Reflexive documentaries force viewers to question their assumptions and to engage with the film's material as if they are implicit within rather than outside the film's frame of reference.

Lastly, the sixth mode emphasizes how individuals perform identity. The "performative" endorses the position that knowledge is best described as "concrete and embodied, based on the specificities of personal experience" (Nichols 131). These films might emphasize the bodies of the individuals it films, but the point does not end there. Instead, the film also questions how our bodies contribute to our understanding of the world. In other words, performative films emphasize the standpoint epistemologies of participants in relation to their social locations. Performative documentaries "se[t] out to demonstrate how embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general processes at work in society" (Nichols 131). Instead of only focusing on personal experience, performative documentary links the personal to the political and the individual to the collective, which works to "embrace a social, or shared, form of subjective response" (Nichols 133). As is true of the participatory mode, the performative represents the personal as the "port of entry" to the social systems that govern all individuals, rather than merely a subjective representation or way to think about the

social world (Nichols 137).

Christopher Pullen deepens the concept of performative film in relation to performance: the performance of self "resists conclusions, just as it resists sorts of definitions, boundaries, and limits" (55). Drawing from epistemological theory, Pullen argues that performative documentary "privileges the 'body as site of knowing'" (55). Performance, then, is a *tool* individuals use to express agency. Performing one's body challenges dominant meanings in visual ways. Stella Bruzzi echoes Pullen's argument, maintaining that performative documentaries "function as utterances that simultaneously both describe and perform an action" (154). In other words, a performative documentary that focuses on trans* subjectivity "describes" the multifarious understandings and uses of the term while, at the same time, it "performs" trans* identity and subjectivity in ways that bring it into existence onscreen.

Based on Nichols' schema, many contemporary documentaries productively blend participatory, reflexive, and performative tactics. Contemporary trans* documentarians share their stories and express identification with a queer and trans* audience. They emphasize issues of visibility, community, voice, history, and politics and recognize the potential in foregrounding "dissenting voices and counter-cultural ideology" (Pullen 86). However, performative documentaries are still often observational in nature; though they focus on individual experience, they are not autobiographical in that the filmmaker and subject are not the same. In the following section, I explain a seventh mode, the "autobiographical," which uses tactics of the performative yet is created from a particular, grounded perspective. Similarly offering collective notions of social change, autobiographical documentaries locate radical trans* representation in

first-person experience, thereby retelling familiar stories in new ways.

Autobiographical Storytelling in Trans Documentary*

Turning the camera on themselves, autobiographical filmmakers expand notions of trans* subjectivity and create new forms of selfhood. "In an age of intensified and shifting psycho-social identities," Renov reasons, it should surprise no one that documentation of U.S. culture and the individuals who exist within it "should be deeply suffused with the performance of subjectivities" (177). According to Michele A. Willson, subjectivity

> refers to the ontological and phenomenal consequences of being an active social being within a particular body, a being who interacts and is interacted with, and who is positioned temporally and spatially. Therefore, a person's subjectivity is shaped by the historical, structural, and cultural/social settings into which s/he is born and lives…This understanding emphasizes the agency, the sociality, the historicity and the particularity of the subject. (7)

As a display of subjectivity, the autobiographical documentarian's identity, body, and political agency are inseparable, which returns voice to those who have not previously been able to speak for and about themselves (as in expository and observational modes, for instance). Representing subjectivity through autobiographical processes is a "strategy determined to resist the limiting ideology of universal identities," which emphasizes the "historical, structural, and cultural/social settings" Willson analyzes (Lane 21-2). Autobiographical documentarians evince how the idea of the subject is dynamic

depending on socially viable possibilities for self-narration. Because narratives hold the potential to locate the subject in a particular context, autobiographical films have the radical potential to develop more diverse understandings of trans* identity.

Autobiographical filmmakers not only perform but also narrate subjectivity. As Pullen contends, a move towards the telling of personal stories—"tales of 'who I am', 'what I want to be,' or 'what troubles me'"—can be seen as a move towards self-consciously collective practices and more realistic representations of trans* lives (5). At the same time, narrative is not merely expressive of identity but is an identity content in and of itself, which forms and shapes the subject. Narrative is a "mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience" (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 100). In autobiographical films, the filmmaker's use of narration physically connects the cinematic sound and image to the "real thing that they represent" while also narrating a new self into existence (Lane 5).

Moreover, context-specific narration is extremely effective in building productive communities. For example, in Eli S. Clare's keynote speech for a 2007 trans*-masculine conference, he remarks, "I'm reminded of the incredible importance of community, how bodily difference means one thing in isolation and quite another when we come together, finding ourselves reflected in each other's stories" (261). In other words, embodied storytelling can bond people through shared experience as well as visually link one's body with another. Collective storytelling encourages public recognition, the realization that one is not alone or exceptional, and the discursive potential of personal agency.

At the same time, autobiographical practices that link what Foucault calls "regimes of truth" with the display of bodies can be problematic and occasionally

impossible for trans* people who don't locate the truth of their bodies in sexual characteristics or who, rightly so, do not feel safe revealing their bodies. Throughout history, as Emma Heaney posits, trans* people have been made to legitimate their lives with an "added incitement to show" and not just to speak (Heaney 18). To effectively analyze autobiographical trans* identity in relation to visible bodies, I incorporate Ellen Rees' argument on contemporary Norwegian cinema: she writes, the "notion of the body not only *in* a situation but also the body *as* a situation is a particularly useful tool in examining the spectacle of the gendered and/or transgendered body in film" (76). Rees' concept is helpful in distinguishing between context-specific understandings of identity and the ways that bodies figure within those conceptions. I explore this tension by analyzing how Rosskam and Haworth mitigate this issue – how they visually represent their bodies in relation to the stories they tell.

Notable trans* documentaries effectively blend Nichols' final three modes *and* incorporate autobiographical tactics, which feature trans* bodies *as* a situation rather than merely *in* a situation – participants existing within trans* bodies rather than as trans* bodies. These films include (but are not limited to) *Almost Myself: Reflections on Mending and Transcending Gender* (2007), in which Tom Murray weaves a context-specific narrative through extensive interviews with trans* women who are over forty years of age, white, and live in the rural U.S.; *Transparent* (2005), a moving film that features trans* people who had children before deciding to medically transition; Kate Bornstein's *Adventures in the Gender Trade* (1993), which presents her "frank account of her personal journey from unhappy boy child into liberated transsexual lesbian" (back cover); Paul Hill's *Myth of Father* (2003), in which Hill reflects on his father's transition

to become Jodie; *Beautiful Daughters* (2006), which documents the first all-trans* cast as they prepare to debut their version of *The Vagina Monologues*; *Call me Malcolm* (2006), a meditation of trans*-identified Malcolm's transition as he maintains a Christian identity; the compilation film *Boy I Am* (2006), which emphasizes trans* men's stories; and the two films to which I now turn: Rosskam's reflexive and autobiographical *Against a Trans Narrative* (2008) and Haworth's autobiographical and participatory *She's a Boy I Knew* (2008).

Against a Trans Narrative

In *Against a Trans Narrative,* Rosskam—a trans*-masculine identified filmmaker and activist—destabilizes what it means to claim, discuss, and share a personal trans* narrative. *Against a Trans Narrative*'s filming process occurs in several steps, which the viewer witnesses onscreen: Rosskam records himself narrating a personal trans* epistemology and conversations between himself and his partner as they discuss his identity in relation to their lesbian relationship. He then asks actors to recreate these scenes, taking on his narratives as their own. Finally, Rosskam shows these recreated scenes to several groups of queer, feminist, lesbian, and trans*-identified people, who he asks to discuss the scenes in relation to questions he provides. These representational layers are explicit, and thus Rosskam's autobiographical narrative reflexively plays with the documentary's form while simultaneously calling his own story into question in light of collective epistemologies of trans*-masculine identity. Evident in the film's title, Rosskam is critical of having *one* narrative for such a diverse population, including his own. Particularly, Rosskam opposes narratives that are conventional, sensational, and

uninterrogated, even if they are narratives he uses and quite literally forces others to use as well. Because of this contradiction, *Against a Trans Narrative* forces the viewer to question the politics of a shared narrative.

Including diverse and multilayered footage, Rosskam tells a complicated story of relational trans* identity. The recreations he inserts are clearly not "real" in any sense of the documentary term: actors hold scripts, mess up lines, and repeat one movement or phrase several times (see Image 3.3). In one scene, the actress who plays Rosskam's partner continues to mistakenly say "You're worse than other real women!" when the line should be, as Rosskam interjects, "You're worse than other real men!" In this and other scenes, Rosskam is a part of the filming process, also holding a script and directing the actors in how they should behave, interact, and say their lines. This scene highlights the performativity of identity as well as the tricky nature of language itself. At no point does the viewer see a "finished" product of Rosskam's narratives, subsequent recreations, or group conversations. In fact, the film suggests that there is no such thing as a "finished" product—from identity formations to use of language to collective understanding, nothing can ever be made whole or allowed to stand in as objective truth. *Against a Trans Narrative* probes whether personal understanding and language use can effectively show the heterogeneity of identity. At the same time, the film argues that even narratives that are true for an individual must sometimes incorporate dominant vocabulary and discourse to gain recognition.

Image 3.3: In *Against a Trans Narrative,* Rosskam (above right) directs the actress who plays his partner as she rehearses.

Throughout the film, Rosskam shatters the constructed nature of documentary as well as the constructed nature of all narratives, identities, and embodiments. Like other reflexive documentaries that draw attention to how documentary itself is constructed, *Against a Trans Narrative* uses scripted scenes, actors, and non-spontaneous footage to call into question the film's "documentary" label. Candace Moore argues in her review for *Curve* magazine that the film "adapts the conventions of the documentary in order to better critique stabilized notions of identity." Instead of asking, "what is the truth this documentary aims to bring to light?" the question becomes, "what is the truth this documentary reveals about the self and about me?" (Nichols 130). The question the film also asks is, what is the truth this documentary reveals about the dangers of a shared trans* narrative?

Nevertheless, the constructed nature of this documentary only becomes clear as it progresses; in other words, the film requires a certain amount of work from its viewers. At first, many of the participants seem to be interviewees: they position the camera directly across from themselves, sit down, and divulge information about themselves in a

typical confessional manner. Microphones and simple scenery reinforce the idea that these individuals are "real" participants taking part in the development of a trans* production. However, as the language of Rosskam's scenes and the language of the participants begin to overlap, the reflexive aspects of the documentary become clear. In one scene, Rosskam talks directly into the camera about how it is "weird" to divulge information to an object when no one else is around and when he is usually "on the other side" (see Image 3.4). Rosskam says, "I said I would do this every day, but…", implying that he set out to document his transition as it happens yet has not followed through with his intention. Immediately thereafter, the scene transitions to another individual sitting behind a microphone, reporting that ze has been on testosterone "for seven weeks, so, it's been seven weeks" (see Image 3.5). Ze goes on to say, somewhat despondently, "But today I'm feeling pretty shitty, so maybe today isn't the day to talk about it. Or maybe it is." With this switch in scene and speaker, Rosskam draws attention to the ways that documentary filmmaking produces "rote" narratives from participants.

Image 3.4: In *Against a Trans Narrative,* Rosskam speaks directly to the camera about his decision to transition.

Image 3.5: In *Against a Trans Narrative,* a participant discusses hir transition, though it soon becomes clear that ze actually restates Rosskam's narrative.

At the same time, the scenes overlap in such a way that the viewer realizes that the second speaker finishes Rosskam's line and thus coopts his narrative as hir own. This sequence stresses the conventional aspects of shared storytelling and yet locates these narratives within a particular embodiment – that is, within Rosskam's embodiment. This overlapping narrative and explicit attention to the constructed nature of interviews further blurs the lines of "truth" and "reality"—these tactics force the viewer to question what changes concerning the reception of a narrative when the conversation or story takes place in a "real" moment of confession as opposed to when it is acted out or recreated.

If the viewer has not yet caught on, the final scene clearly draws attention to the performative and reflexive tactics of the rest of the film and suggests that all narratives, reflexive or otherwise, are mediated. The final scene features the same individual who previously overlaps with Rosskam's narratives: the camera zooms in as ze puts hir head in hir hands. The camera then pans out as ze perks up and asks, "Did I say it how you wanted it?" In the background, Rosskam's muffled voice replies affirmatively: "Yeah, it was good." As the rest of the film intimates, this final interaction suggests that identities

themselves can be imagined as fictional realities. Identities require narratives and are therefore always re-conceptualized at the moment of confession. Identities also require collective recognition and are therefore always relational in nature. This ending leaves the viewer with several questions: can we separate an individual's story from the community in which ze exists? How are idealized narratives written on the body in ways that one cannot easily shed? How do certain narratives become dominant and how can individuals subvert these narratives for personal, political, and collective change?

In her review, Moore takes up and yet simplifies some of these questions. She writes, "this super smart film presents the quandary of gathering a group of individuals to represent trans identity (when trans is about destroying categories) and exposes how other members of the queer community often project onto the trans-gender experience." Though the notion that "trans is about destroying categories" is simplistic and only true for certain individuals, particularly those who are white, young, able-bodied, and middle class—Moore is spot on with her attention to the "projections" the film illuminates. If one imagines each re-enactment or scene in which an individual confesses a trans* identity using Rosskam's words as a "projection," one can begin to see how the film pushes against normative identity politics. These "projections" force the viewer to question if one can ever represent someone else's story, even if ze shares identity categories and experiences. Tellingly, *Against a Trans Narrative* does not put forward a definitive answer to this question. Instead, the film encourages the viewer to draw hir own conclusions. In exciting yet complicated ways, *Against a Trans Narrative* deconstructs the notion of individual choice in relation to communal goals. Rosskam questions how one can exist within a medical logic without "buying into the system,"

which privileges some and discriminates against others. How do you, as Rosskam explicitly asks, "make your body exist more comfortably in social interaction without playing into disordered language and pathologizing narratives?"

Rejecting narratives that rely on binary and simple explanations, Rosskam nevertheless illuminates how individuals strategically employ certain narratives for life-saving and life-affirming purposes. He acknowledges throughout the film that certain situations—the doctor's office, coming out to friends and family, and in conversations with others who may not share one's identity—inspire and sometimes require the use of these stories. In one scene, a young African-American trans*-masculine person enters a doctor's office and sits in front of a nurse (see Image 3.6). He nervously inquires about receiving testosterone, but the white nurse continues to ask her routine questions, not looking up from her clipboard. Three other trans* people of color enter, though neither the trans*-masculine person nor the nurse acknowledges them (see Image 3.7). They appear as "specters"—or what Moore might call "projections"—of societal pressures, who tell him which narratives to use to get what he wants: "Tell her you've always felt that way, tell her you're over 18, don't look away, you need this!" These haunts and the nurse exit the room and the boy remains, staring despondently at the floor. This scene suggests either that he did not tell the right narrative and will not be receiving testosterone or that he told the right narrative and is waiting for a prescription. Either way, outside voices have eclipsed his confession and rendered him invisible. As is apparent in this sequence, *Against a Trans Narrative* idealizes the belief that visibility equals possibility and yet the visibility the film creates is never fully actualized.

Image 3.6: In *Against a Trans Narrative,* a participant plays out a scene in a doctor's office in which he must tell a particular narrative in order to receive testosterone.

Image 3.7: In *Against a Trans Narrative,* actors enter to give the patient tips on what to say to receive testosterone.

Emphasizing how others—particularly, medical professionals—encourage rote a narrative, another scene shows this young boy with his primary care provider. She explains, "when you go to the doctor, she's going to ask you all sorts of questions to, to make sure you know all the consequences of your actions. But also to make sure you fit what they consider the profile of a transsexual." The doctor gives him the "Standards of Care" to peruse before his appointment: "You should go over it just so you," she begins. The young boy responds, "so I know what they want me to say." After his response, the

scene fades to black. Later, Rosskam places his handheld camera within inches of his face. He explains that it is the night before his double mastectomy surgery and that he has been looking at the mirror for hours, contemplating whether he is making the right choice. He whispers, "I'm doing what I need to do to face my reflection in the mirror, but what if that's different from what I need to do to face my reflection in society?" Rosskam makes a distinction between his body as it exists for him and his body as part of a lesbian culture that may or may not support his decision. The "pressure" here, a similar though in this case invisible "haunt," reinforces the notion that though his narrative belongs to him, it also belongs to others who identify in similar ways, including individuals he may potentially "abandon"—lesbians and feminists, for instance—in becoming a socially recognizable white man.

Because others may coopt narratives that enforce or perpetuate trans* people's perspectives, openly communicating the dangers of this practice becomes imperative to the structure of the film. Emphasizing the collective nature of trans* identity, the film includes several scenes in which multiple generations of queer and trans* individuals of varying races and classes discuss feminism, language, sexuality, masculinity, and future realities of a feminist, trans* movement. Underscoring how narratives and stories travel, these groups watch the recreated scenes I discussed earlier and react to questions, which Rosskam provides. In responding to the previous scenes, which feature the trans*-masculine boy in his doctor and nurse's offices, participants question the danger of idealized or dominant narratives. One respondent replies,

> there's certain narratives about trans* men that are surfacing. So people on the periphery are saying, 'no isn't this great, you have visibility' like

> visibility necessarily equals possibility…It's adding one more narrative that I have to negotiate with. And so I feel like we're so at the beginning of even talking to each other that I don't feel that people really feel comfortable talking about the diversity of their experiences, and how they don't fit in…these ideal versions of trans* people…there's a lot of sway that they can have because we're not actually talking.

This participant illuminates the inherent tensions of identity: how can we identify in a particular way through a recognizable vocabulary and yet not downplay differences within categories, whose constituents we imagine share a prescribed way of thinking? This participant also draws attention to how narratives become conventional when only one narrative is seen as somehow more "real" or authentic than others. For this person, more trans* representations do not allow for more ways of being trans* or even more societal acceptance. Instead, because communication does not yet exist within trans* communities in any widespread way, new trans* representations layer one upon another, creating a kind of cage for individuals who identify as trans*. With open dialogue, however, perhaps these trans* representations and narratives could create a web or galaxy of possibility, wherein one narrative is not more valuable or recognizable. Teasing out these ideas, Rosskam suggests that all trans* narratives are mediated, whether or not they are subsumed by other categories or erased at the expense of dominant narratives.

Throughout all of the conversation scenes, language continues to be of utmost importance. Participants discuss the categories *butch* and *lesbian*, the importance of self-identification, and whether or not naming hinders community building. Through strategic editing that shifts between conversations, one sequence noticeably shows the disparities

in group and generational understanding: one young Asian-American participant begins by saying that naming clearly "limits" and alienates individuals (see Image 3.8). Next, a mid-60s, black, self-identified lesbian says that she "loves" to label herself a lesbian because it is her choice and no one else's (see Image 3.9). Immediately after, a young black trans* man in a different group discusses the fact that groups should "try to do community different," arguing that certain individuals unfortunately "might not even be recognized as part of a community" depending on what narratives and identity terms they use. Finally, an Asian-American woman and Latina lesbian discuss how the idea of community has changed, which reinforces the inevitable problems in having to "think the same way" and the impossibility of being recognized as part of two different groups.

Image 3.8: In one of many conversation scenes in *Against a Trans Narrative,* a group of participants discuss issues of visibility, privilege, and language.

Image 3.9: In the same scene in *Against a Trans Narrative*, a second set of participants discuss lesbian and trans* identity.

This sequence shows several important issues: first, it highlights how younger generations perceive notions of community and identity in ways that may not connect self-naming with survival or self-constitution. Second, it stresses how identity categories often do not take into account variation within groups, rendering intersectional experiences one-dimensional. These shifting scenes emphasize how gender- and sexuality-based social movements dismiss and sometimes explicitly erase the experiences of nonwhite, working class individuals and individuals with disabilities, as well as individuals who simply do not share a common narrative. Finally, this sequence questions the meaning of an "authentic" trans* or feminist identity and stresses how strict boundaries and group policing can damage social movements. Individuals with similar identifications but different experiences can both reinforce *and* deny one another's legitimacy—though these individuals share similar goals, how they go about achieving those goals is different. If individuals across generations and identity categories cannot recognize one another as allies in the same social project, the radical potential for growth and transformation evaporates.

In the following scene, Willy Wilkerson performs a poem that echoes these sentiments. Facing the camera directly, Wilkerson glows from the backlighting the scene employs (see Image 3.10). In hir poem, Wilkerson connects the younger generation's "privilege" with gender transition: "had I been born twenty years later, I would have transitioned, no doubt. But that collective journey of feminism as survival stayed with me," ze explains. In Wilkerson's understanding, the new generation seems to have abandoned feminism: "they look at me like I am truly crazy. Have we come so far that we really can't remember?" Though new generations of queer and trans* youth employ a "different language" and have "different options," they discuss the "same ideas: biology is not destiny" and yet they do not call what they believe in "feminist."

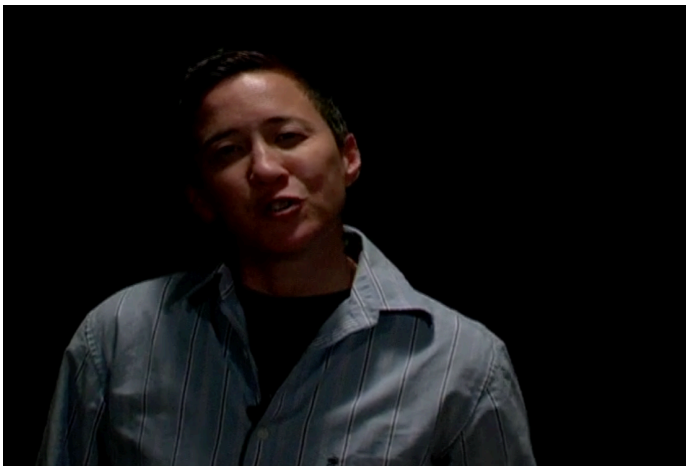

Image 3.10: In *Against a Trans Narrative,* Willy Wilkerson performs a poem in an all-black room with back and top lighting.

Connecting non-normative ethnicity and gender, ze goes on to say, "I found peace with my mixed heritage, mixed gender, ambiguity. Fought too hard, too long to change this body now." Wilkinson makes visible how white skin and unambiguous "heritage"

might allow some youth the ability to transition. In becoming someone "new," some white trans* youth abandon the feminist, queer, nonwhite warriors and social movements, which allowed them to transition in the first place. At the same time, these white trans* youth do not see their privilege (in terms of race and ability to transition) and thus do not understand why previous generations proudly cling to *lesbian* and *butch* identities. Instead, they see their trans* identities as a rejection of hegemonic norms and limiting identity categories and, in turn, erroneously see their *lesbian, butch,* and *aggressive* predecessors as competitors rather than allies. Though the previous conversation sequence—paired with Wilkerson's performance—reflects generational and identity differences, there is clearly more at stake here than identifying as *trans** versus *butch* or growing up in the 1950s as opposed to the '90s; Wilkerson and the film's participants also connect whiteness with privilege and nonwhiteness with survival. Those who are not white more often talk about the limitations of identifying as trans* and thus "leaving" the feminist and lesbian communities they worked so hard to create. In opposition, those who are white more often talk about the restrictions of being trans* and being perceived in a way that doesn't reflect self-understanding.

In many contemporary texts written by and about trans* people, authors connect whiteness with non-binary identity and nonwhiteness with binary gender or identity conceptions that fall outside of dominant frameworks entirely. Perhaps nonwhite people who are already on the margins of society are able to create more radical forms of viable existence through communities and identity forms that do not exist within the category of trans* at all. Recall that Wilkerson's acceptance of hir ambiguous gender, which did not require hir to medically transition, depended on hir acceptance of a "mixed" ethnic

identity as well. At the same time, perhaps white trans* people are more able to live and exist as non-binary because of the privilege their skin color affords them. Or maybe it is more an issue of access: white people are more likely to have the option to pay for and access bodywork if they so choose (based on class status, income, and access to health insurance) and thus white individuals might be more likely to transition physically and reject previous generations of lesbian feminists and separatists who believe transition is a "way out" of oppression. Whatever the explanation, *Against a Trans Narrative* highlights how race and gender are co-productive and co-dependent identity categories and ways of being. Trans* identity does not merely illuminate one's gender identity or community affiliation; trans* identity also constructs and is constructed by whiteness.

Finally, throughout *Against a Trans Narrative*, Rosskam draws attention to the "rub" that exists between having a broad, theoretical understanding of gender, akin to what one might learn from a Gender Studies course or expository documentary, and having a personal identity based on the desire for gender transition. In one constructed interview, a participant sets up a camera, turns it on, and sits a few feet away. He begins, "I'm dating a girl now, but I'm worried that my transition is going to have a negative effect on our relationship. I think she's really upset about my having surgery, but it's weird, it's not like she's known me any other way. She met me like this—me as male and, I don't know, she acts like I haven't thought of male privilege or something." Instead of interrogating the potentially real reservations this "girl" has about his desire to transition and whether or not he has considered the "male privilege" he will gain, the interviewee continues: "maybe she took a Gender Studies class or something. I've never met anyone with such radical views of feminism as she has, and by radical I don't mean

progressive, I just mean radical. I like her though…She'll get over it."[5]

This scene indicates that claiming a trans* identity—*being* trans* and living in a trans* body—is very different than understanding and accepting what it might be like to transition. These scenes draw attention to the disconnect that can occur between those with trans* experience and those who may not comprehend gender diversity. The interviewee flippantly suggests that his girlfriend does not—and perhaps cannot—grasp what he is going through. Denying the complex and difficult emotions one feels throughout the process of finding acceptance with a partner's transition, this narrative shows the danger in assuming that others will immediately cognize and accept trans* experience and identity. At the same time, this narrative claims trans* agency in a personal rather than relational way, which doesn't rely on others for acknowledgement.

Against a Trans Narrative does not shy away from the difficult and tense issues involved in working out a productive and radical trans* politics. Instead, it forces participants and viewers to face these questions head on, which insinuates that through open dialogue, we might begin to forge alliances across identity categories. But it won't be easy, and it certainly won't be a quick or painless process. Nevertheless, as Rosskam implies, the process is what matters. In his article, "Community, Identity Politics, and the Limits of Representation," Rosskam clarifies these issues: "we cannot keep expecting one person to represent an entire community, [and] as a community, we need to recognize the limits of representation" (337). Narratives are always multiple in that they demand recognition from others. At the same time, representations always fall short in illustrating trans* realities. As a film that visually employs what Rosskam explores in his article, *Against a Trans Narrative* expands trans* knowledges, questions collective organizing,

and pleads for dialectical social change.

She's a Boy I Knew

On an individual level, Gwen Tara Haworth's *She's a Boy I Knew* concretizes Rosskam's attentiveness to visibility, community, and intergroup communication. The experimental aspects of *Against a Trans Narrative* magnify social understanding of trans* identity and embodiment, whereas *She's a Boy I Knew* locates the expansive capacity of trans* identity in a particular body through one woman's experience. Using one-on-one interviews, photographs, home videos, letters, phone conversations, quirky animations, and voice-over narration, Haworth intimately confesses a relational trans* identity. Haworth interviews her family and friends and documents her pre-transition life in Canada as Steve, a rough-and-tumble boy who grew up to marry his college sweetheart and first romantic partner, Malgosia. She documents her physical, mental transformation *through* Malgosia's realization that she cannot love the woman Haworth has become, as well as her family's recounting of their emotions during her ongoing transition.

Haworth tells her own story through polyvocal narratives, which produces a radical understanding of gender not unlike *Against a Trans Narrative*'s. Tellingly, in a review of the film, Jane Chapman defines *She's a Boy I Knew*'s genre as "domestic ethnography with an authorial subjectivity" (36). Chapman points to the underlying transgressive nature of the film; though it is clearly about Haworth's life story, how we understand her story is mostly through the interviews she conducts. Haworth is both subject and outsider: she embodies the role of the objective, expository filmmaker looking in on her family and friends' innermost thoughts as well as the role of the subject about which they reflect. Chapman goes on to argue that this film's "deeply personal

account of self-empowerment through self-representation" allows the viewer to more fully understand and question "the difficulties involved in conforming to society's expectations" (36). As a performative documentary, Haworth brings her trans* identity and body into being onscreen, displaying what Pullen calls the "discursive potential" of personal agency (54).

Haworth sets up the film as a meditation of trans* identity *and* kinship. Tellingly, the title itself draws attention to the importance of other people's experiences in relation to her changing identity and body—*She's a Boy I Knew* implies that Haworth is the "she" about whom others will speak. In the opening sequence, Haworth incorporates family home videos of her young parents: a smiling white woman next to a Christmas tree, a smiling white man playing with his children (see Images 3.11 and 3.12). These images then slow down and become blurry, and Haworth's voice cuts in, stating, "my nightmares are about being ostracized, being purposefully left behind…rejection and abandonment, those were my nightmares." Immediately afterward, Haworth's older sister, Kim, states, "I struggled with, is it necessary?...Why not just be a feminine male?" Her father's voice interjects, "I guess we're looking at what benefit is this, what is he going to be going through, what if it's all for naught?" Finally, Malgosia's voice enters the landscape of the film: "I really didn't want to love what you didn't want to be." This montage of images and voices—the happy images of a white, middle class, Christian, family clouded by ominous and discordant voice-overs—sets up the film as a narrative of inter-personal communication and relational identity. Her sister and father's use of male pronouns and third-person perspective paired with Malgosia's direct address to Gwen as "you" destabilizes Haworth's identification as female and initially precludes her voice as *the*

authorial subject position of the film. At the same time, Haworth's attentiveness to her "nightmares" of "rejection and abandonment" centers her fear of "loss" and chosen identity.

Image 3.11: Haworth's childhood home videos in *She's a Boy I Knew*.

Image 3.12: Haworth's childhood home videos in *She's a Boy I Knew*.

Haworth's consistent use of archival material throughout *She's a Boy* emphasizes her masculine past while underscoring the inherent instability of both history and memory. Using childhood videos as well as videos of her father as a child and young

adult, Haworth connects Thomas and Gwen as gendered beings with a similarly embodied history. Visually, Haworth places side-by-side images of her father as a boy with images of herself as a child (see Images 3.13 and 3.14). By incorporating home movies as "evidence" of a "shared memory," Haworth claims these videos as historical artifacts, which are "complex, sedimentary, active and contradictory" (Cuevas 18). Haworth makes all the footage from the past look grainy and ephemeral, which, in effect, disallows the viewer from differentiating these videos. In this way, the archive is "where social memory has been and is constructed" (Cuevas 18). Including home movies produces an intense identification between Haworth and her family, which cannot be reduced to individual explanations of the past.

Image 3.13: Haworth's father as a young boy in *She's a Boy I Knew*.

Image 3.14: Haworth as a young boy in *She's a Boy I Knew*.

At the same time, Haworth does not deny or erase her family's negative and potentially hurtful reactions to her transition but, instead, features their stories as equally valuable to her own life narrative. Haworth's parents' interviews, more so than others, shed light on Haworth's transition. Her father, Thomas, is a stoic, furrow-browed man who confesses discriminatory thoughts towards his son, now "daughter," as he begrudgingly corrects. Thomas looks at the camera—at Haworth—and away, refusing to make eye contact, silently shedding tears as Haworth's narration describes her relationship with her father as warm but deadly silent (see Image 3.15). As the film moves from the interview to photographs and videos of Haworth as a child, Haworth's voiceover explains that masculinity coopted her grandfather's, father's, and then her own life; it rendered her relationships shallow and her voice silent. Though Haworth doesn't return to the idea that masculinity, as a force and filial lineage, was the confining factor against which she repositions herself, the film claims an authentically feminine voice in opposition to the quiet solitude masculinity demanded of her.

Image 3.15: In *She's a Boy I Knew,* Haworth's father discusses the loss of Steven.

Interestingly, instead of coping with Haworth's change by re-thinking their memories, Haworth's family members claim that Steven is now somehow "dead" or "gone." Her mother, Colleen, explains, "Now I see you as not the same person at all. My son is dead, and I mourned my son. I have a new daughter who has some of my son's personality. It may not be so much change as you've just come out…but this is not the person I knew before." Kim has a similar response: "Steven is gone, I know that's kind of silly, but Steven is gone and who Steven was but, you know, you always have your memories." In response to Steven changing her name to Gwen Tara, Thomas confesses: "that was devastating for me, it really hit hard…I guess that was the first moment I realized I had lost my son." These narratives of mourning suggest that the little boy featured throughout Haworth's film does not become the filmmaker. Instead, her family members represent Haworth as a different re-iteration of a person who no longer exists. In this way, Haworth's family imagines Gwen as a facsimile or simulacrum of Steven. At the same time, the boy the Haworths fondly remember, the boy who no longer exists, is memorialized through the film itself.

Throughout the film, Haworth illuminates how trans* narratives are always

contextual, mediated, and constantly changing. At the end of the opening sequence of the film, Haworth appears in a mirror, naked from the waist up. Her face is hidden behind the camera and her breasts are partially blocked (see Image 3.16). Haworth looks at herself through the lens of the camera, seeing herself in the camera rather than in the mirror. As this image appears onscreen, Haworth's voice explains, "I'm a woman trapped in a man's body…I hate that fucking statement." She goes on to clarify that she hates this statement because though it is the closest narrative she has for her own story, it only exists because it is safe and understandable from a nontrans* perspective. It is conventionally comforting but restrictive. By invoking the wrong body narrative and then calling attention to its detrimental standards, Haworth shows how an individual's narrative must be understandable for hir intended audience—family, friends, partners, doctors, and others who hold claim on and over hir subjectivity and livelihood. At the same time, Haworth invokes and then subverts the wrong body narrative while filming her naked body—which appears both masculine and feminine—in a mirror. Haworth thus reinscribes embodiment—and her surgically altered trans* body—as the defining factor of a trans* identity with or without reliance on medical legitimation.

Image 3.16: In *She's a Boy I Knew,* Haworth films herself naked in the mirror.

Immediately after, while home videos silently play out in the background—young Gwen and her sisters on vacation, a family picnic, and newer footage of a family dinner—Haworth justifies her earlier statement: "granted, I couldn't explain it back then. I didn't learn the term transsexual until I was in my teens, which is around the time I saw films like *Psycho, Dressed to Kill, Silence of the Lambs.* I don't think society and I were ready to take each other seriously at that point." These references to popular representations of sadistic trans* characters—in relation to her original narrative that she is "trapped" in the wrong body—works to produce visual and epistemological discord. Though she experienced herself as a girl from a very young age, she did not have any viable explanations of what that meant outside of popular culture's consistently negative view of trans* people. What this sequence suggests is that if she had laid claim to a trans* identity from a younger age, society might have forced her in more aggressively hostile ways to identify as defective, abnormal, or illegitimate. But by evoking these narratives *and* undermining them in that she could never "take them seriously," Haworth refuses to capitulate to popular misconceptions of trans* identity. Still, as she explains, society refused to "take her seriously" as well, which highlights how non-conformist goals are often erased and denied on a social scale.

Throughout the rest of the film, Haworth continues to employ *and* upend the wrong body narrative. In one scene, images of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*'s medical jargon concerning Gender Dysphoria float by (see Image 3.17). In the background, Haworth's voice explains: "I saw myself as female, not transsexual. And

from the little I knew about trans women, society didn't accept them as female but considered them as gender deviant men." Haworth differentiates her experiences of gender from dominant conceptions of trans* identity. In using but contextualizing this pathological narrative, Haworth represents herself as "trapped" not only by her body, but also by popular representations of trans* people and medical legitimation discourse. Haworth acknowledges the hold medical discourse has over trans* individuals who must capitulate to its standards in order to fully self-actualize.

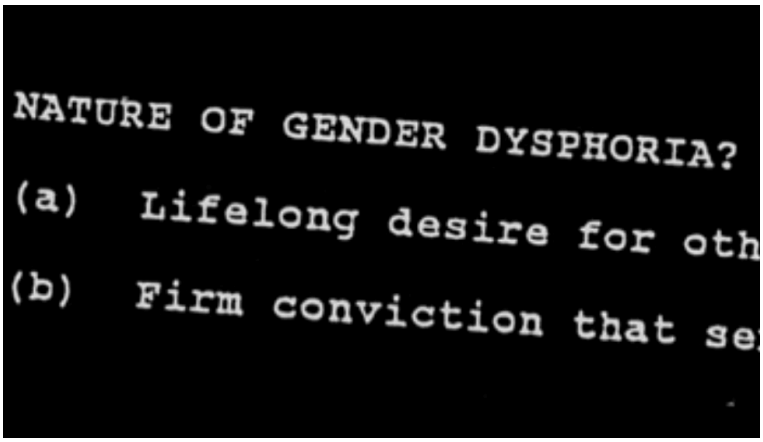

Image 3.17: Language from the *DSM* appears onscreen.

Haworth's family members similarly explain that Haworth's trans* identity is both abnormal as well as understandable. For instance, Haworth's mother, Colleen, recounts her initial response to Haworth's trans* confession: "I couldn't think of anything in your past that gave us any clue…You were a regular BC boy …This was so out of left field, I mean we have all these hockey medals and stuff of yours!" The camera lingers on Colleen's face looking directly back, wide-eyed and excited, as if she expects some sort of response or explanation from Haworth (see Image 3.18). Colleen calls into question what gender really is—perhaps it is a "feeling," as Haworth previously expresses, or

maybe a role, set of behaviors, or even a regional sense of self. Whatever it is, it is not something Colleen expected based on Haworth's normatively masculine past.

Image 3.18: Haworth's mother, Colleen, during one of her interviews in *She's a Boy I Knew*.

As Haworth becomes a woman in both conventional and radical ways, Colleen is more able to accept that because Gwen's body is changing, who Gwen is understandably changes as well. To highlight Colleen's ability to both pathologize and accept Haworth's trans* identity, Haworth emphasizes Colleen's reaction to her younger sister's performance of femininity. Haworth's sister, Nikki, grows up throughout the filming of the documentary, which spans several years – she leaves for college, joins an environmental commune, cuts her hair short, and begins to express resistance to pathological views of trans* identity. Haworth explains that Nikki's gendered performances of self cause Colleen distress: "to my mom's repulsion, [Nikki's new life] involves showering less than once per day, long armpit hair, and dumpster diving for food." Their mother's "repulsion" seems to be more about Nikki not fitting into conventional roles of femininity than about her anti-capitalist goals. Because Nikki has always been identified as (and identifies with being) female, Colleen does not as

purposefully accept her daughter's nonconventional behavior. Though Colleen comes to accept Gwen's trans* identity because it is something that Gwen cannot control or change—in Colleen's understanding—Colleen rationalizes Nikki's behavior as a choice and thus explicitly rejects it. Tellingly, in the final few moments of the film, Colleen tells Gwen, "You'll always be in my life, because I want you in my life…I'd like you to have long hair, but [laughs]…" Though presented in a light-hearted and joking manner, Colleen's emphasis on conventional performances of gender underscore her reliance on binary gender norms rather than her inability to believe that one can move across the gender spectrum. In these instances, Colleen's understanding of trans* identity is more expansive than her understanding of gender itself.

These notions of conventional femininity and conformity also play out in the short animated portion of the documentary, which Haworth labels "How To Be a Girl." "How To Be a Girl" clearly represents how individual bodies change depending on the way others read and police them. Suggestions for how to perform femininity appear onscreen, as the camera follows a pretty, young, blonde and blue-eyed girl: "Call your mom more, always ask advice, family events are not optional, grow your hair long, highlight your best features with makeup, don't unzip until you're in the stall, always wipe from front to back, and for god's sake, shave your armpits!" Presumably, these are all suggestions Haworth (and Nikki) has received. Though many of these suggestions are performative iterations of gender roles, they also speak to how our bodies figure differently in the world depending on how others "read" us. Subsequently, an image of Haworth as a femme lesbian appears after her male form is zipped open, as she continues to discuss how gender norms influenced her to imagine that being and becoming a woman could

only happen in prescribed ways (see Image 3.19). Finally, the femme lesbian persona also unzips to reveal an image of how Haworth sees herself today – as both feminine and masculine and as someone who no longer feels compelled to conform to social standards of femininity (see Image 3.20).

Image 3.19: In *She's a Boy I Knew,* Haworth includes an animated section, which features this cartoon image of Haworth as a femme lesbian.

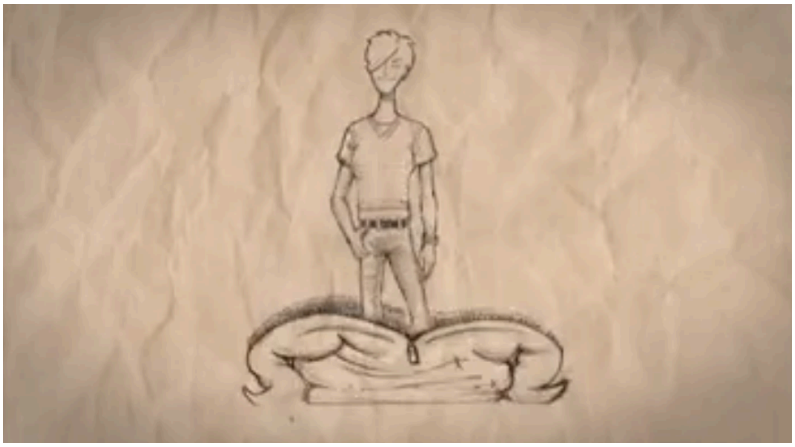

Image 3.20: In *She's a Boy I Knew,* Haworth includes an animated section, which features this cartoon image of Haworth as she sees herself today.

Haworth emphasizes how we are all constantly implicated in a system that demands conformity and yet resistance to heteronormative, sexist ideologies might be

made visible by performing one's body in a different way. Immediately following "How To Be a Girl," Nikki appears onscreen saying, "I love my armpit hair!" This discrepancy between what "girls" are supposed to be and what Nikki and Gwen actually are produces a humorous though important deviation from conventional narratives. Gwen lays claim to a feminine identity, and yet cuts her hair short, does not wear makeup, and continues to be attracted to women. Nikki similarly identifies as a woman and yet does not shave her armpits, wear makeup, or dress in a stereotypically feminine way. These simple choices, which Haworth stresses throughout the film, draw attention to the artificiality of gender rather than the artificiality of trans* gender.

Nevertheless, by pairing her and her family's confessions with the *DSM,* as well as images of herself as a young boy, Haworth associates her sense of loss, isolation, and resistance with medical legitimation. This choice returns the "truth" of her gender to the level of the body—a body that must be "fixed" by surgery, hormones, and technology. After "How To Be a Girl," Haworth recounts various body modifications she has endured: a chin reduction, nose job, breast enlargement, and extensive electrolysis, as well as weekly and then monthly hormone injections. Though Haworth represents these surgical alterations as an inevitable part of becoming a woman, she emphasizes that these body modifications are "necessary" not so she can become a woman but so she can "convince the medical establishment that [she] could pass for their idea of a transsexual woman." As she voices this opinion, images appear of her in her home, pulling up and buttoning baggy, faded jeans with chains on the sides, putting on a t-shirt over a black sports bra, and lacing up black combat boots. This juxtaposition suggests that the extensive body modification practices she endures are "necessary" in that they allow her

to be the woman she wants to be—to be her own self-actualized version of "woman." Haworth capitulates to *and* resists medical mandates of trans* legibility.

Through body modification, Haworth expands what it means to be and perform femininity, which allows her to question gender itself. Haworth explains that after her vaginoplasty, she "didn't feel the need for further medical intervention," though she had "intended to have another surgery to remove [her] Adam's apple." Feeling total "congruency" between body and mind allows her to choose to keep her Adam's apple as a "souvenir to remind [her] of where [she'd] once been." As she reasons, "I didn't jump out of one closet just to jump into another." Haworth connects the "feeling" of gender to the body she inhabits, a body that bears traces of her past as Steven. At the same time, Haworth shows how medical legitimation through surgery did not necessarily give her a new sense of self but simply a new body. Haworth states, "it took my mind a few weeks before it successfully remapped its understanding of my skin's geographical position in relation to the contours of my body." Her bodily change allows the viewer to see how everyone, in their own ways, negotiates institutionalized understandings of gender.

Haworth underscores embodiment while nevertheless calling into question what it means to live *in* a body rather than *as* a body. This radical emphasis allows her voice—its sound and story—to take precedence as her "self" and thus the arbiter of identity. Once Haworth's feminine body enters the landscape of the film, she appears only a few times, laughing and joking with friends, with her parents, and then completely naked in the bathtub and in bed. In these final moments, Haworth shows the viewers her vagina, explaining that she will need to dilate it to aid in the "recovery" of "normal, working" genitals (see Images 3.21 and 3.22). In this sequence, Haworth strategically uses *and*

subverts confessional practices: she allows viewers in to her personal space, her bathroom and bed, and yet describes her vagina and its "healing process" using medical language. Haworth uses the language of a doctor's office—a space that demands confession—to claim a feminine existence through her female-typical naked body.

Image 3.21: At the end of *She's a Boy I Knew,* Haworth reveals her post-operative vagina in the bathtub. In this and the following scene, she frames the shots with a pink background.

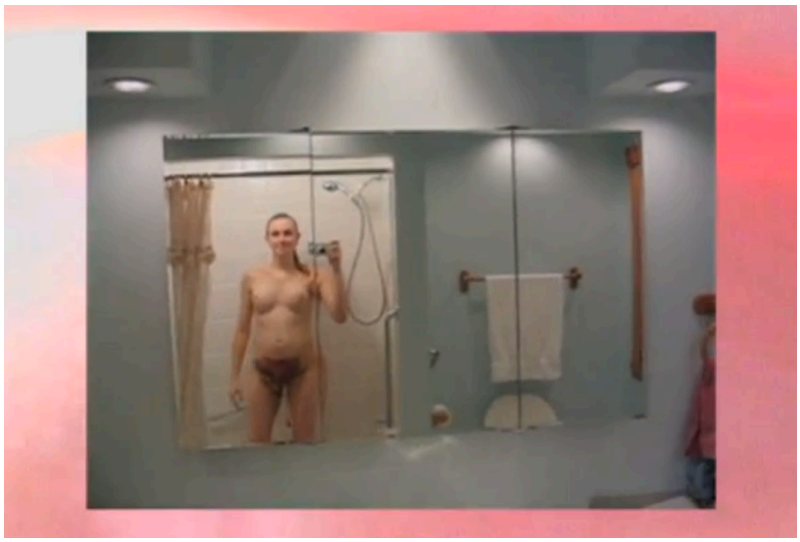

Image 3.22: In the final scene of *She's a Boy I knew,* Haworth reveals her vagina in the

bathroom mirror.

Conclusion: Reimagining the Wrong Body Narrative

As conventional and institutionalized as Haworth's bodily reveal is, perhaps we should consider its useful dimensions, particularly for those who are dependent on familial and social ties for survival. As previously noted, the wrong body narrative fortifies the notion that trans* identity is a medical phenomenon, demanding that one's body be "fixed" rather than society's view of a strict gender binary being expanded. At the same time, if we were to incorporate a Disability Studies politics into this analysis, as Eli S. Clare does, we could greatly expand what it means to live *in* a body that is "wrong" rather than *being* a body that is incorrect. In this way, those of us who identify as trans* could understand trans* identity as a "diagnosis…without being defined by it, all the while resisting the institutions that hold power over us" (Clare 265). If we imagine the wrong body narrative as simultaneously limiting and liberating for those who employ it, "we could frame bodily difference as neither good nor bad, but as profoundly *familiar*" (Clare 265). Haworth gestures toward this radical conception by using the conventional language of feeling "trapped," and of "always" being trans*, while at the same time acknowledging this ideology's detrimental consequences.

Further, rather than understanding the wrong body narrative as a "hopeless" refusal to acknowledge a "way out," Julian Carter encourages us to take into account the multiple meanings of the word "trapped" (130). The wrong body trans* narrative is a "potent form of truth-telling" that is "claimed and resisted in many ways" (Carter 130). Such descriptions can feel politically and culturally detrimental in that they "mobilize a

troubling vision of embodiment as a form of constraint" (Carter 130). However, as Carter shows, "inclusa," the Latin word that translates to "trapped," can also mean "to enclose" or "include"—not necessarily a trap "but rather the condition of possibility for movement" (131). In other words, "do away with the trap, and we can begin to explore the range of motion inherent in the dynamic prefix 'trans'" (Carter 131). We may more productively understand this metaphor as an individual's desire to embody one's intention, rather than to escape or physically change into something *else*. Bodies do not "trap" trans* people, then; bodies offer new possibilities. In actuality, we cannot escape the bodies we occupy, but we can learn to "include" new forms of being.

Haworth and Rosskam illuminate the notion that transitioning is never a linear or predetermined process: "a forward movement becomes a sideways step, or a slowly moving body accelerates" (Carter 131). In this conception, to "transition" or to be trans* is a finite *and* infinite process in that the present is not the past's future so much as its re-embodiment. This understanding of gender transition forces us to re-think time itself: "transition pleats time, and in so doing transforms our relational capacities" (Carter 133). In other words, individuals who choose to change their bodies do not refuse the past but, instead, re-imagine the past as a productive landscape for radical future movement.

Notes

[1] Nevertheless, these texts are "open to multiple interpretations" and thus determining one "answer" to the way individuals should use or understand these texts would be futile (Couldry 375). As Nick Couldry maintains, "we should not expect a single answer to the question of how media transform the social, since media themselves are always at least doubly articulated, as both transmission technology and representational content" (375). Furthermore, several earlier documentaries and films produced in the twentieth century resist and challenge normative understandings of the gender binary. For instance, *Paris is*

Burning, Ma Vie En Rose, and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* all incorporate radical gender frameworks.

[2] See, for example, Stella Bruzzi's *The New Documentary: A Critical Introduction,* Michael Chanon's *The Politics of Documentary,* Jane Chapman's *Issues in Contemporary Documentary,* Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary,* Paula Rabinowitz's *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary,* and Michael Renov's *The Subject of Documentary.*

[3] To be sure, as a political and social trend, neoliberal ideals dominate the media (both in terms of production and distribution), including documentary. As Axel Honneth asserts, neoliberal ideologies work to "sprea[d] standardization and mak[e] lives into fiction," particularly in media representations of identity (474).

[4] Though documentary is the form participants cite, I believe that in the future, new media (in the form of web forums, blogs, video diaries, and websites) will be more often attributed to "light bulb" moments as documentarians interview younger participants and as trans* filmmakers born after 1990 begin to make their own films. Nevertheless, documentaries are widely accessible online and so the reach of the genre may certainly continue.

[5] In another constructed interview, a participant similarly sets up the camera and sits down, stating, "When I told my best friend that I was coming out as trans*, she told me she was politically opposed to my identity. And we haven't spoken since." This interview draws attention to how seemingly progressive views of trans* identity—often taken by nontrans* people who identify as feminist—view trans* identity as counterintuitive or inauthentic. In this conception, trans* identity is not an inherent part of one's sense of self but a political issue others can choose to oppose.

CHAPTER IV

"BEAR WITNESS AND BUILD LEGACIES":

TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TRANS* AUTOBIOGRAPHY

> Stories are told, and each of these expands our understanding of identity a little more and better. Every one of them—every new story, every new word—creates a kind of opportunity to see ourselves anew.
> -S. Bear Bergman, *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You*

This chapter argues that a significant and rapid shift has occurred in trans* autobiographies written post-2000. This shift illuminates a distinct cultural moment, in which individuals are more and more able to break from *and* rework traditional beliefs concerning trans* lives. By focusing on how trans* individuals narrate their life stories in relation to dominant ideals and institutions, I contend that twenty-first century autobiographies reveal epistemological changes on both macro and micro levels of society. To make this argument, I incorporate two distinct but interconnected discussions: first, I examine autobiographies written by *transsexual*-identified people, which were published between 1954 and 1999. Reflecting the historical ideologies of their time, twentieth century transsexual autobiographers similarly justify and legitimate trans* existence. Written for a white, straight, cisgender, and privileged readership, "traditional" trans* autobiographies complicate and expand what it means to live a normatively gendered life at the same time as they medicalize and constrain trans* identity.

Second, I investigate contemporary autobiographies by *transgender* and *trans**-identified writers published between 2000 and 2014, which stray from the previous century's normalizing framework. Specifically, I analyze Alex Drummond's 2012 theoretical autobiography, *Grrl Alex: A Personal Journey to a Transgender Identity,* and

Jennifer Finley Boylan's 2008 literary autobiography, *I'm Looking Through You: Growing Up Haunted*. In contrast to earlier memoirs, these texts show a new era of trans* epistemology, which does not rely on the "wrong body" model as the foundation of trans* existence. Boylan remembers her "haunting" past, which inevitably leads her to seek personal and social acceptance through medical transition while Drummond firmly situates her identity in opposition to medical discourses. Though their stories are different, their embedded assumptions reflect similarly radical conceptions of gender.

Because Boylan and Drummond narrate a continuous subject rather than a subject split between past and present, they put forth a new way to understand trans* identity: it does not demand one narrative (for instance, the wrong body narrative of most twentieth century autobiographies), nor does it require that individuals feel disturbed by their prior selves. Instead, *I'm Looking Through You* and *Grrl Alex* illuminate how gender is never stable but rather "an identity tenuously constituted in time" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 519). Drummond and Boylan do not rationalize a past that legitimates a future transition. Instead, their life narratives explore rather than explicate trans* identity and experience.

Like documentary, literary autobiography offers an incredible amount of power for those who write and are able to publish. In penning an autobiography, ze is able to control hir narrative. Autobiography is thus a meaningful tool for individuals who are and have been historically silenced and whose stories others have skewed, manipulated, or simply erased. Similar to how contemporary theorists think about gender categories, scholars such as Susanna Egan and Sidonie Smith smartly show that definitions of autobiography change over time as individuals narrate new and different life stories—in other words, as cultural knowledge evolves. Because autobiography "creates and

reinvents the self through writing" in relation to an imagined community (Hall 96-7), personal narratives have the capacity to "provide witness for others, create a community of affirmation, and encourage social transformation" (Hall 104). Trans* life narratives resituate trans* individuals as active subjects rather than consumable objects, which directly counters American culture's tendency to sensationalize trans* people.

Articulating visions of difference, Boylan and Drummond resist dominant understandings of trans* selfhood through radical storytelling tactics. Throughout this chapter, I follow Margo Perkins' argument that identity-focused autobiography can "give voice to oppositional or counterhegemonic ways of knowing that repeatedly invite readers to challenge their own assumptions and level of comfort with the status quo" (xii).[1] Similar to how Perkins addresses black women's writings within the Black Power era, I address trans* autobiography within contemporary trans* movements as "tied to impending struggle" in ways that "bear witness" to historical realities and "build legacies" for future generations (xiii).

Rethinking Vocabulary and "Traditional" Trans Narratives*

As I show in Chapters I and II, identity terms are powerful tools trans* writers use to break out of conventional categories, combat transphobia, and take control of their life stories. Echoing the political and social moments in which authors *first* felt discriminated against or called out based on their gender identity, trans* writers consistently identify with one of three terms: *transsexual, transgender*, and *trans**. However, it would be incorrect to imagine that these identity terms divide trans* authors into corresponding "waves" or time periods, where the use of *transsexual* comes first, then the widespread

use of *transgender,* and finally *trans**. Rather, these terminologies reflect the historically available ideologies in the author's lifetime.

Counter to how medical models and popular culture understands these terms, life writers incorporate them in different ways and with diverse goals. Within medical discourse, for example, someone who is *transsexual* feels persistent, long-term discomfort with hir anatomical sex. Transsexual individuals do not identify as the gender associated with their sex as assigned at birth and thus transsexual people tend to engage in bodywork, which may involve hormone injections or pills, electrolysis, behavior and speech therapy, and surgery. Medical practitioners consistently link *transsexual* identity with the gender binary wherein one begins in one category and transitions to the "other." However, this simplified understanding does not ring true for many transsexual people. Some authors who identify as *transsexual* do not subscribe to a particular gender or choose to engage in bodywork. More often than not, these individuals grew up in 1950s and '60s America. In this historical moment, *transsexual* was the only available term, which encompassed a variety of gender-diverse bodies and experiences. At the same time, individuals born as late as the 1970s and '80s continue to adopt this term whether or not they seek bodywork. We should be wary of any argument that seeks to pin down these identity terms by time period or behavior and, instead, look to the author's explanations and cultural position for answers.

Though authors' identities and politics do not align in consistent ways, there are *narrative* patterns that link historical realities with identification. My emphasis on "narrative" is deliberate: individuals who identify as *transsexual* do not necessarily share one perspective or social location and yet *transsexual*-identified autobiographers tend to

use similar narrative tropes. *Transsexual* autobiographers tend to focus on how their sex or body-biography (rather than gender) changes throughout their lives. Authors who adopt *transsexual* tend to structure their life narratives around what Jonathan Ames calls a "basic outline," which consists of three "acts" (xii). Ames describes these three "acts": a "gender-dysphoric childhood," followed by a "move to the big city and the transformation," concluded by "the aftermath of the sex change" (xii). The final act, which features the author's "self-acceptance and peace," emphasizes the individual's surgically transformed body as now being in line with hir "true" sex (Ames xii). In his anthology, Ames chooses excerpts that follow this *bildungsroman* schema: he includes passages from early twentieth century sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who associated transsexuality with perversion, endocrinologist Harry Benjamin, who helped medicalize transsexuality by regulating the field's common practices, and celebrities such as Jan Morris—a Welsh historian and travel writer—and Renée Richards—a tennis player and coach—whose stories follow Ames' three act model.[2] Intriguingly, Ames chooses excerpts written almost exclusively by transsexual women and male doctors, all of whom imagine gender reassignment surgery (GRS) as a necessary requirement for "curing" the dysphoria caused by a transsexual identity. Though Ames describes the three act model as representative of a universal trans* story, the model only applies to white, able-bodied, straight, middle and upper class transsexual women whose identities depended on medical legitimation.

Unlike Ames, who imagines that these universal patterns connect trans* individuals through similar experience, I argue that these patterns say more about the culture in which authors came to consciousness than about their *transsexual* identity.

Cultural ideologies become embedded within our identities and bodies in ways that we don't fully realize; at the same time, cultural ideologies continuously change as new ideas replace or overlap with the old. Because twentieth century media representations, medical ideologies, and cultural narratives introduced and explained transsexuality through negative, individual-based rhetoric, many transsexual authors who began to understand themselves through these discourses did so as well. Though no less political than current discourses, these frameworks offered a generation of trans* authors the vocabulary and understanding to newly cognize their experiences, albeit through a limiting, "three act" model. In the following section, I explore these patterns in autobiographies published between 1954 and 1999.

Traditional Trans Autobiography and Discourses of Medical Legitimation*

One of the most common explanations concerning trans* identity—a variation of which medical systems require—is what I've referred to in previous chapters as the "wrong body" narrative. In this explanation, one's physical body does not match one's internal gender identity; often, individuals who use this narrative explain how they feel "trapped" or isolated because of their bodies. Because this narrative is so widespread, contemporary trans* authors continue to reference it, whether or not they believe it to be true in their own lives. For example, Aaron Raz Link and Hilda Raz resist *and* reinforce the wrong body narrative in their co-authored autobiography, *What Becomes You* (2007): "I am trapped within my body only as little and as much as every other human being" (13). By universalizing the trope of being trapped, Link and Raz suggest that everyone, not just trans* people, exist within ideologically limiting bodies. In contrast, in her 1974

autobiography, *Conundrum,* Jan Morris theorizes what gender can and cannot be: "gender is not physical at all, but is altogether insubstantial. It is soul…[and] more truly life and love than any combination of genitals, ovaries, and hormones" (qtd. in Ames 89). As Morris reflects, a transsexual framework explains not the "apparatus" but the "*self*" (qtd. in Ames 86). Nevertheless, Morris complicates these sentiments by hierarchizing individuals who experience "lifelong" discomfort and who are "driven blindly and helplessly towards the operating table"—individuals who would most likely use a variation of the wrong body narrative—as the only trans* people who "can really achieve happiness" (qtd. in Ames 97). Morris paradoxically argues that gender is neither purely physical nor purely soul but rather some combination, which legitimates wrong body experience through medical intervention at the same time as it challenges intervention, which cannot change one's soul.

Working within available twentieth century medical discourse, many transsexual writers cast their identity as a serious problem in need of fixing; in this conception, the fix becomes synonymous with sex confirmation. For example, Roberta Cowell prefaces *Roberta Cowell's Story* (1954) by explaining her intention to "furnish material for the medical psychologist and the geneticist" so that they may determine "a new answer to an old problem" (viii). Similarly, Mona Joslin Cross and Mark Rees (writing in 1984 and 1996, respectively) suggest that transsexuality is a "birth disorder[r] involving sexual abnormalities" (Cross ix), which means that "it would be absolute medical ignorance, medical incompetence, even abuse, NOT to rehabilitate a person with a sex error of the body" (Rees x). Transsexual narrators explain how they change their bodies to be in line with their identities through an emphasis on surgery as *the* defining moment of

transformation. Understandably, many life writers who use this framework report feeling limited happiness until after surgery is complete: as Rhonda Hoyman reflects in *Rhonda: The Woman in Me* (1999), "It was not until the body image everyone knew and loved as Ron was allowed to be skillfully reshaped by surgeons, that the bonding of body, mind and spirit finally formed Rhonda and the total person she was always meant to be" (x). Twentieth century transsexual life writers (who are almost all women, for whom surgery was available) and medical experts see GRS as the sign of a successful trans* story largely because GRS was supposed to create "normal" women out of disordered men.

In one of the first autobiographies written by a transsexual person, *My Unique Change* (1965), Hedy Jo Star chronicles her experiences as someone who knew from a young age that she was not a boy and could not fit into cultural norms of masculinity. Fortunately for Star, her femininity allows others to regularly view her as a girl and, later, a young woman. Others in her community see her so consistently as female that her mother decides to take her to a doctor, convinced that something is wrong. Upon examination, the doctor explains that Star will "probably go insane" if she is able to live "past 35" (23). Before the appointment, Star does not view her body as incorrect; after, however, Star imagines the doctor's sentiments as indicative of her inability to fit cultural ideologies and, subsequently, Star understands herself as "a woman…trapped inside the body of a man" (23). As she matures, Star searches for a doctor who can "change" her into the normal, heterosexual woman she knows herself to be. Star recounts being seen as a girl repeatedly when she was younger, which suggests that her body communicated "girlness" socially and culturally even before surgery. At the same time, she emphasizes the fact that what "counts" in terms of gender recognition is genital rather than bodily in a

generalized sense.

Star spends a good portion of her memoirs recounting her medical transition to successful womanhood, which destabilizes 1950s and '60s ideals of sex as immutable. After the appointment and her rationalizations of it, she determines that GRS is the only viable option: "The only thing that kept me going was the hope that one day I would find a doctor who could and would do the operation" (Star 79). After more than a decade, and dozens of rejections from shocked and inexperienced American surgeons, Star finds a doctor who will perform the operation. The final, brief pages of *My Unique Change*, which Star pens after her surgery is complete, accentuate GRS as *the* moment of closure: "now, suddenly, this fear was gone. The fear that clung to me for over thirty years was suddenly removed. I was a different person because I had a different image of myself" (126). Ending her narrative in this way, Star underscores her belief that changing her body—her sex—changes her identity. This notion upholds medical discourse, which tends to imagine that surgery produces a different person who must adopt new identities and ways of being in the world.[3] At the same time, like other twentieth century transsexual authors, because Star always knew she was a heterosexual woman, GRS also confirms her identity. Her life narrative suggests that GRS both creates a new identity *and* reinforces an identity she already had.

Similarly, though he does not associate GRS with becoming a man (since genital surgery for trans* men did not yet exist), Mario Martino uses his story to create and legitimate a male identity. In *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (1977), Martino mourns his female history to move forward as male. In part, his explicit attention to mourning a female past requires that any remaining traces of a feminine personhood

perish or at least not take center stage. Aware of this fact, Martino goes to great lengths to write short, direct sentences, which do not include flowery language or overly sentimental memories. In his preface, he explains that he writes his memoirs to "lay [his] own ghosts to rest and to help others exorcise their demons" (Martino xi). For Martino, these two projects are inseparable. In laying his ghosts to rest, he opens up a space where other transsexual readers may find comfort and may see his story as their own, his mourning as their mourning, and his transition as their transition. At the same time, because of his desire to help others "exorcise their demons," Martino consciously offers a model for successful trans* masculinity, which depends on overly exaggerating a masculine persona. Collective notions of resistance become possible *through* Martino's specific articulation of his transsexual experience.[4]

Texts that document identity through bodily changes exemplify what Jay Prosser calls the "conjunction of body and narrative" (103). In this genre, one's life story becomes so entwined with one's body-biography that they cannot be differentiated. Prosser offers "the clinician's office" as the origination site of transsexual identity and thus of transsexual narratives (103-4). In the clinician's office, a psychiatrist diagnoses an individual as transsexual and, subsequently, the individual *becomes* transsexual; ze must then begin to reflect on hir life in relation to this pathologized subjectivity. Though it is clear that many transsexual writers of the twentieth century recount experiences in which psychiatrists, doctors, and other mental health professionals name their identity before they are able to (as Star does in *My Unique Change*), this common pattern does not necessarily identify the site of trans* origination. Instead, twentieth century transsexual writers who include these moments do so because medical understandings, however

limiting or normalizing they may be, give voice and perspective to previously misunderstood or unrecognizable identities. To say that the clinician *creates* the transsexual identity of the author is an overstatement, which takes agency away from trans* authors who document their diverse life stories. Though it is my contention that trans* identity is not a disorder or pathology, it is nevertheless reasonable that some trans* people find validation in having a fixed medical narrative through which their non-normative feelings and experiences become clear.

Furthermore, there are other reasons why so many twentieth century transsexual writers frame their life stories through medical intervention; most importantly, this model was the only one available for authors who came of age or sought treatment before the late 1990s. According to sex historian Joanne Meyerowitz, trans* subjects—like all subjects—consistently use "available cultural forms to construct, describe, and reconfigure their own identities" (35). Meyerowitz defines the "available cultural forms" of the mid-twentieth century as the pathological ideologies put forth by mass media: twentieth century popular press tended to "provid[e] certain readers, who already had a general sense of crossgender identification, with new and particular ways to describe who they were and new and specific fantasies about what they might become" (35). As readers saw themselves in the media's stories, they also began to "reframe" their identities and self-understandings "with a newly available language" (Meyerowitz 35). Because popular press outlets tended to feature stories that sensationalized developing surgical technologies, which journalists claimed could "create" women out of men, individual trans* narratives similarly followed suit by focusing on surgery as the defining factor of a successful transition (Meyerowitz 37-40).

For instance, as I discuss at length in Chapter II, journalists who reported Christine Jorgenson's 1952 transition imagined surgery as *the* determining factor of her status as a woman. Jorgenson herself initially suggested that surgery was what made her a woman both in terms of identification as well as recognition. Later in life, Jorgenson took up her endocrinologist Harry Benjamin's argument that no one is 100% male or female and that everyone embodies characteristics of both masculinity and femininity, a theory which she strategically employed to "humanize herself" and "to suggest that transsexuality was only one version of a normal, universal mixed-sex condition" (Meyerowitz 101). Despite her attempt to "humanize" her trans* experience, journalists continued to speculate for years on end whether she was still "really a man," while others harped on her masculine bone structure, large hands, and the occasional moments when she teetered in heels or wore too much lipstick (Meyerowitz 65-8). In these ways, the popular press of the 1950s reincorporated early twentieth century sexology tenets, which understood trans* people as pathological and abnormal. These tenets both hierarchize sex over gender (where anatomical sex reveals the "truth" about one's being) and conflate sex and gender – to be a woman, one must first and foremost have a female body.

In Jorgenson's historical moment, transsexuality was understood through anatomy rather than psychiatry. Transsexuality was a bodily condition rather than a pathological disorder of the mind, as it was later described in the 1960s once psychiatry gained traction in American culture. Transsexual identity moved from the realm of physical sex to "psychological sex" through psychoanalyst Robert J. Stoller's 1964 invention of the term "gender identity" (Meyerowitz 115). These contested medical frameworks greatly influenced cultural understandings of transsexuality and, perhaps more so, individual

trans* people who had no prior framework or language to describe themselves. Psychological validation through surgery became *the* component of transsexuality, and autobiographers reflected this notion in their life narratives. Trans* people who requested surgery in the 1950s-1980s displayed an "active form of self-expression" by claiming an "authentic inner self" that was in tension with their bodies (Meyerowitz 138). Though contemporary authors tend to shy away from concepts of identity rootedness or "core identity," late twentieth century transsexual people widely used the metaphor of an "inner" or "trapped" true self. Many individuals understood their trans* identities through religious or psychiatric discourses but a majority of trans* individuals who wrote about their lives or who sought bodywork conceived of their identities through biological approaches, which inevitably led to surgical intervention.[5]

Though debates have moved away from deciding whether transsexuality originates in the body or the brain, the medicalization of trans* identity has only slightly lessened since the 1970s. Medical legitimation continues to be a powerfully influential discourse, permeating all realms of U.S. culture from first-person narratives to media representations and journalistic treatments of trans* issues to judicial guidelines, health care mandates, and much more. As I will explore in Chapter V, some trans* youth who document their gender transitions through videos they post on YouTube continue to frame their identities through medical legitimation discourse. Sixty years later, aligning with the medical model continues to afford some trans* people a certain amount of cultural, familial, and individual acceptance, which is perhaps still unlikely through other types of legitimation discourses.[6]

To be fair, some twentieth century transsexual writers opposed the medical

institution, declaring independence from such a racist, sexist, and classist establishment. In one key example, Erica Rutherford's 1993 autobiography details her experiences of disrespect and denial within medical spaces. In her preface, she recounts several moments when she explained to the "professionals, the doctors and psychiatrists" that her identity did not necessitate intervention (Rutherford 2). These professionals refuse to believe Rutherford, relying instead on scientific "data" that proves otherwise (2). Rutherford accepts that her transsexual identity may not find a place in the medical world: "I cannot reject what I have experienced, and if I do accept it, I accept the contradictions of life and accept the dichotomy as a constant reality" (5). Rather than representing her narrative through the "corrective" lens of medical legitimation discourse, Rutherford rejects the narrative altogether. Her refusal points to a shift in epistemology wherein diverse trans* experiences become visible in a culture that previously relied on medical explanations.

In the following sections, I turn to twenty-first century autobiographies written by Alex Drummond and Jennifer Finley Boylan. In light of this section's findings, Drummond and Boylan strategically expand what it means to identify as trans* by referencing yet resisting traditional narrative tropes concerning medical legitimation and dysphoria. Specific to their historical context, Drummond celebrates rather than laments her trans* identity while Boylan expands what it means to narrate a trans* life.

I'm Looking Through You: Growing up Haunted

As a sequel to *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2003), in which Boylan recounts her psychological changes as she transitions from a masculine to feminine

subject position in adulthood, *I'm Looking Through You* (2008) takes the reader back to Boylan's childhood.[7] In her second autobiography, Boylan remembers when her parents move from their urban home and relocate her and her sister, Lydia, to a rural Maryland mansion they name "the Coffin House." In this residence, Boylan grows from ten year old boy to college-aged young man; during this time, as her gender identity becomes clearer, she experiences and tries to communicate with otherworldly spirits. Throughout *I'm Looking Through You*, Boylan incorporates brief yet complicated reflections of her changing gender identity in relation to these uncanny occurrences. In linking haunting and trans* experiences, Boylan compares the capability of connecting with other realms—which contemporary understanding typically brushes aside or denigrates—with the capability of seeing past gender binaries. In this way, Boylan's ghostly experiences foreshadow and yet trouble her subsequent gender transition.

At the same time, Boylan's narrative is ambiguous concerning who is being haunted – the text suggests that young Jimmy is haunted by spirits in the Coffin House as well as by the realization that she is not masculine and thus must change for her own survival. *I'm Looking Through You* also suggests that present day Jenny, who writes the memoirs, is haunted by a masculine past, with which she comes to terms by rewriting her history. These open-ended hauntings allow for multiple readings of the text and blur the lines between fiction and autobiography, past and present, and male and female.

Rather than use personal experience to enlighten the (assumedly nontrans*) reader or add to the growing body of literature on transsexuality, Boylan documents gender-diverse experiences to theorize what it means to *narrate* a differently gendered life. Boylan's narrative makes sense of her past through a lens she did not at the time have

access to—a lens that may or may not actually speak to how she currently feels. In the "Author's Note," which precedes her stories, Boylan writes, "a memoir is meant to be an impression of a life, and not a photograph." This pithy statement prepares the reader for stories that comprise who Boylan becomes rather than stories that exemplify or rationalize her trans* identity as a white, middle class professor, husband, and father of two. *I'm Looking Through You* gives voice to her perspective and yet doesn't exactly recreate her lived realities.

Reconciling her past, Boylan's stories stand in for the theoretical explanations others use to try to legitimate her life. Boylan explains,

> I don't find *gender theory* especially helpful, in terms of explaining the thing I felt. I resent, to no small degree, the idea that a theory should even be necessary. To be honest, just about the only theory I trust is *story,* and I'm hoping that, before all is said and done, the tale I am trying to tell can stand in for the theory. In the meantime, I am sustained by a saying of my mother's: "It is impossible to hate anyone whose story you know." (25)

It is unimportant in this regard for Boylan to legitimate or "explain" why she decides to transition into womanhood; it needs no rationalization because it is simply her life's truth. Boylan suggests that trans* identity, and self-transformation in general, is a viable life path bogged down by our cultural need to categorize and explain. Instead of convincing her reader that what she writes is representative of a trans* existence, Boylan figures her trans* identity as only one of the theories—one of the "stories"—that explains her life.

Keeping with this theme, in the opening scene, Boylan recounts a present day experience in which she travels to a biker bar in Astrid, Maine to perform with her R&B

band. At the Astrid Hotel, Boylan sees the ghost of a young Victorian girl who lost her life by falling over the edge of nearby Carrabec falls; the young specter floats silently on the stairs that lead up to the defunct second floor. In this moment, Boylan compares her life to this apparition's: "Just like the girl…I'd lost my father and my sister, too. *Hello?* I said, looking down the long, empty hall. *Is anybody there?*" (13). In trying to directly communicate with the young ghost, Boylan addresses both her imagined reader and herself as a character within her history. This experience brings back a flood of childhood memories, which forces her to reflect on who she has become. Boylan questions what it means for others to define her as what she "Used To Be" and whether it is human nature to be "unwilling, even irritated, by the prospect of seeing [others] As They Are Now" (12). "How do we let go of the past?" she wonders (Boylan 12). A few lines later, she contemplates whether "trying to tell [her] ridiculous and incomprehensible story" might be one way to live triumphantly "As She Is Now" (Boylan 12). Setting up her memoirs as both an impression of a life as well as a way to find her present self anew, Boylan explains to the reader that what follows will be "ridiculous and incomprehensible" and yet, by telling her story, she will bring her previously unrecognizable identity into view by expanding what it means to transition.

Importantly, Boylan's "Author's Note" contrasts with the prefaces many autobiographers of the twentieth century incorporate: while Boylan foregrounds her memoirs as "incomprehensible," many transsexual life writers prefaced their autobiographies by characterizing their stories as normal and banal. In effect, traditional trans* stories reinforce the notion that comprehensibility is the reason to write autobiography in the first place. In *Wrapped in Blue: A Journey to Discovery* (2003), for

instance, *transsexual*-identified Donna Rose prefaces her story by explaining, "It's just my life…My typical days are the normal routine that most people tend to take for granted. Normal is all I ever really wanted" (9). Rose's appeal on the first page of her memoirs assumes that her reader will not share her story or will distrust her precisely because of her trans* identity. Boylan's autobiography, however, emphasizes her difference rather than her similarity; her memories are entirely not "normal," even for the very person who experienced them. Boylan draws attention to the ways that trans* identity does not have to make itself comprehensible; instead, incomprehensibility can be one theme around which a legible trans* history forms.

Throughout the rest of her autobiography, Boylan recounts moments that connect being afraid of spirits with fear of transforming the self. For example, she remembers a time when her grandmother (whom she calls "Gammie") is pretending to read her and her friends' fortunes. Calling herself Madame Casbah, Gammie eerily looks about the room and asks who wants their fortune told, supposedly through the spirits Gammie will contact. All of the young children in the room turn their gaze down, afraid of what she might tell them; they giggle uncomfortably at the thought that something not quite alive could know more about them than they do. Gammie's gaze settles on young Jimmy and she demands: "Let's ask the spirits for *your* future" (Boylan 22). Jimmy responds defensively: "No, please…Don't" and yet Gammie is incredulous: "What's the matter?" she asks. "Are you scared?" (Boylan 22). After this interaction, the text breaks and Boylan's memory ends. Boylan's recollection and then abrupt ending suggests that, as a child, she was in fact scared to know her future—scared to know how (and if) she would be able to live happily as Jimmy and yet also scared that others might find out that she

wanted to live as a differently gendered person. Boylan represents herself as consistently worried about coming to terms with the ghosts of her past who know more about her future than she wants to admit.

Nevertheless, Boylan's ironic humor disrupts a coherent reading of the fortune-telling scene: in what follows, she recounts being "terrorized by a paint-by-numbers portrait of a German shepherd," which hung on the wall of her bedroom (23). She is also deathly afraid of "an advertising jingle for tanning butter" as well as one for "Windsong perfume," not to mention the "illusion produced when two mirrors were held face to face, creating an endless regression of mirror faces" (Boylan 24). By pitting these seemingly incoherent fears against one another, Boylan retrospectively makes light of admitting her fear of the future, her terror of becoming the feminine person who writes these memoirs. At the same time, Boylan also humanizes and trivializes the difficulties of trans* identity, which, in these juxtapositions, are no more important than the annoyance one feels when the Windsong perfume commercial comes on the radio for the tenth time in a day.[8] Nonetheless, these fears are actually not incoherent at all in that each one—the Windsong ad, mirror reflections, and her mother's painting—are all recreations of an original that might not exist. Each fear forces Boylan to re-remember something painful rather than to learn to forget her past. While one might argue that Boylan is making light of her identity, it seems, rather, that she wishes to prevent its presence from becoming the be-all and end-all of the narrative. For, as a young boy, perfume ads and mirrors also produced existential crises along the same lines as imagining herself as someone who could not peacefully exist *as herself* for much longer. Perfume ads and infinite mirrors, which both repeat over and over again, produce a similarly macabre feeling: memories,

like objects, which build one upon another in such a way as to frighten a person might as well be turned off and tuned out, unless one wishes to question why the memory exists as fearful in the first place.

In all of the memories in which Boylan experiences and communicates with spirits, she connects her identity with those of the ghosts, thereby theorizing her trans* identity through them. In connecting her trans* identity with the undead, it is no mistake that the ghosts who visit her are all femininely gendered. Throughout her time at the Coffin House, Boylan sees mysterious forms of all kinds: a blue mist follows her when she goes into the basement and, later, into her room on the third floor. She consistently feels bouts of electricity, all the while knowing that someone or something is there that she cannot see and that presumably cannot see her. Spirits pass through her and try to speak to her, and she is convinced that the ghosts of a young girl and old woman visit her room at night. Outside her bedroom door, the floor creaks with inexplicable footsteps and, almost nightly, her bedroom door opens by itself as her dog, Sausage, growls at the noises and raises his back fur in response. One night, Boylan recalls the first time a ghost looked her in the eyes when she had suddenly woken up at two in the morning. Creeping into the hallway and down to the bathroom, Boylan catches sight of herself in the mirror. Behind her image is "an older woman with long blond hair, wearing a white garment like a nightgown" (Boylan 47). In Boylan's retelling, the ghost "seemed surprised to see [her], and raised one hand to her mouth, as if [Boylan was] the ghost, as if [Boylan was] the one floating, translucently, in the mirror" (47). The ghost appeared to have a "curious, regretful expression" as if she "wanted to warn" Boylan that "something terrible" was about to happen but, "being translucent, was powerless to stop it" (47). Connecting

herself to the ghost of a woman, and later suggesting that she might be the ghost haunting the Coffin House, Boylan implies that it is her own transformation that will be the "terrible thing" about to happen but, as a then-translucent ghost haunting a male body, she is "powerless to stop it." Boylan figures trans* identity as external—something happening *to* her and in spite of her willing it to go away—rather than something she chooses. At the same time, instead of detailing an irreconcilable past, Boylan rewrites these "hauntings" to be more in line with how she presently sees herself.

Throughout her memoirs, Boylan interjects theoretical and reflective musings about life, which both clarify and complicate her experiences. Because of these interjections, Boylan is a more complex narrator than most transsexual authors of the twentieth century. Rather than incorporating academic or medical explanation, however, Boylan takes over as theoretician and authority of her own life story. In one scene, Boylan reflects on the ways that her childhood trans* feelings were less about clothes and sexuality than about "spirit" (24). It is as if there is something inside of her – or something alongside of her – which knows her secrets from the beginning. Only when she begins to listen to this "something" does she realize what she's known all along. Boylan implies that becoming a woman brings a coherent identity into fruition that had always existed, however "incomprehensible" or ephemeral it had been. As a child, she doesn't understand her desires, let alone know what a trans* identity is, and yet she knows that "in order to survive," she will have to "become something like a ghost [her]self, and keep the nature of [her] true self hidden" (Boylan 25). Haunting her "young body," Boylan's trans* self is a latent presence, which she can only truly inspect as she brings this identity to the forefront – as she allows it to no longer "haunt" her life but to

control it (25).

Though most of Boylan's autobiography focuses on her experiences between the ages of two and twenty-five, the final scene fast forwards thirty years to when Boylan returns to the Coffin House as an adult who has medically and legally transitioned to womanhood. As she walks through her old home and up to her bedroom, she feels the familiar pull of prior memories and apparitions. Because her memories of childhood so far have consistently involved her now-estranged older sister, Lydia (who refuses to recognize her transition) and her late father (who did not live long enough to witness it), Boylan's final story theorizes her trans* identity in relation to her now empty familial home. She reflects on Lydia's abandonment as she gazes at her sister's bedroom: "There was one reaction I had no response for, though, and it was the one belonging to my sister. *It would have been better,* she suggested, *if you had died*…And so, after all these years, when I entered the doors of the Coffin House, it was I who had become, at long last, a ghost, and she a ghost to me" (Boylan 234-35). At this point, it is unclear who or what is haunting Jenny. Is Jenny (or, perhaps more likely, her previous self as Jimmy) now the ghost who haunts the house and her sister's memory? Or is it her trans* identity that haunts Lydia? Leaving this question open-ended, Boylan allows for many interpretations.

In the final scene, Boylan continues to blur the lines between her childhood ghosts and her trans* experience. While she reflects on Lydia's rejection, Boylan feels the sensation of a spirit in the room:

> Electricity sizzled on the back of my neck…I looked up, and *there she was,* just as in days long past. Floating in the mirror was the translucent old woman in the white clothes…Except that, as I stared at her, I realized

> that it was no ghost. After all this time, I was only looking at my own reflection. Against all odds, I had become solid. (249)

In this moment, Boylan ostensibly unravels the focus of her autobiography, suggesting that the previously iterated experiences of being "haunted" were, in fact, experiences of feeling like a woman in a world that recognized her as a boy and then a man. Whether or not her experiences of feeling haunted were "real"—a photograph rather than an impression—Boylan's conclusion brings up more questions than it answers: does her autobiography tell a childhood story of a home frequented by long-dead spirits or a story of a childhood haunted by trans* experience? Is there any real difference, according to Boylan? Though it would be easy, in light of this last scene, to write off her otherworldly experience as a metaphor for a burgeoning trans* identity, the "hauntings" Boylan recounts do not end once she transitions to womanhood: the book's opening scene, in which Boylan, on her break from playing with her R&B band, sees the shade of a little girl who "drifted up to the top step, and dissolved into the door" prove otherwise (11). Though perhaps "incomprehensible," the hauntings Boylan experiences are certainly real, however one may try to explain them away.

As Boylan compares the ghost's mirror image to her own, she implies that both the houses and the bodies we occupy tell a more complicated story than dominant and traditional knowledge suggests: "Surely whoever it is we become," she speculates, "is the result, in part, of the houses in which we live" (52). Who we become is also the result, in part, of the bodies in which we live – bodies that become "solid" through our ability to theorize the self. Instead of representing her identity as one that revolves around transitioning from one gender to another, Boylan lauds her own ability to live in the gray

area. As she transitions, she acknowledges that she cannot and does not want to shed her masculine past: "what about that kid I used to be?" Boylan asks her therapist, Shell: "What about all those memories? That's the one thing they can't give you in surgery: a new history" (256). In response, Shell looks incredulously at her; "You know how many people wish they could see the world the way you see it?", Shell asks (Boylan 257). Boylan clearly maintains that a new history is not what she seeks; instead of disregarding her past as a disruption that haunts her current identity, she reincorporates it as merely one part of who she has become.

Because she narrates a continuous subject, rather than a subject split between past and present, Boylan creates a new trans* epistemology. She was not trapped in the wrong body and is not presently disturbed by her prior sense of self. She does not explicate a past that legitimates a future transition but, instead, clarifies her transition through past experience. Boylan represents herself as someone who has always been on a path towards becoming someone new. Though her history may limit the possibilities of who she can become, it nevertheless reflects who she has been all along: a gendered spirit inhabiting and haunting a body that must change and transform.

Grrl Alex: A Personal Journey to a Transgender Identity

Like Boylan's exemplary text, Drummond's autobiography radically expands current trans* knowledges through narrative and theoretical forms. By celebrating what medical models largely regard as pathological, Drummond reimagines trans* identity. In her final memoir, Drummond proclaims:

> I'm excited by a whole new vibe that is emerging – gender fluidity is starting to take hold as a nation, as a countermovement, as a new zeitgeist

> for the next generation. These creative ways of floating between genders, blending genders, queering genders is going to offer new possibilities for everyone…This is a new language, a new identity, a new possibility. (125-26)

Drummond celebrates an identity that falls outside dominant conceptions of binary gender as well as typical ideations of trans* existence. As a "nation," trans* identity destabilizes cultural values that rely on recognition, congruence, and fixed boundaries between categories. At the same time, by emphasizing "floating…blending…[and] queering genders," Drummond visually maps gender as a spectrum rather than a binary. In this prospect, there would be no stable "sides" against which trans* existence would be compared. As a "countermovement" and "new zeitgeist," Drummond imagines trans* identity as both revolutionary and commonplace. Throughout *Grrl Alex*, Drummond exemplifies these claims: by retelling her life story, she bears witness for others who may share her narratives and, at the same time, by reimagining trans* identity as celebratory, Drummond offers new possibilities for the future.

Drummond's text is divided into two sections, the first of which features memoirs that explore the concept of "doing gender" through themes related to clothing, sexuality, bullying, family, parenting, and activism. This section, titled "Doing Transgender" (a riff on the iconic 1997 article "Doing Gender" by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman), incorporates yet reimagines a canonical gender studies framework. In the second section, "Transgender Theory," Drummond outlines her research as a social scientist who studies trans* people across historical time periods and cultures. By foregrounding her memoirs, Drummond encourages readers to approach the secondary material in light of her life

story rather than the other way around. By flipping the order (since many transsexual autobiographers prefaced their stories with "expert" opinion), Drummond encourages readers to view subjective and objective knowledge as mutually reinforcing. At the same time, her memoirs are theoretical and her theory section is autobiographical, and thus *Grrl Alex* blurs epistemological lines between personal and collective knowledge in both content and form.

As her title insinuates, Drummond does not identify as a woman but as a "trans* grrl," a moniker which Drummond offers up as a newly viable trans*-feminine standpoint. Drummond's identification with a "grrl" persona integrates the punk rock, feminist characteristics associated with "riot grrrl" culture as articulated by all-female bands in the 1990s. Riot grrrl culture famously made headlines in 1991 as an underground music phenomenon, which began in Washington D.C. and the Pacific Northwest and featured all-female bands such as Bikini Kill and Bratmobile (Leonard 115). According to music scholar Marion Leonard, riot grrrl music reflects third wave feminism, which highlights gender inequality, sexual assault, and intersectional analyses of women's oppression. Riot grrrl musicians created widespread collective organizations to "promot[e] sexual awareness and feminism" (Leonard 116). Riot grrrl musicians critiqued rock music, which exemplified a "masculinist culture," at the same time as they performed in stereotypically masculine ways (Leonard 1). What's more, riot grrrl bands experimented formally as well as stylistically in their songs – they are most often known for their vocal styles—which included "shouting and screaming"—as well as their songs' content, which rejected "mainstream values and trends" (Leonard 4). In these ways, the passionate energy, explicit lyrics, and activist leanings associated with riot grrrl culture

easily map onto Drummond's sense of self. Identifying as a "grrl" rather than a "grrrl" (notice the use of two 'r' letters instead of three), Drummond gestures to this culture and yet differentiates herself from it.

Building on her grrl identity, Drummond resists common narratives associated with both female and trans* identities; as a consistent trope, Drummond uses clothing as a symbol for internal rather than external gender. When Drummond remembers her childhood and young adulthood, the types of clothing she was not allowed to wear and yet coveted become symbols for her history: for pages at a time, she describes the "A-line" and "stitched down box-pleat" skirts of the late 1970s (9), as well as the "adorable long flared corduroy" skirts of the '80s (14). Drummond recalls how she was "deeply jealous" and longed for the "identifiers of girl-world," which she imagined would free her "from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity tied up in boy-world" (9-10). Feminine clothing takes on a "unique excitement" of its own, which stands in for her queer and trans* desire "at both a sexual and an identificatory level" (Drummond 10). Because of the masculine standards with which Drummond was implicitly and explicitly forced to comply, these A-line, box-pleat, and corduroy skirts come to define a way of being and an identity, which she is unable to inhabit until much later in life.

Before she has the ability to make her own clothing (and thus gender) choices—prior to attending "Uni," for example—Drummond's inability to put feminine symbols on her male-typical body becomes a heartbreaking realization that she is not, in fact, part of the "girl-world." Though feminine clothing is off-limits to her as a child, Drummond recalls several moments in which she secretively tries on her girlfriends' or Mum's clothing. In one example, Drummond remembers her first girlfriend, Sally-Ann, a "brill"

girl whose sheer presence granted Drummond "status" among the boys in her middle school (13). Through Sally-Ann, Drummond's masculinity is maintained by her classmates' assumption of her heterosexuality. One afternoon, Drummond finds herself alone in her girlfriend's room as Sally-Ann heads to the kitchen to get a drink. Drummond notices a skirt on the floor and "a combination of curiosity and temptation" overwhelms her (14). Suddenly, she is "picking it up off the floor and nervously fumbling to try it on" (Drummond 14). Rather than finding comfort or happiness by being able to "try on" femininity, so to speak, Drummond feels "a combination of shame and terror and guilt" and hurriedly takes off the skirt (14). In later scenarios in which Drummond recalls putting on feminine clothing, she at first feels elated at seeing her image in the mirror. This feeling of happiness, however, is immediately followed by shame as she is caught and admonished in each scenario: first by her Mum, then a High School girlfriend, and finally by her daughter.

Wearing women's clothing brings Drummond closer to a "true" identity, but it doesn't illuminate the whole story. Drummond experiments with shaving her legs (and later, her arms) as well as padding her hips and butt to appear more feminine (24-6). Though she appreciates her image in the mirror, imitating stereotypical femininity in all its bodily markers does not make Drummond "feel real or comfortable" (26). Instead, she recalls feeling like "a trussed chicken" (Drummond 26). Initially, she is perplexed at the fact that appearing feminine does not make her feel like "herself" as it does for so many trans* people in the newspapers and magazines she consumes. As she begins to realize how different women are—"observing the extraordinary range of shapes and profiles" they embody—Drummond reimagines her male-typical body as female (26). In

retrospect, these experiences come to solidify Drummond's sense of self as somewhere between masculine and feminine. Trying on feminine identities that had previously been denied to her, Drummond explains that wearing women's clothing allows her "to finally experience and physically explore the meaning" behind the early images she associates with "girl-world" and, at the same time, to pick and choose the elements of femininity that make sense for her (21). Wearing women's clothes, particularly clothes she chooses rather than co-opts, Drummond experiences and inhabits her male body *as* female.

Identifying somewhere "between male and female," she theoretically and physically plays with what it means to occupy a feminine social position. Drummond does not find a "comfortable" gender identity until she abandons the male/female binary and begins to explore "new constructs such as gender-fuck, gender blending, and the construct of 'transgender'" (27). Though she desires to be recognized as feminine, she does not wish to pass as a nontrans* woman, which she imagines would require hormone therapy, surgery, and behavioral changes she is not interested in pursuing. Instead, she begins to search for an appearance, which would "communicate…femaleness" to others through "queering" gender expression (Drummond 28). Drummond argues that "being female is a state of mind" and not an embodied persona (28).

Even after Drummond discovers a fitting, non-binary trans* grrl identity, clothing continues to be an important symbol. She humorously reflects, "I have come to learn that a big part of becoming confident in being out as transgender is knowing that an outfit works" (Drummond 28). Experimenting with wearing women's clothing in public spaces, Drummond blends "elements of both genders in a coherent and visually-appealing aesthetic" (32-3). Once she begins to wear women's clothing in public and is not met

with overt discrimination, she wears feminine clothing at all times. Her favorite pieces include skirts, boots, tights, and scarves, and she consistently wears eyeliner, eye shadow, and mascara. Though these gendered markers encourage others to read her as a woman, she nevertheless refuses to shave her thick beard and does not walk in a feminine manner or raise her deep voice. Drummond claims a defiantly phenomenological gender identity: "Now I find myself in a space where I can redefine what it feels like to have a female body – by simply inhabiting my own as female" (63). For her, women's clothing (in particular, skirts) initially represent unreachable femininity and, later, trans* visibility.

Because trans* visibility is a key characteristic of her identity, Drummond consistently recalls moments when other women and girls read her as more similar to them than different. In these moments, others acknowledge her as part of an expansive, collective womanhood and yet do not read her as female. In one instance, Drummond is walking to the local campus library; she stops at a traffic light alongside another woman who "smile[s] briefly" at her before they cross the road (35). This simple form of non-hostile recognition reinforces her trans*-feminine identity and encourages her to continue to present in more "truthful" ways. In another example, Drummond shares a "farewell" with a woman on a train whose knowing glance concedes the "shared queering of social norms…[and] an affirmation" (55). Later, Drummond observes a little girl in a coffee shop, whose mother silently hails her: "Now she gets it. I look up at her and we smile at each other in acknowledgement. I continue reading my book" (67). This moment is one of "mutual validation," as Drummond recalls (68).

Nevertheless, not all of the public interactions Drummond recounts are positive; local construction workers catcall her, frat guys mock her, and, in many instances, men

aboard the train harass her. In each instance, though she feels threatened, Drummond ironically finds comfort in the way men treat her. Above all else, these negative interactions reinforce her feminine identity: "If I am to openly inhabit some of the space defined as female then perhaps the reality is that the threat of assault and assaulting comment by ill-educated and low-intelligence males is part of the 'real girl' experience" (Drummond 61). Drummond retroactively observes these potentially hurtful experiences as comforting; these moments reinforce her sense of self in opposition to "males" who see her as either a woman with a beard or as what she is—trans*. At the same time, in drawing attention to these common feminine experiences, Drummond locates herself within a history of feminist, trans* discourse.

Drummond's emphasis on clothing as a way to claim a trans* identity depathologizes "transvestism" (more appropriately called cross-dressing) *and* offers new ways of imagining what a trans* identity could be. She explains, "the crossing of gendered identities through the adoption of the clothes of the other, is an historically and cross-culturally constant phenomenon" (Drummond 138). Nevertheless, cross-dressing has historically been imagined as pathological, fetishistic, and perverse, whereas transsexuality has been imagined as an unfortunate "mistake" of body/mind alignment (Drummond 142). Because sexologists, psychoanalysts, and therapists imagine the former identity as behavioral and the latter as biological, medical professionals of the early nineteenth century deemed one "chosen" and the other "innate." As a culture, we are much more sympathetic to those who are "born" with non-normative differences (those who might identify with the wrong body narrative) than those who we imagine "choose" to be different. Dominant U.S. narratives, then, imagine trans* people as

tragically sympathetic and cross-dressers as sexually abnormal or sadistic. In this line of thinking, to put a dress, blouse, boots, makeup, and earrings on a male-typical body does not produce a "woman." However, Drummond argues that it in fact does produce a woman if that person *feels* it to be the case. Reclaiming a "transvestite" identity and stressing the fact that she chooses to be trans*, Drummond embraces fluidity as a way to create a new understanding: "being out starts to create a new awareness for others, that through a process of familiarisation, a society can become accustomed to difference" (31).

Interestingly, throughout her text, Drummond incorporates several images of herself (see Images 4.1 and 4.2), which embody multiplicity and trans* corporeality. Using photographs complicates Drummond's textual self at the same time as it reinforces her trans* identity. In a sense, as Susanna Egan argues, this visual presence of the body "resists current cultural notions that the self is constituted entirely in language and in text" (5). Drummond's images create new meanings, which multiply her textual identity.

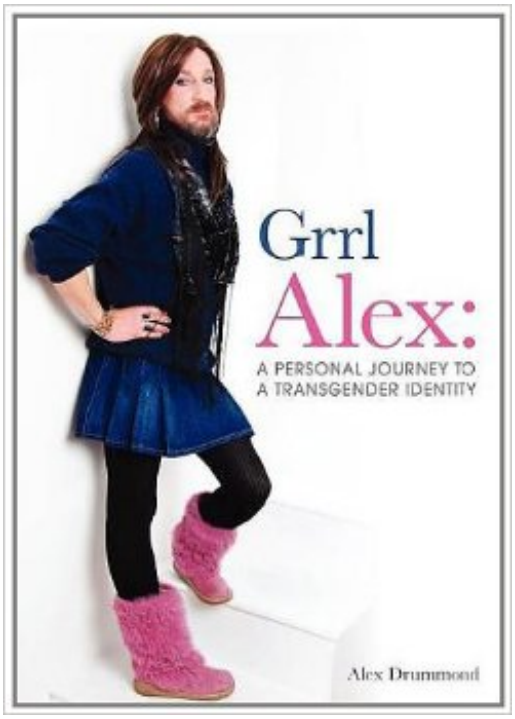

Image 4.1: Alex Drummond on the front cover of *Grrl Alex.*

Image 4.2: Alex Drummond's headshot in *Grrl Alex* (128).

Unlike many traditional *transsexual* autobiographies and mainstream news media, which include a linear progression of "before and after" images that show movement from one gender to the other, the images Drummond includes feature her only as she is presently. Traditionally, a transsexual author incorporates images that show hir as a baby, an unhappy child engaging in forced gendered behavior, in middle school and high school, with partners and children, and finally, in several shots taken after hir physical transition is complete, displaying whatever bodywork ze has undergone. Before and after pictures emphasize artificiality in relation to gender rather than the legitimacy of one's current identity. According to Julia Serano, who discusses the mainstream use of "before and after" images, "the images and experiences of trans people are presented in the media in a way that reaffirms, rather than challenges, gender stereotypes" (36). By focusing on images of trans* women "*in the act of*" putting on makeup, painting nails, or engaging in other stereotypically feminine behaviors associated with a visual aesthetic, mainstream media suggests that "the trans woman's femaleness is an artificial mask or costume" (Serano 41). This obsession with "doing female" as opposed to "being" female devalues femininity and renders trans* people as deceptive (Serano 42). However, in *Grrl Alex,* Drummond's images expand what it means to visually represent a trans*-feminine body. Drummond's photographs refuse the common practices Serano discusses and, embracing an identity that emphasizes the "new potential" of self-acceptance – the ability to "present a congruent self to the world and in that space let go of much of the inner doubt" – Drummond thumbs her nose at the notion that femininity is artificial or inaccessible to individuals with male-typical bodies (165). In presenting an aesthetic that harmonizes with her sense of self without engaging in bodywork, Drummond rejects medical

legitimation discourse and solely relies on self-understanding: "I am me and here I am" (165).

At the same time, Drummond herself is a medical expert who received her Master's of Science degree in cognitive behavioral psychotherapy specializing in trans* issues. Drummond, then, uses her personal experience and formal education to expand scientific thought. She writes, "scientific truism does not have to imply hierarchical disadvantage…Ultimately, a key tenet of this book is that 'masculine' and 'feminine' as gender-identified traits can exist beyond the genital anatomy" (Drummond 155). Drummond uses scientific data to show that gender fluidity is more of a reality than medical discourse acknowledges. After her literature review, Drummond remarks: "What has ultimately become clear to me as a researcher is that…trans* identity is not a single or fixed entity, but one with complex manifestations" (154). The rest of her text shows how this complexity is possible.

Drummond's autobiography signals a fundamental shift in twenty-first century epistemology. Not only does she expand definition and vocabulary concerning gender diversity, she also destabilizes traditional conceptions of transsexuality as purely a medical problem in need of fixing. By celebrating her trans* existence, Drummond offers new possibilities for the future. In hir review, Marilyn Roxie brilliantly sums up the inherent potential in *Grrl Alex*, which signals a contemporary "shift to the present and future compilation of more and more narratives of trans* lives that portray a holistic view of such lived experience, rather than a strictly medicalized narrative or a trans* person as the subject of someone else's gaze." By expanding what it means to be, feel, and identify as trans*, Drummond concretizes her predictions that *trans** will be the "new zeitgeist for

the future" (126). Radically reimagining what a trans*-feminine identity and body can be, *Grrl Alex* pronounces the trans* movement as the next riot grrrl revolution.

Conclusion: Seeing Ourselves Anew

*Trans** and *autobiography* are collectively created categories that are constraining *and* limitless: they each demand recognition by a community and yet what it means for a text to be called an *autobiography* or who is and is not visible as *trans** constantly changes. The terms themselves likewise morph to meet the needs of the collective. As new knowledges develop, and as individuals live differently imagined lives, both trans* identity and the genre of autobiography concomitantly transform. As S. Bear Bergman succinctly puts it, "stories are told, and each of these expands our understanding of identity a little more and better. Every one of them—every new story, every new word—creates a kind of opportunity to see ourselves anew" (*The Nearest Exit* 21). Because life narratives bring new identities into fruition, trans* autobiography multiplies gender and genre possibilities. Because most autobiographers directly engage an imagined reader, highlight truthful intentions, and represent their life stories as both unique *and* representative, the genre allows for yet constrains the types of narratives one can write. Simultaneously, trans* identity widely includes yet limits those who fit under its umbrella's shade.

In these ways, Boylan and Drummond's autobiographies illuminate new and viable possibilities for trans* life stories, which no longer solely rely on medical legitimation or sensational models of gender diversity. Demanding that their narratives be taken seriously outside expert or institutional approval—in fact, that they are the experts

and theoreticians of their lives—Boylan and Drummond reposition trans* identity as one possibility of many. Subverting the traditional "acts" of trans* maturation, Boylan and Drummond reconfigure gender transition as only one part of their complex humanity, rather than *the* defining factor of their lives—and of their autobiographies.

Notes

[1] In 1937, Stuart Bates defined autobiography simply as "first-hand evidence" or as "a narrative of the past of a person by the person concerned" (5). Unlike subsequent definitions, which require autobiography to be theoretical or phenomenological or linear (or some other exclusionary characteristic), Bates' definition incorporates a variety of disparate texts into one useful analytic category. Fifty years after Bates introduced the term, Philippe LeJeune redirected autobiography studies with his canonical conception of *le pacte autobiographique*: in his forward to Lejeune's *On Autobiography,* John Paul Eakin explains, "the autobiographical pact is a form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life" (ix). Rather than simply "first-hand evidence," which implies an immediate connection between narrator and narration, Lejeune understands autobiography as an author's sustained, distanced, and deliberate reflections of evidentiary life moments: "not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not 'the effect of the real,' but the image of the real" (22). The autobiographical pact assumes that readers depend on autobiography to be truthful until proven otherwise: the pact requires that the reader not question the author's self-representations until breaks, faults, or fissures in the text expose the text to be antithetical to the author's "true" life story.

[2] In a *bildungsroman* or "coming-of-age" maturation story, "the narrator describes the progress of life and career, adult success and the development of the sense of self and personal philosophy" (Lynch 212). Trans* autobiographies that follow a *bildungsroman* narrative structure document the author's birth, childhood, young adulthood, school life, relationships, parenthood (if applicable), and professional life, all of which culminates or is perpetually driven by the desire for GRS. This structure highlights the author's persistent, significant discomfort with hir body and parallels "wrong body" representations in mainstream media.

[3] Similarly, Rebecca De Havalland assumes a suspicious, cisgender audience and yet expands what it means to live a "normal" life. In the preface to her autobiography, *His Name is Rebecca* (2010)*,* De Havalland writes,

> To me my life is simply that: Nothing extraordinary. It is what I wake up to each morning and sometimes it is what I cry myself to sleep over at night. I take up more or less the same body-space as you. So you see, I am not so very

> different to you. A slight tweak here, a lift there, a different set of experiences and you could be moulded into me, or I into you. (3)

De Havalland emphasizes the universal experience of taking up space in a body and experiencing emotion, which any normative reader shares. De Havalland assumes that the normal cis reader has not had a "tweak here" or a "lift there" but rather is normal precisely because ze hasn't felt the need to change hir body. This common appeal to normal exceptionalism reinforces dominant ideologies that define trans* people as abnormal.

[4] Though trans* autobiographers variously frame their narratives as personal *or* collective—written for the benefit of the author *or* for others—most trans* autobiographies are both individually and communally productive. For example, in *Stephanie: A Girl in a Million* (1991), Stephanie Anne Lloyd intends to document her changing identity to "help [her] beloved parents, [her] beautiful and loving ex-wife and [her] three irreplaceable children truly to understand the complex and wholly untenable condition that [she] fought to come to terms with" (6). This intention is collective rather than individual. Like Lloyd, Caroline Cossey hopes that her autobiography, *My Story* (1999), might help others "who are in search of unity between body and mind, as they struggle to piece together their particular jigsaw in the face of prejudice and ignorance" (xii). In *He's My Daughter: A Mother's Journey to Acceptance* (2002), Lynda Langley comes to terms with her daughter's trans* identity so that others will write their own narratives: "Maybe if I tell my story, others will follow, or listen and know they are not alone. I need to know I am not alone" (ix). Though her intention is collective in that she wants to help and hear from others, Langley also specifies that her collective goal will bring personal comfort in knowing she isn't alone. Leslie Townsend also frames her memoirs as "a contribution to everyone in the transgender community, their families and friends. And also to society, in the hopes that understanding may be gained from my story" (x). All of these examples show that explicitly personal or collective intentions within trans* autobiography quickly blur, which implies that personal and collective ideas of gender cannot be as neatly separated as authors might like.

[5] Nevertheless, surgery was often not an option. Not only is it an expensive procedure not often covered by insurance companies due to its "elective" nature, doctors' biases extensively determine who has access to GRS. As Meyerowitz and others suggest, in the 1950s-1980s, doctors tended to choose patients who would likely "pass" as the "other" gender after surgery and who would then live heterosexual lives. Those who identified as lesbian trans* women or gay trans* men were not generally granted surgery.

[6] In "Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question," Susan Stryker addresses this phenomenon by analyzing her own life narrative. She argues that her transsexual body "is different from most other bodies, and while this difference does not impair, it has been medicalized" (Stryker, "Transgender Feminism" 67). Further, medical legitimation discourse claims its ability to "cure" the individual of the "social domination, regulation, and control" associated with living in a trans* body (Stryker, "Transgender Feminism" 65). In other words, because the medical model encourages

trans* people to feel "disabled", it is no wonder that so many trans* authors frame their life narratives through GRS and rhetorics of rehabilitation.

[7] In this section, though I don't consistently specify, all citations that reference Boylan come from *I'm Looking through You* rather than *She's Not There.*

[8] Though Boylan doesn't specify which "Windsong perfume" ad she feared as a child, the most popular Windsong advertisement in the mid-1970s was a radio jingle that included the lyrics "I can't seem to forget you" and "you're always on my mind." In light of her autobiography, these lyrics fit quite well. What Boylan seems to fear the most is not being able to clear her mind of the ghosts and genders that haunt her.

CHAPTER V

COLLECTIVE ARCHIVES OF RESISTANCE:

TRANS* DIGITAL STORYTELLING ON YOUTUBE

> One of the most important things that I've discovered in my life is that where I was and where I'm going is inevitably where I will be found.
> -Skylar Kergil, YouTube vlogger "SkylarkEleven"

In Chapters III and IV, I explored how twenty-first century trans* individuals produce new discourses of gender through documentary and literary life narratives. Trans* individuals no longer solely represent their identities as pathological (which was a common practice in the twentieth century) and, in fact, some trans* people now discuss how their lives and experiences can be understood as euphoric rather than dysphoric. Locating themselves in resistance to the normalizing gaze of the medical-psychiatric institution, some trans* people validate their identities through other means. At the same time, trans* individuals who engage in bodywork or experience gender dysphoria can readily access similar life stories in mainstream media. As more diverse trans* narratives proliferate, the sensational and simplified depictions of the twentieth century no longer serve as the only viable options. In Chapter V, I build on these arguments yet shift the textual focus to digital storytelling, which is a uniquely twenty-first century form.

On user-generated digital platforms—like LiveJournal in the early 2000s and contemporary sites like Tumblr, WordPress, and YouTube—diverse trans* voices, narratives, and images proliferate. Trans* digital storytelling, which is a term I use throughout this chapter, refers to amateur audio-visual videos, which individuals share with a community of online viewers. On YouTube, individuals post video blogs (or

"vlogs") of themselves speaking directly to the camera and viewing audience. Others post videos that depict their daily lives—going to school, interacting with friends and family, visiting the doctor, receiving hormone therapy, talking with sexual partners, going to the DMV, healing after surgery, and more. By documenting seemingly mundane activities for strangers to view, trans* digital storytellers (or "vloggers," as I sometimes refer to them) expand traditional conceptions of what it means to live a trans* life. "While seemingly mundane," Tracy Kennedy argues, the personal vlog "provides a useful way to express oneself, a place to unload and unpack feelings." Blurring the boundaries between conceptions of individual and collective knowledge of the self, digital storytelling offers some trans* youth the possibility of sharing life stories in personally political and politically personal ways.

Based on my continued desire to foreground how trans* individuals narrate their life stories, I narrow this chapter's focus to two trans*-masculine vloggers: SkylarkEleven (whom I refer to throughout this chapter as "Skylar" to honor his chosen YouTube moniker and name) is a twenty-three year old musician and activist named Skylar Kergil who has documented his transition since the age of seventeen by posting more than 200 videos; and KyFord23 (whom I refer to as "Ky") is a twenty-four year old white trans* man from rural Iowa whose twenty-four videos similarly document his changing identity and body. Specifically, Skylar and Ky use digital storytelling to record their changing bodies *and* resist medical legitimation discourses that pathologize trans* individuals (see Chapters II and IV for discussions of medical legitimation discourses). Through documentation *and* resistance, Skylar and Ky use digital storytelling as a reflexive survival tool, which helps them negotiate the societal oppression they

experience in safe ways. Instead of merely acknowledging the contemporary nightmares of transphobia and heterosexism, Skylar and Ky perform new ways of being. As Ky reflects in one video, "not only do we have to accept that we are trans*, we have to fucking love it" ("RE: Lost and Confused"). Digital storytelling is thus a creative tool these and other trans* individuals employ to archive *and* embody previously unrecognizable gender positions. Through these goals, Skylar and Ky's digital storytelling practices illuminate our cultural moment's changing epistemology of gender.

Skylar and Ky's seemingly disparate goals – to document bodywork *and* resist the medical model – illuminate the ways that digital storytelling can be better understood as a platform for "unstable, contested, multiple, and often incoherent selves" (Strangelove 69). Through time-lapse photography, music, interview, theoretical and emotional exploration, and confession, Skylar and Ky expand what it means to live as *trans** in a world that constantly demands that they choose between male and female. Throughout these discussions, I will also highlight how other trans* individuals use YouTube to celebrate gender identities that fall outside of normative categories. Rather than isolating or colonizing their use of creative expression, narrative, and bodily performance to show how trans* youth validate or invalidate established academic theory, I recognize these vloggers as themselves gender theorists. Trans* youth tell a digital story that insists on its own validity outside of academic and medical discourse.

Furthermore, I argue that trans* digital storytellers incorporate practices typically associated with Second Wave feminist consciousness-raising groups. This idea is one I will extensively discuss in relation to how trans*-masculine youth on YouTube construct and discuss "community." As I will argue, white trans* digital storytellers implicitly

sidestep the exclusionary tendencies commonly associated with Second Wave consciousness-raising groups by enacting what Cherríe Moraga calls "a theory in the flesh." In line with Chela Sandoval's conception of "differential consciousness,"[1] a theory in the flesh is "born out of necessity" based on one's social position as well as one's physicality – one's skin color, sexual desire, homeplace, and gender, among other factors (Moraga 23). A theory in the flesh is an "attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience…by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words" (Moraga 23). This "differential" mode depends on fluidity, allowing subjects to move "between and among" forms of resistance in tactical ways (Sandoval, *Methodology* 14).

Trans* digital storytellers consistently perform theories *in* the flesh at the same time as they perform theories *of* the flesh: by naming what was unnamed, telling stories in their own words, and archiving the physicality of their changing bodies, trans* vloggers reimagine Moraga's important feminist theory and take up Sandoval's call to action. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's explicit intention in putting together *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) was to bring together women of color feminists who experienced multiple and interconnecting layers of oppression. Similarly, trans* individuals use digital storytelling to shed harmful oppressions, forge relationships, and negotiate knowledge. In light of these arguments, trans* digital storytelling might be able to change the way U.S. culture understands trans* identity—not only for trans* scholars but also for future generations of trans* youth, advocates, medical practitioners, teachers, and students.

In the future, trans* digital storytelling could help foster a multi-vocal conversation about gender, which could challenge hierarchically valued "expert" opinion

and, instead, focus on individual life stories within a collective medium. In "Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography," Jack Halberstam claims that "the discussions that take place in medical communities about embodiment and desire may be way behind the discussions taking place on email lists [and] in support groups" (66). In addition to "email lists" and "support groups," I believe YouTube offers another site wherein trans* people's dialogues about trans* identity illuminate new ways to resist and reconceptualize medical discourse. Halberstam's theory is made visible on YouTube – trans*-masculine individuals resist medical mandates and create life narratives that do not rely on legitimation discourses.

Nevertheless, I do not mean to suggest that there are no negative aspects to digital storytelling; on the contrary, there are significant issues related to privacy, stalking, harassment, and cyber-bullying, which contribute to real and sometimes life-threatening circumstances. Issues of access also disrupt the positive outcomes I will discuss: one's class, race, and physical ability contribute to whether one has the technology, leisure time, and freedom to watch (let alone create and post) videos. Materially speaking, in order to create a vlog, one must have access to a video camera or computer, video and music editing software, a microphone, the internet, and the space to quietly and independently record oneself. Though smartphones and computer software programs have reduced the amount of required technology, lighting, and time, not all or even most trans* individuals have access to this medium and thus its "collective" nature incorporates only a portion of trans* Americans.

By mapping the terrain of trans*-masculine digital storytelling on YouTube, Chapter V documents how trans* individuals reinvent the self through social methods. In

the following sections, I explore how trans* digital storytellers expand what it means to live a white trans* life in twenty-first century America. First, I investigate the unique aspects of the YouTube vlog; I explain what it is, what it does, and how it has grown in popularity in the past five years. Second, I discuss the ways that Skylar, Ky, and other white, trans*-masculine vloggers document their transitions by taking advantage of the diary nature of video posts. In this section, I show how documenting one's body as it changes is interconnected with exploring identity, creating dialogue with others, and forging digital consciousness-raising groups, which mimic Second Wave iterations. Third, I examine how Skylar and Ky explicitly resist discourses of medical legitimation, which pathologize and limit trans* expression. Finally, I analyze how Skylar, Ky, and other trans*-masculine digital storytellers collectively negotiate trans* knowledges.

Trans Digital Storytelling and YouTube*

Digital storytelling is a genre that has become incredibly popular in a short amount of time. Not only do millions of people produce and post personal videos each day, hundreds of millions of people consume such videos. In his 2010 survey, Michael Strangelove found that "Internet users watch more than 1 billion video clips on YouTube every day, and much of that viewing time is spent watching amateur videos" (3). Similarly, in their study of the most popular YouTube videos, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green discovered that vlog entries dominated the sample, "making up nearly 40 percent of the videos coded Most Discussed and just over a quarter of the videos coded Most Viewed" (94). On an average day, hundreds of millions of individuals from all over the globe watch vlogs produced by people they do not know and likely will never meet.

To be sure, as Strangelove argues, video diaries have loudly demanded an "attention economy on the Internet," which should not be neglected by autobiography or media scholars who might view these posts as obscure or inauthentic (71). In 2010, at the time of Strangelove's study, "a search for the term vlog (video blog) on YouTube renders 310,000 hits" (70). Since 2010, the searchable number of vlogs has exponentially grown: in January of 2015, for example, a search for the term "vlog" renders over twenty million videos. In five short years, the number of vlogs posted on YouTube increased by more than sixty-four times. This ever-expanding "chorus of voices" illuminates the fact that "video confessions yield further video confessions" (Werner 41).

In the same period of time, the amount of information related to trans* identity located a click away powerfully represents a twenty-first century cultural shift. I have researched trans* digital storytelling for more than four years, and every few months I take note of the upward trend in YouTube and Google's searchable trans*-related material. In November 2012, for example, a YouTube search for "transgender" produced 137,000 videos, up from 78,000 in May of the same year. In November 2012, a YouTube search for "trans" brought up almost half a million videos, up from 300,000 six months before. Two years later, in October 2014, the numbers were staggering: searching "transgender" brought up more than 679,000 clips and "trans" matched 6 million. Today, in January 2015, a Google search for "transgender" brings up 75 million websites, which is more than quadruple the number three years ago. Clearly, public discourse related to trans* identity is rapidly expanding: in Susan Stryker's words, American culture and new media are "fascinat[ed]" by "all things transgender" (*Transgender History* 26).

Nevertheless, though a cultural "fascination" with "all things transgender" does

not necessarily produce positive or even realistic representations of trans* lives, trans* individuals and allies create much of YouTube's trans*-related material. Trans* media scholar Sonja Vivienne echoes my research when she argues that digital spaces have "heralded unprecedented opportunities for trans people who wish to speak their own stories in public spaces" (43). For trans* teenagers and tweens who grew up "amid the turn-of-the-century digital media and telecommunications revolution," intuitively using new media to constitute or reinforce identity "just makes sense" (Stryker, *Transgender History* 26). According to Mary Gray, an enormous number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) youth turn to the internet as a tool to find others who are "like them," ask questions they couldn't ask of their parents, teachers, or friends, and combat the isolation some experience in small-town America.[2] For many queer youth, "the Internet has been an important, even vital venue for connecting with others and for establishing a sense of identity and community" (Alexander and Losh 39). These ideas also apply to the tens of thousands of trans* youth who use YouTube to connect with others, share stories, and gain new insights, which the nontrans* people in their daily lives cannot or will not give them. As R. Cohn reiterates, "many, if not most, of us have no problems dealing with being trans – it's how we fare at the hands of others who are steeped in cultural bigotry which causes distress. In each of these scenarios, it is often an Internet connection and support groups that keep us going" (qtd. in Heinz 327). In these ways, vlogging is a mode of resistance that quite literally saves lives.

In their study of "participatory politics," Cathy J. Cohen and Joseph Kahne illuminate how and why youth interact online. Echoing previous findings, Cohen and Kahne find that online participation is a popular endeavor. Defining "participatory

politics" as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern," Cohen and Kahne discover that out of the youth they surveyed, a surprisingly high one in six create "original media to share online" (vi-vii). Because online contexts "provide a space of connection…where trust is built and deliberation happens," digital spaces allow individuals to "buil[d] and mobiliz[e]" collective identities (Cohen and Kahne ix). By engaging in digital participatory acts, young social media users "facilitate a renegotiation of political power and control" through recognizably personal iterations of identity (Cohen and Kahne vi).

Interestingly, Cohen and Kahne's study did not find statistically significant differences in how youth of diverse races use the internet: contrary to the assumption that nonwhite youth have fewer opportunities to engage in "participatory politics" based on access to technology, Cohen and Kahne discovered that "96% of whites, 94% of blacks, 96% of Latinos and 98% of Asian Americans all have access to a computer that connects to the internet" (vii). In fact, "participation is highest among black youth" (Cohen and Kahne viii). Even when they took into account their participants' income and class, Cohen and Kahne found no significant differences based on race (x).[3] These findings show that youth who participate on user-generated sites may not do so because of heightened "access" as scholars once imagined. Developing technologies clearly offer similar opportunities for youth of all socio-economic and racial backgrounds to interact online. Unlike the more traditional genres of documentary and autobiography, digital storytelling is an accessible and free way to share life stories. Laurie McNeill, Helen Kennedy, Julie Rak, and Marilee Lindemann agree: "bypassing the commercial, aesthetic, or political interests that dictate access to traditional print media, and that

decide whose life stories deserve to be told," digital sites like YouTube offer egalitarian platforms for subjugated knowledges to flourish (McNeill 26).[4] At its core, digital storytelling is a radically collective *and* intensely personal genre.[5]

Collective Support: Trans Communities on YouTube*

> Without the trans community on YouTube I wouldn't have known that transgender people exist. It's great for awareness, and support. I hope my videos can contribute both of those things in the community.
> -Benton Sorenson, YouTube vlogger

The white, trans*-masculine digital storytellers I analyze share at least two goals: first, to connect with others who are going through similar experiences or who are looking for answers (to foster community); and second, to reclaim agency over their bodies, identities, and life stories (to foster individuality). In light of these shared goals, this section illustrates how trans*-masculine YouTube vloggers create consciousness-raising communities and use digital storytelling as an act of personal reclamation. Though I discuss the notion of "community," I want to stress the fact that there is no such thing as one monolithic trans* community (on YouTube or otherwise), just as there is no such thing as one trans* identity or narrative.[6] In reality, there are many different types of trans* communities online, and YouTube is only one platform through which trans* collectivity is made visible.

As previously mentioned, trans* digital storytelling offers a contemporary example of 1970s and '80s Second Wave feminist consciousness-raising groups. According to Tracy Kennedy, in consciousness-raising groups, women came together "to talk about their experiences of sexism and oppression under a system that traditionally

undervalued women." Fostering the sharing of common experiences, consciousness-raising groups helped women to see that their feelings could be accredited to a "social system laden with cultural and institutional ideologies that dominate and subjugate women" (Kennedy, "The Personal is Political"). Women were thus able to find comfort and validation while learning how to place blame externally rather than internally. Bonnie Moore-Randolph and Clydene Ross-Valliere clarify: "by becoming more aware of the reasons behind their behavior," women who attended consciousness-raising groups were encouraged to "explore alternatives in making decisions about their lifestyles" (922). Consciousness-raising groups thus offered some women the ability to reclaim agency over their lives and relationships. Not only did these groups benefit the women who attended meetings, these groups benefited all women who were a part of a culture that began to change because of the discussions women were able to have in consciousness-raising spaces (Keating, "Building Coalitional Consciousness" 89).

At the same time, consciousness-raising groups were not intended to be therapy sessions where women could simply "get in touch" with their feelings (Scheman 34); instead, Second Wave feminists designed these groups to create communities that could "collectively advocate for social change" (Kennedy, "The Personal is Political").[7] In these meetings, which followed a "three-step method," women focused on "sharing, analysis, and action planning" (Keating, "Building Coalitional Consciousness" 89). Kathie Sarachild, who developed consciousness-raising guidelines, suggested that there should be no designated leader so that women could freely and more organically engage in dialogue (Keating, "Building Coalitional Consciousness" 87-9). Along these lines, the assumption at the root of Second Wave feminist consciousness-raising strategies was that

"everyone is a theorist" who is capable of critiquing society so as to change society (McKinnon 102).

Nevertheless, consciousness-raising groups have been widely critiqued, particularly by feminists of color, lesbians, and women with disabilities, who argue that these groups explicitly and implicitly featured exclusionary tendencies. The problems associated with Second Wave feminist groups, according to Cricket Keating, stemmed from some women's desire to "searc[h] for commonalities" (91), which can be a dangerous and "alienating" practice for women of color (Sandoval, "Feminist and Racism" 66). In other words, by searching for unity rather than solidarity, consciousness-raising groups created "safe spaces" for otherwise privileged white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class American women to share their woes and pontificate about the future of feminism rather than to actively seek social justice or search for and validate alternative perspectives.

Moreover, consciousness-raising groups understood the category "woman" as coherent rather than contested and multifaceted, which encouraged women to downplay "inequitable power relations" among discussion members (Keating, "Building Coalitional Consciousness" 91). As Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Elsa Barkely Brown maintain, this practice did not take into account the race and class identities women did not share, which encouraged Second Wave feminists to view difference as "benign and non-challenging" (qtd. in Keating, "Building Coalitional Consciousness" 91-3). This understanding of difference was, in Brown's words, "as deadening to coalition-building as the erasure of difference itself" as (qtd. in Keating, "Building Coalitional Consciousness" 93). Further, consciousness-raising groups did not adequately assess how

women co-create oppressive gendered systems. Instead, white, middle class, straight, able-bodied, cisgender women understood themselves as somewhat passively inculcated within a system that oppresses all women in the same ways.

Despite the inherent pitfalls associated with consciousness-raising groups, I argue that trans* YouTube vloggers incorporate the productive goals of these communities to talk about how trans* experience and identity shapes their lives and social positions in a widely transphobic culture. Trans* digital storytellers engage in difficult and complex discussions about gender, life, relationships, sexuality, health care, politics, and the body, which expands cultural epistemologies of gender. Trans* vloggers validate one another's stories by offering comfort to viewers who feel they are alone in their desire to transition or who occupy a gender-diverse social position.[8] However, in light of these extensive and important critiques, we should consider whether trans* digital storytellers replicate similar exclusionary tendencies. We should ask, who is included in the trans* communities that are visible online? Who might be explicitly or implicitly excluded? If YouTube can indeed be an example of a contemporary consciousness-raising platform, how might white trans*-masculine vloggers' stories elide fundamental intersections of race, class, sexuality, and ability? How might white trans*-masculine vloggers reify *trans** as a stable category rather than a contested position many disparate people occupy? These and other questions need to be more fully explored. In this section, though I touch on these questions, I do not actively search for the exclusionary practices some trans* vloggers might exhibit. Instead, I follow what trans* vloggers themselves purport: the consciousness-raising communities YouTubers forge are beneficial to those who use them. Not only do trans* users consistently maintain that they are beneficial, I have yet to

find accounts by trans*-identified individuals who argue that these digital communities are in and of themselves oppressive or exclusionary.

In actuality, trans* individuals who use YouTube consistently discuss the fact that there are many positive outcomes to finding friends and confidantes in cyberspace, especially when those connections are with others who share social, political, or personal goals. *FTM Magazine*'s October 2014 edition (which features Skylar Kergil on its cover) exemplifies this claim: affectionately referred to as "The YouTube Issue," at least seventy percent of the magazine is dedicated to trans*-masculine vloggers discussing how and why they use YouTube. Though the vloggers are diverse in terms of race, class, sexuality, ability, and location, they all reference YouTube's communal aspects; all the vloggers *FTM* includes express heartfelt gratitude towards other trans* men who have changed their lives by digitally recording their life stories. For instance, Dade Barlow (who goes by ElectricDade on YouTube) has been, in his words, "so positively affected by the videos that other transmen made," that he chose to "follow in their footsteps, and hopefully make a difference [him]self" (*FTM* 20). Barlow continues, "While considering transition, I could find no other resource that compared to YouTube when it came to real life documentation of transitioning. I wanted to add my story to that resource" (*FTM* 20). Similarly, Chase Ross (who goes by uppercaseCHASE1 on YouTube and is a vlogger I will later discuss in depth) expresses the notion that he would not be alive if it wasn't for the YouTube trans* community and his viewers: "I didn't even know trans men existed before YouTube. I think the YouTube trans community has helped lots of people realize who they are and helped them solve many problems like how to come, how to pack, how to pass, how to go on T [testosterone] and so on" (*FTM* 24). In his reflection, Ross

connects the notion of community with survival, identification, and knowledge. Watching other trans* men talk about their lives creates a sense of community, even if the vlogger and viewer never digitally interact. Without a doubt, trans* men who vlog see the medium as collective.

Merely being aware that there are other trans* men in the world – particularly trans* men who find happiness in publicly declaring a trans* identity – can change how individuals understand and narrate their lives. Ashton Colby reveals that his own transition did not seem possible until he "saw videos of real guys living their lives and feeling the same way" (*FTM* 35). YouTube gave Colby "hope" and "inspiration" that he too could live an openly trans* life (*FTM* 35). Many other trans* men in *FTM*'s "YouTube Issue" relate similar sentiments: Benton Sorenson thanks his viewers and those who have "supported [him] over the internet," which, in his words, "means the world" (22); Ryan Cassata claims that YouTube "has allowed [him] to connect with the Trans community and to make many good friends" (27); Emery Quincy argues that YouTube vlogs have "shaped the community by providing an outlet and source of networking for thousands of transgender people all over the planet" (30); and Noah Wagoner suggests that the world is "more honest" because of YouTube, in that trans* vloggers are "reaching people outside [of their] intended audience" (32). There are many other examples of this kind of rhetoric in the interviews *FTM* features. Based on these interviews, as well as the interactions I discuss below, I argue that digital storytelling is a contemporary, more inclusive version of feminist consciousness-raising in that the diversity and wide array of voices on YouTube fosters complicated, nuanced, and collectively negotiated discussions.

The notion of fostering community through sharing stories is also imbedded within vloggers' video posts. For example, Skylar explicitly states his archival yet collective intentions in "response to Kean – November twenty ten":

> I originally started putting videos out to uh document my vocal changes…it was kind of like a blog for me, like a journal of my transition…so I never went out searching for other trans* guys on YouTube but all of a sudden like related videos would pop up and like it would be this guy who had just gotten top surgery and I would go looking and be like "wow! That's incredible!"…and I really got excited about my own future.

Skylar emphasizes his desire to archive his body's changes as he begins testosterone and plans for a double mastectomy and, at the same time, draws attention to the ways that other trans* vloggers reflected his bodily desires and future possibilities. Later in this video, Skylar relates, "community is one of the most powerful things." He has been able to see other trans* men on YouTube and thus "know[s] they exist," which encourages Skylar to continue to share his own life stories with others ("response to Kean").

Ky similarly emphasizes his relationships with and imagined responsibility to his viewers, which informs the way he narrates his life. This fact is distinct in his first video, "FTM Intro," in which he implores his audience to accompany him throughout his transition in ways that his rural, unsupportive community will not (see Image 5.1). "I live in a pretty conservative area…on the borderline of Illinois and Iowa, and so people aren't very open-minded around here," Ky confesses ("FTM Intro"). The only people in his life who know about his trans* identification and plans to seek hormones are his two sisters and a few friends; his parents and others are not yet aware. Ky goes on to explain, "I'm

hoping to share my experience with people who don't really understand and other trans* guys out there. I know you guys on YouTube have helped me so much, so I just wanna thank you guys for that" ("FTM Intro").

Image 5.1: KyFord23 in "FTM Intro" discusses his choice to begin transitioning to a masculine subject position.

Ky constructs an intimate, conversational storytelling experience through his direct address to the viewer and choice of setting. He continuously mentions his viewers' questions and addresses his audience at the beginning of every video in the same way: "Hi guys, it's me, Ky." He often mentions "getting to his inbox," which suggests that his viewers have messaged him with comments and questions to which he plans to respond. He promises his viewers that he will document his double mastectomy in "9 Months on T" and, one month later, follows through with this promise in "Top Surgery" (see Image 5.2). His choice of setting—most often his bedroom—highlights how he conscientiously constructs his videos as intimate conversations. In these scenes, he draws attention to the posters on his bedroom wall—one of Michael Jordan, his "idol"—and several

drawings of his own making. In “Identity,” his clothes lay strewn across the floor and on the bed, and he occasionally apologizes about the clutter, as one might with a friend in a personal space (see Image 5.3). Ky’s consistently direct address to his audience, some of whom have previously empowered him, from within the domestic space of his—or his parents’—home, draws attention to the participatory and community-building nature of what Patricia G. Lange calls “videos of affinity.” Videos of affinity “try to establish communicative connections to people, often members of a social network” who “identify or interpellate themselves” in similar ways as the vlogger (Lange 71). Like other types of videos of affinity, Ky’s vlogs are “not oriented around content but rather around human connections” (Lange 78). Ky exemplifies this notion and consistently seeks connection with his viewers.

Image 5.2: KyFord23 in “Top Surgery,” which includes before and after videos from his double mastectomy. In this clip, doctors unwrap Ky’s bandages for the first time.

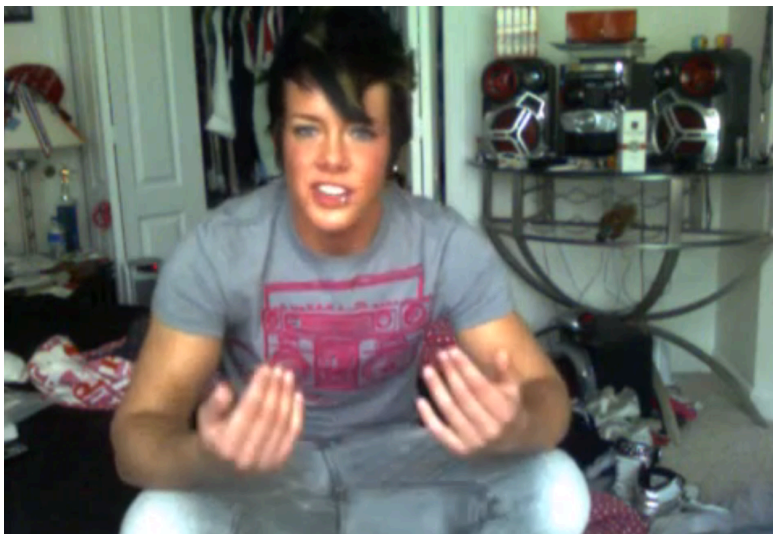

Image 5.3: Kyford23, in "Identity," perches on his bed, which is his favorite spot to vlog.

Like many other trans* vloggers, Ky welcomes his viewers to follow his intensely personal journey and viewers respond in equally personal ways. Other users respond to Ky's display of mutual validation in his "FTM Intro" video (as well as most of his other posts) with positive and intensely grateful comments. For example, Musiqluv788 comments on his "6 months on T" video, writing, "I know I'm super late but its so nice to watch your transition. I feel like I've been with you the whole time." Similarly, kiromasaje posts a comment on "Identity": "oh my god, that almost brought tears to my eyes…guess i'm not the only one that feels that way." In the comments sections for other videos, users ask questions about where Ky buys his binders, what doctor he used for his double mastectomy, and other more specific questions about the milligrams of testosterone he injects and his preference of sexual positions. In many places, particularly in the beginning of his transition, following the threads associated with these comments shows that Ky consistently responds to sincere encouragement and questions by offering answers, suggestions, and thanks.

Nevertheless, though most comments are supportive, many others "troll" Ky's posts and some comments that seem encouraging actually reinforce transphobic discourses. Trolling is defined as an online act (particularly a post on a blog, article, vlog, or other digital forum) with the intention to redirect conversation, add ideas that are unrelated, odd, or humorous, and elicit an emotional response from others. Sometimes trolling is benign, but it can also be malicious, particularly when it is threatening, uses sexual imagery and language, or is derogatory. Some users try to encourage Ky and yet reinforce transphobic notions that he is "really" female or that he should question his identity since he incorporates some aspects of femininity into his gender expressions. For instance, in "Gay Frenzy," Ky discusses feeling attracted to other trans* men, which has forced him to call his heterosexual orientation into question for the first time. Again, though many of this video's 148 comments are supportive (the most common response is from individuals who express how excited they are to find another trans* story that relates to their own), other users police Ky's gender expression, refer to his previous life, and call his narrative into question. lovelylady7 writes, "you look way better with less makeup on!" and seri0us adds, "Guys always hit on you because you're gorgeous! I wouldn't be surprised if even the straight girls did too!" Though seemingly positive, these comments implicitly demand that Ky should express himself in stereotypically masculine ways. Though seri0us, in particular, suggests that Ky is attractive (which is a positive sentiment), hir statement that "even straight girls" might hit on him implies that Ky is not really or fundamentally male. Farther down in the comments, nakita_c asks, "what did you look like as a girl? ☺" These and other users reify the notion that Ky should be more masculine or that his "original" sex overrides his trans*-masculine identity and

experience. Clearly, even encouraging comments can harbor harmful and ignorant implications. Because of the way some users police trans* vloggers, digital storytelling spaces can easily become unsafe, threatening, and damaging to a vlogger's sense of self.

Though Ky and Skylar almost never respond to negative comments—except through addressing particularly hurtful ones in subsequent videos—other users actively pursue negative YouTubers. In this way, users police Skylar and Ky at the same time as they police one another. In one representative example, in response to Skylar's five-year transitional montage video, AirbusA380rox writes, "I'd still call Skylar a guy, but it's kinda weird that he's a guy with no penis." Though it seems that AirbusA380rox is trying to be supportive in validating Skylar's identity as a "guy," AirbusA380rox reifies the notion that genital formation trumps gender identity. Drawing attention to what Skylar's body looks like takes attention away from his powerful video of transformation. Nevertheless, AirbusA380rox's comment received thirty responses from other users coming to Skylar's defense. itzmeherehi immediately counters, "you don't need a dick to be a dude, if you think you do then your a dick." Caz Savidge replies with a less combative response: "It's not weird, it's just something that isn't extremely common." A few interjections later, gnarlybudz enters the discussion with clear intent to troll the now passionate others: "Well youre wrong. If all genetic makeup considers you to be a female then your brain yearning to be a boy doesnt qualify you as a boy. Its not a matter of opinion because it is a fact that this is a girl. However we can all give her comfort by refering to her as a boy if she really wants." Though the discussion somewhat devolves following this comment, several users engage gnarlybudz by referring to academic studies, writing personal narratives of their own trans* experience, and calling out this

user's use of incorrect and harmful assumptions (not to mention grammar, spelling, and punctuation). Though gnarlybudz continues to troll this thread, the interactions that occur between users who try to change gnarlybudz' mind visually map a collectively negotiated discussion. Though it is likely that gnarlybudz did not learn anything and will continue to troll other videos, the trans* and nontrans* users who were a part of this discussion were undoubtedly interested in exchanging knowledge with the hopeful intent of changing gnarlybudz' perspective. Productively, this thread's visible exchange of knowledge attests to the fact that there are thousands of users who share positive and supportive views of trans* identity and are committed to declaring and negotiating those views.

Because Skylar never once enters the discussion, one might imagine this comment thread as displacing Skylar's agency: several users speak for and about him without his consent. Though this notion is partly true, I also see the discussion as one that symbolizes how gender epistemology is constantly negotiated in digital storytelling spaces in ways that benefit all users. Though these discussions complicate the notion of a trans*-masculine "community" on YouTube, it is not clear whether they negatively affect Skylar and other vloggers' senses of self. Skylar continues to post videos, respond to positive comments, and disregard the trolls. Digital storytelling's remote yet interactive nature thus offers him the ability to choose which responses to address and which to ignore; in these ways, YouTube is a space in which trans* knowledges are collectively negotiated in affirming yet precariously safe ways.

For these reasons, the rhetorical power of digital storytelling centers around a vlogger's ability to establish an identity that is not only self-made but also recognized and publicly discussed by viewers. Similar to queer "coming out" videos, trans* vlogs

illuminate the existence of many different kinds of online communities. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green maintain that the vlog "is a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback" in an "intercreative" fashion (94). Marilee Lindemann agrees, arguing that YouTube "is a community built almost entirely out of…publicly reiterated gestures of self-invention and affiliation" (210). Because of YouTube's "intercreative" function, the viewer's role is active rather than passive—the viewer participates in constructing the text, and, at the same time, validates, questions, and/or denies the identities to which the vlogger subscribes. The vlogger's identity is thus relational, depending on the array of discussions his videos produce, as well as personal. Because, as Tobias Raun argues, trans* vloggers "address a selection of audiences" ranging from like-minded trans* people to "a larger global audience," trans* digital storytellers "create awareness and advocacy for trans-related issues" at the same time as they begin conversations that develop and negotiate trans* knowledges (116). Though trans* vloggers encourage collectivity, the communities they create are complex and variable.

Archiving Trans Embodiment and Identity through Digital Storytelling*

Trans* digital storytellers like Skylar emphasize profound connections between one's body and one's biography. By connecting how they feel about their bodies to how they relate to individuals and socio-political systems, Skylar and Ky highlight how standpoint epistemology is interdependent with social location—both how ze identifies and how others identify hir through visual markers. As trans* youth engage in bodywork, social location shifts: ze may be more often publicly recognized as a boy or man, called

"sir," or ze may notice that ze is treated differently by heterosexual men. Ze may receive different comments on videos as hir appearance and comportment figures in new ways onscreen. As hir public recognition changes, so too does hir sense of self. As Riki Ann Wilchins underscores, to understand our bodies, we must "understand the cultural gaze that fixes upon them, we must construct what our bodies can be said to mean and to look like" (40). One's standpoint epistemology, in other words, is constructed by one's position in society based on an array of visible and invisible identities. For many trans* vloggers, these identities are in flux, which illuminates critical ideas about the body.

If we think of the body as a situation (à la Simone de Beauvoir), which occupies a particular setting, placement, and cultural rules to follow, to grasp our bodies fully would require that we think objectively *and* subjectively about them—how we move in and with them, how we take up space, and how others perceive our bodies. In other words, "the physical being is in itself a political statement" in that the "body is a participant in generating social practice" (Nagoshi and Brzuzu 435). As Julie L. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzu suggest, we are the experts of our bodies because we are the only ones who inhabit them; and yet, at the same time, how others perceive our bodies influences how we view ourselves and how we negotiate dominant ideologies. Ky and Skylar embody these notions throughout their videos: they use their bodies to express new, subjective experiences as they become socially recognized men. Resisting "the meanings culture drapes" on their bodies, which can often be "extremely painful and depressing," Skylar and Ky's creative documentation allows them to situate their bodies in ways that feel more right and that reflect a more fitting cultural gaze (Wilchins 40).

Skylar, Ky, and other trans*-masculine vloggers document their changing bodies

in ways that function as a digital scrapbook with a chronological index. When a viewer finds a new vlog, ze can watch the entirety of the vlog's progression or start fresh from the newest entry without any background information. This set-up allows individuals "to put events in context and get the whole story without the diarist having to explain again" (Lindemann 201). Users (vloggers and viewers alike) can also access the videos chronologically, which is of particular importance for those who document their journey throughout all processes of medical intervention. With this interactive function, users can scroll back through time and visually see identity, body, and narrative change or choose to focus on one topic that is of interest.

Throughout his videos, Skylar documents hormonal and surgical milestones, which expresses his body as the signifier or "evidence" that he is changing. With an emphasis on archival documentation, Skylar records how his use of bodywork (hormone injection, surgery, hysterectomy, and other masculinizing practices) transforms him corporeally. In early videos, he titles his posts in relation to the passing of time after beginning bodywork: "1 week on Testosterone," "2 months on T," and "1 week post-op" are three examples of over 200 videos that archive his transition. In almost every video, he outlines hormonal effects on his body and mind while he flexes his muscles, shows developing acne and hair growth (particularly on his arms, face, stomach, and legs, which are characteristic of a male-typical body), displays bruises and scars that accompany surgery, and reveals his post-op chest (see Image 5.4). As he shows these changes, he comments on how he *feels* about his body and conjectures about how others might feel who could be differently experiencing testosterone.

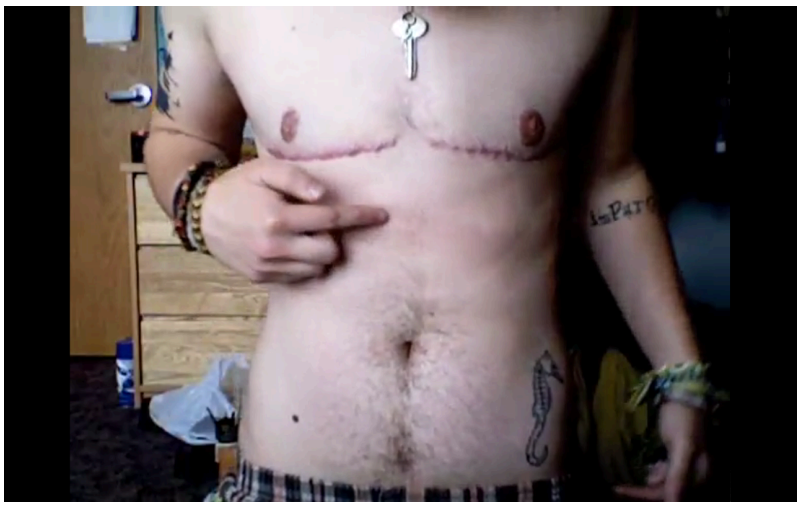

Image 5.4: SkylarkEleven in "six months on testosterone! + comparison" documents his surgery scars and new hair growth.

The masculinization practices Skylar documents performatively create his masculine social identity in personal and political ways. Based on dominant notions of what a "man" is, it is not surprising that trans*-masculine vloggers like Skylar emphasize stereotypically masculine characteristics such as deepening voices, muscle and hair growth, and post-surgery, flat chests. Skylar documents his post-surgery body in "Chest Healing over Four Months!" wherein he pieces together six previously posted videos that show his chest from the side and front as he comments on how happy he is with his recovery and newfound freedom. Like many other trans*-masculine vloggers, in subsequent videos, Skylar records himself shirtless, visibly relishing his ability to bare his chest on camera in a public space (see Image 5.5). This documentation process shows his body changing at the same time as it rhetorically and visually establishes a new identity.

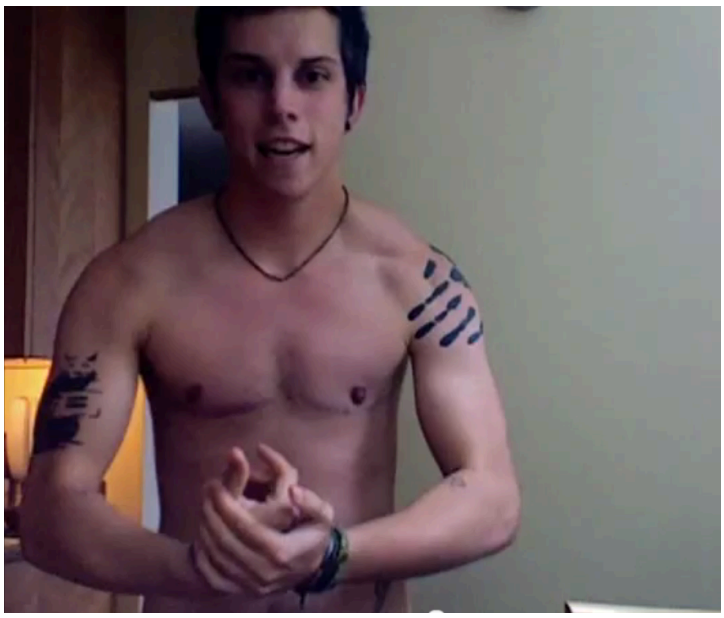

Image 5.5: Skylar in "SkylarkEleven's Channel Trailer," in which he discusses and shows testosterone's effect on his muscle and hair growth.

Intriguingly, many other trans*-masculine vloggers who do not receive or are waiting to receive top surgery place the camera in such a way as to *appear* flat-chested, by only showing the viewer the bare tops of their shoulders, arms, chest, and neck (see Images 5.6 and 5.7).[9] This practice legitimates the notion that body transformation constructs identity and how one is perceived in the world at the same time as it celebrates non-medical gender fluidity. By bearing part of their chests even without surgery, these vloggers illuminate the fact that self-representation has the capacity to create a new identity, even when the body doesn't change. Douglas Schrock, Lori Read, and Emily M. Boyd suggest that an emphasis on bodywork "shapes subjectivity, identity, and perception" both for trans* individuals and those who respond to them (318). In light of this argument, perhaps trans* individuals who emphasize bodywork or visually present themselves in masculine ways do so to reiterate and evoke their newly negotiated selves.

Image 5.6: Alker in "Hombre Trans/FTM Transition: Two months on T/2 meses" appears shirtless, though he has not yet received top surgery. In this video, Alker uses a headset to reduce the sound of his voice. As he clarifies, he is not yet out to his family, so he doesn't want to risk them hearing his YouTube narratives.

Image 5.7: Popeslave introduces himself to the YouTube community in "Radford's FTM Vlog Intro." Though he has received hormone therapy for several months, he has not yet received top surgery yet still bears the top of his chest.

YouTube thus functions as a mirror, illuminating the literal ways one can reinvent gender through or in spite of one's body. As trans* men capture themselves on video in

the moment of recording as well as in the editing process, they also continually see themselves reflected back onscreen. This notion is clearly evident in the videos trans*-masculine digital storytellers produce: they adjust clothing and hair, smile and make funny faces, laugh at disheveled appearances, and analyze how their bodies translate on camera. In relation, the vlogger's camera, computer, or smart phone witnesses the "birth" of a new identity and corporeal form (Raun 119). This external yet internal mirroring gaze allows vloggers to evaluate themselves while "assum[ing] the shape" of a desired representation (Raun 120).

Though intended as an archive of his changing body, Skylar's vlog becomes an archive of his changing identity as well. For instance, in "a march 2012 update!", Skylar contemplates his trans* identity and body after he has been on testosterone for two years:

> I started hormones at a young age, and I definitely think that was the right choice for me but…I also think it's important to understand that gender is very fluid, and so although my like I identify as a man, um my body is neither male nor female at this point. And I'm starting to groove on that, like I'm accepting that. But it's okay to be in-between and uh for me, hormones and surgery were…a way of making my body identify more with my own identity um but also realizing that that is fluid…But um I think it's really important to realize that gender is like a very much constructed thing and it's very inherent as well. So, I've had a lot of thoughts about my own identity.

Though his first year and a half of videos focus on his transitioning body as he becomes socially accepted as a man, in this and other subsequent videos, Skylar begins to

contemplate his identity in more contradictory ways. At times, he rejects a trans* label, maintaining that because he passes most of the time as a man, his transition is "complete."[10] In other videos, he fully embraces a trans* identity and even occasionally rejects identifying as a man.[11] With or without access to academic theory, his experiences as a trans* man with a "female past," as he calls it, reveal the ways that gender is both "constructed" as well as "inherent" ("a march 2012 update!"). His changing body encourages him to think more openly about the concept of gender identity itself.

Skylar's emphasis on bodily change in relationship to identity illuminates what Lucas Cassidy Crawford calls a "geo-affective theory" of gender. According to Crawford, using bodywork as the basis for an authentic trans* identity demands "metaphors of…literal movement from place to place by those who practice it" (129). Embodying and representing change, then, is "an essential component" of the trans* self (Crawford 435). It is too easy to say that the self changes as the body changes or that the body must change if the self changes; instead, the body and the self alter in interconnected ways. Skylar performs Crawford's geo-affective understanding of trans* experience by pairing body documentation with explanations of identity transformation.

Though Skylar is consistently positive about his transition, he occasionally contemplates the notion that to change is also to lose or even "murder" a part of himself ("addressing my 'past'"). For example, in "transition 4 months!", Skylar remarks, "I think [transitioning] was definitely the right choice for me and I couldn't imagine my life any other way. But at the same time like the more I think about it I'm also kind of losing part of my identity, like what I was before. And um it scares me." In subsequent videos, he continues to come back to the notion that he might be losing something he can no

longer recover. At the same time, Skylar suggests that publicly using YouTube to identify as trans* helps to recover the "lost" history he occasionally mourns. Three years after posting "transition 4 months!," Skylar reflects on this issue in one of his most personal videos, "addressing my 'past.'" In this twenty minute video, he cognizes his life before coming out as a "disassociation" in that he has already "lived a second life." "Looking back at who I was then is not at all who I am now," Skylar muses.

Nevertheless, he goes on to contradict his previous thought that this idea means that he has somehow "lost" or "murdered" a part of himself; rather, he has gained the ability to understand himself as "whole" by reclaiming a female past:

> That's a huge part of my life right there that's like the first fifteen years of my life…So I've been thinking a lot about this idea of the past and how that ties into the present um, and how I could either completely remove myself from who I was or I could embrace that and carry that with me. And while it does feel that I was a different person then, I think that I'm more open now that I am comfortable with myself and comfortable with who I am to wholeheartedly acknowledge who I was and where I've come from and say you know, yeah I was born, I was born female and raised as a girl…It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with my body and it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with my gender identity 'cause those things aren't, haven't been fixed and they've been changing…I think I'm kind of at this comfortable place um where I identify as a man um but I'm not as rigid with my masculinity and femininity so that's really cool. But I think like this idea…carries over into the kind of guy that I am now

> like and I really I really appreciate that…My past isn't really you know like it's isn't like a different part, it's part, it's part of the whole like it's not something separate from me now. ("addressing my 'past'")

Skylar comes to realize that growing up in a world that socialized and viewed him as female actually contributes to his ability and desire to publicly share his story and to identify as trans* instead of as a man. His past, in other words, prepared him for his current conception of self and thus he can never truly "lose" or "disassociate" that part of himself. By rejecting the common narrative that to be fully trans* is to mourn or lose one's past, Skylar performs a new way of understanding gender transformation – as something that is not only inevitable but always already happening. His past as a girl named Katherine Elizabeth does not disallow his present life as a trans* man named Skylar; in fact, his past sets the foundation for his life story.

What these moments of tension or ambiguity show is that digital storytelling, perhaps unlike the more traditional genres of autobiography and documentary, illuminates the ways that identities are fluid and much more complex than a simple label or linear narrative allows. Like a diary, digital storytelling is a medium in which viewers "encounter the real of others," including the authors' messy, unmediated, and disparate conceptions of the self (Strangelove 69). As Raun argues, vlogs "bear out the feminist slogan that the personal is political by their personalized unraveling and negotiating of the meaning of trans identity" (126). Instead of seeing Skylar's narratives of identity as contradictory, Raun's conception helps to clarify how Skylar documents how his body and identity changes as he reconceptualizes himself as a socially perceived man. Skylar uses the serial yet scrapbook nature of the medium to document gender transition as it

occurs at the level of the body while exploring various identities and narratives to mine them for potential liberation and meaning.

Interspersed with his diary entry posts, Skylar uploads a "montage" video every six months, which displays his transition from the beginning to the moment of creation, allowing him to reclaim control over his disparate, digital stories. In "photographic evidence of who i was to who i am," images of Skylar's childhood precede images that depict him becoming more masculine: he begins testosterone, flexes his muscles, hangs with friends, receives top surgery, shows hair growth, shaves, and begins college. His voice-over narration tells the viewer at the beginning of the video, "one of the most important things that I've discovered in my life is that where I was and where I'm going is inevitably where I will be found." In the background, "Glosoli" by Sigur Ros plays, which gives the video an eerie overall effect. The song's lyrics, which are in Icelandic, reinforce Skylar's ability to claim agency over his story: translated to English, Sigur Ros' lead singer croons, "Now that you're awake, everything seems different…Go on a journey and roam the streets." Through the juxtaposition of Skylar's message, the music, and the images, Skylar connects his trans* identity with becoming someone new. However, Skylar's emphasis on "movement" in his opening quote does not suggest that he has traded one identity or body for another; rather, he suggests that transitioning to a masculine subject position has allowed him to reconstitute his body to fit an identity he already had in order to (re)awaken in a world that sees him anew.

These archival and confessional practices are significant largely because they exist within a culture that tends to insist that the mind and body are separate faculties of the self. In this conception, one tends to distance one's mind from the powerful

experiences of one's body. In medical legitimation discourses, some doctors imagine that the trans* "problem" exists or begins with the body and thus the body should change to match an individual's internal identity. This framework, however, cannot account for the myriad ways trans* individuals demonstrate the social *through* the personal and use the body to talk about the self. Skylar complicates academic and medical discourses, which may limit his ability to create coherent and non-dysphoric understandings of his own experience. Concurrently, Skylar expands Western ideologies by incorporating new metaphors to explain trans* existence: in "october twenty first exactly nine months! changes + art," he imagines himself as "a glacier" who is "hiding a wooly mammoth inside…fully frozen." He laughs away this powerful metaphor, yet mentions that he recognizes that his experience, social position, and identity are "really rare. And really cool." Skylar does not imagine that his body must change but that societal knowledges about gender need to develop to match the practices of his trans* existence.

Skylar and other trans*-masculine vloggers illuminate how the body is both a producer *and* product of gender. Photographic montages, documentation of bodywork, and explicitly masculine cues produce the identity Skylar knows himself to be. As Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh argue in relation to queer "coming out" videos, the "performative quality of the speech act also reminds the viewer than an actual change of state takes place through the speaker's rhetoric" (39). Similarly, Skylar's use of visual and aural documentation de-stigmatizes the body modification practices he incorporates and brings into being his new conception of self. Skylar's body can be understood as a palimpsest on and through which he performs masculinity with a body that bares traces of a female past; through digital storytelling, he creates a new epistemology of the

relationship between gender and sex that is all his own.

Resisting Trans Pathology through Digital Storytelling*

Though Skylar, Ky, and other trans* men use YouTube to archive their changing bodies and identities, many vloggers simultaneously underscore the notion that changing one's body is not necessary to publicly declare a trans* identity. Trans*-masculine vloggers consistently argue that one should feel free to shift from one gender to another without any intervention at the level of the body. To better understand the resistant tactics trans*-masculine vloggers incorporate, in this section, I briefly analyze current medical conceptions of trans* identity and, subsequently, discuss how Skylar, Ky, and other trans* vloggers incorporate yet subvert these ideologies.

According to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's (WPATH) "Standards of Care" (SOC), before beginning hormone therapy, individuals must see a therapist and receive a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria (GD).[12] Individuals who want to transition must sign forms that indicate that they will shift to the "opposite" sex and remain that sex thereafter (WPATH). Couched in the pathological language of this document, therapists must also write a letter of recommendation for the "patient" so that ze can receive hormone "treatment." To receive a mastectomy or genital surgery, an individual must present as the "opposite" gender and receive hormone injections for a period of one year or two years respectively. In granting permission or drafting letters, therapists must assess the individual's ability to hold a job or go to school, function in the community, and "pass" as the new gender. To get one's sex changed on a birth certificate

or social security card (and be seen this way in the eyes of U.S. legal and judicial systems), one must live as the "opposite" sex for two years. If trans* people do not follow these procedures or refuse to pathologize their identities, they inevitably risk the institutional denial of care. Gender-diverse individuals who do not want surgery or do not identify as transsexual are forced to lie to therapists to receive access to other kinds of bodywork. As Kate Bornstein iterates, trans* people in remedial spaces are labeled as "diseased, for which the therapy is to lie, hide, or otherwise remain silent" (*Queer and Pleasant* 62). She elaborates: those of us who identify as trans* are "not allowed, in therapy, the right to think of ourselves as transsexual," only as failed women and men trapped in the wrong bodies and in need of intervention by medical experts (Bornstein, *Queer and Pleasant* 62). There are few viable and no legal alternative options.

Despite these rigid medical protocols, some trans*-masculine vloggers depathologize gender movement, even if they reconstitute the notion that gender is a congenital variation in need of intervention. For instance, though Skylar incorporates medical discourse in some of his narratives, he nevertheless tells his trans* viewers that they do not have to engage in bodywork to be socially recognizable men. In "information on getting testosterone, binders, packers, and chest surgery," Skylar answers viewers' questions concerning his decision to pursue bodywork. After explaining where he bought his binder—"underworks.com"—he goes on to say that viewers do not have to "take testosterone to be transgender or to be perceived as male in society, just so you know." Further, he mentions that he does not wish to "pack" (or wear a prosthetic dildo so as to appear to have a "bulge" in his pants). In Skylar's words:

> It's not at all that I feel that having a penis is what makes me a man, that's

> not at all how I feel so I just wanted to put that out there like some guys have no desire to pack and some guys like really need it to feel whole and that's absolutely normal...It's all about your comfort level. It's all about what you wanna do as you discover who you are. ("information")

Though Skylar finds comfort in his identity as a trans* man who engages in bodywork through weekly testosterone injections and a double mastectomy, he still maintains that other trans* men do not have to take the same path. Interestingly, there are dozens of glowing comments in this particular video's feed: comment after comment thanks Skylar for doing this video, applauding him for how "helpful" it was in their own transition process or in thinking through personal identifications. Based on these comments, it is clear that Skylar's trans*-masculine identified viewers have not been able to find a resource as valuable as this video in other medical or social media. In effect, this video opens up a space for trans*-masculine individuals to contest medical and cultural notions that a penis, flat chest, and testosterone-induced secondary sex characteristics do not produce Skylar's masculine identification. Instead, it is the way Skylar identifies and performs masculinity that produces his trans*-masculine status.

Similarly, Ky separates himself from medical legitimation discourse by imagining gender diversity as electable or even preferable. Like Skylar, Ky often contradicts his previous videos to draw attention to how his gender identity is not static and that he is the expert of his gender. In his coming out video, Ky identifies as "transgendered" ("FTM Intro"). In "Gay Frenzy," Ky foregoes labels and maintains, while fighting back tears, "I'm me and this is who I am." Later, after several months of testosterone treatment, he expands identification by describing himself as a "female to male gender transguy boi

trans androgyne androgynous unisex bigender genderqueer man" ("Identity"). By linking many diverse trans* identities together, Ky rejects the notion that he should simply identify in one way. In effect, engaging in bodywork through testosterone injections and top surgery, Ky is able to more radically define his identity. Medical legitimation, in this way, affords Ky agency over his appearance and identification rather than placing him in a system or role he rejects.

Ky continues to explore his identity because, as he explains, viewers consistently ask how he identifies and why he wears makeup and dresses in a stereotypically feminine manner if he wants to transition to a recognizably masculine identity. Ky explains:

> I know people have like watched my videos, like my friends especially, and they're so worried about me changing like as a person and I mean it really makes me sad because I'm still gonna be me…I don't think I'll change whatsoever…Uh I don't consider myself as a trans* man, like I don't consider myself as a *man*, I consider myself as like a trans* guy. I mean, I am boi, basically. Uh I know I'm not [laughs] you know very, very manly but I'm definitely male…I'm gonna keep shaving, whatever…I don't know, maybe one day I'll grow it out. See like shit like that it just, uh I don't know, I mean like I'm pretty femme for a dude, I guess to say. ("1st Appt")

In this narrative, Ky separates what he thinks of himself as a person—an internal "me," which will not change throughout his transition—and how he thinks of his fluid gender identity as a "trans* guy" or "boi." He resists one label that would represent his total person and instead chooses to string together many categories. This narrative exemplifies

the common argument that individuals who transition reconfigure their bodies to be more in line with who they *already* are, not to become someone fundamentally different. Ky also resists the wrong body narrative trope that medical legitimation discourses use to explain trans* experience as an individual "problem" that surgical and hormonal intervention must fix and, instead, reimagines gender identity as both innate (it's just "me") *and* constructed. His emphasis on feeling like a guy—in fact, that he is male already—paired with his acknowledgment that his feminine attributes and practices do not have to stop highlights his resistance to narratives that represent trans* individuals as trapped, inauthentic, or dysphoric. The contested and complex discussions that occur within the comments section attached to this video (as previously discussed) attest to the fact that Ky's identification is both rare and contentious within contemporary discourses of gender identity.

Ky's identity cannot be neatly mapped onto medical models, which rely on a binary gender system, nor can his identify map onto cultural explanations of what it means to identify as *trans** rather than as a *man* or *woman*. He explains others' reactions to his ambiguous identity by stating, "people don't like it, 'cause I'm in the gray area. I'm frickin' in the gray area! It's not black and white, people. I mean, you know, gender is so ambiguous…just be who you are, you know. And fuck everyone else. They don't matter" ("Identity"). To visually diagram his identity, Ky shows a drawing he made, which illustrates his position within the gender spectrum (see Image 5.8). Though he acknowledges his shift in position, he highlights the ambivalent nature of gender categories, particularly in terms of the inherent and far-reaching problems that come from a strict binary system; at times, Ky identifies as male and as a feminine trans* man. At

other times, Ky resists identification entirely, abandoning gender labels and marking himself as who he *knows* he is no matter what others say. This tactic allows him to separate sex (anatomical and biological characteristics, which would typically categorize him as "female") and his gender, which he determines to be more about what he fluidly feels and desires than any categorization can encompass. Using the metaphor of the "gray area," Ky repositions his gender as spatial, but not necessarily in the sense that he is moving toward or away from one category to another.

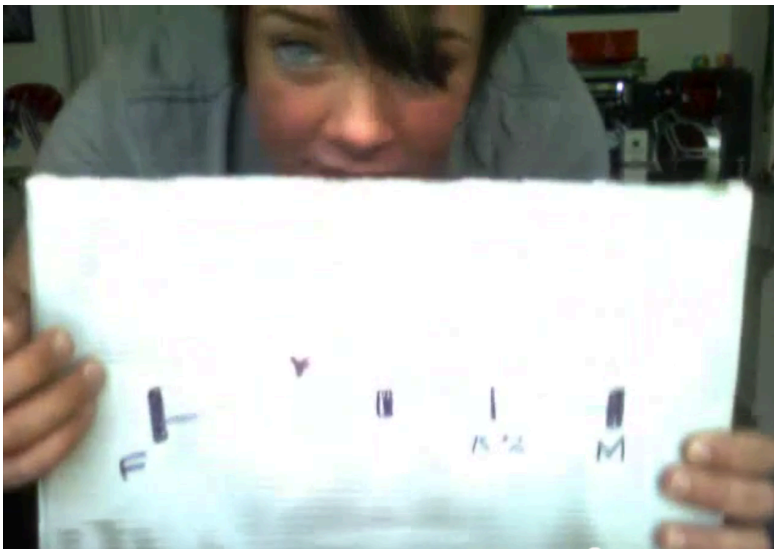

Image 5.8: KyFord23 in "Identity" maps his gender identity between "F" and "M."

Many other vloggers who identify as *trans** resist the therapeutic mandate that they must identify instead as boys or men. For example, JoeLikesHisBro (who now goes by TheRealAlexBertie) insists that he is neither male nor female and prefers the gender-neutral pronouns ze/hir/hirs or they/their/theirs. In hir video, "Gendergifted?!", ze questions why ze must fit a certain mold: "I wasn't born in a box, so how can I actually think in a box?" Ze goes on to say, "If you look beyond gender, uh, gender *dysphoric*

people are actually uh more beautiful and more open-minded than anyone else, because you know, they're gender *euphoric* people." By refusing to pathologize hir gender and upending medical vocabulary, JoeLikesHisBro draws attention to how a trans* identity can be rewarding rather than stressful, confusing, or harmful.

By visually enacting variation, which the medical field tends to limit, some trans*-masculine vloggers encourage more than two gender options. Some emphasize the fact that bodywork does not make the man. Others probe the institution's control of their identities and narratives. Trans*-masculine vlogger Chase Ross (who goes by uppercaseCHASE1 on YouTube and was featured in the "YouTube Issue" of *FTM Magazine*) resists the notion of a dominant trans* narrative, which his story does not follow. For one thing, like JoeLikesHisBro, Ross does not feel that he experiences dysphoria because he is trans*. In "being happy before transitioning," Ross explains:

> I feel like there's a really big misconception in society that think that people who are trans* um live like an absolute horrible life before coming out and they were completely unhappy and they've always known they were trans* and I um I don't follow that narrative at all. And I think it's important to distinguish that I don't talk for the whole trans* community…every single trans* experience is different…And this is just my experience...before I came out, I was a lesbian and identified as such…I was generally happy with my life…I was just like a tomboy or a butch lesbian. I saw nothing wrong with this…I never questioned my gender I think people questioned my gender for me…I feel like it's only after I realized trans* people existed…something clicked and I was like

looking at the screen like "oh my god, I am trans*."

Ross maintains that his experience does not follow the traditional trans* narrative, which mainstream media and medical discourse often highlight; nevertheless, he strongly identifies as *trans**. At the same time, he suggests that until he knew that being trans* was an option, his experiences with gender (and, in connection, sexuality) were not necessarily difficult for him to understand. Perhaps his identification as a "tomboy" or "lesbian" aided in his ability to feel validated and find others who were "like him" or looked like him (see Image 5.9). Still, gender "dysphoria" was not what he experienced.

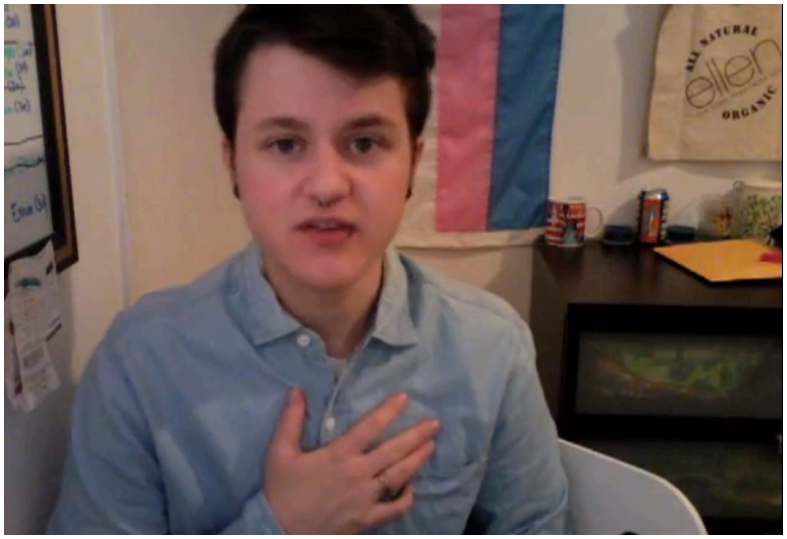

Image 5.9: Chase Ross in "being happy before transitioning."

In many other instances in his more than 200 videos, Ross discusses his relationship with – both his use of and then rejection of – testosterone. He documents his decision to take hormones, go off hormones, and then begin to take them again. The sheer fact that he archives his decision to discontinue taking testosterone, as well as his ambivalence about top surgery and the fact that he likes his breasts and vagina,

illuminates an alternative and differently imagined yet viable trans* story. Though his decision to cease testosterone was based on many "personal reasons," which he does not specify, one reason Ross gives is that he began to feel that he was no longer visible as a queer person. Passing as a man made him feel happy and comfortable and yet, at the same time, passing as a man within queer communities disallowed his lesbian identity from being visible to other potential partners. Because other lesbians no longer recognized him as queer, he felt his transition had put him in an awkward and imperceptible place. In "why i stopped t," Ross explains that he identifies both as a trans* guy and as a lesbian because these identities most closely fit his experience as well as individuals whom he desires. What's more, being on testosterone the first time around made Ross feel like he should "act more like a guy," which he did not accept and which actually caused him to "feel dysphoric and unhappy" ("why i stopped t."). This narrative flips the traditional, psychiatric understanding of trans* experience. For Ross, being forced to perform or identify in a particular way (or to dis-identify, as is the case with his need to continue to claim a lesbian existence) was actually more harmful than his experiences of being socially perceived as a girl or woman. Though claiming a trans* identity makes sense for him, he refuses to imagine that being trans* disallows him from embracing his past and incorporating multiple identities into one coherent whole.

Through these tactics, Ross encourages his viewers to imagine other ways to identify and live a trans* life, which may or may not rely on corporeal change. In "lack of dysphoria," Ross maintains,

> Your dysphoria is 100% valid but my no dysphoria is absolutely 100% valid as well. I am allowed to love my body as much as I want to. I'm

> allowed to show it off. I'm allowed to do whatever I want with my body…It's okay, you do not have to have dysphoria [to be trans*]. I keep getting messages from all these trans* people so this video is for that.

Speaking directly to his trans* viewers, Ross validates their lives and choices, whatever they may be. Though he claims a non-dysphoric identity, he recognizes the fact that many trans* people experience dysphoria, particularly in relation to how others recognize them in social situations. In suggesting that he keeps "getting messages from all these trans* people," Ross implies that others have contacted him perhaps because they are confused how he can be both *trans** and not experience dysphoria or perhaps to ask questions about his choices concerning testosterone. In "regretting t?", Ross emotionally discusses the fact that he has been "really upset" that he felt he had to take testosterone "in order to feel like [he] was trans*." Framed as a public service announcement, he explains:

> this is just a message for people out there to know that if you are unsure about taking testosterone, please do not take it…it sucks that I had to go on T because I felt like I needed to be trans* and I wanted to pass and I wanted to be seen as male and shit like that. But now [after going off testosterone] I am happier in my body.

The fact that Ross feels he needs to explain this sentiment and encourage viewers to be aware of their potential ambivalence towards bodywork suggests that his life narrative is both rare and controversial.

The comments in this video's feed support this claim: in comment after comment, YouTubers encourage his thoughts and express gratitude and awe at his honesty and yet many users completely disregard his trans* identity or viciously troll his radical views. At

least thirty comments offer solidarity and dozens of users thank him for finally representing a trans* identity the commenter shares but had not been able to articulate. NinjaSubmarine writes, "this video makes me feel less alone, and for that i thank you. my respect and admiration for you is beyond anything i could actually put in words. i relate so much which is so refreashing for me because the trans people i meet all seem to be big about T. now i feel like i have more options. thank you so much." In this response, NinjaSubmarine suggests that ze has not yet met a trans* person (let alone a health professional) who doesn't fully support or even demand medical legitimation and hormone use. Nevertheless, many other comments are derogatory and some are downright vicious: huntingflowersx writes that Ross is a "pussie" for going off testosterone and making it "that much harder" for other trans* guys. Huntingflowersx implies that Ross' thoughts might dissuade doctors from prescribing testosterone to patients whose narratives do not match medical legitimation discourses or who are ambivalent about testosterone. dasrael tells Ross, "You're screwing yourself over and confusing cis-gender people," which suggests that nontrans* individuals can only understand simplified, linear narratives of trans* identity. Josh Gerbasi homophobically adds, "this faggot is wasting good testosterone, fuck this gay earth." As these comments imply, Ross' alternative narrative is both refreshing and taboo. In speaking of his different life experiences, Ross' videos are in and of themselves political acts of defiance.

In these ways – based both on what Ross says in his videos and the comments he receives – resisting traditional trans* narratives and claiming more than one seemingly contradictory identity makes others, both trans* and nontrans* people, very uncomfortable. Not only do the commenters police Ross' gender and choices, they also

demand that he change his narrative to one that is more acceptable to a cisgender audience. Though these comments are disheartening, Ross continues to post about how empowered he feels; in many instances, Ross directly addresses these derogatory statements and continuously and sometimes robotically repeats the phrases "this is just my experience" and "I do not represent the entire trans* community." Clearly, there is something about alternative narratives that seems dangerous to a good deal of people, and perhaps this reason encourages Ross and other vloggers to continue to tell their unique trans* stories.

Alternative narratives like Ross' and Ky's clarify how our gendered social reality is not a given but is continually created "through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" (Butler, *Bodies* 14-15). According to Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex,* gender performativity refers to the recurrence or "citation" of recognizable acts, which (re)produce the separation between anatomical sex and performed gender. Nontrans* individuals have the privilege of taking gender expression for granted while simultaneously assuming that it is inherent or literally a part of the body rather than layered on the body as socially constructed signification. Judith Lorber adds, "gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced" (64). We are taught to believe from a very young age that expressions of gender signify an "inner" identity and, concurrently, prescribed gender roles, rights, and responsibilities. However, because gender is "an ongoing discursive practice," it is also "open to intervention and resignification," which Skylar, Ky, and Ross perform in their vlogs (Butler, *Bodies* 33). For trans* digital storytellers, "doing

gender" is not unconscious; on the contrary, it is deliberately practiced, narrated, and reflected upon. These videos are thus a lasting archive of the ways that "doing gender" can produce different social outcomes as well as newly imagined ways to see the self.

We should nevertheless interrogate the concept of "doing gender" in relation to trans* digital storytelling. Stemming from the rise of queer theory in academia more than two decades ago and heralded by—among other things—the publication of Butler's *Gender Trouble,* some theorists argue that gender is something we "do," not something we "are." Gender is thus a citational process where each act layers over the other to create a behavioral set of recognizable practices that we daily perform in conscious and unconscious ways, which others read and respond accordingly. As Wilchins puts it, "gender is always a *doing* rather than a being. In this sense, *all gender is drag*" (12). This notion has become so commonplace that the opposite—that we fundamentally "are" our gender because we know it to be so—might seem contradictory or counterproductive. However, it is no less authentic or political for Ky or Ross to claim that they "are" a particular gender. It is no less authentic or political for a trans* person to claim a masculine existence and yet celebrate female-typical bodily characteristics. We should ask, why might Ky claim to "be" gender rather than "perform" or "do" gender? What kinds of stories might proceed from *feeling* like a particular gender and thus playing the part or bucking the system, rather than the other way around? No matter what, we should trust these trans* youth to tell us the stories of their lives rather than jump to applications or refutations of academic gender theory. Above all else, it seems unethical to continue to argue that gender is merely performative when it clearly isn't for so many who do not fit conventional trans* or nontrans* scripts.

Conclusion: Collectively Negotiated Knowledges

Trans* digital storytellers on YouTube encourage self- and community-created possibilities at the same time as they create new realities and identities within their videos. Though the confessional mode is a historically patriarchal medium, which has been used to garner information to catalogue and hierarchize individuals, contemporary trans* vloggers destabilize our culture's emphasis on personal disclosure as a means to stratify persons. Instead, trans* digital storytellers re-signify the confessional as a tool of personal and collective survival, which trans* youth use to rewrite their histories and futures.

YouTube, Tumblr, WordPress, and other social networking sites produce collectively negotiated knowledges, which do not rely on authorial oversight or master narratives. As more individuals add their stories to these networks, the way we understand and view gender must expand. The "rhetorical" power of digital storytelling has the "potential to create fluid and challenging representations" of gender identity—representations that, "like cyberspace itself," understand gender "as complex, changing, [and] dynamic" (Alexander and Losh 46). On YouTube, trans* digital storytellers legitimate their worldviews and changing bodies and push against societal notions that they are unacceptable as gendered subjects and citizens. In these ways, digital storytelling gives silenced individuals with differing views the chance to speak *and* be heard.

Furthermore, trans* digital storytellers articulate critical ideologies, which resist binary gender. This stance—what Butler in *Undoing Gender* calls a "transformative relation"—allows trans* vloggers to both remain within *and* look outside the system. Butler illuminates,

> I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I also may feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the junction from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation. (*Undoing Gender* 4)

How trans* digital storytellers narrate their experiences clarifies Butler's ideas. Because trans* identity is not yet recognized as a legal or political gender category, narrating a viable trans* life is in itself an act of resistance. Through digital storytelling, trans* vloggers clarify more inclusive "conditions," which might allow for differently gendered lives to exist. What's more, trans* vloggers resist normative epistemologies and thereby valorize historically subjugated identities. Because contemporary U.S. social institutions reinforce hierarchical understandings of individuals by disenfranchising many to privilege some—which also works to validate what counts as a recognizable life—trans* digital storytelling has the capacity to displace our culture's determinations of which bodies, identities, and narratives "matter." At the least, it offers a platform through which trans* knowledges can be more ethically and publicly negotiated.

Notes

[1] In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval traces postmodern and de-colonial methods individuals employ to combat oppression. Sandoval shows how "academic apartheid" (152) prevents oppressed people from "horizontally" moving between subjective positions on the cultural map of subjugation (*Methodology* 72). Her "methodology of the

oppressed" includes: recognizing injustice through Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *la facultad* (or sense perception in a state of "abyss"), deconstructing and "appropriating dominant ideological forms…to transform them," locating love in a "post-empire world," and employing "differential movement" across social and cognitive maps (82-3). While Sandoval agrees with some of Fredric Jameson's notions of postmodernism—particularly the flourishing of culture and the distance it demands of the subject—she also wants to make clear that there *is* love and hope still accessible in the world. We are *not* fragmented subjects but fragmented objects in need of decoding (Sandoval, *Methodology* 166). With an emphasis on fluidity, politics, and the rejection of power, Sandoval employs Michel Foucault's "individual" to suggest how we should work toward social change (*Methodology* 166). Not only do we need a new concept of the individual, we also need a new vocabulary so that we can "break with ideology while at the same time *also* speaking in, and from within, ideology" (Sandoval, *Methodology* 44). Trans* digital storytelling offers an example of how Sandoval's theory plays out in the world; vloggers openly combat their experiences of oppression and gain visibility and acceptance by doing so.

[2] Susan Driver also suggests that digital queer youth communities "are able to bypass unwanted adult control…seeking social ties and knowledges that are not adult initiated, mediated or evaluated" (176-77). Knut Lundby echoes this idea: "Digital storytelling not only bypasses set forms of authority but also invites new forms" (369).

[3] Though race and class may not encourage nor prevent youth from interacting online, the most statistically salient factor that did prove relevant was participants' level of education (Cohen and Kahne 28). Cohen and Kahne do not expand on this point in their report, though it certainly is a factor that requires further exploration.

[4] Additionally, digital storytelling lends a certain amount of immediacy and intimacy to its form: vloggers can post videos within minutes of recording them and thus others can view them almost as if they occur in real time. This real or imagined proximity heightens the viewer's sense of identification, since ze "can experience vicariously the events in the diarist's life" as if they are happening at that moment (Lindemann 207). Social discourse scholarship suggests that individuals view their online activity as more personal and private than other forms of popular culture, such as movies, television, and magazines, which individuals address as more public and final (Burgess and Green 104). However mediated viewers perceive it to be, digital storytelling allows individuals who are unaware of trans* issues or who struggle with the thought that they might be trans* themselves the ability to watch personal and informative videos in a private setting.

[5] As Erich Alan Werner argues, vlogs are "revolutionary," "highly interactive" (1), and "highly emotional" (5). In a sense, YouTube vlogs are so expansive in terms of content that they do not necessarily comprise a coherent genre. Nevertheless, YouTube vloggers use similar rhetorical strategies, which Werner argues points to the vlog as a "ceremonial" mode rather than a genre (24).

[6] I take seriously Jacob Hale's manifesto, "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, and Trans," which purports that those of us who do not identify as trans* need to be cautious about using "plurals" (i.e. making claims about all trans* people or referring to trans* people as "transgenders") and "the" (i.e. "the trans* self," "the trans* body," "the trans* community," etc.) when researching trans* people.

[7] The emotions women feel and are able to share with others, according to Naomi Scheman, are never "politically neutral" (34). In reality, who and what we are depends on "what others take or at least allow us to be" (Scheman 34). In Scheman's conception, all identities (whether they are oppressive, privileging, liberating, or otherwise) relationally depend upon others' recognition. Though we have the capacity to name our emotions and identities, they nevertheless depend in part "on the particular social processes, which will give or fail to give our feelings the possibility of definition" (Scheman 34). Consciousness-raising groups allowed women to name emotions and identities in collectively recognizable ways, albeit perhaps only identities and emotions that were recognizable from a dominant perspective.

[8] When analyzing the collective potential in digital storytelling, we must keep in mind that the liberation one can receive in cyberspace can be just as real as the social, cultural, and political empowerment one experiences offline. As Helen Kennedy maintains, it is imperative to hold life online and offline in "dialectic tension": in other words, "one should not be privileged at the expense of the other" (132).

[9] This is a very common practice on YouTube for trans*-masculine youth. Others who document body changes and show their bare chests though they have not received top surgery include (but are not limited to) ALionsFear, Transmansable, TransIrish, LiamMichaelBauer, and hundreds more. As some of these usernames evince, being trans* or going through the process of changing one's gender is often why young people come to YouTube in the first place.

[10] For example, see "what it means to be transgender (to me)," in which Skylar rejects identifying as "transgender."

[11] See, for example, Skylar's identification with the trans* community in "response to Kean – November twenty ten" and "addressing my 'past,'" in which he discusses his choice to continue to identify as female on health care forms and in doctor's offices, so that he can be a medical "educator" and so that he does not have to face potentially inaccurate medical care. He explains, "how others see me really isn't as important as how I see myself."

[12] For a full discussion of WPATH's health care guidelines, see Chapter II's "Contemporary Medical Legitimation Discourses" section.

CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE:

GENDER DIVERSITY AND TOOLS OF CHANGE

> Having become aware of the fictions and fissures in our belief system, we perceive the cracks between the worlds, the holes in reality…it is in the cracks between worlds and realities where changes in consciousness can occur. In this shifting place of transitions, we morph, adapt to new cultural realities. As time goes by things start to solidify again and we erect new walls. They stay in place until the next generation kicks holes in them. When the dust settles, who knows what the new structures will look like?
> —Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*

The main arguments in "Radical Epistemologies in Twenty-First Century Trans* Life Narratives" are ones that I have been wrestling with for at least two decades. Though I have never doubted my identity as assigned to me by midwives at birth, I have been consistently unwilling (and unable) to conform to dominant conceptions of femininity. As a child, I was captivated by gender diversity and all the various ways individuals express themselves, though I was always confused by the rigid standards and contradictions this system produces.

Identifying from a young age as queer, not only was I physically and emotionally attracted to girls and boys alike, female-typical individuals who used and expressed masculinity as well as male-typical individuals who embodied feminine characteristics fascinated me. In middle school, I would scour magazines for images of masculine women and feminine men. When I would find an image I liked, I would put it up on my bedroom wall. Over the course of a year, I filled this wall. Though these images comforted me in a way I still cannot describe, they perplexed and distressed others. To

me, then as well as now, these images represented a futurity I could not yet express – a futurity that no one else seemed to understand.

As I approached the end of the dissertation, I decided to mark my body in a way that would exemplify the futurity I needed as a young adult and yet couldn't articulate, a futurity that "Radical Epistemologies" begins to put into words (see Image 6.1).

Image 6.1: Gender-diverse tool-kit. Personal image.

This image combines traditional symbols of femininity, masculinity, androgyny, and trans* identity with common tools one might find on a Swiss Army survival tool: a knife's blade, bottle opener, corkscrew, scissors, and wrench, as well as the addition of a pencil. For me, this image represents gender diversity as a set of weaponry, which can be strategically used to combat oppressive structures of power. To resist systems of control, we are sometimes required to cut ties with our own bodies or communities. We might have to whittle down negative conceptions of ourselves to see the possibilities underneath or the new possibilities we might create. At other times, we are required to physically

resist structural oppression through sustained and unwavering force and resistance to violence. When oppressive ideologies tell us that we are wrong and abnormal, we fight back by developing self-acceptance and by simply enjoying ourselves, creating chosen families, and forging solidarity with others. And we write – we create new narratives that explain our experiences, which others might incorporate as their own, and we craft new ways to understand the world around us so that future generations will not have to reinvent the wheel by struggling through the same issues that limit and constrain our lives. We morph and change and tactically employ diverse resistant practices. In my dissertation, and in my own life, I see gender diversity as a set of tools that, when held differently, can become radical weapons of survival.

Rethinking a Radical Trans Identity*

In *Interviews/Entrevistas,* Gloria E. Anzaldúa purposes a radical analogy of identity as a "process-in-the-making" or as a series of interconnected tracks on which countless trains move (239). In this analogy, the train symbolizes an identity category, and the train stations represent significant experiences that force one to re-evaluate. When the train is in motion, the individual aboard doesn't know who ze is or is in the process of becoming a new person. The scenery is moving by so quickly that ze cannot define any features of the landscape. Once the train comes to a halt, ze has a chance to look around. Ze reflects on hir journey from this new perspective and evaluates if the train ze has been on (the particular identity ze has chosen, fallen into, or been forced to occupy) is still working. Ze can then get back on the same train or get on a new train. Ze might also decide to build a new train or new tracks that lead hir in a different direction.

In this analogy, ze actively traverses hir identity; identities do not just *happen*, nor are they merely prescribed. Though a new train—a new identity—can be built, one must convince others to help and must struggle against those who are comfortable in the trains that already exist and in the locations to which they lead. Similarly, contemporary trans* life narratives conceive of identity as a process, which depends on past experience and other intersecting forms of identity. If laying claim to an identity *makes* subjects, as Michel Foucault argues, the process also occurs bi-directionally: identities come into existence through the act of claiming them. The twenty-first century trans* life writers I have analyzed—Jules Rosskam, Gwen Haworth, Alex Drummond, Jennifer Finley Boylan, Skylar Kergil, and Ky Ford, among others—claim self-determination by creating new ways to understand trans* identity.

Though these trans* life writers and film and video artists reconceptualize identity, they do so in varying ways. While many twentieth century trans* individuals tended to rely on institutional recognition, citing medical legitimation discourse and "wrong body" narratives, some twenty-first century trans* people reimagine trans* identity. For example, Haworth and Rosskam depict trans* identity as relational. Haworth's relational identity depends on her family's ability to recognize her as Gwen and not Steven. To fully cognize Haworth as the trans* woman she becomes during the filming of *She's a Boy I Knew*, Haworth's family mourns her past and imagines Gwen as a new person who only contains traces of the boy she once was. Through her autobiographical documentary, however, Haworth reclaims Steven as an integral part of who Gwen becomes. In *Against a Trans Narrative,* Rosskam's relational identity comes into view as he negotiates others' (his lesbian partner and generations of feminist and

queer individuals) conceptions of him. Rosskam's identity, then, relationally depends on collective acknowledgement from lesbian feminists just as Haworth's identity relationally depends on familial acceptance and love.

Boylan and Drummond, however, see trans* identity as a latent force, which helps to situate but not encapsulate their life narratives. For both autobiographers, trans* identity depends on one's ability to personally recognize and articulate it. Though Drummond represents her trans* identity as something she actively chooses, Boylan sees her trans* identity as something that found and chose her. In both conceptions, Boylan and Drummond come to identify as trans* as they acknowledge the other ways they supersede cultural recognition: Drummond inhabits her male-typical body *as* a woman without any medical intervention and Boylan theorizes her trans* identity through the feminine ghosts that visit her. Trans* identity, for Drummond and Boylan, is simply one factor that contributes to a radical life.

Moreover, Skylar and Ky understand trans* identity in ways that blur the distinctions between collective and personal recognition. In other words, Skylar and Ky see their trans* identities as both relational and chosen depending on context. Skylar identifies variably as a man, trans* man, genderqueer, male, and transgender, and at other times rejects these identities to name himself simply as "Skylar." Ky similarly identifies in divergent ways depending on the video and the questions he contemplates. Though Skylar always identifies as trans*-masculine, Ky is never quite sure how masculine he is or wants to be and continues to embrace femininity, even after viewers question his motives. Skylar and Ky conceive of trans* identity as something that can infinitely change depending on how one feels and to whom one feels responsible.

Though Rosskam, Haworth, Boylan, Drummond, Kergil, and Ford differently cognize trans* identity, they all similarly understand gender diversity as initially internal and yet contingent on social realities. Ze must first recognize a point of departure so that ze can change hir inner dialogue and images concerning the problem. Only after internal narratives shift can ze work to change society. At the same time, because gender is contingent on social realities—because it is always relational *and* self-fashioned—there is no way to secure personal gender agency without simultaneously altering society. Though these contemporary trans* narratives and tactics change depending on genre and author, the underlying motive stays the same: trans* identity should expand to include a range of diverse subjectivities, some of which have yet to be narrated into existence. As more trans* people differently theorize identity and articulate new ways to contemplate trans* identity, personal and collective trans* epistemologies will expand.

Future Research

In future work, I intend to more explicitly address how whiteness and trans* identity are co-productive and co-dependent identity categories. Experiencing skin privilege, to be sure, has a huge impact on feeling comfortable identifying as trans*; privilege affects the level of visibility and freedom to which one has access, as well as the level of comfort one feels in identifying in alternative ways. White individuals who choose to publicly document their trans* identities might not risk the same levels of harassment, violence, familial rejection, loss of housing or employment, and other detrimental outcomes. In other words, the empowerment associated with sharing one's story may only be available to otherwise privileged people. In future research, I will more

fully interrogate how whiteness informs trans* identity.

In *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness,* Ruth Frankenberg argues that whiteness affects one's perspective. Whiteness is both a "location of structural advantage" as well as a "'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society" (1). At the same time, whiteness "refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenberg 1). To name whiteness is to fundamentally "question" and "delimit" its authority (Frankenberg 234). Based on these definitions, it is not surprising that the trans* individuals I have highlighted—with the exception of Rosskam—do not contemplate how whiteness affects or informs their trans* identity and experience. More specifically, again, with the exception of Rosskam, all of the contemporary trans* life writers I chose do not even mention that they are white. Frankenberg might argue that it is simply because they do not have to – as white trans* individuals, they take their experiences for granted as universal, no matter how different those experiences are from traditional or stereotypical conceptions of gender. Because it goes unrecognized, whiteness becomes a "formless entity," which continues to carry a great deal of power (Frankenberg 197). Because they do not question or even name their whiteness, they hold in place systems of domination, which ground whiteness "as normative masquerading as 'generic'—unadorned, basic, essential" (Frankenberg 205).

Future work should also analyze how whiteness and masculinity are in tension within trans* narratives. For instance, one way white trans* vloggers implicitly address whiteness is through expressing ambivalence concerning normative masculine gender roles. By discussing the ways they reject cultural scripts for masculinity, which are so

often associated with domination and violence against women, Skylar, Ky, and many other digital storytellers resist the allure of (white) male privilege. Skylar documents the ways he continually outs himself in social situations, refuses to be a part of male bonding rituals that objectify women, and draws attention to the ways that others treat him differently as a man who denounces stereotypical masculinity. Rejecting these gendered scripts, perhaps Skylar creates new ways of being a white man within a white supremacist, sexist, transphobic world.

Frankenberg suggests that we should rethink the normativity of silence surrounding whiteness; similarly, I believe we should also begin to rethink the normativity of silence surrounding nontrans* identities. We desperately need to explore the ways that white trans* people might similarly perpetuate systems of racial domination by not marking themselves and their life narratives as white. What other possibilities might emerge, what new narratives might be told, if both whiteness and nontrans*ness become visible?

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