Documenting Transition, Transforming Gender: the Worldmaking Work of Trans Men on Youtube

Ace Jordan Eckstein
University of Colorado at Boulder, ace.eckstein@colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/comm_gradetds

Part of the Communication Technology and New Media Commons, Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons, and the Rhetoric Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.colorado.edu/comm_gradetds/66

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Communication at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Graduate Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
DOCUMENTING TRANSITION, TRANSFORMING GENDER:
THE WORLDMAKING WORK OF TRANS MEN ON YOUTUBE

by

ACE JORDAN ECKSTEIN

B.A., University of Colorado, 2014

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Communication
2016
This thesis entitled:
Documenting Transition, Transforming Gender:
The Worldmaking Work of Trans Men on YouTube
written by Ace Jordan Eckstein
has been approved for the Department of Communication

______________________________
Dr. Peter Simonson

______________________________
Dr. Jamie Skerski

Date ________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Eckstein, Ace Jordan (M.A., Communication)

Documenting Transition, Transforming Gender: The Worldmaking Work of Trans Men on YouTube

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Peter D. Simonson

Through analyzing videos from five trans men’s YouTube transition channels, this thesis amplifies the voices of trans men, arguing that trans men on YouTube engage in a project of queer worldmaking. Each chapter traces one mode of queer worldmaking. First, documentation of transition via YouTube constitutes a complex temporality where past, present, and future intertwine to disrupt a normative, teleological understanding of transition. Second, the counterpublic nature of the transmasculine YouTube community allows for the constitution of alternative gender norms, which in turn allow for trans men to be intelligible through, rather than despite of, their transness. Finally, the transmasculine YouTube community can fulfill needs of trans men left unaddressed by transphobic structures and institutions through an ethos of care. This thesis adds to a growing body of scholarship on rhetoric and queer worldmaking, highlighting both rhetoric’s contributions to understanding worldmaking and queer worldmaking’s contributions to understanding rhetoric.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I first told a friend of mine, a fellow trans man, that I was going to be writing my thesis about trans men on YouTube, he said that meant I had to start the thesis by stating my name and how long I have been on testosterone, a ritual that so many trans men on YouTube follow. So, my name is Ace Eckstein and as of May 2, 2016, I will have been on testosterone for two years and one month.

This thesis hits close to home, and the pressure to “get it right” runs deep. But more than anything, this thesis has brought out in a new way for me what I have always known instinctually to be true about trans guys: the way we show up both for ourselves and each other has the power to change the world. So this thesis is first and foremost indebted to the trans men in my life, those I know personally, those I sometimes feel like I know because I have watched so many of their videos, and those who have and continue to pave the way so that I can exist as a trans man in this world. In particular, I want to thank Shane, Levi, Max, Morgan, and Rafi who have each been instrumental in showing me that there are other ways to “be a man.” Without them, I would not have learned the strength of a trans man’s voice. This thesis is a result of that lesson.

This thesis is also the result of the generous guidance of my academic mentors. Pete Simonson’s uncanny ability to ask the right question at the right time has helped this thesis to grow from an instinctual hunch to an academic work. Lisa Flores and Jamie Skerski have now served on two thesis committees for me, and I deeply grateful for their investment in my academic growth. Their provocative comments and timely suggestions throughout this process have strengthened the theoretical and critical contributions of this thesis. The *ethos* of care chapter was also written in Lisa’s rhetorical criticism class. Her feedback and those of the peer reviewers in her thoughtfully structured course strengthened that chapter immensely. In addition to my committee, I would be remiss not to acknowledge other faculty members who have influenced this thesis. Early drafts of the temporality chapter and the intelligibility chapter were originally written in Ted Striphas and Phaedra Pezzullo’s grad seminars respectively. Each provided incredibly helpful feedback on these drafts that was instrumental to shaping the
chapters as they appear in this thesis. Each of these professors have not only contributed greatly to this thesis project, they have also each in different ways modeled for me the kind of academic mentor that I hope to one day become.

I am incredibly lucky to have such thoughtful and compassionate graduate student colleagues. This thesis has benefitted from the many conversations I have had with my peers, those fleeting and those in depth, those directly related to my thesis and those seemingly unrelated at the time. In particular, I want to thank Bri Wiens and Meghan Dunn. Bri has been my sounding board when I needed to talk through an argument, my cheerleader when it felt like this thesis was never going to get done, and my copy editor when I forgot how to write in real sentences. I honestly cannot imagine going through this process without her. As a recent PhD, Meghan has provided invaluable perspective and advice, but more than anything she has taught me to never underestimate the power of a well-timed GIF. I am a better scholar today from having learned from and with my fellow grad students. I can only hope to find such a thoughtful and caring group of colleagues next year at the University of Iowa.

Finally, any acknowledgments section I ever write will be incomplete without mentioning my parents. There is absolutely no way I would have completed this thesis without my mother’s matzo ball soup and stuffed cabbage. I am incredibly lucky to have parents who are happy (or at least willing) to have me talk about queer theory around the dinner table. They were the first people to make me believe what I had to say that was worth listening to, a gift that this thesis could not have been written without.
CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .........................................................................................................................1
   Trans Men’s YouTube Transition Channels: A Genre ...........................................3
   Methods ...............................................................................................................................5
   Transgender Historical and Cultural Context .......................................................8
      Transgender Identity Language ..............................................................................8
      Medical Transition Possibilities ..........................................................................12
      Transmasculine Specificity ....................................................................................17
   Literature Review ...........................................................................................................19
      Trans Narratives and Self-Presentation ............................................................19
      Trans and the Internet .........................................................................................22
      Trans on YouTube .................................................................................................25
   Theoretical Framework – Rhetorical Queer Worldmaking ...........................28
      The Rhetoricity of Worldmaking ........................................................................31
   Chapter Preview .............................................................................................................36

II. OUT OF SYNC:
   A COMPLEX TEMPORALITY OF TRANSITION .......................................................38
   The Stakes of Queering and Transing Time .........................................................40
   The Asynchrony of Testosterone ...........................................................................43
   A Complex Temporality of Transition ...................................................................48
      Speaking the Present Past ...................................................................................49
      Seeing the Present Past ......................................................................................51
Turn to Futurity.................................................................52
Complex Temporality of Viewing...........................................56
Conclusions...........................................................................58

III. “BEING SEEN FOR WHO I AM”:
TRANSFEMININITY INTELLIGIBILITY .................................61
Counterpublics, Queer Worldmaking, and the Internet..............62
Gender Intelligibility.............................................................68
Carving Space for Transmasculine Subjectivity.........................70
  Rhetorics of Openness ......................................................72
  Rhetorics of Stealth............................................................73
  Rhetorics of Passing...........................................................75
Witnessing Transmasculine Bodies .........................................77
Norms of Transmasculinity....................................................83
Conclusions...........................................................................87

IV. MY BROTHER’S KEEPER:
A TRANSFEMININITY ETHOS OF CARE ...............................90
The Significance of Care ........................................................91
  Dichotomies of Care in Nel Noddings Caring .................93
  Gendering Care and Gendered Caring ..........................98
  Queerly Expanding Care .................................................100
The Sociality of Ethos as Dwelling Place ...............................105
Constructing Communal Dwellings .......................................107
  Ethos of Care in Practice .................................................109
Conclusions...........................................................................116
V. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 119

Limitations and Future Research .................................................. 126

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................... 131
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Internet has been a crucial site of transgender community in large part due to the lack of large groups of transgender people in close geographic proximity to one another. Facebook groups, Tumblr blogs, resource websites, and web-based chat rooms among many other Internet platforms have all contributed to transgender people connecting in ways that transcend geographic divides. However, as Laura Horak notes, “Though trans people also use platforms like Vimeo and Tumblr, YouTube has almost single-handedly transformed the trans mediascape.”¹ By creating, viewing, and subscribing to trans YouTube channels, commenting on trans videos, and connecting with trans YouTube users through features such as private messages on YouTube, trans people use YouTube to access resources and build community.

YouTube also provides an alternative to mainstream media, and the distinctions between trans self-presentation on YouTube and trans representation in mainstream media are worth noting. The self-publishing nature of YouTube allows transgender people to tell their own stories without the need for a cisgender mediator or tailoring to a cisgender audience as would be required to engage with mainstream media. Many genres of YouTube videos focus on the everyday over the sensational that often is featured in mainstream media. Trans use of YouTube mediates trans experiences, lives, and communities. This mediation matters in that the videos can circulate widely, constituting counterpublics—as Michael Warner suggests—“through mere attention.”² As such, trans YouTube counterpublics include all those who watch the videos or

---


interact with them passively as well as those who participate more actively through creating
videos, commenting on videos, or subscribing to channels.

Trans men in particular have taken to YouTube, creating YouTube channels to document
their physical transition. The prevalence and salience of these transition channels in
transmasculine culture makes them particularly fruitful objects of study. These transition
channels generally feature the channel’s creator by himself speaking into a webcam or video
camera on a tripod. The first video tends to coincide with the beginning of the physical
transition of the channel’s creator, often in anticipation of his first injection of testosterone. The
trans guys in the videos tend to speak to an implied audience of other transgender men. Across
most of the channels, trans guys provide regular updates about the physical changes due to
testosterone, often using the camera to try to show the changes. The frequency of video updates
as well as content beyond updates on the physical transition varies from channel to channel.
Many trans guys include reflections on their transition process and stories related to other aspects
of their lives in addition to documenting physical changes.

This thesis uses the videos from five trans men’s transition channels to address questions
of queer worldmaking. More specifically, I take up the ways trans men on YouTube contest,
subvert, reproduce, and exploit norms of gender, masculinity, and transness; this complex
engagement with norms renders YouTube a key site of queer worldmaking. In highlighting the
intertwinement of contestations, subversions, reproductions, and exploitations, my analysis
follows from West’s critique of queer criticism and theory for valuing “radical antinormativity
above all else, which almost always disappoints us as a heuristic because the text or practice in
question cannot wrench itself loose from any and all normativities so nothing is ever queer
enough to satisfy the conditions of purity required by such unrealistic metrics.”

Further, West suggests, “In practice, then, we need to calibrate our critical assessments with these inevitable impurities in mind and recast the question of normativity such that an act of queering is judged by the rhetors’ ability to productively play the norms against one another and disrupt, even if only temporarily, their normative and normalizing authority.”

Following West’s framework, my primary research question is:

- **RQ 1:** How do trans men on YouTube, individually, and the transmasculine YouTube community, collectively, participate in a queer worldmaking project through their engagement with norms of gender, masculinity, and transness?

Secondarily, I ask:

- **RQ 2:** What affordances of YouTube enable this queer worldmaking project?

**Trans Men’s YouTube Transition Channels: A Genre**

Trans men posting videos to YouTube to document their transition, according to Raun, “is so ubiquitous . . . that trans vlogging has become a genre in itself.” An April 2016 YouTube search for “FTM,” which stands for female-to-male, yielded over 311,000 results. These results include several genres of videos including but not limited to video diaries, collaborative channels, and timelapse videos. The trans men’s YouTube transition channels I am studying fit

---


5 West, “Queer Generosities,” 540.


7 As of April 8, 2016. The search term “FTM” yielded the most results out of similar search terms including “transgender men,” “trans men,” and “trans guy.”
the genre of video diaries. The channel creator, often referred to as YouTubers, typically record themselves at home in casual, everyday settings such as sitting on a couch or lying on a bed. Channel creators look into the camera and typically speak unscripted, often directly addressing an implied audience of other trans guys.

A YouTube channel consists of several videos uploaded by the same channel creator. Each video can range in length from under a minute to over ten minutes. The channels are typically updated regularly, but the frequency of updates varies greatly and is not always consistent within a channel. Additionally, channels are maintained for varying lengths of time, up to several years of regular updates. With such variety, it is difficult to gauge a typical frequency of updates or duration of active channel maintenance. That being said, there is a general tendency for the most popular channels—as determined by number of subscribers and overall channel views—to be updated at least biweekly for at least a year.

The genre conventions of transition channels are both enabling and constraining for channel creators. For example, the common practice of beginning a video by stating how long one has been on testosterone and discussing the physical changes that have occurred since the last update valorizes the physical aspects of transition. These practices have lead some to criticize transition channels, as Horak summarizes, “for implying that there are only two genders and the most livable space in one or the other; that transition is always a linear, goal-oriented process; and that medical intervention is necessary to legitimize trans people’s gender identities.”

However, Horak also notes, “While it is easy to decry the formulaic nature of trans YouTube videos, genre conventions help amateurs enter the field and attract new viewers.”

---

8 Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 574.

9 Ibid., 573.
Raúl, a trans man on YouTube, resembles this idea as he began his first video by saying it was a “typical FTM intro video, well hopefully it isn’t that typical.” The genre conventions of transition channels help to cohere the community by providing recognizable practices that can then be expanded on.

Many of the genre conventions pertain to the structure of videos and channels, but there are also many content themes that are consistently discussed. Each of the major *topoi* centralizes transition. As suggested above, a first *topos* is that of physical transition. Foundational to the genre of the transition channel, channel creators discuss and show physical changes induced by testosterone. Many channel creators also discuss the process of seeking and recovering from top surgery. A second *topos* is discussion of dysphoria including lamenting experiences and discussing coping strategies. A third *topos* is social aspects of transition including family, work, and romantic relationships. Closely related to the third *topos* is the *topos* of sexuality. Additionally, many channel creators who are marginalized within trans communities discuss that intersectional marginalization. For example, among trans men of color on YouTube, there is a *topos* of race and racism in the context of transition. These common *topoi* also help to unify the transmasculine YouTube community by establishing common ground, while variations on these *topoi* highlights rifts, exclusions, and limitations of the community.

**Methods**

In order to select the channels for study, I began by looking at which channels trans guys were recommending to each other via online discussion boards. I identified James’ channel as the most frequently recommended and found that his channel has over 65,100 subscribers and over six million views. I found Michael’s and Kyle’s channels through the “recommended
videos” list that YouTube generates using an algorithm based on the video you are currently watching and by searching for “transgender men” and “ftm transition.” All three of these channels as well as all of the videos listed in the first few pages of the searches and the recommended videos featured white trans men. Horak noted that videos featuring trans people of color will only come up using marked searches such as Black ftm. I found Melvin’s channel from the search “Black ftm” and Raúl’s channel from the search “Latino ftm.” Additionally, although trans men from numerous countries use YouTube to document their transition, all five channels that I use in this thesis are U.S.-based.

I find the ethical obligations of this research to be complex particularly as they pertain to whether or not to use pseudonyms for the channel creators. Because these channels are public access, I am not required to go through the IRB and am thus not required to obtain informed consent from channel creators or to use pseudonyms. Raun conducted his dissertation research on transgender YouTube channels, and his reflections on the ethical implications of pseudonyms were formative for my thinking and are thus worth quoting at length:

Studying trans people is a contested field, given the long history of exploitive and harmful research done especially by non-trans people. Jacob Hale’s “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans: (Hale 1997/ongoing) is a reminder of this history, but also an admonition to all researchers, trans or not, to engage with this field of study with a discerning mind and compassionate heart. Changing the YouTubers usernames and not stating their hometown takes into account that some may feel personally and emotionally exposed. However, anonymising the trans vlogger’s username (which often is not their real name) can potentially contribute to the transphobic myth that being trans is something you should hide or of which you should be ashamed.10

An additional hesitation I had to selecting pseudonyms for the channel creators was the immensely personal process that most trans people go through in selecting their own name. To

address the hesitations I had while ensuring privacy and respect to the channel creators as much as possible, I chose to contact each channel creator, explaining my project and asking if they would like me to use a pseudonym for them in my thesis and if so, if they would choose what pseudonym they would like me to use. In the last week of February 2015, I used the private message function of YouTube to contact each channel creator. As of this writing, I have only received a response from one person. For those who did not respond, I assigned a pseudonym.

In selecting the five channels to focus on in my thesis, I am employing a rationale of theoretical sampling. I am not claiming that these five channels are a representative sample of transgender men on YouTube. Rather, I selected these five channels to show a range of experiences and forms of masculinity among transgender men documenting their transition on YouTube. The complete whiteness of the videos I found from racially unmarked searches is important to note because it points to the underlying and unspoken assumption of whiteness in the genre of transition channels. As Horak points out, “tens of thousands of trans people of color do post videos and many actively comment on each others’ videos. These networks are invisible, though, to anyone who does not specifically seek them out.” This is salient in the theoretical sampling in that I have chosen videos to highlight intersectional diversity of identity and experience, yet the specificity of each channel particularly as it pertains to race and ethnicity cannot be overlooked. Trans of color channel creators may constitute another trans YouTube counterpublic. To account for both range and specificity of experience, I will read across channels not to make generalizable claims but to look for the range of queering practices that extend beyond the level of the individual.

Transgender Historical and Cultural Context

To situate this thesis in the broader U.S. historical and cultural context, three categories of transgender experience are particularly salient to address: identity language, medical transition possibilities, and transmasculine specificity. These three aspects certainly do not encompass all or even most of transgender experience, but they are each important in shaping how YouTube transition channels become a useful genre for trans men to document their transition. Additionally, both transgender identity language and medical transition possibilities have and continue to change rapidly. Some of these evolutions, such as the emergence of transgender as an identity category and early gender identity clinics, are well reflected in scholarly literature. Others, such as increasing use of trans* notation and shortcomings in medical transition technology, are notably absent from scholarly literature. Thus, in contextualizing these two strands of experience, I draw from both scholarly literature and community-based knowledge.

Transgender Identity Language

Trans: A Keyword

In the introduction to *Keywords*, Williams reflects “every word which I have included has at some time, in the course of some argument, virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss.”¹² Such was my experience with the prefix “trans-.” Beginning with what is perhaps too obvious, the prefix is shared by transvestite, transsexual, transgender, and ultimately the truncated identity label trans. The German physician and defender of sexual minorities,

---

Magnus Hirschfeld, coined the term transvestite in 1910 in his book *Die Transvestiten*. For the past one hundred years, through a proliferation of vocabulary, “trans-” has been the connecting thread. Moreover, trans people are often described as transforming, transgressing, and transcending gender. The process of socially, physically, legally, and/or medically altering one’s gender is referred to as transition.

“Trans-” saturates our vocabulary of these phenomena. A keywords approach, at its core, is invested in vocabulary “in two senses: the available and developing meanings of known words, which needed to be set down; and the explicit but as often implicit connections which people were making, in what seemed to me, again and again, particular formations of meaning—ways of not only discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences.”

The saturation of trans- in seemingly every facet of our vocabulary discussing trans people means that the explicit and implicit connections tied to trans- are central in shaping not only how we discuss, but how we see trans people and experiences.

“Trans-” comes from Latin with the primary meaning being “across, through, over, to, or on the other side of; beyond, outside of; from one place, person, thing, or state, to another.” This definition is most associated with trans- identity labels and highlights trans as movement. Importantly, this definition of trans- incorporates multiple kinds of movement, notably movement across and movement beyond. This allows for inclusion of both movement across polarized gender categories and movement beyond the gender binary all together. A less

---


14 Williams, *Keywords*, 15.

common definition of trans- is “formed on.” This definition can be seen in words such as transboard or tranearth. This definition suggests a constitutive power of trans-. Holding both senses of trans-, as movement and as constitutive, allows for a more capacious understanding of trans identities and experiences.

An Expanding Vocabulary of Trans Identity

Transsexual as a concept and term predates transgender by several decades. The idea transsexuality, which Meyerowitz defines as “the quest to transform the bodily characteristics of sex via hormones and surgery,” emerged in the 1910s. The term “transsexual” was first used in 1949 by psychiatrist Dr. David O. Cauldwell in describing people seeking to change their sex. Transsexual was deeply tied to medical transition, and this tie was at least one reason for a shift to transgender in the early 1990s.

California-based activist Virginia Prince is typically credited with coining the term “transgenderist” in the 1970s to refer to people who lived as a gender other than they were assigned at birth but did not pursue surgical intervention. However, it was not until the early 1990s that activists and social service providers began to use “transgender” as an umbrella term to encompass a wider range of gender non-conforming identities and experiences inclusive of experiences that had previously been distinguished as specifically transexual or transgender.

16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Even as an umbrella term, as David Valentine points out based on ethnographic work in New York City, transgender remains a deeply contested concept, asserting that “these definitions are tentative and shifting, precisely because the meanings of the terms are still being negotiated.”

It is in this spirit of continually contested meanings that I turn to Susan Stryker’s definition of transgender as a useful definitional framework. Stryker uses transgender “to refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.”

Moreover, “it is the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition—that best characterizes the concept of ‘transgender.’” As it pertains to this thesis, this definition is useful in that it calls attention to the socially imposed boundaries of gender. This opens up possibilities for movement across these boundaries to have radical implications for gender normativities on a broader social level, rather than merely an individual process of transition towards a destination.

Since the 1990s, there continues to be a proliferation of terms within the transgender umbrella. Terms regularly heard among U.S. trans men include FTM (female to male), trans man, transgender man, transexual man, transmasculine, female assigned at birth (FAAB), man of trans experience, trans*, boi, and masculine of center among many others. Although these terms may seem quite similar to a reader who is not immersed in transmasculine culture, self-identification with a particular identity label or combination of labels is often a matter of deep and specific personal and political importance.

---

20 Ibid., 38.

21 Susan Stryker, Transgender History (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 1.

22 Ibid.
The plethora of identity labels poses unique challenges in writing a thesis that reads across identity experiences in trying to simultaneously reflect individuality of experience and social commonality. I will be using “transgender” or “trans” as umbrella terms for the category and “trans men” to describe the channel creators in the genre of transition videos that I am looking at. I have chosen these terms because they are broad enough to encompass the range of experiences presented in the channels I am analyzing. In the past few years, trans* has been taken up as a more deliberately broad category than trans or transgender. I have chosen not to use trans* in this thesis because the political motivation of trans* notation has largely been about highlighting the experiences of genderqueer and gender non-conforming people who have no desire or intention to pursue medical transition. The genre of YouTube transition channels revolves around medical transition, making trans* a less relevant identity label in this project. In using “transgender,” “trans,” and “trans men,” my goal is to embrace the political nature imbued in choosing such identity labels, not to homogenize the experiences and identities of the channel creators whose videos I am analyzing. I aim to speak into the diversity within such identity categories while also suggesting that the radical potential of YouTube transition channels lies less in the individual channels, but in the counterpublic(s) they constitute.

Medical Transition Possibilities

Early attention to medical transition focused on male-to-female transition. Although certainly not the first person to undergo sex reassignment surgery, heavy media coverage of Christine Jorgensen’s sex reassignment surgery, performed in Denmark in 1952, brought the possibility of medical sex reassignment into the public consciousness. 23 Harry Benjamin, a

---

23 Meyerowitz, How Sex Changed, 4.
cisgender endocrinologist and sexologist, was one of the first doctors to document his work with trans patients, and his work, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, formed the basis for medical standards of care for trans people. First published in 1966, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* largely emphasized male-to-female transition with only brief consideration of female-to-male transition. Benjamin was by no means the only doctor working with transgender patients, and in 1979, they formed a professional organization, the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, which is now known as the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH). The majority of WPATH members are based in the U.S., however there are also members from Mexico, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and several other countries in Europe. The WPATH standards of care, which were originally guided by Benjamin’s work, continue to guide the practices of medical and mental health professionals working with transgender patients. As will be elaborated below, these standards of care serve as a barrier to medical transition for many transgender people.

In the 1960s through 1980s, the majority of U.S. sex reassignment—hormonal and surgical interventions—took place in gender identity clinics associated with research universities. An affluent transsexual man, Reed Erickson, funded the first gender identity clinic at John Hopkins University in 1966. If accepted to the program, the gender identity clinic would prescribe and supervise hormone replacement therapy and sex reassignment surgery as part of participation in research. For transgender men, sex reassignment surgery included double

---


25 Ibid., 7.
mastectomy and a phalloplasty, which are commonly referred to among trans men as top surgery and bottom surgery, respectively.

These gender identity clinics helped numerous trans people to medically transition in the mid to late 20th century, but they also served as gatekeepers to medical transition. People seeking sex reassignment had to apply to gender identity clinics. The clinics, almost exclusively staffed by cisgender doctors, would then determine if an applicant met the criteria of a “true transsexual,” using Benjamin’s terminology from *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. One of the criteria in accepting an applicant to a gender identity clinic was heterosexuality. In other words, someone transitioning from female to male must be sexually attracted to women. Lou Sullivan was a pioneer of transmasculine community and founder of the first organization dedicated to trans men, *FTM International*. Sullivan was rejected from the Gender Dysphoria Program in Palo Alto that was formerly associated with Stanford on the basis of his sexual attraction to men.26 These kinds of criteria functioned to reinforce binary conceptions of gender normativity tied to heterosexuality.

With the publication of the DSM-III in 1980 came a new hurdle for transgender people, particularly those seeking medical transition, and that hurdle came in the form of Gender Identity Disorder (GID).27 As Valentine explains, “GID created a diagnostic place for people who had not previously been explicitly recognized as such in the pages of DSM, transexuals and others who engaged in visibly gender-variant behaviors and who had previously been understood at


27 “Gender Identity Disorder,” in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 1980).
least partially through the categories of either homosexuality or transvestism.”

GID further pathologized and stigmatized transgender identity. Additionally, a GID diagnosis became a requirement for medical transition, which began taking place outside of gender identity clinics. In 2013, GID was removed from the DSM-V and replaced with Gender Dysphoria Disorder (GDD). The American Psychiatric Association defines gender dysphoria as, “the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender.”

The shift from GID to GDD may be framed as progress in that the primary target of pathologization is the experience of dysphoria rather than a transgender identity. However, endocrinologists and surgeons who had previously required a GID diagnosis continue to require a GDD diagnosis. This requires a transgender person to prove to a therapist that they are “truly” trans. This notion of truly trans comes from Harry Benjamin’s scale from transvestite to “true transsexual.” The highly specific criteria to be deemed a true transsexual by Benjamin’s standards are no longer unilaterally enforced. However, Benjamin’s notion that “true transsexuals feel that they belong to the other sex, they want to be and function as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such,” provides a framework for what many mental health professionals deem “truly” trans. It is important to underscore that this is a standard that is largely imposed on trans individuals, and thus maintains the authority of mental health professionals to determine who can medically transition.

A significant difference between medical transition in the days of gender identity clinics and medical transition today is the proliferation of ways to transition. Specifically for trans men, genital reassignment surgery in the form of phalloplasties are less common, though there is little

---

28 Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 55.

29 “Gender Dysphoria,” in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013)
scholarly research to say how many fewer phalloplasties there are. In large part this is due to lack of medical technology that can build a fully functioning penis as well as the high cost of the procedure. Many trans men transition by taking testosterone typically administered through injection, but the patch and gel versions of testosterone are gaining popularity as those versions of the pharmaceutical become more reliable. Top surgery to surgically construct a male-appearing chest is also common as part of transmasculine transition. That being said, a combination of testosterone and top surgery is not the only way to transition. Additionally, high costs are a barrier to medical transition for many transgender people as insurance companies have historically refused to cover transition-related medical care. Only very recently have some insurance companies considered covering hormonal and surgical interventions. For example, in 2013 the Colorado Division of Insurance issued a bulletin stating that Colorado insurance companies may not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation including “transgender status.”

This bulletin has been successfully used to have insurance companies cover hormones and surgery, but does not guarantee this coverage.

Even with the proliferation of ways to transition, there remains a cultural transition script that can be seen in the YouTube transition channels. Channel creators will often discuss the process of getting a therapist’s letter with a GID or GDD diagnosis depending on when the individual went through the process and perhaps give tips to trans men viewers on how to approach the therapist in order to get a letter. In addition, channel creators often provide a hypothetical timeline of their transition prior to beginning medical transition. Typically the timeline includes going on testosterone and having top surgery as soon as that is financially feasible. This can also be seen in the way the act of self-injecting testosterone is often

---

constructed as a rite of passage to specifically be documented in the videos. The explicit and implicit engagements with this transition script are salient in what the YouTube channels do for the transmasculine community.

**Transmasculine Specificity**

The title of an *FTM International* publication is telling in the need for transmasculine specificity: “FTM 101—The Invisible Transsexuals.”

Published in 1997, the article presented basic healthcare information, necessary information particularly because most understandings of transsexual health needs were—and still are—conceptualized based on trans women’s experiences. There are many significant differences between transfeminine and transmasculine communities and experiences. The differing physical transition scripts for trans men and trans women and the relationship and friction between trans men and butch lesbians are useful examples to demonstrate the need for transmasculine specific work.

How physical transition is generally conceived and pursued both shapes and is shaped by transfeminine and transmasculine communities. In particular, there are notably different scripts and expectations as to what constitutes “complete” transition. As the *FTM International* publication notes, “Many MTFs define themselves in the separation of preop [sic] and post-op and the distinction between cross-dresser and transsexual, subscribing to the premise that one is ‘real’ and the other a mere pretense or dalliance. These clear strata do not exist for the FTM. Many of us ‘blur,’ or exist with two or more so called categories.”

Specifically, this is

---


32 Ibid., par. 1.
referring to the community significance of genital reassignment surgery as the apex (or not) of transition. Importantly, I am not suggesting that all trans women desire or should desire genital reassignment surgery, nor am I suggesting that no trans men desire or should desire genital reassignment surgery. Rather, I am suggesting that looking at the different transition scripts and how various physical transition choices hold different significance in transfeminine and transmasculine communities points to the need to conduct research that focuses on the specificity of transmasculine or transfeminine transition experiences rather than trying to generalize across trans experiences.

The blurring referenced in the FTM International piece above may also invoke the sometimes blurred, often contested, relationship between trans men and butch lesbians. This contested relationship is what Halberstam refers to as “butch/FTM border wars.” Halberstam summarizes the border wars, saying, “Some lesbians seem to see FTMs as traitors to a ‘women’s’ movement who cross over and become the enemy. Some FTMs see lesbian feminism as a discourse that has demonized them and their masculinity. Some butches consider FTMs to be butches who ‘believe in anatomy,’ and some FTMs consider butches to be FTMs who are too afraid to transition.” Halberstam critiques a masculine continuum that places androgynous, butch, and FTM on a continuum from least to most masculine, asserting, “At the transgender end of the spectrum, the continuum model miscalculates the relation between bodily alterity and the degree of masculinity; at the butch end of the spectrum, the continuum model make it seem as if

---


34 Ibid., 287.
butchness is sometimes just an early stage of transsexual aspiration.”\textsuperscript{35} The masculine continuum and butch/FTM border wars significantly influence community dynamics and individual experiences of trans men and butch women. Transmasculine specific scholarship can and should attune to these dynamics in ways that generalized trans scholarship cannot.

\textbf{Literature Review}

\textbf{Trans Narratives and Self-Presentation}

Given the extent of normative control over transgender representation, trans narratives and self-presentation provide an important intervention in reclaiming trans experiences. Stone’s seminal essay, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” sees autobiographies as having the power to resist the erasure imposed by a medical system that requires very particular narratives for trans people to access medical transition. Stone suggests, “in the transsexual’s erased history we can find a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender, which originates from within the gender minority itself and which can make common cause with other oppositional discourses.”\textsuperscript{36} Stone highlights the radical reclaiming work that occurs when trans people tell their own stories.

Building on Stone, Prosser’s book, \textit{Second Skins}, points to specifically transsexual autobiographies as a way to assert the centrality of the body in trans experiences. Transsexuality, Prosser writes, “is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 295.

remolding of the life into a particular narrative shape.”\textsuperscript{37} Further, through this narratological sense of transition, Prosser suggests “that the resexing of the transsexual body is made possible through narrativization, the transitions of sex enabled by those of narrative.”\textsuperscript{38} Specifically, Prosser considers transsexual autobiographies, books published by transsexuals post-transition, recounting their experience. These published autobiographies, however, are not the first autobiographical act for the author, for “in order to be diagnosed as transsexual, s/he must recount a transsexual autobiography. The story of a strong, early, and persistent transgendered identification is required by the clinical authorities, the psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists who traditionally function as the gatekeepers to the means of transsexual ‘conversion.’”\textsuperscript{39} Prosser is simultaneously pointing to the importance of transsexual autobiographies in reclaiming trans stories and showing how these narratives are always already bound up in normative institutions.

Like Stone and Prosser, Spade points to the connections and disparities between trans people’s self-constructed narratives and the narratives required by a medically controlled system of transition. Spade juxtaposes his own personal writings as he sought top surgery in which he reflects on the required medical narrative with commentary and critique of the way “that sex reassignment-related procedures are regulated through a mental health model which promotes regulatory, binary gender expression and denies access to medical procedures to those who fail


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 101.
to perform normative binary gender for their health care providers.”

In an excerpt of his personal writings, Spade reflects on conversations with other trans-identified people at a trans support group, “I have these great, sad, conversations with these people who know all about what it means to lie and cheat their way through the medical roadblocks to get the opportunity to occupy their bodies in the way they want.”

Navigating an institutionalized narrative of transness that is at odds with a personal trans experience becomes a source of community. The YouTube transition channels of this thesis similarly draw on imposed narratives, reclaimed and self-constructed narratives, and communities of resources and visibility.

Although there is significantly more scholarly literature attending to imposed trans narratives, including narratives promoted by the medical system and more mainstream representations of trans lives intended for cisgender audiences, a small number of studies address trans self-presentation. Tiffe studied *Original Plumbing*, an independent magazine published by and for transgender men. *Original Plumbing* was motivated by the co-founding editors’ desire for more accurate representation of trans men. Tiffe argues that the magazine is useful in understanding the relationality performed between trans men. Peterson through close readings of their poetry and in-depth interviews studied three trans poets, identifying a trans


41 Ibid., 23.


poetry aesthetic that is parallel to gender transition narratives. In both *Original Plumbing* and the trans poetry, trans people reclaim their trans narratives through self-presentation in contrast to mainstream media representation.

**Trans and the Internet**

Prior to delving more deeply into literature specifically focused on the Internet and trans communities, it is worth noting recent scholarly attention to broader queer engagement with the Internet. Several edited volumes examining the relationship between the Internet and queer communities and identities have been published in the last decade. Although these volumes frame their scope using broader identity categories such as “LGBT” or “queer,” studies largely focus on experiences of gay men and lesbians online. While, it is useful to contextualize trans use of the Internet in the larger trend of queer people connecting and sharing resources online, it is critical to recognize that the experiences of the LGB and T parts of the acronym are not necessarily transferrable. For example, in studying queer blogs, Rak highlights the salience of a blurred public/private divide in constituting queer identity. However, Rak identified blogs of interest to the study using keywords including “transsexual” along with several other identity labels, and generalized across blogs, framing all of her analysis as “GLBT” or “queer” blogs, without accounting for the specificity of the identity experience presented in each blog. These

---


45 See e.g. Kate O’Riordan and David J. Phillips, eds., *Queer Online: Media Technology & Sexuality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); and Christopher Pullen and Margarate Cooper, eds., *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010).

kinds of generalizations can render the queer community a monolith and gloss over salient specificities of identity and experience.

Turning now to literature specific to trans communities and the Internet, it is widely agreed upon that the Internet marked a significant turning point for trans community. Prior to the Internet, trans people had few opportunities to interact with and learn from other trans people leading to trans lives largely being characterized by isolation and marginalization. The medical community including the gender identity clinics strongly encouraged trans people to go stealth—not disclose their trans history—after transition, making it quite possible for a trans person to have no knowledge of or connection to another trans person.  

The Internet has allowed trans people to connect to each other directly. Through in depth interviews with trans people in Toronto, Hill found “the majority of respondents in this study relied on technology to come to terms with their gender, connect with others like themselves, and develop a more sophisticated sense of issues facing their community either by raising their consciousness or helping them to tell their own story.”

Gauthier and Chaudoir studied trans men’s posts on websites, chat rooms, message boards, web rings, and private chat groups. Although problematic in the way the study presumed the central struggle for all trans men was passing and the “struggle to achieve manhood,” Gauthier and Chaudoir productively point out “because the very existence of the female-to-male transsexual challenges mainstream norms, many transsexuals have turned to the


48 Darryl Hill, “Coming to Terms: Using Technology to Know Identity,” Sexuality and Culture 9 (2005), 49.

Internet for acceptance and support they fail to receive elsewhere.” These studies all point to the Internet as a critical way for trans individuals to learn about themselves through access to community.

In addition to making access to trans community possible, the Internet provided ways to mobilize trans communities for political action. Whittle, one of the first to write on the significance of the Internet for trans communities, notes that the Internet “has been a place where the trans community has been able to thrive, while the real world has often been a cold and unwelcoming place. The development of a community home, albeit a virtual place, has, for the first time probably, enabled the trans community to participate effectively in national and international gender politics.” Shapiro, based on interviews with prominent trans activists, asserts that the Internet also affected trans organizing in two prominent ways:

First, the Internet has become a tool for activists and organizations to use to reduce organization’s upstart and maintenance costs and to provide quick and efficient information distribution. Second, the Internet has become a space within which to facilitate networking and collective identity development and employ new tactics, leading to the further development, growth and success of the transgender movement. The Internet revolutionized the way trans people could connect to each other, and thus interact with normative publics.

Finally, Rawson’s work highlights the importance of the Internet in documenting trans histories. Rawson asserts, “For trans communities in particular, cyberspace provides a revolutionary tool for creating, sharing, and preserving trans histories that would otherwise

50 Ibid., 381.


52 Shapiro, “Trans’cending Barriers,” 171.
remain untold.” To this end, in January 2016, Rawson launched the Digital Transgender Archive with the purpose “to increase the accessibility of transgender history by providing an online hub for digitized historical materials, born-digital materials, and information on archival holdings throughout the world.” Rawson’s work suggests ways that scholars can both analyze and contribute to trans community connections through the Internet.

**Trans on YouTube**

Trans use of YouTube has received some, although limited, scholarly attention. Horak points to the importance and power of these videos: “To put it bluntly, these videos save trans lives. Distributed freely through the Internet and easily found, they collectively tell trans youth that self-determination and transformation are viable routes.” This power is closely tied to the way trans YouTube videos reclaim expertise in that “vlogs position trans youth as experts, implicitly contesting the expertise over trans bodies claimed by medical professionals, educators, and parents . . . . Rather than being impelled and judged by an authority figure, they are framed as conversations between a group of assumed peers.” This reclamation of expertise, Horak argues, renders the videos a form of political action. Dame looks at how three trans men constructed themselves in their videos as experts in order to hail the audience into changing


56 Ibid., 575.
problematic behaviors such as unsolicited comments about a trans guy’s ability to pass.\textsuperscript{57} This construction of expertise adds another dimension to the videos as political action.

Raun’s work illuminates the transformative potential of trans YouTube vlogs. Raun asserts that this transformative potential is fostered in the connection of “fleshly transitioning bodies and information technology. They engender the ongoing process of ‘becoming’ man/woman/trans by (re)learning, testing, evaluating in front of the camera the act of gender.”\textsuperscript{58} The camera is particularly salient as a “vehicle of transubstantiation”\textsuperscript{59} that witnesses what Raun terms the “screen-birth” of trans vloggers. The transformative potential that Raun emphasizes here is one of personal, rather than political, transformation though the radical political potential of this type of personal transformation should not be overlooked. Elsewhere, Raun describes trans vlogs as an affective counterpublic, or “an archive of feeling, a repository of feelings experienced by individuals in transition. They are privatized affective responses as well as collective or political ones.”\textsuperscript{60} Trans YouTube videos as an affective counterpublic bridge personal and political transformative potential.

A final theme that has been highlighted in trans YouTube scholarship is temporality. Sonja Vivienne studied Digital Storytelling, which tend to be highly planned and constructed in

\textsuperscript{57} Avery Dame, “‘I’m your hero? Like me?’: The Role of ‘Expert’ in the Trans Male Vlog,” \textit{Journal of Language and Sexuality} 2 (2013), 40-69.


\textsuperscript{59} Raun, “Screen-births,”119.

contrast to the more impromptu style of the trans vlogs featured in the previously mentioned studies. Vivienne notes, “In creating a Digital Story that is singular, brief and static, trans storytellers need to reconcile many different versions of personal history. . . . These renditions attempt congruence with past, present and unknown future articulations of identity and there is invariably much distillation of complexity required to arrive at a three minute ‘summary.’” Documenting transition poses unique challenges in aligning past(s), present, and future. Horak points to an additional temporal nuance of trans vlogs asserting “most transition videos operate according to a progressive temporality we might call ‘hormone time.’” Time begins with the first shot of testosterone or HRT pills (hormone replacement therapy) and is measured against that date, even years afterward.” Hormone time is described as linear and teleological, rendering it “at odds with ‘queer time,’ which has been theorized along postmodern lines as asynchronous, out of joint, and antifuture.” The centrality of hormones is significant particularly in the difference between focus of trans men’s and trans women’s videos. As Raun explains, “Trans men typically have a different relationship to ‘visibility’ than do trans women, as it is often easier for them to slide into mainstream society as recognizable men. This seems to partly explain why hormones play such a different role in trans men’s vlogs than in trans women’s vlogs.” The work of this thesis contributes to the need for more research specific to trans men.


63 Ibid., 580-1.

64 Raun, “Video Blogging,” 5.
Theoretical Framework – Rhetorical Queer Worldmaking

In their 1998 essay “Sex in Public,” Berlant and Warner introduce the concept of queer worldmaking as an alternative way of understanding queer culture. They write, “By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where ‘world’ like ‘public,’ differs from community or group because it necessarily introduces more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright.”65 Through this worldmaking project, Berlant and Warner emphasize the generative capacities of queerness: “We are trying to promote this world-making project, and a first step in doing so is to recognize that queer culture constitutes itself in many ways other than through the official publics of opinion culture and the state, or through the privatized forms normally associated with sexuality.”66 Sparked by Berlant and Warner’s work, queer worldmaking scholarship highlights three key characteristics of queerness: a focus on the everyday, an emphasis on relationality, and an orientation to possibility.

The constitutive work of queer worldmaking happens in everyday moments and mundane actions. Nothing is predetermined in the queer world. As Nakayama and Morris write, “It is not a strategic plan, organized by anyone, but a bottom-up engagement with the everyday.”67 This focus on the everyday leads to an embrace of messiness and contingency. Nakayama and Morris go on to say “Worldmaking is a messy enterprise driven by a vision of another world, another


66 Ibid.

way of living, but it requires engaging the contemporary situation with its historical legacies, varying interests and much more.”

Moreover, “Worldmaking is never ‘pure’ in the sense that it does not encounter competing interests. It is always engaged in multiple politics that force all of us to make important decisions in a messy world.”

The queer world that is envisioned is characterized by multiplicity, excess, and undefinability. Berlant and Warner describe the queer world as “a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.” This description extends the messiness and multiplicity of the current moment into the imagined queer world.

Queer worldmaking happens in and through queer relationships. Berlant and Warner’s original theory focuses on sexual and intimate relationships. They assert, “Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation.”

West et al. extend the scope beyond sexually intimate relationships, highlighting relationality as a key contribution of queer worldmaking. “The joining of ‘queer’ with ‘worldmaking,’” they argue, “redirects us to the creative capacities of individuals, together and alone, to forge relations that evade the complete capture of compulsory heteronormativities.”

Notably, for both Berlant and Warner

68 Ibid., vi-vii.

69 Ibid., vii.


71 Ibid.

and West et al., relationships are queer in so far as they are in excess of heteronormativity. West et al. further extend Berlant and Warner’s theory by examining the connecting capacities of the Internet through the video-sharing ‘It Gets Better’ project. In this context, “queer worldmaking can be understood as the rhetorical relay of memory reactivated in the present to create lines of identification between those who may otherwise understand themselves as separated by space, time, and age.”73 The excess tied to queerness in this case is spatial, temporal, and generational distance. In sum, relationships function in queer worlds to bring people together in ways that defy heteronormativity, as it is most broadly understood.

Finally, queer worldmaking seeks to enact that which is possible. Muñoz links this sense of possibility to the relationality of queerness. He identifies queerness within a worldmaking project as “a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality.”74 The self-knowing and relationality of Muñoz’s trifecta are both sparked by queer possibility and ways to enact that sense of possibility in the here and now. Possibility further ties worldmaking to Muñoz’s theorization of queer utopia. “Utopia,” Muñoz writes, “is always about the not-quite-here or the notion that something is missing. Queer cultural production is both an acknowledgment of the lack that is endemic to any heteronormative rendering of the world and a building, a ‘world making,’ in the face of that lack.”75 The generative queerness in response to the gaps of heteronormativity highlights the transformative potential of worldmaking. Further, this generative capacity brings with it a sense of hope. As West et al. suggest, “worldmaking

73 Ibid.


75 José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 118.
possibilities engender a now and a future with promise and hope that must not be discarded as always already hetero- and homonormative.”76 Thus, queer worldmaking is a project of profound optimism.

The Rhetoricity of Worldmaking

Queer worldmaking scholarship is strongly interdisciplinary, but rhetoricians are poised to make unique contributions when we understand rhetoric, at least in part, as a worldmaking project. To support this conjecture, I draw on two strands of rhetorical scholarship: the constitutive rhetoric of the ideological turn and the Sophistic rhetoric of possibility.

Constitutive Rhetoric and the Ideological Turn

Queer worldmaking relies on an embrace of the generative potential of queerness; this is mirrored in the turn to rhetoric as constitutive. Charland introduced constitutive rhetoric as a way to account for the ways that rhetoric can constitute the subjects it appears to address. He asserts, “A rhetoric to Athenians in praise of Athens would be relatively insignificant compared to a rhetoric that constitutes Athenians as such.”77 As such, constitutive rhetoric moves rhetoric away from representation or even identification towards something that is generative, material in a way. This materiality is concretized as Charland links constitutive rhetoric to ideology. “Ideology,” he writes, “is material because subjects enact their ideology and reconstitute their material world in its image. Constitutive rhetorics are ideological not merely because they

76 West et al., “Queer Worldmaking in the ‘It Gets Better’ Campaign,” 58.

provide individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience, but because they insert ‘narratized’ subjects-as-agents into the world.” 78 This move to ideology extends the significance of constitutive rhetoric beyond subjectivity toward the notion of worldmaking. To this end, DeLuca defines constitutive rhetoric as “the mobilization of signs, images, and discourses for the articulation of ideologies, consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures.” 79 In this way, constitutive rhetoric highlights the worldmaking potential of rhetoric and the key roles of signs, images, and discourses in the process of worldmaking.

Building on the connection between constitutive rhetoric and ideology, McKerrow’s critical rhetoric exposes lines of critique fundamental to a critical project of worldmaking. McKerrow’s critical rhetoric combines two lines of critique: the critique of domination and the critique of freedom. Taken together, the aim is “to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change.” 80

Worldmaking, at its essence, is about social change. It is imagining and enacting a social world other than what is currently experienced. For McKerrow, social change occurs in opposition to ideology. This resonates with West et al.’s definition of queer worldmaking as “practices and relationships that contest the logics of compulsory heteronormativities.” 81 In particular, using a Foucauldian understanding of power as productive, McKerrow’s critique of freedom moves

78 Ibid., 143.


toward the generative possibilities of critique. He argues, “The critic is in a position to posit the possibilities of freedom. Recharacterization of the images changes the power relations and recreates the new ‘normal’ order. In this interaction, ‘truth’ is that which is supplanted by a newly articulated version that is accepted as a basis for the revised social relation. Once instantiated anew in social relations, the critique continues.”\(^\text{82}\) While McKerrow’s ultimate call for a state of permanent critique falls short of a worldmaking project, the critiques of domination and freedom are useful in identifying the ideological structures that both constrain and inspire the enactment of alternative social worlds.

In their response to McKerrow’s call for permanent critique, Ono and Sloop move one step closer to a worldmaking project, particularly focused on the generative potential of the act of criticism. Ono and Sloop call for an embrace of telos as an antidote to McKerrow’s permanent criticism. This embrace of telos would mean that “those who adhere to the structural views on knowledge and discourse and those who are committed to critical rhetoric must demand of themselves, at the moment of placing pen to paper, that they relinquish skepticism and advance their argument for that moment as if the direction chosen by the critic (i.e., a telos) were Truth with a capital ‘T.’ Upon lifting pen, however, the critic must relinquish this ‘Truth’ in favor of a skepticism, a critique of freedom.”\(^\text{83}\) This telos for Ono and Sloop is tied to the generative possibilities of critique, but must be balanced by a return to skepticism. Skepticism is paused, not abandoned. It is thus through the process—the cycle of telos and skepticism—that critique becomes generative.

\(^{82}\) McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” 100.

Ono and Sloop’s process of criticism provides a productive model for critiquing worldmaking. No project of queer worldmaking can singularly defy all forms of normativity. As such, a state of permanent critique would overlook the resistive and transformative work that is accomplished. Ono and Sloop call to embrace telos resonates with West’s call for queer rhetoricians to stop judging texts and practices against an overly simplistic, binary understanding of queerness and instead to judge “by the rhetor’s ability to productively play the norms against one another and disrupt, even if only temporarily, their normative and normalizing authority.”

Such an approach sets up the way “rhetorical criticism, by virtue of its emphasis on the particular, is suited uniquely for guarding against the tyranny of the theoretical and making valuable contributions to queer worldmaking.” Both Ono and Sloop and West, in their understandings of what makes for good rhetorical criticism, bracket the ideal and the universal, instead focusing on the situated and contingent. This allows the critic to say what is rather than is not accomplished. Queer worldmaking, as West suggests, benefits from this perspective. In sum, critical rhetoric’s contribution to queer worldmaking is two-fold. First the “making” of worldmaking can be accomplished through rhetoric. And second, rhetorical criticism is able to critically engage with that “making” through a focus on the situated and contingent without losing sight of the enabling and constraining ideologies.

**Sophistic Rhetoric of Possibility**

As discussed previously, possibility is central to the work of queer worldmaking. Poulakos’ work on Sophistic rhetoric shows rhetoric to work primarily in the realm of

---

84 West, “Queer Generosities,” 540.

85 Ibid.
possibility. He presents a Sophistic definition of rhetoric as “the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible.”

This definition places the temporality of rhetoric between present and future. For, “unlike the actual, the possible is not a given which can be known or verified; it exists in the future as something incomplete and dormant, something awaiting the proper conditions to be realized.”

Crucially, the possible is distinct from fantasy. Fantasy is farther beyond reach. By contrast, “The possible is an aspect of non-actuality claiming that, given the proper chance, it can turn into something actual. And even though it opposes the actual, it always seeks to become actualized.” Similarly, queer worldmaking reaches beyond what Muñoz calls “the quagmire of the present,” but always with the hope of actualizing a world more hospitable for queer people.

The Sophist’s rhetoric of possibility emerges from the inadequacy and incompleteness of the present world. Poulakos writes, “[The Sophist’s] is a constantly changing world, full of ambiguity and uncertainty, always lacking, never complete.” Moreover, “the Sophists tend to look at the world not as it is but as it is not. Accordingly, they venture into the sphere of possibility searching for that which is not yet but which can be; therefore, we can say that their rhetoric aims at creating possibilities opening what is closed, undoing what is done.”

---


87 Ibid., 44-5.

88 Ibid., 45.

89 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.


91 Ibid.
rhetoric of possibility is a response to a lack. In the context of queer worldmaking, that lack stems from hetero- and cisnormativities. Ultimately, an emphasis on possibility “opens new horizons and advocates their pursuit, thus giving man [sic] the chance to venture finding what he lacks.” Through Poulakos’ articulation of a Sophistic rhetoric of possibility, we can see queer rhetors as neo-Sophists, in a way. Queer worldmaking is the specific rhetoric of possibilities that emerges in response to limitations imposed on the present by hetero- and cisnormativities.

Chapter Preview

The first chapter deals with questions of temporality. Building on theories of queer temporality, this chapter suggests that trans men’s YouTube transition channels represent a complex temporality of transition. The way trans men mark time in relation to transition combined with the archival affordances of YouTube disrupt a linear temporal understanding of transition. As opposed to a linear temporality, a complex temporality rejects a teleological nature of transition as moving towards the end goal of passing. By embracing this complexity, temporality can be a modality of queer worldmaking outside a normative understanding of transition.

The second chapter examines how YouTube allows for trans men to be intelligible as trans men. Whereas in dominant publics, trans men can only be understood in relationship to cisgender men, the counterpublic nature of the transmasculine YouTube community provides a setting for “trans man” to be an intelligible subjectivity on its own. Drawing on Butler’s work on norms and intelligibility, this chapter traces the discourses and practices that trans men engage in via YouTube that constitute norms of the transmasculine subject. This chapter closes by

---

92 Ibid., 224.
examining the exclusions that are (re)inscribed through these norms, demonstrating the worldmaking potential and limitations of an intelligible transmasculine subject.

The final chapter engages with what I am calling the *ethos* of care of the transmasculine YouTube community. The chapter first traces specific ways that trans men care for one another, highlighting the essential role the YouTube community plays for trans men who are largely geographically disperse and under-resourced. The chapter then moves to a discussion built on the deep meaning of *ethos* as “dwelling place,” suggesting that YouTube is a caring place for trans men to dwell. The chapter closes with notes on the ways care and *ethos* both contribute to queer worldmaking projects.
CHAPTER II
OUT OF SYNC:
A COMPLEX TEMPORALITY OF TRANSITION

Trans men frequently describe their YouTube channels as existing to “document” their transition; documentation as a primary goal highlights the centrality of historicity for these YouTube channels. Rawson argues that digital trans culture—including but not limited to YouTube transition channels—“is a growing part of transgender lives and without including it in our histories we would be ignoring a major site of historical production.”¹ Further, as Raun asserts regarding trans presence on YouTube, “the ability to store and display chronicles of everyday trans life in a publicly accessible archive is especially significant, given that many queer histories have been lost, destroyed, censored, designated as ‘classified information’ and prohibited from view, or never collected in the first place.”² In other words, trans men’s transition channels are an intervention into who creates trans history. By extension, the significance of trans men’s transition channels is tied in important ways to temporality.

A key benefit of YouTube transition channels is that they are self-representational media. Halberstam in critiquing more mainstream representations of transgender subjects asserts, “Transgender history should allow the gender ambiguous to speak; too often, . . . narratives of transgender men attempt to rationalize rather than represent transgender lives in the glory of all

their contradictions.”

YouTube transition channels are full of contradiction not edited out by cisgender directors or producers. This contradiction is a generative starting point of analysis. Halberstam argues that mainstream transgender film demonstrates a paradox of visibility and temporality in that “whenever the transgender character is seen to be transgendered, then he/she is both failing to pass and threatening to expose a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present and future.” The “distinct temporal registers” that Halberstam references depend on a linear understanding of transition in which a trans person moves from one gender identity and sexed body to another. When transness is “exposed” this linearity cannot hold. Through self-representation and participation in transmasculine community on YouTube, trans men’s transness is always at the forefront. If in film instances of trans visibility momentarily rupture distinct temporal registers, then the constant trans visibility of trans men on YouTube prolongs that rupture such that the distinctions of past, present, and future can no longer be recognized as they once were.

This chapter is concerned with the affordances of YouTube and trans men’s particular uses of YouTube that enable the disruption of temporal registers. Building on queer temporality scholarship, this chapter articulates two understandings of the temporality of transition in relation to trans men’s YouTube transition channels. First, an asynchronous temporality highlights how physical transition marks time in alternative ways, but does not challenge the linearity of transition. Second, a complex temporality of transition accounts for temporal aspects of trans experiences that cannot be captured by a simple linear timeline, emphasizing the collapsing and integration of past, present, and future. Ultimately, I argue that adopting a complex temporal

---


4 Ibid., 77.
perspective to understand the role of time in trans men’s YouTube channels challenges the teleological nature of transition as a linear process.

The Stakes of Queering and Transing Time

Scholarship on queer temporality posits at a most foundational level that queerness is bound up with alternative conceptions and practices of time and that this queer temporality shapes queer lives and politics. Queer temporality is only one of many “alternative” temporalities. As Cipriani argues, “time can be seen as referring to a plurality of temporalities and to a multiplicity of forms of knowledge, whether consolidated or as yet to be acquired.” Queer temporality fits within this plural understanding of time while highlighting the particular stakes of embracing time’s alterity for queer subcultures, namely time as a modality for imagining and enacting life outside the bounds of heteronormativity.

The relationship between queerness and temporality is twofold; queerness constitutes and is constituted through alternative temporalities. This dual nature is perhaps most clearly captured in Halberstam’s theorization of queer time in opposition to “family time” when family time is understood as “the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing.” Queerness constitutes a temporality in opposition to family time insofar as “[q]ueer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and

---


6 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 5.
death.” And, queerness is constituted through a temporality opposed to family time such that “[i]f we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from a sexual identity.”

Rather than being strictly tied to sexual identity and practices, queerness constituted through alternative temporality is understood as a broader way of life.

Queer temporality can be understood within the project of what Warner and Berlant call queer worldmaking in that it is used as a tool both to expose temporal workings of heteronormativity and to imagine and enact a life beyond those constraints. Halberstam’s theorization of queer time exposes normative logics by showing “how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality.” Working from similar assumptions to Halberstam, Edelman’s work demonstrates the inventive potential of queer time, arguing for a queer rejection of a politics of hope and futurity because futurity and hope are tied to children and norms of reproduction. Queerness, Edelman asserts, “names the side of ‘not fighting for the children,’ the side of outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the value of reproductive futurism.” In response, Muñoz argues that Edelman’s call to abandon futurity because it is linked to children ignores the racial implications of such a statement; children of color do not have the same promise of the future as white children. In an alternative vision, Muñoz asserts, “It is important not to hand

7 Ibid., 2.
8 Ibid., 1.
9 Ibid., 4.
over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity. That dominant mode of futurity is indeed ‘winning,’ but that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up.”

The tension between Edelman’s and Muñoz’s temporally imagined queer worlds demonstrates that the experience and politics of queer temporality are not monolithic. And yet, they both demonstrate how time can be a modality through which we can bring worlds radically different than currently exist into being. The imaginative power of queer temporality renders it a powerful analytic of queer worldmaking.

A queer temporal perspective of transness suggests that to be trans is to be in some way out of sync. Halberstam uses the case of Brandon Teena, a trans man who was murdered in rural Nebraska, as a central example in theorizing queer temporality. Halberstam describes Teena as “literally and figuratively out of time and out of place.” In Halberstam’s account, Teena’s particular asynchrony is tied to being a “passing man” in a rural setting. The theme of transness being out of sync can be seen in broader theorizations of trans in addition to specific case studies. This theme is latent in Stryker, Currah, and Moore’s theory of “transing” as a more capacious way to discuss trans phenomena. They define transing as “a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces. It is a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly.”

---


12 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 16.

on assembly and reassembly point to a latent temporal element of transness. (Re)assembly is not a linear process and therefore disrupts the linear temporal connotation of gender transition. Stryker, Currah, and Moore continue this disruption of linear temporality through a recasting of trans spatiality using the metaphor of horizontal and vertical axes:

It’s common, for example, to think of ‘trans-’ in ‘transgender’ as moving horizontally between two established gendered spaces, ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ or as a spectrum, or archipelago, that occupies the space between the two. . . But what if we think instead of ‘trans-’ along a vertical axis, one that moves between the concrete biomateriality of individual living bodies and the biopolitical realm of aggregate populations that serve as resource for sovereign power?14

The vertical axis between the biomateriality of the individual and the biopolitical of populations also interrupts the one-way, linear temporality implied by the horizontal axis. The vertical axis also suggests the stakes of queering—or transing—time. To attend to the temporality of transness is to intervene in how we conceptualize transition, which has implications at both the individual and collective levels.

The Asynchrony of Testosterone

Although trans men’s YouTube transition channels include discussions of a variety of trans-related topics, as Raun observes, “the trans male vlogs show a significant emphasis on, even preoccupation with, testosterone.”15 The significant concern with testosterone suggests that the temporality of testosterone bears significant influence on transition channels. Testosterone constitutes an asynchronous temporality—an alternative way of marking time—in trans men’s channels. This asynchronous temporality is manifested in several ways.

14 Ibid., 13–4.

15 Raun, “Archiving the Wonders of Testosterone,” 704.
First, testosterone hormone replacement therapy is frequently described as “second puberty.” Puberty, complete with voice cracks and patchy facial fuzz, at the age of—for example—23 is a noticeable and embodied asynchrony. Furthermore, puberty is normatively associated with adolescence. Halberstam contends that one manifestation of queer temporality is a “stretched-out adolescence,” asserting that such a stretched-out adolescence “challenges the conventional binary formulation of a life divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood: this life narrative charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction.” Here, Halberstam is addressing patterns of queer life that displace marriage and reproduction as the markers of entry to adulthood, resulting in an elongated social adolescence. By contrast, the stretched-out—or perhaps more accurately, duplicated—adolescence produced through testosterone queers the expected biological timeline. That is to say, testosterone causes embodied changes to happen out of sync with a normative expectations of bodily development.

A second form of testosterone-related asynchrony is the expansion and contraction of sensations of time. Frequently around anniversaries of being on testosterone, a trans man will share with his YouTube audience a reflection about his sensation or perception of time on testosterone. For example, after being on testosterone for three years, James joked “time flies when you are taking hormones.” Though said in jest, this comment reflects an outlook shared by many of the trans men on YouTube. After six months on testosterone, Michael shared “I can’t believe I already made it to six months. That seemed like an entire lifetime away six months

---

16 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 153.
ago.” Michael’s reflection gestures to the way this temporal sensation changes; six months looking back is not the same as six months looking forward. Expressing the expansion and contraction of time is certainly not unique to trans men. Rather, what is notable about these comments is that testosterone is the primary force that enables a sensation of time that is out of sync with the steadiness and predictability of clock- or calendar-based time.

Testosterone marks time tied to bodily development, and this way of marking time is central to how trans men structure their YouTube transition channels. Horak claims, “Most transition videos operate according to a progressive temporality we might call ‘hormone time.’ Time begins with the first shot of testosterone or HRT pills (hormone replacement therapy) and is measured against that date, even years afterward.” Relatedly, Raun suggests that the YouTube channels constitute “screen-births.” Trans men on YouTube frequently take up this birth metaphor explicitly. Raúl and James both use this metaphor in the first video after their first shot of testosterone. James also titled a video marking one year on testosterone “one year old – changes since I was born :].” This metaphor is simultaneously intriguing as it is troubling: intriguing in that it shows just how crucial testosterone is in marking many trans men’s life cycles, and troubling in that it seemingly erases the past. Despite this move to separate out and erase the pre-testosterone self through the birth metaphor, trans men on YouTube do engage with the past in a variety of ways. I will take this up in much greater detail in discussing the complex

---

17 In the spirit of non-linearity and complex temporality, I do not organize examples in this chapter chronologically.


temporality of transition, but for the moment, it is worth noting the role of testosterone in marking time as part of “transgender lives in the glory of all their contradictions.”

All five of the YouTube channels focused on in this analysis mark their channels through “hormone time” by titling their videos with how long they have been on testosterone and/or stating that information at the beginning of the video. Channel creators do this to greater and lesser degrees with some structuring every video in this way and some only providing this information in some videos. Melvin began every video for the first year of his transition by stating how many days he had been on testosterone. He provided the following rationale for why he did this:

I start my videos with ‘I have been on T for such and such days’ not because I am glorifying the role testosterone is playing in my transition, it is definitely not the biggest part, but I know other guys out there who are curious about what changes happen when, particularly with voice, and I know that I looked for that when I started my transition so that is why I included how long I have been on T.

Through this rationale, Melvin reframes temporality in terms of community. As Peters asserts, “Timekeeping is always a question of identity and affiliation.” Engaging with testosterone as a marker of time is both a practice of transmasculine identity and of transmasculine community affiliation.

Hormone time is asynchronous in that it marks a uniquely transmasculine timeline of bodily development. Like Halberstam’s understanding of queer time in opposition to family time, hormone time can be understood in opposition to a cis-normative timeline of bodily development (i.e. birth, puberty, and physical maturation all in line with what is expected based

---

20 Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 56.

on sex designated at—or prior to—birth). And yet, hormone time mirrors a key element of this cis-normative timeline: linearity. As Horak notes, “Hormone time is linear and teleological, directed toward the end of living full time in the desired gender.” Once the “rebirth” occurs and “second puberty” is induced, the same linearity of a cis-normative timeline is expected.

The linearity of hormone time changes how hormone time can be understood as queer. Horak asserts that hormone time is necessarily not a form of queer temporality:

While experiences of transition can ‘enfold’ queer and other temporalities (Carter 2013), and trans lives and artworks can generate queer times and places (Halberstam 2005), hormone time itself is not queer. Rather, it appropriates the ‘straight’ temporality of progress for radical ends—proving that trans self-determination is not only possible but viable and even joyful. Unlike ‘straight’ time, the goal is not children or the future of the nation but expansive trans subjects and communities.

Horak points to the positive and outcomes of appropriating a “straight” temporality, going on to state “criticizing hormone time for not being ‘queer’ enough misses the life-saving work that these vlogs do.” This kind of generous reading does much to recuperate the power of practices that retain some normative elements. That being said, Horak’s assertion that hormone time is the temporal logic of YouTube transition channels in conjunction with her assertion that hormone time cannot be queer limits our understanding of the queering—or transing—power of the temporality of YouTube transition channels.

Hormone time in particular, and the asynchrony of testosterone more broadly, are only two strands of a much more complicated temporal web. Asynchrony happens outside of the logics of normative temporality, but once outside those logics, it can still have linearity. Recognizing the linear elements of YouTube transition channels is important especially in order

---

22 Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 580.

23 Ibid., 581.

24 Ibid.
to see how testosterone influences their temporality. However, there are several dangers to reading the linear asynchrony as the only temporal element of trans men’s YouTube transition channels. First, a linear approach to transition implies that a particular embodiment is always the end goal of transition. It is then too easy to create a hierarchy in which cisgender men are on the top, followed by trans men who have achieved an embodiment that most closely mimics a cisgender man. Succumbing to the linear temporality of transition then becomes one of catching up to cisgender men.

A Complex Temporality of Transition

In contrast to asynchrony, a complex temporality includes all of the messiness of interactions between temporal categories of past, present, and future and contradictory temporal logics that are simultaneously occurring. Asynchrony is one element of a complex temporality in case of YouTube transition channels, but it is not the only element. I read the five trans men’s YouTube transition channels—frequently against the grain—to highlight a complex temporality as a way to open up embodied temporal possibilities that are closed off by a purely linear reading, namely the possibilities for past, present, and future to intertwine in generative ways.

Deleuze’s engagement with the philosophy of Bergson illuminates the complex relationship of past and present through the concept of duration. Deleuze asserts, “Bergsonian duration is, in the final analysis, defined less by succession than by coexistence.” The framing of coexistence rather than succession necessitates a non-linear temporal relationship. The present does not follow the past. Rather, “the ordinary determinations are reversed: of the

present, we must say at every instant that it ‘was’ and of the past, that it ‘is,’ that it is eternally, for all time.”\textsuperscript{26} This temporal reversal is the heart of Deleuze’s take on Bergson. The past is not something that can be moved on from. Moreover, “the past would never be constituted if it did not coexist with the present whose past it is.”\textsuperscript{27} Past and present are thus not in a passive sequence, but an active entanglement. YouTube enables particular kinds of documentation that emphasize the entanglement of personal past, present, and ultimately future.

**Speaking the Present Past**

Trans men will frequently reflect in their videos on how their past influences their present. These reflections most directly and explicitly show the past as an active part of the present. For example, marking eleven months on testosterone, Michael recalled thinking that he would never go on testosterone. He would watch other trans men post their one-year on testosterone videos on YouTube and thinking that it was an eternity away. This reflection in many ways shows the linearity of testosterone marking time, but referencing his past thinking that testosterone was always out of reach brings that feeling into the present as he rapidly approaches the milestone he used to think he would only see others reach. Deleuze says on recalling, “it does not actualize this recollection without adapting it to the requirements of the present; it makes it into something of the present.”\textsuperscript{28} In this case, feelings about testosterone cannot be fully understood by only looking at the most immediately present feeling. Michael’s recollection of the seeming impossibility of testosterone not only shapes the present inevitability

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 55.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 58.
of his reaching the one-year on testosterone milestone, but the way that past impossibility gets recalled and evoked is shaped by the present inevitability.

In the same video, Michael described his present embodiment saying, “It is like I am the happy kid I used to be before I realized I was stuck in the wrong body.” Once again, the invocation of past embodiment shapes and is shaped by present embodiment. This reflection adds another circular layer to the temporality in that he is invoking two pasts—one of the “happy kid,” which he now more closely identifies with, and another of the “wrong body.” Rather than see this as a linear sequence in which the happy kid is followed by the wrong body is followed by the happy present self, Deleuze’s work invites a reading in which all three coexist through the relationship of the past(s) to the present. The recollection of the “happy kid” and the “wrong body” are adapted to the present happy self, and the “happy kid” and the “wrong body” relate to each other to shape the present happy self.

The specific affordances of YouTube documentation further enable trans men to speak into the mixing of the past and present. Because older videos are stored on the YouTube platform, both viewers and the channel creator can go back and rewatch old videos. Several trans men on YouTube are reflexive of this in some of their videos. For example, in a video marking one year on testosterone, James said, “It is nice doing this because I can see myself from a long time ago and see how high my voice was and I totally thought it was a lot deeper than that, but it wasn’t.” Alternatively, Raúl reflected on various changes he had experienced being on testosterone and invited his audience to go back through his old videos in order to witness the changes. The basic premise of YouTube storing old videos enables the past to be evoked more concretely than by the channel creator sharing a memory. This also bridges to the
ways in which the audio-visual nature of YouTube allows for channel creators and audience members to see the complex temporality of transition.

**Seeing the Present Past**

Many trans men on YouTube, in order to mark an anniversary of transition such as one year on testosterone, will create compilation videos. These compilation videos feature either still images or clips from previous videos in more or less chronological order. Some compilation videos start with images or clips from when the channel creator first started testosterone and others begin earlier, often with childhood photos. These videos are polysemic in that they invite multiple readings.

One reading of the compilation videos is very linear. Horak takes up a linear reading in asserting that these compilation videos are exemplary of hormone time. Horak argues, “Unlike video diaries, which can be viewed in any order, in slideshows the author controls the pacing and order of time unfolding. Time only ever moves forward and the subject only ever becomes more and more his or her ‘true self.’”

For Horak, compilation videos show the linear progression of time from past to present.

Horak’s argument is limited by analyzing compilation videos in isolation from the rest of the channel. Horak views compilation videos and video diaries, which involve the channel creator reflecting on transition and daily life while speaking directly into the camera, as separate genres that warrant separate analysis. For this analysis, I looked at five channels in their entirety. Some individual channels included both video diaries and compilation videos. In fact, no individual channel was made up exclusively of compilation videos. Thus, my understanding of

---

29 Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 580.
the temporality of compilation videos is based not only on them as individual videos but also in the context of the entire channel.

Contextualizing compilation videos as part of larger transition channels leads to an alternative reading of the compilation videos as reinscribing the past as part of the present. Deleuze suggests, “Not only does the past coexist with the present that has been, but, as it preserves itself in itself (while the present passes), it is the whole, integral past; it is all our past, which coexists with each present.” Compilation videos, as condensed representations of an integral past crystalize this idea. Considering the order in which videos are uploaded, compilation videos interrupt the sequential linearity of the channel as a whole. The temporal entanglement is perhaps best described in the words James spoke as a poetic voiceover at the beginning of one of his compilation videos: “One of the most important things I have discovered in my life is that where I was and where I am going is inevitably where I will be found.”

**Turn to Futurity**

Futurity has been a key tension of queer temporality. Edelman argues that queerness and futurity are fundamentally at odds, stating, “Far from partaking of this narrative movement toward a viable political future, far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning’s eventual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form.” In direct contrast, Muñoz posits, “The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that

---


allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.”32 As noted earlier, Halberstam similarly connects queerness and futurity with the assertion that “[q]ueer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience.”33 What is alternative about queer temporality, thus, is not only the set of markers used to measure a lifetime. It is also the way the future is constituted otherwise through these markers. The connection between present and future that both Muñoz and Halberstam gesture to serves as a useful starting point for understanding how trans men on YouTube not only bridge past and present, but ultimately link to the future.

YouTube transition channels, understood as archives, demonstrate how the future can be entangled with—not just linked to—the present and past. Derrida’s work on archives presents the archive as a site of more entangled relationships between past, present, and future. Derrida writes, “As much as and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should call into question the coming of the future.”34 YouTube transition channels are unique as archives in that a key part of what is being “archived” is trans embodiment. As Rawson notes, “transgender phenomena prove quite challenging to the archive. The very site of transgender experience—the body—cannot be captured by the historical fragments collected in an archive because of the irreducible distance between historical objects and the lives they come to


33 Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 2.

The challenge of archiving trans experience reflects the gap Taylor identifies between the archive—“supposedly enduring materials”—and the repertoire—“embodied practice/knowledge.” YouTube transition channels are unique in the way they hold elements of both the archive and the repertoire. Raun describes trans YouTube channels as “encompass[ing] a ‘living’ archive of trans corporeality and identity.” Through a Derridean lens, YouTube transition channels engage with questions of future embodiment through documenting and archiving present and past embodiments.

This connection between past, present, and future embodiment is best demonstrated through three examples. In each example, the channel creator imagines a future embodiment, but each to a different effect on the present. First, Kyle explained that he had not experienced a lot of body dysphoria (feelings of discomfort that arise from a disconnect between sexed body and gender identity) “just because I know it is within my power to change how my body looks, so even if I had a smidgen of dysphoria, I would just focus on what I can do for myself in the future with T and surgery and all that jazz.” Here, Kyle’s invocation of future embodiment suggests a present embodied agency, even if that agency is suspended to a degree. Second, shortly before having top surgery, Michael went into a store that sold board shorts. He reflected that that was the moment in which he realized the significance of top surgery because, “ya know, in a couple months I am going to come in here and buy myself some new board shorts


37 Raun, “Archiving the Wonders of Testosterone,” 702.

38 “Top surgery” is how trans men refer to chest masculinization surgery.
and that’s all I’m going to have to buy. Not going to have to worry about matching anything to it.” This example highlights the everydayness of embodiment. Michael is not only imagining a distinct change in his physical body, but also the way that will affect the most mundane aspects of his life such as buying and wearing clothes. Both aspects shape how he approaches the immediate present moment in the store. Finally, before starting any aspect of medical transition, Kyle shared, “I cannot wait to start T. I cannot wait to get top surgery. I cannot wait to look in the mirror and meet myself for the first time. That will be the day for the history books, well, my history books anyways.” This example adds the layer of historicity. Kyle is imagining a future history in the present moment. This act of projection allows Kyle to capture and convey the significance of the yet to come in a way that is still tangible in the present through and understanding of the weight of history.

Each turn to futurity can also be understood as an articulation of an embodied fantasy. Butler understands gender fantasy and possibility as crucial for those whose subjectivity is not fully recognized. “Fantasy,” Butler claims, “is not the opposite of ‘reality’; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside.”39 Here, what Butler calls “reality” can also be understood as the present moment. Fantasy is directly tied to a complex temporality of the past, present, and future. Future does not oppose the present or the past, but is a necessary constitutive counterpoint. Butler elaborates on the power of fantasy as “Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.”40 Embodying a complex temporality, as the trans men on YouTube


40 Ibid.
do when they gesture to a fantasized embodied future, constitutes that embodied future that is intimately bound to the present.

**Complex Temporality of Viewing**

Audiences view the videos of trans men’s transition channels. Some of the videos included in this analysis have been viewed tens of thousands of times. Others have been viewed fewer than fifty times. Regardless of how many times, they have all been viewed. Each time one of the videos is viewed, it punctuates a new, specific relationship to a particular present. Even if videos remain unedited between viewings and no videos are added to or removed from channels, each video and channel is and is not the same each time it is viewed. The relevance and significance of trans men’s YouTube channels and videos are thus always being constituted in a temporal relation.

As I viewed the videos included in this analysis, my own past, present, and future engaged with the temporality of each video. Discussing the way I interact with the temporality of the videos is not only to be accountable to my personal relationship to the project as researcher and critic but also to gesture to the temporal complexity added when these videos are viewed. Deleuze argues, “the past, it is true, seems to be caught between two presents: the old present that it once was and the actual present in relation to which it is now past.”\(^{41}\) When I watch a trans man’s video on YouTube, that video is caught between the present it once was and the present in which it is being watched, that is to say, my present. Halberstam contends, “The academic might be the archivist, a coarchivist, a full-fledged participant in the subcultural scene that the scholar writes about. But only rarely does the queer theorist stand wholly apart form the

\(^{41}\) Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 58.
subculture, examining it with an expert’s gaze.” My subjectivity is deeply enmeshed and implicated in writing about trans men on YouTube. I first watched trans men’s YouTube videos because I was starting testosterone, and I needed to learn how to self-inject. The video tutorials trans men had posted to YouTube lent expertise acquired through weeks, months, or years of self-injecting testosterone. The accumulation of their pasts coexisted with the moment of recording that has since become past, and, in the moment of my viewing, came to coexist with my pasts arriving at the then present moment of anticipating my first injection.

As I selected, (re)watched, coded, and analyzed the 419 videos for this project, the relation to my present was not usually as urgent and pressing as it was when I was watching the videos out of personal need. However, to ignore the presence of my present (and past and future) in the data would be to ignore a fundamental temporal component of the communal nature of trans men on YouTube. Moreover, the documenting affordances of YouTube enable viewing practices that add layers of complexity to the temporality of trans men on YouTube.

I chose to view channels in their entireties because I wanted to experience the “life course” of YouTube transition channel. This choice framed the project in terms of temporality from the start. I (re)watched and coded the videos that form the basis of this analysis primarily over the course of two months. This resulted in a significant condensing of time. For example, in two weeks I watched 140 videos from James’ channel spanning six years. For the initial watching and coding process, I chose to watch the videos from each channel in chronological order from oldest to newest. I could have easily chosen to do this differently. For example, when visiting a channel’s page with all of the uploaded videos, YouTube invites me to order the videos from oldest to newest, newest to oldest, or by most popular. The default setting is to

---

42 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 163.
order the videos from newest to oldest. I could have chosen to watch the videos “out of order,” but I chose not to. These methodological practices shaped how I experienced the temporality of each channel and of the genre of trans men’s YouTube transition channels as a whole.

**Conclusions**

A complex temporality embraces the messiness and contradictions of the coexistence of past, present, and future. Trans men on YouTube highlight the complexity of a complex temporality through tensions around linearity and non-linearity coexisting as temporal logics. YouTube, as a platform for audio-visual documentation, crystalizes these tensions in that the very documentation that allows the viewing of a sequential transformation also enables the past to reemerge, explicitly and implicitly, as an active part of the present. Additionally, the past and present do not merely march toward the future. Rather, futurity as an imagined state is enfolded into the past and present in that it allows a reach beyond the most current immediacy.

Trans embodiment is key to the complex temporality that emerges in trans men’s YouTube channels. This centrality of embodiment links back to Stryker, Currah, and Moore’s definition of transing as “a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and allows for their reassembly.” Stryker, Currah, and Moore’s definition emphasizes contingency and (re)assembly. These concepts are strengthened when understood in connection to the coexistence of past, present, and future. Contingency, by one reading, can be understood as solely existing in the present without guarantee for the past or future. However, what if the contingent was understood as the lurking of past and future, implicitly acting on and in the present? (Re)assembly functions similarly.

---

There is no guarantee that this is how the gendered, trans body has been or will be, and it is this very lack of certainty that shapes how we understand the present body. In a poetic voiceover of a video marking six years on testosterone, James says to his body, “I hope you are as proud of creating me as I am of creating you.” Transing happens in this temporal middle-space where bodies are shaped and reshaped, act and are acted upon.

The link between trans embodiment and temporality highlights that the complex temporality of transness is not merely an alternative; it is a counter-hegemonic. Hegemonic embodiment relies on a cis-normative alignment of gender and sex, and constructs a normative timeline of bodily development. Testosterone and other aspects of transition are ways for trans men to intervene in both cis-normative embodiment and a cis-normative timeline of bodily development.

Embracing a complex temporality that is linked to counter-hegemonic embodiment serves to disrupt the teleological nature of transition. Because the complex temporality of trans men on YouTube entangles the past, present, and future embodiment, it undermines that there can be a singular, embodied telos of transition. Such a telos would require distinct separation between past, present, and future embodiment. Embracing a complex temporality, transness is not in pursuit of cisness or cis-passing as a standard of gender purity. A complex temporality of transness, like other articulations of queer temporality do for queer subjects, allows trans subjects to imagine their lives according temporal logics other than cis-bodily development.

A limitation of focusing on trans men on YouTube is that the overwhelming majority of trans men on YouTube pursue medical transition, many with the explicit goal of “passing” as a cis man. As a result, testosterone is the most central and obvious mechanism of a complex temporality. This emphasis on physical and medical transition could be seen as undermining the
idea of a complex temporality of transition on YouTube. This view is apparent in Horak’s writing on hormone time. And yet, that view is limited because it does not recognize all of the ways that the YouTube platform enables past, present, and future to intertwine as trans men document their transition. The complex temporality of trans men on YouTube exemplifies one way that temporality can open up possibilities for trans people to resist a teleological narrative of transition that epitomizes cis standards of gender and embodiment. Further attention is needed to understand the multitude of complex temporalities that trans people engage in for this and other resistive ends. Trans experiences cannot be fully understood based on logics built from cis experiences; a complex temporality of transness represents one intervention into detaching transness from cis standards.
CHAPTER III

“BEING SEEN FOR WHO I AM”:
TRANSMasculINE INTELLIGIBILITY

To find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human.

--Judith Butler, Undoing Gender, p. 218

In the framework of mainstream culture, trans men can only be understood in relation to cisgender men. Even affirming discourses such as “trans men are real men” imply that the unmarked cisgender man is the standard for comparison. This mainstream, normative framework centers cisgender experiences of manhood. By contrast, the transmasculine YouTube community centers trans experiences of manhood. This centering of transness is a necessary first step for trans men to become recognizable not despite of, but through their transness.

I will argue that trans men on YouTube collectively constitute transmasculinity as an intelligible subjectivity; this constitution is the work of queer worldmaking, as defined by Berlant and Warner, and can only be accomplished in the context of transmasculine YouTube as a counterpublic. Drawing on Butler’s work, intelligibility is a uniquely social form of recognition. As opposed to a recognition based on individual schemas, intelligibility is based in socially recognized norms. This connection leads to the necessity of counterpublics to enable alternative intelligibilities. Counterpublics typically do not (re)produce the same norms as dominant publics. In this case, the transmasculine YouTube community does not (re)produce the same norms of gender and, more specifically, masculinity; the centering of trans men is key to the establishment of alternative norms. The transmasculine YouTube counterpublic imagines and enacts a queerer world through the intelligibility of trans men.
A queer worldmaking perspective brings into focus questions of norms, normativity, and standards of queerness. In calling for a more generous engagement with queer texts and practices, West suggests rhetorical critics emphasize how those texts and practices queer norms and normativity, rather than holding queer rhetors to unattainable standards of queerness that entirely reject all forms of normativity. In so doing, West argues “rhetorical criticism, by virtue of its emphasis on the particular, is suited uniquely for guarding against the tyranny of the theoretical and making valuable contributions to queer worldmaking.”¹ Trans men on YouTube are not exemplars of queer purity, rejecting all semblance of normativity. Rather, the way trans men on YouTube queer norms of gender and masculinity is exemplary of queer worldmaking.

**Counterpublics, Queer Worldmaking, and the Internet**

Trans men on YouTube constitute a counterpublic. Warner conceptualizes a counterpublic as a type of public in that, like other publics, it “comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers.”² By the nature of YouTube videos’ circulation, trans men on YouTube address indefinite strangers; anyone with an Internet connection can access transition channels. However, “counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody. They are social marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person that would participate in this kind of talk, or be present in this kind of scene.”³ The strangers that are addressed by trans men on

---


³ Ibid.
YouTube are largely presumed to be trans men. This is shown through a variety of discourse practices such as trans men addressing their audience as “brothers” or not defining transmasculine-specific vocabulary and experiences that other trans men would presumably know and others would likely need more explanation to understand. These discourse practices are exemplary of the alternative discourse practices and norms that Asen argues mark “the ‘counter’ of counterpublic.”

Counterpublics do more than mark their publicity as subordinate; they enable certain discursive actions within their boundaries and with broader publics. Fraser defines subaltern counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” Trans men on YouTube invent and circulate discourses of transmasculinity and manhood that run counter to normative discourses. These counterdiscourses form the basis of the reformulation of gender intelligibility and subjectivity. Moving from internal to external functions, Chávez argues that counterpublic enclaves aim “to invent rhetorical strategies to publicly challenge oppressive rhetoric or to create new imaginaries for the groups and issues they represent.” The transmasculine subject that emerges through YouTube may not be an explicit or direct challenge to normative conceptions of

---


gender, but the intelligibility of transmasculinity in the counterpublic enclave of YouTube enables a new imaginary of how trans men can be recognized.

In constructing this new imaginary, the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic is steeped in potentiality. Rhetoric dwells in the realm of the possible. As articulated in Poulakas’ sophistic definition, “Rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible.”

The transmasculine YouTube counterpublic allows trans men to make rhetorical moves that work collectively to constitute the intelligibility of trans men. This subjectivity largely lives in the realm of possibility, as it is not yet fully realizable within dominant publics, but this does not diminish its significance. Rather, the intelligibility of transmasculinity that emerges on YouTube allows trans men to imagine their own subjectivity otherwise, a necessary first step to toward broader recognizability.

The work of imagining an intelligible transmasculine subjectivity is the work of queer worldmaking. Warner contends that all publics engage in worldmaking in that “all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, and it must attempt to realize that world through address.”

Regarding queerness in particular, Berlant and Warner call for attention to queer culture as a “worldmaking project,” asserting the need “to recognize that queer culture constitutes itself in many ways other than through the official publics of opinion culture and the state, or through the privatized forms normally associated with sexuality.” To this end, counterpublic spaces—like the transmasculine

---


8 Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 422.

YouTube counterpublic—are key sites of generating queer culture. Trans men on YouTube characterize and attempt to realize a world that centers trans men as wholly intelligible subjects. Rhetorical scholars have taken up Berlant and Warner’s call for attention to queer worldmaking, bringing rhetorical perspectives on contingency, publicness, and influence to bear on what it means to constitute queer worlds. Mediated texts have been particularly fruitful for rhetorical scholars to engage with the influential component of queer worldmaking. Pearson and Lozano-Reich, for example, read the television show, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy as a civilizing project in order to “understand the role that civilizing rhetorics and, in particular, uncivil tongues play in the cultivation of queer worlds.”\(^1\)

In examining man-on-man kissing, such as in the film Dude, Where’s My Car, Morris and Sloop argue for “a ‘world making project’ in which mass-mediated representations articulate sexuality differently, queering readings of all forms of intimacy and their public connections.”\(^1\) Both Pearson and Lozano-Reich’s and Morris and Sloop’s analyses suggest that a queer worldmaking perspective highlights the queering potential of mediated mainstream representation by reading mainstream representations through queer logics rather than assimilationist logics. Further, Morris and Sloop suggest the rhetorical nature of a queer worldmaking project, saying, “In order to achieve a queer world, a ‘critical visual mass’ of same-sex public kissing must exist, a rhetorical project that influences the meanings articulated by those acts.”\(^1\)

Mediation allows for the circulation of this


\(^1\) Ibid.
critical mass, which enables queer worldmaking projects to yield broader influence by extending queer culture.

While the queer worldmaking work of television and film extends the queering influences of such projects, the participatory dimensions of this work are limited; the Internet provides an alternative platform for increased potential for participation. Howard theorizes participatory media enabled by the Internet as “a vernacular web of communication performance that hybridizes the institutional and noninstitutional.”\(^\text{13}\) Further, Howard argues, these participatory media “hybridize multiple agencies in the texts that they produce. Rejecting reified notions of pure or authentic vernacular, participation in this web can be seen to open up new venues for transformative public discourse.”\(^\text{14}\) Although Howard is not specifically discussing the worldmaking potential of participatory media, his theorization of the vernacular web resonates with the call of queer worldmaking to recognize sites constituting queer culture other than official publics of the state. Additionally, Howard’s emphasis on the rejection of a pure vernacular resonates with West’s urging of queer rhetorical critics to reject standards of queer purity.

Given the possibilities of the vernacular web, the Internet is a site particularly ripe for rhetorical inquires of queer worldmaking. In their examination of the “It Gets Better” campaign, West et al. define queer worldmaking as “practices and relationships that contest the logics of compulsory heteronormativities.”\(^\text{15}\) They suggest the “It Gets Better” campaign functions “as


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

the rhetorical relay of memory reactivated in the present to create lines of identification between those who may otherwise understand themselves as separated by space, time, and age.”

These connections transcend the temporal constraints of face-to-face interaction, and thus highlight one of the unique ways that the Internet, especially through Internet-based video sharing platforms such as YouTube, can foster queer worldmaking.

Rawson takes up questions of how trans people, specifically, engage with the Internet in queer worldmaking projects. Rawson characterizes three worlds constituted through trans engagement with the Internet: a world where trans lives count, a world where everyone makes history, and a world of shared experience. Of particular interest here is Rawson’s last world in which he examines trans people documenting their lives on YouTube as one exemplar. Trans people using Internet platforms such as YouTube, Rawson asserts, “create a world where trans people can share their experiences, recognize their shared experiences, and contribute to the development of community knowledges.” In a world where trans people are ostracized and have their experiences delegitimized, such acts of community and recognition are radical and political acts. As Rawson demonstrates, trans use of YouTube is exemplary of how participatory media of the Internet can constitute counterpublic spaces that do the work of queer worldmaking.

16 Ibid., 57.


18 Ibid., 56.
Gender Intelligibility

Drawing from a Butlerian perspective, intelligibility is a form of a recognition that is bound up in social norms. According to Butler, “‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”\(^{19}\) Trans men disrupt this normative coherence between sex and gender. From this perspective, the idea of an intelligible transmasculine subject—that is a subject whose transness is recognizable as a part of his gendered subjectivity—is an impossibility. However, this definition relies exclusively on the social norms of mainstream culture. The transmasculine YouTube counterpublic constitutes alternative gender norms not reliant on sex-gender coherence. These alternative norms are the second key to constituting an intelligible transmasculine subjectivity.

Butler highlights the relationship between norms and recognition. “The norm,” Butler asserts, “governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social.”\(^{20}\) The implications of this “grid of legibility” are paramount because it is fundamentally linked to recognizable personhood. As Butler writes,

\begin{quote}
The very criterion by which we judge a person to be a gendered being, a criterion that posits coherent gender as a presupposition of humanness, is not only one which, justly or unjustly governs the recognizability of the human, but one that informs the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves at the level of feeling, desire, and the body, at moments before the mirror, in the moments before the window, in the times that one turns to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to medical and legal professionals to negotiate what may
\end{quote}


feel like the unrecognizability of one’s gender and, hence, the unrecognizability of one’s personhood.\(^{21}\)

While gender and personhood are not one in the same, their recognizability is fundamentally intertwined. In a world where a trans person’s gender is unrecognized or can only be recognized through medical and legal stigma, the recognition that occurs on YouTube makes it a space that validates trans men’s personhood. Such validation is essential. “To put it bluntly,” Horak asserts, “these videos save trans lives.”\(^{22}\)

Butler famously asserts that “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself.”\(^{23}\) Gender norms constitute gendered subjects in such a way that cisgender men are produced as the naturalized original that trans men imitate. Seemingly caught between illegibility and imitation, trans men’s subjectivity highlights the need to investigate the margin of the intelligible. The transmasculine YouTube counterpublic is an exemplar of this work of transforming gender intelligibility.

In theorizing gender intelligibility, Butler leaves open the possibility of alternative and subversive grids of legibility. The “persistence and proliferation” of gender identities that are illegible within dominant norms of intelligibility “provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility, and, hence to open up within the very terms of the matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder.”\(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 58.

\(^{22}\) Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 581.


\(^{24}\) Butler, Gender Trouble, 24.
realization of this possibility always exceeds the individual; the necessary proliferation of illegible gender identities cannot happen in isolation.

YouTube provides the space for trans men to connect, collectively constituting an alternative set of gender norms that determine intelligibility. Central to the theory of gender performativity is that one is constantly doing gender. “Moreover,” Butler asserts, “one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary.”25 The indefinite strangers of the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic are the imagined other. Butler argues, “The act of self-reporting and the act of self-observation takes place in relation to a certain audience, with a certain audience as the imagined recipient, before a certain audience for whom a verbal and visual picture of selfhood is being produced.”26 In this case, the audience is imagined as other trans men. This audience stands in stark contrast to the generalized imagined other of dominant publics, whose presumed naturalized cisness marks trans men as unintelligible subjects. Moreover, understanding each trans man’s construction of self on YouTube in relation to this imagined audience of trans men contextualizes it within work of intelligibility. That is to say, the subjectivity concretized in each individual’s videos is inextricably tied to the imagined audience of trans men.

Carving Space for Transmasculine Subjectivity

Each of the five trans men whose YouTube channels serve as the basis for this analysis, identify and relate to their transness and their masculinity differently, and many of their understandings of self in relation to these two aspects of their identity change over the course of


26 Ibid., 67.
the videos posted to their channel. However, what is consistent across the five channels is reflexivity about their gendered identities and subjectivities. Most frequently this occurs in the form of providing an account of something that happened in everyday life that caused gender to be particularly or differently salient. These acts of reporting through YouTube videos do something more than repeat or reflect the gendering that transpired. Rather, if we are to take seriously Butler’s assertion that we are always doing gender for an other, then the YouTube videos’ imagined counterpublic of trans men engenders a different doing of gender than the presumably cisgender actors of the story that is shared.

These reflections of identity largely fall into three categories: rhetorics of openness, rhetorics of stealth, and rhetorics of passing. Each of these rhetorics consist of discourses that situate a channel creator’s transness as a part of their larger identity. In examining these three categories, I argue that each of the rhetorics—even when seemingly contradictory—collectively constitute an intelligible transmasculine subject. As Butler writes, “When we do act and speak, we not only disclose ourselves but act on the schemes of intelligibility that govern who will be a speaking being, subjecting them to rupture or revision, consolidating their norms, or contesting their hegemony.” Trans men’s disclosure to an imagined audience of other trans men not only contests the hegemony of gender intelligibility based on sex-gender coherence, but also recognizes, and thus confers, the specifically trans subjectivity necessary to and constituted by these reflections.

---

**Rhetorics of Openness**

When James began college, he wanted to be stealth. However, this made him more dysphoric because he felt like he had to fit the box of a cisgender male. He realized while being stealth that he wasn’t presenting as himself because he was so concerned with not being seen as trans. He has since become very open about his trans identity. He reflects, “Now I feel like I am actually being seen for who I am.” For James, intelligibility strictly within the framework of cisgender masculinity limited his sense of authenticity. This was also reflected in a video in which James discussed why he chose to leave his job as a counselor for an all-boys farming camp after a week of staff training. The camp administration was requiring that he be stealth to the campers. During the week of training, James started to feel a lot of anxiety about being surrounded by all cisgender men. He realized that a big part of his identity as a man is that he had to “become a man.” To “become a man” highlights transition, and for James to say that becoming a man continues to be a large part of his identity as a man suggests that that transition is not merely a means to an end. Rather, James marks—for him—a difference between cisgender manhood and trans manhood. Notably, this difference is not one of lack; trans manhood is not less desirable for James than cisgender manhood. This distinction cannot be understood within the sex-gender coherence framework of intelligibility, which constitutes cisgender manhood as natural and primary.

Kyle, like James, rejects the idea that intelligibility within a cisgender framework can authentically capture his subjectivity. In a video entitled, “FTM Vlog: The Guy that Doesn’t Quite Fit the Mold,” Kyle, in anticipation of beginning testosterone hormone replacement therapy, reflects “Obviously once I start transitioning, to other people, to society at large, I will be read as male and I’m ok with that, but people that know me, people that will come to know
me will know that I am transgender, not 100% male, not 100% female.” The “mold” that Kyle references in the title of his video is constituted by gender norms; it represents normatively intelligible gender. For Kyle, when people read him as male within that framework, he feels inauthentic. While expressing being “ok” with these moments of passing, he seemingly feels it is a compromise or concession because a more authentic reading of his subjectivity is inaccessible to society at large.

Each of these reflections deals with a tension between normative intelligibility and authenticity. There is largely no reference point for this tension outside of trans experience. Speaking into this tension to an imagined audience of other trans men calls into being a subject position that does not exclusively rely on binary cisgender norms of maleness, manhood, and masculinity; that is to say, a transmasculine subjectivity rehearsed and performed within subaltern counterpublic space.

Rhetorics of Stealth

In a video entitled “I’m invisible!,” Michael elatedly describes going to a bar and flirting with a group of lesbians who all ignored him. He realized through this interaction that they were ignoring him because they were reading him as a—presumably cis—man. The title is particularly telling in this instance. Contrary to the dominant attitude towards the importance of visibility and the stifling effects of invisibility, Michael seems to be suggesting that invisibility is, in fact, a positive. Invisibility means a kind of blending in that it allows Michael to experience a legibility that affirms his identity.

In a separate video, Michael remarks, “I live my life as a male. I am seen, regarded, and treated as a male, not a trans guy.” Throughout his videos, Michael seems to desire and enjoy
legibility within normative frameworks of gender intelligibility. That the transmasculine
YouTube community constitutes an intelligible transmasculine subject outside the normative
framework of gender intelligibility does not mean that trans men cannot or should not desire
intelligibility within that framework. Rather, the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic
constitutes an alternative subjectivity that opens up possibilities for how trans men can become
legible beyond the normative framework. The assumptions of a framework of intelligibility
grounded in sex-gender coherence will always preclude trans men on some level. Michael
gestures towards this when he goes on to say, “I’m at the point in my transition that I’m a man
and the transition left is about me deciding what kind of man I am going to be… How am I going
to be the man I want to be without detrimental actions i.e. outing myself when outing myself
could be detrimental to whatever situation I am in… Lord knows we can lose our jobs over
nothing.” Even within the relative freedom that Michael finds in being stealth, there are limits to
his normative intelligibility.

In discussing his thought process around going stealth, Melvin reflects that he was
thinking of doing so because he identifies more as male than as transgender. Melvin comments
that he used to take issue with people who went stealth because he felt like they were turning
their back on the trans community, but he has since realized that it is not about that. Melvin says
that he would probably keep his YouTube channel when he goes stealth because he values the
community it fosters. His reflection raises interesting tensions around stealth and visibility.
YouTube becomes an interesting limbo space for those who are stealth in that maintaining a
YouTube channel or even keeping it up without continuing to post retains a community of
visibility. Understandings of the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic as an enclave are
particularly prevalent in moments like these in that YouTube appears to be a distinctly separate
space from “the public,” one where one’s performance of identity can be markedly different. Because a framework of transmasculine intelligibility does not rely on the same rigid norms that a normative framework of gender intelligibility does, there is potentially space for being intelligible as a stealth trans man. This allows for the kinds of reflections that Michael and Melvin both have in their videos without seeming to compromise an understanding of themselves as stealth.

**Rhetorics of Passing**

Many trans men on YouTube provide suggestions to other trans guys on how to pass. James and Michael both did this in their channels. James gave several specific tips about how to bind one’s chest, how to speak in a lower vocal register, and other ways to alter one’s physical appearance, but he emphasized a main theme of confidence as the most important. He encourages trans guys to leave the house feeling like “I am male” regardless of others’ reactions. He also suggests trans guys go for a walk alone in order to escape people reading them as female and as a way to “be at home in your masculinity.” Passing is framed as something that is for the outside world, recognizing that there are limits to how much individuals may be able to pass. Although James does not make this explicit, providing this advice on YouTube and in this framework suggests that YouTube provides a sort of refuge in which one’s gender is intelligible in ways that may not be possible in the cisgender world. Michael’s tips on passing are very different than James’ video. Michael focuses on various “gear” that trans men use to alter their appearance such as chest compression binders. Michael commented “the other piece of gear that no trans guy can be without is some sort of stand-to-pee device… when you walk into the men’s room it is nice to go up to the urinal and do your business like the man that you are.” This piece
of advice seems to suggest that manhood is tied to urinal usage and that a stand-to-pee device is thus necessary for trans men to be intelligible as men.

Advice around passing should be understood in terms of counterpublicity. As Warner writes, “A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.” Michael’s advice perhaps suggests a more conscious awareness of subordinate status. YouTube may be a refuge for many trans men, but YouTube does not and cannot exist entirely separated from trans men’s everyday lives. Fraser writes of a dual character of counterpublics: “On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics.” Advice around passing, including Michael’s advice, recognizes that trans men live in a world in which transmasculinity is not intelligible and supplies trans men with techniques for navigating dominant publics. YouTube is the rehearsal space. Further, a generous read of Michael’s advice would see it as a reclamation of manhood, a stand-to-pee device allows at least some trans men to access legibility in the typically highly normatively gendered context of a public restroom. Giving this advice in the context of the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic, on some level, marks the transness of the act.

Discourses of passing can also complement discourses of openness. Kyle and James both decenter the importance of passing, although it is important to note that their attitudes to passing—as with several of the other trans men included in this analysis—fluctuate over the course of their channel. After two and a half years on testosterone, Kyle reflects that he only passes 30-40% of the time. He says that he has never passed 100% of the time. It used to upset


29 Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 68.
him, but he has gotten to a point where it has stopped bothering him because he is happy with how he looks and sounds. James, on the other hand, reflects that it is very easy for him to pass since he has been on testosterone and had top surgery. For James, passing can be helpful, but it can also erase his trans experiences. He concludes that he does not want to be seen as a cisgender man. Both Kyle and James disrupt the idea that passing is the telos of transition. Instead, YouTube becomes a space where trans experience and subjectivity can be understood more capacious. The way in which rhetorics of passing and discourses of openness can overlap points to a uniquely transmasculine intelligibility in that these two discourses are mutually exclusive in dominant publics.

**Witnessing Transmasculine Bodies**

Trans men on YouTube use the camera to witness their embodiment for themselves and for those they invite to witness with them. Trans men will actively interact with the camera (e.g. moving closer or farther away or changing the angle of the camera) in order to show particular parts of their bodies that are visibly changed through hormone replacement therapy or surgery. The camera serves as a material instantiation of the imagined audience of the videos. This follows Peters’ observation that “[c]ameras and microphones are often presented as substitute eyes and ears for audiences who can witness for themselves.” Trans men engaging with the camera, then, shape how the audience witnesses their bodies.

---

30 “Top surgery” is the vernacular within trans masculine communities referring to a double mastectomy surgery that masculinizes the chest.

Framing this use of the camera in terms of witnessing emphasizes the active quality of both producing and consuming these videos. In contrast to passive witnessing, Peters argues, “in active witnessing one is a privileged possessor and producer of knowledge.”

From this perspective, the audience viewing these videos is able to affirm the veracity of a channel creator’s changing body in a way that could not be done without the act of witnessing. Frosh decenters the witness (person) in favor of witnessing texts, but maintains the active dimension of witnessing. “Witnessing texts,” according to Frosh, “invite us to engage them in producing imagined worlds.” For Frosh, the videos would be witnessing texts that an audience can engage with. This engagement is necessary to the worldmaking work that the videos accomplish; trans men cannot become intelligible subjects without the transness of their bodies being witnessed.

Thus, the body becomes a key site of witnessing. As Cram asserts, “Witnessing is a mode of ‘spect-acting’—bodies act just as they are acted upon visually.” Moreover, “‘witnessing’ traces how citizenship is a category of embodied sociality, public emotionality, and performative enactment. ‘Witnessing’ compels critics to consider how visuality is an embodied rhetorical process.” While Cram’s work, like other rhetorical work on witnessing, focuses on

32 Ibid., 709.


34 E. Cram, “‘Angie was Our Sister:’ Witnessing the Trans-Formation of Disgust in the Citizenry of Photography,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 98 (2012): 417.

35 Ibid.

36 See e.g. Christine Harold and Kevin DeLuca, “Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till,” Rhetoric and Public Affairs 8 (2005): 263-286; and Bradford Vivian,
witnessing tragedy, it is also useful for understanding the embodied rhetorical work of trans men’s YouTube videos as it is connected to sociality. This connection to sociality ties into the necessity of social recognition to become intelligible. For Butler, the body is bound up in the tension between the individual and the social. She asserts, “The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later and with some uncertainty that to which I lay claim as my own.”37 As trans men engage with the camera as the material instantiation of the imagined audience, they are directly engaging with the socially constituted dimension of their bodies.

Trans men use the camera to witness several aspects of their changing bodies such as muscle development and increased body hair. This analysis focuses on two practices of camera witnessing: the showing of facial hair and the showing of a bare chest after top surgery. Raúl, James, Michael, Melvin, and Kyle all use the camera to show facial hair growth. James, Michael, and Raúl all use the camera to show their bare chests after top surgery. Of note, James, Michael, and Raúl were the only ones to have top surgery while documenting their transition on YouTube.

When using the camera to show facial hair, it is common for trans men on YouTube to actively manipulate the camera or their body in relationship to the camera in order for the audience to be able to see. Trans men will get very close to the camera, contort their heads, or shine a flashlight at their chin in an attempt to show their facial hair as prominently as possible. James, for example, after almost five years on testosterone, created a slideshow of pictures from

---

37 Butler, Undoing Gender, 21.
all of the years he had participated in “No Shave November.” He adds a disclaimer at the end of the slideshow that all pictures were edited to have “maximum beard showing capacity.” In addition to these attempts to make facial hair more visible to the camera, many trans men will use the camera to show facial hair that they know is not visible. Kyle, for example, in one video tilts his head up to show his thickening facial hair and says as he is doing this that he knows people will not be able to see it because he trims it. After one month on testosterone, James recounts to his audience “Not really much facial hair. Well there are a few dark hairs. I am not going to even try and show you them because I think they are in my imagination, but I’m pretty sure they are there.” He appears torn about whether or not to show the camera because of concern that his facial hair is not “real.” However, showing facial hair to the camera, regardless of visibility, frequently serves to validate its presence. In one video prior to beginning testosterone, Kyle had drawn on facial hair using eyeliner. At the end of the video, he asked his audience if they like his “faux facial hair.” Even in this case when Kyle’s facial hair was clearly not “real,” the audience, imagined through the camera, served as a validating force.

After top surgery, it is very common for trans men on YouTube to take off their shirt to show their newly flat chest and also to show their scars. Raúl only did this once four months after he had surgery, but it was in his first video after having surgery. Raúl posts significantly less frequently than James or Michael—nine videos compared to James’ 140 and Michael’s 176. James and Michael both engaged in this practice of showing their bare chests frequently after top surgery. Both included video footage on their channel of them at the hospital, immediately after surgery. Both also posted videos showing their bare chests while they still had bandages over much of their chests and surgical drains, which drain blood and fluid out of the chest for
approximately one week after surgery, still inserted. They both also posted semi-regular updates about how their chest was healing, showing close ups of their scars.

Using the camera to witness trans embodiment functions to materialize trans bodies. Butler writes, “to speak within these classical contexts of bodies that matter is not an idle pun, for to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what ‘matters’ about that body, its very intelligibility.”

38 Butler argues this materialization happens through citing sex norms, thus largely precluding the possibility for bodily intelligibility outside of those binary norms. Thus, Butler asserts, “we are asking how the criteria of intelligible sex operates to constitute a field of bodies, and how precisely we might understand specific criteria to produce the bodies that they regulate.”

39 To understand the ways trans men on YouTube use the camera to witness their embodiment, this framework would emphasize that facial hair and bare flat chests are male sex norms and thus would see what trans men on YouTube are doing as citing male sex norms. Through this process of citationality, the criteria of intelligible male sex both produce trans men’s bodies and regulate them as outside of intelligibility.

In qualifying the rhetorical nature of bodies, Hauser asserts “The body itself is an ambiguous form of signification, and the meaning that we attribute to one in pain is not necessarily the assertion being advanced.”

40 The polysemic nature of the body invites multiple readings. Trans men using the camera to witness their embodiment could be read normatively as


39 Idib., 27.

pointing to the ways in which their bodies increasingly resemble male sex norms in order to make a citational claim to male intelligibility within a framework of normative sex-gender coherence. Trans men using the camera to witness their embodiment could also be read resistively as highlighting a specifically trans body. The same bodily elements that could be read as citing male sex norms could also be understood as marking transness. This is particularly evident in the case of showing a bare chest post-surgery. In a world where public display of bare female chests is criminalized, baring one’s flat chest is normatively a claim to male embodiment. And yet, the presence of scars cannot be ignored; particularly because trans men highlight their scars in the way they manipulate the camera to guide what the audience witnesses. Top surgery scars mark the would-be citation of a male sex norm. Rather than understand this as a failure to meet the criterion of intelligible sex, this can be seen as a practice that does work to constitute an intelligible transmasculine body.

Performativity and, thus, intelligibility are predicated on repetition. Shirtless trans men is not an image or action repeated widely enough within dominant publics to be understood in any other frame than that of shirtless cisgender men. However, in the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic trans men removing their shirts is a widely repeated act such that it is not entirely dependent on the frame of shirtless cisgender men in order to be understood. The act can also be understood through the framework of a body in transition. In this way, using the camera to witness parts of the body most visually altered by testosterone therapy can emphasize a body’s transness. Moreover, the repetition of this practice serves as a constitutive force of an intelligible transmasculine body.

Understanding the ways in which trans men’s bodies are produced and regulated by normative criteria for intelligible sex is undoubtedly useful for understanding trans men’s (lack
of intelligibility in dominant publics. However, the power of queer worldmaking is to sit in the potentiality that a queer world can be and is constituted beyond these dominant publics. Within the specific counterpublicity of transmasculine YouTube, it is possible that trans men’s engagement with the camera to witness particular parts of their changing embodiment cannot be fully captured by normative criteria for sex intelligibility. These bodily practices also work constitutively to establish counterpublic-specific norms of intelligible transmasculine bodies.

**Norms of Transmasculinity**

To claim that YouTube allows a space for transmasculinity to become an intelligible subjectivity is necessarily to claim that there are norms of transmasculinity circulating through YouTube. Just as norms grounded in sex-gender coherence produce a grid of legibility that precludes many, including trans men, from being fully intelligible in dominant publics, norms of transmasculinity on YouTube also produce a grid of legibility that is not fully inclusive. To begin, there is an expectation that trans men on YouTube are seeking medical transition through testosterone and top surgery. Medical transition plays a central role in the content of the videos as well as in structuring the timeline of the channels. For example, many videos are titled or begin with a statement of how long the channel creator has been on testosterone and/or how long it has been since they had top surgery. There are some trans men on YouTube who do not transition medically or who “detransition,” meaning that they stop medical transition once they have started. However, this is a clear minority. Moreover, trans men on YouTube not pursuing medical transition are largely having entirely different and predominantly separate conversations. This pervasive expectation of medical transition means that an intelligible transmasculine body is constituted through and constrained by medical transition.
A second pervasive norm of trans men on YouTube is that of whiteness. A norm of whiteness is constituted algorithmically, among many other ways. In order to find trans men of color’s YouTube channels, you must mark your search terms. This was reflected in my own methods. I found the three channels of white trans men—James, Michael, and Kyle—first. I began with James’ channel because it was the most frequently recommended channel on online discussion boards pertaining to trans men. From there, I found Michael and Kyle’s channels through the “recommended videos” section of YouTube. The recommended videos section as well as the first several pages of results of a racially unmarked search for “ftm” yielded exclusively channels of white trans men. In order to find Melvin’s channel, I had to use a racially marked search for “Black ftm.” Likewise, to find Raúl’s channel, I used the search term “Latino ftm.” Horak notes, “tens of thousands of trans people of color do post videos and many actively comment on each others’ videos. These networks are invisible, though, to anyone who does not specifically seek them out.”\(^4\) This upholds broader social normalization of unmarked whiteness that constitutes naturalized racial hierarchies.

Both Raúl and Melvin mark and push back against the norm of whiteness among trans men on YouTube. In his first video, Raúl reflected on the reason why he wanted to create a YouTube channel to document his transition saying, “I think the reason I am doing this is to provide some sort of support to other trans guys who are from the Hispanic community because, ya know, it’s hard. I’m not going to say it’s harder but it might be a little bit harder when you come from a different culture and we don’t really hear a lot about it.” Raúl’s channel then becomes a way to speak into that silence.

\(^4\) Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 576.
Melvin offers reflections on both the racialized and gendered aspects of his changing embodiment and intelligibility. He notes that he felt either invisible or hyper visible, especially in interactions with white men or white women. As he was read more consistently as male, he was frustrated over how he was being treated being read as a Black man. Melvin recounts several experiences of this maltreatment including white men walking up behind him and intimidating him and hearing a man lock the doors of his car as Melvin walked past. Melvin’s reflections clearly point to the ways in which changing intelligibility within normative frameworks as a passing cisgender man is racialized. White trans men can experience passing male intelligibility as largely alleviating the stares and such of hyper visibility, but that is not the case for trans men of color, and Black trans men in particular. Like in other discourses of openness, stealth, and passing discussed above, addressing these reflections to the imagined audience of the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic functions to bring them into the realm of transmasculine intelligibility. In this case, reflections that mark the racialized specificity of transmasculine experience as part of the discursive milieu constituting an intelligible transmasculine subjectivity also functions to resist the norm of whiteness in transmasculinity on YouTube.

A third norm of transmasculinity is lack of femininity. Although there is a wide range of masculinity represented by trans men on YouTube, there is a level of reflexive awareness among more effeminate trans men that their masculinity is not valued in the same way. Of the channels used for this analysis, this is most clearly seen in several of Kyle’s reflections. Before beginning testosterone, Kyle shares struggles with whether or not he was “really trans” and if he should medically transition. He reflects, “I realized when I came out as trans, whether I realized it or not, whether I wanted to or not, I tried to cram myself into a stereotype. I tried to make myself
very masculine, and that’s not me.” More specifically, Kyle shares that he had put on make up for the first time in a long time and enjoyed it. Afterwards, he struggled with how he could be trans if he enjoyed putting on make up. This norm runs parallel to dominant norms of masculinity as mutually exclusive from femininity. However, in a later video, Kyle addresses the specificity of this norm being enforced within transmasculine communities. He reflects that he has heard from cisgender people that “I yearn to be a man, but I don’t conduct myself as a man should.” Kyle expects this kind of comment from the cisgender community because they do not have to think about gender on a regular basis. However, he was flabbergasted that he would receive such ridicule from within the transmasculine community. He went on to say,

I don’t care if I parade down the fucking street in a goddamn mini skirt and knee high boots fully made up, I’m still a trans guy. And just because you say I’m not or that I make you look bad, I’m still a trans guy. And just because you say I’m not or that I make you look bad, fuck you because it’s not up to you how anyone presents their gender or whether anyone is transgender . . . All you’re doing is perpetuating this horribly destructive patriarchal mindset that our society shoves down our throats since conception.

Kyle directly pushes back against the lateral gender policing within the transmasculine community. His assertion “I’m still a trans guy” carves out space for effeminate trans men to be intelligible as trans men.

Marking and pushing back against norms of transmasculinity on YouTube points to the need for even more capacious standards of transmasculine intelligibility. Moreover, these moments of push back function performatively to begin to carve out that more capacious space of intelligibility. Butler suggests, “to the extent that gender norms are reproduced, they are invoked and cited as bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation.”42 Through their bodily presence and discursive marking of their experiences,

42 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 52.
trans men like Raúl, Melvin, and Kyle harness the resistive power to alter norms within the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic.

**Conclusions**

Following the trajectory from Fraser and Warner, counterpublics theory has largely been concerned with the discursive practices that constitute and emerge from counterpublics. While norms and normativity are strongly implicated in these theories of counterpublics, they are rarely addressed head on. Moreover, the norms most directly addressed in counterpublics theory are those of dominant publics that function to exclude counterpublics. This analysis contributes to counterpublics theory by explicitly linking the discursive practices of trans men on YouTube to the norms they (re)produce within the counterpublic. These counterpublic norms are generative. That is to say, counterpublics imagine and enact a world from the perspective of an alternative set of norms. In this case, the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic imagines and enacts a world in which trans men are intelligible not despite of but through their transness; this intelligibility can only be constituted from a set of gender norms that centers transmasculine identities and experiences.

Even with this counterpublic set of gender norms, trans men on YouTube do not reject all semblance of dominant normativity. Michael’s assertion that trans men need stand-to-pee devices in order to pee like men, stands out as an example with strong normative elements. Transmasculine intelligibility constituted within the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic does not and cannot entirely escape normativity’s grasp. To this end, trans men on YouTube and the emergent intelligible transmasculine subject are productively understood within West’s framework, building off Grossberg, of an impure transgender politics. He suggests, “we
undersell the potential, even if it is only momentary and in small ways, for practices to queer existing normativities, which may settle back into previously received relations of meaning but not without some disturbance and accommodation.\textsuperscript{43} An impure transgender politics returns us to the generative power of (imperfectly) queering norms.

The power of the queered norms in the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic is tied to the connection between intelligibility and livability. Butler articulates this connection, saying, “I may feel that without recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable.”\textsuperscript{44} Trans men in dominant publics largely exist at this position in the middle of craving recognition and rejecting the terms of recognition that are most deeply seeded in sex-gender coherence. By queering gender norms, trans men on YouTube reconfigure the terms of recognition. In so doing, the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic becomes a space that is uniquely livable for trans men. The recognition of the ways YouTube makes life more livable for trans men suggests that the work of counterpublics should not only be understood in terms of effects and influence on dominant publics, but also in terms of what is accomplished within the counterpublic.

Queer worldmaking is invested in the constitution of queer culture, partly constituted through queer subjectivities. This investment does not preclude the possibility for queer culture to trouble and complicate dominant publics. In fact, queer worldmaking necessarily does so. However, the starting point is the realm of queer counterpublics and the relations among queer people and practices. As such, naming transmasculinity as an intelligible subjectivity within the


\textsuperscript{44} Butler, \textit{Undoing Gender}, 4.
specific context of the transmasculine YouTube counterpublic matters as it signals the depth and nature of the recognition of trans men by trans men in that space. Furthermore, it signals the nature of the importance of YouTube for trans men. The recognition and legitimacy conferred through intelligibility of transmasculinity on YouTube moves beyond what is possible within dominant publics. The counterpublic space of YouTube is the actualization of possibility for trans men, and, to quote Butler, “possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.”

CHAPTER IV

MY BROTHER’S KEEPER:
A TRANSMASCULINE ETHOS OF CARE

Kyle closes an early video of his transition channel by saying; “I think I say this at the end of every video, but if anyone out there is feeling lonely or sad, please do not hesitate to message me.” This appeal to community and togetherness exemplifies the way trans men on YouTube show care for one another. Moreover, this type of appeal is not isolated. As Kyle gestures to with his comment that he says this at the end of every video, this kind of direct, caring outreach to the audience is a common practice in the genre of trans men’s transition channels. That is to say, care work pervades the transmasculine YouTube community. As Kyle’s address suggests, YouTube provides a space for trans men to connect and form community with others who may be isolated from people who share their experience to connect and form community. This community of care is not simply a show of kindness; it is crucial to trans men’s survival. The care work on YouTube casts a new light on Horak’s assertion that “These videos save trans lives.”

Care is a driving connection between individual trans men and the transmasculine YouTube community. Care as a virtue that connects individual and community highlights it as an ethos. Concerning the social nature of Aristotle’s concept of ethos, Halloran writes, “The word ethos has both an individual and collective meaning. It makes sense to speak of the ethos of this or that person, but it makes equally good sense to speak of the ethos of a particular type of

---

person, of a professional group, or a culture, or an era in history.”

To this end, we can speak of the transmasculine YouTube community as enacting an *ethos* of care.

In this chapter, I will argue that an *ethos* of care defines the sociality of individual trans men and their transition channels in the transmasculine YouTube community. The analysis will unfold in two sections, each section examining one part of the nomenclature “*ethos* of care.” The first section deals with the question, what does it mean for trans men to care? Beginning with scholarship on feminist care ethics, this section extends this work by turning to queer articulations of kinship, care, and their connections to worldmaking. The second section, addresses the question, how do trans men use YouTube to construct care as an *ethos*? This section first establishes an *ethos* of care within the theoretical context of *ethos* as dwelling place and then examines patterns of transmasculine YouTube’s *ethos* of care in practice. Ultimately, this analysis uses the example of the *ethos* of care of the transmasculine YouTube community to argue for the conceptual significance of both care and *ethos* in the broader project of queer worldmaking.

---

**The Significance of Care**

Care is both the fundamentally necessary and profoundly mundane. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines “to care” as to “feel concern (great or little), be concerned, trouble oneself, feel interest.”

This definition highlights that care can be subtle or profound and is marked by attention, not necessarily action. Alternatively, the *OED* defines “to care for” as “to

---


take thought for, provide for, look after, take care of.”⁴ This definition focuses more on action; there is greater responsibility associated with someone who cares for than someone who simply cares. This second definition enables Held to assert that care is fundamental and essential to human life in that “[e]very human being has been cared for as a child or would not be alive today.”⁵ This sense of care is materially linked to survival.

There is a dimension of the care work of trans men on YouTube that is similarly linked to survivability. Trans communities have a 41% attempted suicide rate.⁶ This staggering statistic provides important context to Horak’s observation on the importance of trans YouTube videos: “Distributed freely through the Internet and easily found, they collectively tell trans youth that self-determination and transformation are viable routes.”⁷ The ability to imagine a life of gender self-determination is a crucial intervention in a transphobic world. The transmasculine YouTube community makes transmasculine lives more livable, but it would be an overstatement to say that trans men on YouTube care for each other with the same level of responsibility of a parent caring for a child. The majority of the caring that happens between trans men on YouTube is marked by attention toward community rather than action toward an individual. Nevertheless, the amalgamation of these moments of attention and thoughtfulness renders the transmasculine YouTube community essential to many trans men.

⁴ Ibid.


⁶ “Injustice at Every Turn: A report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey” National Center for Transgender Equality, September 2011.

Dichotomies of Care

A touchstone work in feminist care ethics, Noddings’ *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* examines caring relationships as the starting point for an ethics built on care. Two dichotomies emerge out of Noddings’ work as central to defining care and caring relationships. The first, caring-for and caring-about, differentiates levels of investment and responsibility in caring relationships. The second, the one-caring and the cared-for, identifies two roles in caring relationships. These distinctions do not hold as dichotomies for the case of trans men on YouTube because caring in this case is directed more at the community level rather than individual relationships. However, Noddings’ work provides a useful heuristic for identifying key characteristics of caring and a benchmark for identifying how the caring of trans men on YouTube differs from prior theorizations of caring.

Noddings’ distinction between caring-for and caring-about fits with discussions of the limits of caring in care ethics scholarship. This attention to limits stems from the observation that one cannot care for everyone, so an ethics based on care must focus on particular relationships. Held articulates this point by saying, “Those who conscientiously care for others...[are not] acting for the sake of all others or humanity in general; they seek instead to preserve or promote an actual human relation between themselves and particular others.”8 Noddings captures the scope of caring in the difference between caring-for and caring-about. “Caring-for,” she writes, “describes an encounter or set of encounters characterized by direct attention and response. It requires the establishment of a caring relation, person-to-person contact of some

---

8 Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 12.
This definition of caring-for resonates with the *OED* definition of “to care for” but adds the dimension of face-to-face interaction. By contrast, “Caring-about expresses some concern but does not guarantee a response to one who needs care.” Noddings privileges caring-for as the centerpiece of an ethics of care.

Using YouTube—a platform that transcends the space and time constraints of face-to-face interactions—trans men integrate elements of both caring-for and caring-about. Horak asserts that YouTube has an ability “to connect geographically disparate people in intimate ways.” This is reflected in the way that trans men on YouTube talk about the role of the YouTube platform in constituting their community. James, for example, discusses being able to see other trans men’s faces as an advantage of YouTube over online forums or chat rooms. This visual connection to other trans men is important to James because “there isn’t a town or any geographic location where you can just be around trans people all the time.” YouTube, for James, provides a way to “engage in a level of closeness.”

Face-to-face caring relationships are simply not feasible for many trans men on YouTube in which case caring-for can only happen through mediation. In some cases, mediated caring-for can still involve person-to-person interaction such as when Kyle says, “know you are not alone . . . I am just a couple of types away.” This invitation to contact Kyle directly approaches the person-to-person characteristic of caring-for that Noddings articulates. Not only does Kyle invite individual connection, he reframes distance in order to highlight the closeness that YouTube, specifically, and the Internet, more broadly, allow. Trans men’s videos commonly

---


10 Ibid.

include an invitation to communicate, but it is not the only way they show care. A lot of the caring is less direct, such as giving advice and creating resources not directed at a particular person or situation. The lack of responding to specific, individual needs might classify this kind of caring as caring-about in Noddings’ dichotomy. However, these caring practices should be contextualized in the medium. Many of these videos are viewed weeks, months, and even years after they are uploaded. Very particular advice that is aimed at only one person is less beneficial to the community than advice that can be applied in a variety of circumstances over time. Trans men on YouTube are responding to the needs of a community, rather than an individual. To this end, they use strategies from both caring-for and caring-about.

This focus on the needs of a community instead of an individual troubles a second dichotomy that Noddings introduces: the one-caring and the cared-for. In a caring relationship, such as parent-child or teacher-student, Noddings asserts that one party must be the one-caring and one must be the cared-for. Each party contributes to the caring relationship but do so in different ways. The one-caring “is always characterized by a move away from the self.”12 Noddings writes, “When I look at and think of how I am when I care, I realize that there is invariably this displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other.”13 On the other hand, “the cared-for must ‘receive’ the caring.”14 “The cared-for,” Noddings asserts, “is free to be more fully himself in the caring relation. Indeed, this being himself, this willing and

---

12 Noddings, Caring, 16.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 Ibid., 69.
unselfconscious revealing of self is his major contribution to the relation.”\textsuperscript{15} This relationship suggests that authenticity and personal growth are key goals of caring.

Levinas’ ethics of face provides another perspective on this central relationship of caring. Ethics, for Levinas, is prior to ontology, and the face is a pre-ontological way of relating to the Other; the face is “a living presence; it is expression.”\textsuperscript{16} Lavoie et al. summarize the Levinasian relationship between face and care, saying, “A person’s face calls for care and respect for him or her.”\textsuperscript{17} The Other, through the face, drives Levinasian ethics and care. “The Other,” Levinas writes, “is linked as a responsibility, and this whether accepted or refused.”\textsuperscript{18} To put this in Noddings’ terms, the cared-for constitutes the obligation to care; the one-caring accepts or refuses that obligation. Even as the Other imposes this obligation of caring, Levinas asserts that the Other “does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness.”\textsuperscript{19} Although Noddings stresses the importance of both the one-caring and the cared-for in a caring relationship, her theory does not embrace the same enmeshment as Levinas’ ethics of face.

Identifying individual trans men on YouTube as either the one-caring or the cared-for is a futile effort because individuals occupy both positions simultaneously. This is not to say that Noddings’ characterizations of the one-caring and the cared-for are not useful in this case; they

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 73.


\textsuperscript{17} Mireille Lavoie, Thomas De Koninck, and Danielle Blondeau, “The Nature of Care in Light of Emmanuel Levinas,” \textit{Nursing Philosophy} 7 (2006): 226.


\textsuperscript{19} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 200.
are. In fact, Noddings notes, “Clearly, in equal meetings, there may be mutual caring and, when this happens, we need not, in a practical sense, try to distinguish the roles of the one-caring and the cared-for.” Instead of a tool for discerning discrete roles in a caring relationship, Noddings’ characterizations of the one-caring and the cared-for function in this case to highlight dispositions key to caring. Trans men are simultaneously moving away from themselves and their own interests and becoming more fully themselves through the ways they care and are cared for on YouTube. This simultaneity resonates more with Levinas’ ethics of face.

This simultaneity can be seen in how gratitude for care that individual trans men receive gets linked to reciprocating care for other trans men on YouTube. For example, Kyle says in his introductory video, “I just want to thank the ones before who have made videos of their transitions. It is just amazing the support it provided and encouragement it gave me, so thank you. To those of you who are researching and considering or running or scared or whatever you are feeling I encourage you to look deep inside yourself to live your life for you.” This juxtaposition of acknowledging being cared for and immediately expressing care for others highlights the simultaneity of trans men’s dual role in the ethos of care.

Gratitude and reciprocity work together as a motivating force for continued care. In a video commemorating one year on testosterone, Michael speaks at length regarding his gratitude to the transmasculine YouTube community. In one segment representative of the larger video, he says, “To all the members of this fantastic community we have here for all of their support, encouragement, and words and gestures, some of which were beyond anything I expected or could have imagined.” The acts Michael references are all examples of care work, and those acts highlight that channel creators are cared for in addition to caring for others. In a subsequent

---

20 Noddings, Caring, 70.
video, Michael reflects, “I don’t want to do what many trans guys do in that they have these great channels going and then they get to this post-transition part of life and they fall away from the community here . . . I’ve gotten so much help, support, and love from you guys that I don’t want to fall away.” Michael implies that he no longer receives care in the same way that he did in the earlier part of his transition, but he expresses a sense of obligation to continue contributing to the community that has been constructed on YouTube by maintaining his presence there. As Michael demonstrates, individuals fluctuate, sometimes moving more to the position of the one-caring and sometimes moving more to the position of the cared-for. However, the blurring of the two positions and the ability to embody the move away from self and the actualization of self simultaneously are key to sustaining the transmasculine community on YouTube.

**Gendering Care and Gendered Caring**

Gilligan’s early theorizing of an ethics of care relies on an essentialist understanding of gender, suggesting that the moral development of women is fundamentally different than that of men. Gilligan argues that morality concerned with justice or fairness is based only on the moral development of men. However, “When one begins with the study of women and derives developmental constructs from their lives, the outline of a moral conception different from that described by Freud, Piaget, or Kohlberg begins to emerge. . . This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships.”21 Women, Gilligan contends, “define their identity through

---

relationships of intimacy and care.” As such, Gilligan articulates both a theory of moral development and identity that essentializes women in terms of caring.

Noddings maintains much of the gendered perspective of Gilligan, but makes the significant move from essentialized womanhood to femininity. The first edition of Noddings’ seminal book published in 1984 on caring was titled *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* whereas the 2013 second edition is titled *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. However, Noddings maintains a commitment within the text to the feminine voice. She writes, “The view to be expressed here is a feminine view. This does not imply that all women will accept it or that men will reject it; indeed, there is no reason why men should not embrace it. It is feminine in the deep classical sense—rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness.” This move to femininity opens up men’s participation in care in ways that Gilligan’s essentialism precluded.

Wood proposes the use of standpoint theory as another alternative to Gilligan’s essentialism. Wood summarizes the critique of the essentialism in Gilligan’s work saying, “The voice of care and the essentialist assumptions about women that undergird it also may be read as not only false in obscuring diversity among women, but regressive in reinforcing views that have profoundly oppressed women historically.” Countering the dangers of essentialism, “standpoint theory uses marginalized lives as the starting point from which to frame research

---

22 Ibid., 164.

23 Ibid., 2.

questions and concepts, develop designs, define what counts as data, and interpret findings.”

Wood argues for feminist research on care to be grounded in standpoint theory “By investigating how women’s understandings of the conditions of their lives cultivate a morality of care, feminist scholars can contribute to reforming conceptions of knowledge, morality, and human nature in ways that represent a variety of groups.” Studies of care that use standpoint theory result in more nuanced and diverse understandings of care.

This turn toward standpoint theory undergirds Hallstein’s “revisioned ethic of care.” Standpoint theory, for Hallstein, not only has space for men to engage in care, but also provides a framework for understanding how men fit in the gendered power dynamics that cultivate and constrain care. Hallstein asserts, “One significant implication of viewing caring as emerging and originating out of women’s subordinate social position is that men are no longer precluded or excluded from showing care.”

Rather, according to Hallstein, men can learn to care as part of confronting gendered privilege and power dynamics.

**Queerly Expanding Care**

Queer theories of kinship have opened up possibilities for kinship to be imagined outside the logics of biological families and reproduction. Although these early theories of queer kinship do not directly engage with the vocabulary of care, care work is central to the social relations they identify. Weston was one of the first scholars to attend to the ways lesbians and gay men

---

25 Ibid., 12.

26 Ibid., 17.

did kinship differently than their straight counterparts. She argues, “Lesbians and gay men, originally relegated to the status of people without family, later lay claim to a distinctive type of family characterized as families we choose or create.”

Building on Weston’s work, Butler moves from centering kinship relationships to centering kinship practices. She writes, “If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few).”

Making practices primary and constitutive of relationships rather than relationships constituting practices allows for these relationships—relationships that are highlighted as caring relationships—to be redefined in queer ways.

In this vein, trans men queer sibling relationships. Many trans men will address the trans men presumed to be watching their videos as “brothers.” James extends this practice when discussing that he likes to watch the videos of “younger guys”—referring to time on testosterone rather than age—because he sees them like “little brothers.” An older brother is conventionally understood as someone who watches his younger siblings grow up, gives advice based on his own experience, perhaps tells younger siblings things that a parent would not. Trans men on YouTube do the same things, just in a different context. For example, they give advice about how to navigate transphobic healthcare systems in order to get testosterone. Most importantly to James’ reflection, through the video sharing technology of YouTube, they are literally able to

---


watch others go through the process of transition. If practices constitute relationships and there is a strong connection between kinship relationships and caring relationships, then this use of “brothers” provides key insight into what kinds of practices are understood as caring within the transmasculine YouTube community.

Building on queer understandings of kinship with a focus on practices situated in the broader queer critique of the heteronormative family unit, Borneman in anthropology\(^\text{30}\) and Roseneil and Budgeon in sociology\(^\text{31}\) each argue that their disciplines would best be served by focusing more on caring practices and less on family units as the fundamental unit of human relations. Roseneil and Budgeon provide a rich provocation for how scholars might study caring practices. They call for “an exploration of networks and flows of intimacy and care, the extent and pattern of such networks, the viscosity and velocity of such flows and the implications of their absence.”\(^\text{32}\) Their description brings to the forefront that caring is an ongoing and dynamic practice. Moreover, their invocation of caring networks makes the significant move of situating caring practices outside of a dyadic relationship. Caring can happen in more disperse and diffuse ways.

Caring communities and networks can function to fill in the gaps in care due to systemic inequality. The AIDS crisis was a formative moment for queer communities of care. Homophobic medical and political systems that responded to the AIDS epidemic with stigma


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 153.
rather than care left many queer people living with HIV and AIDS to rely on networks of friends and community to meet a range of basic needs. In this time and state of immense vulnerability, Weeks made a call for an understanding of care rooted in love. This loving care “can be built only on a recognition of the autonomy of the other, the equality of carer and the person cared for, the reciprocal needs thus addressed, and ultimately on the recognition that the autonomy of oneself is dependent on the autonomy of others.”33 A decade later, Hines found a similar emphasis on reciprocity in her study of transgender support groups in the United Kingdom. Her informants identified participating in support groups “as a means of ‘giving something back’ to the communities and groups from which they had received support.”34 Crucially, Hines found this emphasis on reciprocity to be linked to a foundational trust that participants had with other members of the support group but did not feel in their day-to-day life. Both Weeks’ and Hines’ emphasis on reciprocity, trust, and respect highlight the way caring is done, not just the specific needs that care work attends to. In that respect, one of the roles of queer caring is the affirmation of dignity.

I would argue that queer caring of the sort outlined in these studies is part of a project of queer worldmaking. The queering of care starts with the queering of relationships. This entails the radical expansion of how we understand kinship, community, intimacy, and the overlap of these categories. Central to Berlant and Warner’s project of queer worldmaking is the queering of intimacy. Berlant and Warner assert, “Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple


This queering of intimacy embraces and values a wide range of sexual relationships ignored by heteronormativity. These relationships and values carry inventive potential. One example of this potential is promiscuity during the AIDS crisis. Berlant and Warner write, “One of the most commonly forgotten lessons of AIDS is that this promiscuous intimacy turned out to be a lifesaving public resource. Unbidden by experts, gay people invented safer sex.” The invention and dissemination of safer sex practices are acts of care, but their context—promiscuity—is highly stigmatized. This exemplifies queer caring: caring for others at the margins in ways that may be unrecognizable as care from a heteronormative and cisnormative vantage.

Transmasculine Ethos of Care

Trans men on YouTube are an example of how masculinity could look if oriented to care. Extending the move to standpoint theory helps to establish the significance of looking at how trans men engage in care. Trans men do not engage in gendered caring in quite the way feminist care ethicists outline because they are not women. Trans men also hold a more complicated position than Hallstein articulates for cis men. Standpoint theory enables an understanding of the specific life circumstances that cultivate specific caring practices among trans men. This approach seeks to balance scholarly-political commitments of resisting transphobic essentializing.

---


36 Ibid., 560.
practices\textsuperscript{37} that would see trans men as having some sort of female core and retaining the power of the feminine voice that feminist care ethicists have drawn out.

I make a second move—from ethics to \textit{ethos}. An ethics of care is invested in care as the basis of morality. Although care ethicists reject universalizable tenets of morality, as Noddings writes, “There is, however, a fundamental universality in our ethic, as there must be to escape relativism. The caring attitude, that attitude which expresses our earliest memories of being cared for is universally accessible.”\textsuperscript{38} The concept of \textit{ethos} is less invested in even quasi-universal principles. Rather, through the deep understanding of \textit{ethos} as dwelling place, \textit{ethos} is a way to attend to the ties between individual and community.

\textbf{The Sociality of Ethos as Dwelling Place}

Historical meanings \textit{ethos} point to an expanded understanding of \textit{ethos} as “dwelling place.” Hyde urges rhetorical scholars to attend to a “primordial” definition of \textit{ethos} as “the way discourse is used to transform space and time into ‘dwelling places’ where people can deliberate about and ‘know together’ some matter of interest. Such dwelling places define the grounds, the abodes or habitats, where a person’s ethics and moral character take form and develop.”\textsuperscript{39} This suggests that dwelling places are social by definition. And while Holiday asserts, “incorporation of the social nature of \textit{ethos} moves beyond simplistic or modernist definitions of \textit{ethos} as an

\textsuperscript{37} Janice Raymond’s The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male is a particularly poignant example of how the logic of biological essentialism can easily slip into transphobia.

\textsuperscript{38} Noddings, \textit{Caring}, 5.

individual ‘character,’ the end of Hyde’s definition suggests that the dwelling places of ethos play an important role in shaping character. This expanded definition shifts the focus from individual character to the social conditions that enable individual character to develop. This suggests that the transmasculine YouTube community’s ethos of care should not be understood as a collective of caring individuals but as a rhetorically produced dwelling place that cultivates care that manifests in individuals.

The concept of ethos as dwelling place comes from etymological inquiry. Halloran writes, “The most concrete meaning given for the term in the Greek lexicon is ‘a habitual gathering place.’” This sense can be seen directly in the discourse of trans men on YouTube who use spatial metaphors to describe the community. For example, Michael publicly thanked the first trans man whose channel he watched, saying “had I not stumbled across your video, I would have never gained the language I needed to describe what I had been feeling since I can remember.” Kyle used the same metaphor in expressing gratitude for the transmasculine YouTube community, saying, “I can’t begin to say how amazing it has been to stumble upon this huge community of amazing people who are so welcoming and willing to give advice.” It is striking that both Kyle and Michael use the exact same metaphor of “stumbling upon” the transmasculine YouTube community. It brings to mind the image of coming across a place where people gather regularly—an ethos in the sense that Halloran suggests—for the first time. Additionally, both Kyle and Michael use this metaphor when expressing gratitude; the space they have “stumbled upon” is a place of caring.

---


41 Halloran, “Aristotle’s Concept of Rhetoric,” 60.
Constructing Communal Dwellings

Just as physical dwellings are constructed, ethos are also constructed. The metaphors tied to this idea highlight rhetoric’s constitutive function. Hyde writes, “Understood in this way, the ethos of rhetoric directs one’s attention to the ‘architectural’ function of the art: how, for example, its practice grants such living room to our lives that we might feel more at home with others and our surroundings.” Kenny uses the same architectural metaphor in suggesting that we gain insight about the rhetorical imagination from understanding ethos as dwelling place: “An architect cannot design a dwelling place without imagining it, and similarly a rhetorician cannot articulate the communal dwelling place without being able to imagine that.” In both metaphors, rhetoric’s role is creation; rhetoric discursively constructs dwelling places.

The rhetorical construction of dwelling places is always a social act; it is done with and for others. Watts writes, “The Black Arts movement sought to introduce a way of manufacturing livable space—a dwelling place—for black folk.” In addition to continuing the theme of metaphors of construction, Watts calls our attention to particular stakes of livability. These stakes are particularly clear for marginalized groups who carve these dwelling places for themselves out of contexts of oppression. Kenny contributes to the idea of building dwelling places for others by saying, “Dwelling, in other words, is something that people do; it

42 Hyde, “Rhetorically, We Dwell,” xiii.


characterizes, in particular, the project of making a world for the sake of ourselves, other people, and other beings.\textsuperscript{45} This language of “making a world” echoes that of queer worldmaking.

Part of queer worldmaking is the creation and enactment of a queer ethos. Articulations of queer worldmaking frequently rely on spatial metaphors. In proposing the concept of queer worldmaking, Berlant and Warner characterize a “queer world” as “a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternative routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.”\textsuperscript{46} In a similar vein, Yep describes queer worldmaking as “the opening and creation of spaces without a map.”\textsuperscript{47} These spatial metaphors resonate with definitions of ethos as dwelling place. They characterize the spaces—the ethē—of a queer world as messy and contradictory; in their queerness, they exist beyond the regulatory norms we assume to govern spaces.

Incorporating a perspective of queer worldmaking into this discussion of ethos illuminates the ways in which the ethos of the transmasculine YouTube community might be seen as queer. A queer ethos might not simply be a discursively constructed dwelling place for queer people. Rather, a queer ethos embraces the messiness and contradictions that exist in excess of normativity as central to the dwelling place. The transmasculine YouTube community is built on trans men documenting and broadcasting their own stories and experiences. There is a part of this practice that undeniably centers the self. This directly contradicts Noddings’

\textsuperscript{45} Kenny, “Truth as Metaphor,” 34.

\textsuperscript{46} Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 558.

\textsuperscript{47} Gust A. Yep, “The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies” \textit{Journal of Homosexuality} 45 (2003), 35.
understanding of caring as “always characterized by a move away from the self.” Reading these documentations of self as being fundamentally tied to care work suggests a level of messiness or contradiction—queerness in the broadest sense—of the ethos of care in the transmasculine YouTube community.

The ethos of care is also queer insofar as the most explicitly queer parts of the self are most cared for in the YouTube community. This builds on the transmasculine intelligibility argument from the previous chapter. For example, transmasculine subjectivity is in part constituted through visible markers of transition such as scars from top surgery. Many acts of care, like James creating videos answering frequently asked questions about top surgery to serve as a resource for others hoping to have top surgery, focus on these visible signs of transition. These acts of care help to reinforce these norms that come to define transmasculine subjectivity. In this way, the ethos of care is “in the middle” of trans men’s queer norms. The dwelling place of YouTube both invents and responds to norms of transmasculinity.

Ethos of Care in Practice

Understanding ethos as dwelling place necessarily entails its sociality. One manifestation of this sociality is the view of ethos as being constituted in relationship between an individual and community. LeFevre writes, “For Aristotle, ethos refers not to the idiosyncrasies of an individual and not to a personal and private construct such as is often meant by ‘personality;’

48 Noddings, Caring, 16.

rather, *ethos* arises from the relationship between the individual and community."50 In a similar vein, Reynolds argues that the social construction of *ethos* "shifts its implications of responsibility from the individual to a negotiation or mediation between the rhetor and the community."51 While LeFevre points to the point of origination of *ethos* and Reynolds emphasizes the implications of *ethos*, both highlight the dynamic relationality of the concept. From this understanding, *ethos* is a particularly strong tie between an individual and community.

The tie between individual trans men and the transmasculine YouTube community is most clearly manifest in trans men articulating the community as their motivation for creating their channel; this constructs a sense of obligation to the community. Melvin, for example, in the written description of his channel wrote, “In this vlog, I discuss race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and other things as they relate to my life’s journey in the hopes of expanding minds and being a resource for others.” This description suggests that Melvin does not simply want others to be able to view the documentation of his experience; he wants his channel to do something for his audience. Raúl described his motivations for creating his channel in his introductory video, saying, “I think the reason I am doing this is to provide some sort of support to other trans guys who are from the Hispanic community because, ya know, it’s hard. I’m not going to say it’s harder, but it might just be a little bit harder when you come from a different culture and we don’t really hear a lot about it.” Raúl’s comments signal that the motivation for creating a channel can be even more targeted than doing so for the transmasculine community as a whole. Also implied in his comments is that the unmarked whiteness of the transmasculine


community does not address the specific experiences of trans men of color. In these framing comments, both Melvin and Raúl establish a relationship between themselves and the transmasculine YouTube community and anticipate that that relationship will be a driving force of their channel. Additionally, by framing their channels in this way, they discursively construct their channels as places for trans men to gain support and resources, in other words, to access care.

The community is also articulated as motivation on a smaller scale regarding individual videos and discussions within videos. For example, Kyle began his third video by saying, “I have worked up enough courage to make another video . . . As I said in my last video, it is really hard for me to put it all out there in these videos, but you do it in the hope that it will help someone else down the road.” In discussing the difficulty to “put it all out there,” Kyle implicitly references the publicness of YouTube. Publicness is a key characteristic of *ethos*. As Halloran notes, “ethos emphasizes the conventional rather than the idiosyncratic, the public rather than the private.”

An ethos of care differs from many forms of caretaking that take place in private settings. The trans men on YouTube engage in an ethos of care and not simply caring behavior precisely because of the publicness of YouTube.

*Ethos* manifests in individuals, but that manifestation is evidence of the social context an individual is embedded in. Halloran describes an individual’s *ethos* by saying “To have *ethos* is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks.” Similarly, Reynolds writes, “*ethos* is not measurable traits displayed by an individual; rather, it is a complex set of characteristics constructed by a group, sanctioned by that group, and more readily

---

52 Halloran, “Aristotle’s Concept of Ethos,” 60.

53 Ibid.
recognizable to others who belong to or share similar values or experiences."\textsuperscript{54} To this end, specific practices trans men engage in on YouTube enact an ethos of care to the extent that they are recognizable within the community as caring. Michael’s comments thanking the YouTube community for all of their “help, support, and love” is an instance of this kind of recognition. Examining two key categories of these practices, affirmations and practical wisdom, provides insight into most valued virtues of the transmasculine YouTube community.

Affirmations

Trans men include affirmations in their videos that emphasize trans men’s inherent worth. These practices of affirmation demonstrate goodwill—one of three characteristics Aristotle outlined as part of ethos. Smith describes Aristotle’s notion of goodwill as “wishing good for others for their sake; it is the beginning of friendship (1167a) but not the same thing as friendship, since friendship requires reciprocation.”\textsuperscript{55} Although in the broader context of the ethos of care, trans men both care for others and are cared for, in the case of affirmation, there is no expectation of direct reciprocation. The practice of affirmation, therefore, demonstrates that generosity is one underlying value of the transmasculine YouTube community that informs the ethos of care.

Affirmations tend to emphasize overcoming adversity and inner strength. For example, Michael created a video providing affirmation to another trans man on YouTube who had struggled with getting a prescription for testosterone, saying, “man, you have been through more

\textsuperscript{54} Reynolds, “Ethos as Location,” 327.

adversity in your transition than anyone I have ever seen. I always tell you I know you are strong enough to make it through and you’ve proved time and time again that you can make it through.” This video was created as part of a “challenge” in the transmasculine YouTube community to provide each other with more affirmation and positivity. To participate in the challenge, a channel creator picks another trans man they follow on YouTube and creates a video directed at that individual. That this was a challenge circulated among trans men on YouTube is telling of how common this practice of affirmation is in the community. Practicing affirmation is a community expectation that is taken up by individuals.

These affirmations take on particular significance for trans men with intersectionally marginalized identities. For example, in a video discussing his experiences with racism as a Black trans man, Melvin offers, “To the Black trans men who are watching this, especially those in their earlier stages of transition, just understand you are not the problem. Like I said before, the problem is how our society stigmatizes and penalizes blackness. It has nothing to do with you.” In a separate video addressing his experiences dating gay men as a trans man, Melvin says, “To all of the other gay trans men out there who have had similar situations with dating, please do not let it affect how you feel about yourself. Because we are beautiful. We are valuable. We are desirable. We are sexy. And our value does not lie in what is or isn’t between our legs.” In both of these segments, Melvin affirms the worth of people who are similarly intersectionally marginalized by recognizing the structural oppression that makes it difficult for trans men to recognize their own worth. It is a virtue within the transmasculine YouTube community to recognize and express the value of trans men as a way to resist cisnormative and transphobic structures. YouTube is thus constructed as a place to escape—at least to some extent—these structures through positive affirmations.
Practical Wisdom

Trans men on YouTube primarily give advice, solicit advice, and create resources based on personal experience. In some ways, it seems obvious that trans men would value the advice of other trans men on these matters; understood in the context of an ethos of care, however, it reveals personal experience as a key connection between individual trans men and the transmasculine YouTube community. Halloran asserts, “In its simplest form, ethos is what we might call the argument from authority, the argument that says in effect, Believe me because I am the sort of person you can believe.” The practices of trans men giving and soliciting advice on YouTube construct experience—not education, profession, or research—as the key to believability. A lot of the resources and advice in the transmasculine YouTube community pertains to medical transition. Many of the topics addressed in the advice and resources on YouTube may seem from an outsider’s perspective to be more appropriately addressed by a doctor. For example, Kyle created a tutorial show how to self-inject testosterone. This is a rather common practice among trans men on YouTube. Kyle described part of his rationale for creating the video, saying, “It is kind of a rite of passage for guys who have been on T for more than a couple of years to do an instructive informative shot video.” When 19% of trans people report being refused medical care because they are trans and 50% report having to educate their doctor about trans care, medical professionals lose their reputation of being able to help trans people. Hines aptly characterizes this saying, “A deficit of care for transgender people thus arises from a lack of understanding at a general practitioner level.” In that context, YouTube

---

56 Halloran, “Aristotle’s Concept of Ethos,” 60.

57 “Injustice at Every Turn.”

58 Hines, TransForming Gender, 168.
becomes an increasingly important resource for trans people who may not be able to access crucial information through more conventional resources.

Advice and resources based on personal experience rely on *phronesis* or practical wisdom, a second of Aristotle’s three components of *ethos*. Smith defines *phronesis* as “a capacity for discerning in the sphere of action the intermediate point where right conduct lies in any given situation. It is a capacity for applying a rational principle to practical situations that call for choice about action.” He goes on to say, “*phronesis* combines virtue and knowledge. It is knowledge based on the speaker’s experience that guides good practice (*eupraxis*) in a contingent, diverse world.” Phronesis illuminates the connection between personal experience and practical situation; trans men need to give and receive advice based in personal experience because they are in practical situations require clear and informed choices of action. For example, James created a video detailing the process of how to access testosterone, a process with numerous barriers and gatekeeping measures that is difficult to navigate on one’s own. Although critique of this process—which follows the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH) standards of care—is pervasive within trans communities, James does not offer critique of this system. Instead, he emphasizes the practical urgency for trans men seeking testosterone and acknowledges that at this moment most people must go through the WPATH process in order to do so.

Both categories of caring practices—affirmations and practical wisdom—position care as that which meets the needs of trans men living in a transphobic society. The *ethos* of care constructs a refuge from that transphobia, a place where trans men can dwell and their transness

---


60 Ibid.
is attended to. The virtues most valued by the transmasculine YouTube community are those that bring out rather than suppress transness. Trans men can recognize these virtues as caring because this valorization of transness is crucial in addressing the needs of trans men that a transphobic society creates. In this way, the ethos of care of the transmasculine YouTube community resonates with Mayeroff’s assertion that “to care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself.”[^61] The ethos of care allows transness to flourish.

**Conclusions**

All three key concepts of this chapter—ethos, care, and queer worldmaking converge around the idea of orienting to the other. Perhaps most concretely, care requires recognizing and attending to the needs of an other. An ethos functions to tie individuals to communities in that an individual cannot have an ethos that is not tied to virtues recognized and valued by a community and a community’s ethos cannot be recognized without being manifest in individuals. In her theorization of queer phenomenology, Ahmed describes orientations as “the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places.”[^62] This description bridges the orientation moves of both ethos and care. Queer worldmaking requires orienting to others who are marginalized in a hetero- and cis-normative world. Rejecting the isolation of assimilationist politics, queer worldmaking happens when queer people orient towards each other. Ahmed’s orientation powerfully calls our attention to the ways “that some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do


not leave room for others.” Turning toward queer worldmaking adds that queer spaces and queer engagement with each other also have the power to (re)define and (re)create.

Trans men on YouTube exist at the nexus of these three moves of orientation. They engage in work of queer worldmaking through an ethos of care. Each channel creator orients to the needs of the larger community. This orientation renders YouTube a place for transmasculinity to dwell. The particular significance of the ethos of care for trans men on YouTube should not be overlooked. That being said, these orientating moves also signal a broader significance of both care and ethos in the project of queer worldmaking at large.

Care emphasizes the specific needs of queer people as a starting point for queer worldmaking. Care highlights the needs of queer people that are not being met by hetero- and cisnormative structures, as well as, the creative ways that queer people meet those needs for each other. Care functions for queer worldmaking in a way that parallels the role of love that Wanzer-Serrano articulates in the project of decoloniality. “It is a kind of love,” he writes, “that requires self-reflexivity and response-ability; it requires us, as the Young Lords showed, to open up the spaces for many voices and many worlds, while remaining attentive to how we are implicated and implicate ourselves in those worlds and with those voices.” Care and love both function to recognize and attend to the needs of others as a way to resist structures of violence and normativity that cut marginalized people off from ways of fulfilling their own basic needs.

*Ethos* provides a uniquely rhetorical contribution to queer worldmaking. Rhetoricians might understand queer worldmaking—at least in part—as an endeavor that both constitutes and

63 Ibid., 11.

is constituted by queer ethē. This understanding provides at least two key insights to a queer world.

First, a queer world is a place where people can dwell in all of their queerness. Hetero- and cisnormativity function to marginalize queerness both literally and figuratively. Berlant and Warner’s original conception of queer worldmaking addressed how queerness, specifically queer sexuality, was relegated to the private sphere. The queer world that Berlant and Warner evoke is one that embraces public articulations of queer sexuality. Queer worldmaking is the antidote to the normative forces that demand queerness be contained, toned down, compartmentalized, or left at home.

Second, a queer world recognizes queerness as a virtue. Associated virtues might include intimacy, generosity, unpredictability, and—this chapter has argued—care. This constellation of queer virtues are both tools for constructing a queer world and descriptors of what that world values. A transmasculine ethos of care moves us one step closer to enacting that queer world.

65 See Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.”


CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

This thesis has engaged with the trans men on YouTube from the perspective of queer worldmaking as both a resistive and generative project. The transmasculine YouTube community resists cisnormativity by generating a space that centers the lives and experiences of trans men. Following from the idea that queer worldmaking functions through engagement with norms, my primary research question asked how trans men on YouTube help to make a queer world through their engagement with norms of gender, masculinity, and transness. My secondary research question addressed how the specific affordances of YouTube influenced this process. Each of the three analytic chapters highlighted specific ways trans men on YouTube are able to bring a queer world into being.

Queer resistance to norms is not an all or nothing game. To this end, Jakobsen asserts, “The question of resistance, then, is about how to engage this complex field rather than how to reverse or oppose the norm.”¹ Building on Jakobsen’s work, West cautions queer scholars against falling into this trap of asking if something is “queer enough.” Instead, queerness should be judged based on contextualized and contingent engagement with norms that open up possibilities beyond the normative. This thesis has taken up Jakobsen’s and West’s calls for more nuanced attention to norms, attending to both how trans men wrestle with dominant norms of gender, masculinity, and transness, and how trans men constitute alternative, queer norms of the same. Queer worldmaking happens in the relationship between dominant and alternative norms. Each of the three analytic chapters points to a different type of relationship between

these two sets of norms, and—as I will suggest here—a different role that the critic takes on in each case.

The chapter on temporality demonstrates how dominant norms can mask alternative norms. An increasing number of transition narratives in mainstream media have helped to craft dominant norms of transness that see transition as a linear, teleological process. Traces of these dominant norms of transition are apparent in a linear reading of the temporality of transition channels. However, just under the surface is the countercurrent of a complex temporality. Complex temporality exposes the normativity of a linear temporality that relies on passing as a fixed endpoint of transition. Further, a complex temporality highlights alternative norms of the transmasculine YouTube community that emphasize the temporal moves of cycling back and anticipating what is yet to come. This resists the teleological understanding of transition. In this case, where dominant norms obscure the alternative norms, it is the job of the critic to read against the grain of normativity in order to excavate the resistive work that is being accomplished.

The chapter on intelligibility shows a cyclical relationship between dominant and alternative norms. This cycle contains two relationships between dominant and alternative norms. First, dominant norms of gender preclude trans men from being fully intelligible, establishing the need for alternative norms that can more fully recognize trans men. Second, the alternative norms reflect dominant norms to a certain extent, creating their own set of exclusions. Dominant norms of gender are based on cisgender experience; this sets up the exclusion of trans men. The alternative norms that emerge on YouTube are productive in that they expand the possibilities of recognition for trans men. However, the establishment of alternative norms of subjectivity necessarily creates new boundaries and exclusions. Norms of whiteness exclude
trans men of color. Norms of medical transition exclude trans men who cannot or do not want to pursue that path. Norms of masculinity exclude effeminate trans men. Each of these sets of norms in some ways reflect dominant norms of gender. In this cyclical relationship, the critic must attend to both the productive and restrictive possibilities of alternative norms without letting the two cancel each other out.

The chapter on a transmasculine ethos of care highlights how alternative norms can present new possibilities for dominant structures. The ethos of care emerges in response to the structural transphobia that creates barriers to trans people accessing a variety of forms of care. For example, the medicalization of transness makes accessing medical transition necessary for many trans people but also exceedingly difficult. Trans men establish norms of care via YouTube as a way to fill the gaps created by these structural inequities. Caring is normatively associated with femininity, not masculinity. In this context, trans men’s ethos of care constructs new norms of masculinity that rearticulate the gendered dimension of caring. In other words, the norms of caring exhibited in the transmasculine YouTube community do not need to be limited to transmasculinity; they also suggest that masculinity is compatible with norms of caring. Here, the critic is uniquely positioned to telescope out broader implications while remaining grounded in the specificity of the case study.

This attention to complex engagement with norms leads to a central contribution of this thesis: a focus on how a queer world is realized, not just what a queer world might look like or a promise of futurity. There is a line of queer scholarship—largely stemming from Muñoz’s work on queer utopia—that centers queerness in the future, just out of reach of the present. Muñoz’s queer utopia depends on an understanding of queerness as a “rejection of a here and now and an
insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." I find this work compelling, crucial even, in understanding queerness’ aspirations as well as how those aspirations shape queerness in the present moment. Yet, the question remains how do we move from the constraints of the present to the potentiality of the future? How do we make this move without losing the utopic vision of what queerness can be and without ignoring the material constraints on queer lives in the present moment? How do we actualize a queer world?

These questions certainly cannot be answered from a single project, and yet I hope that this thesis can offer some insight. Queer worldmaking is a project of partiality in that a queer world cannot simply materialize, replacing our current social structures in their totality. Rather, the world is made more queer in glimmers and shadows, in fleeting instances and long generations, in public displays and everyday subtleties, in the hard plastic of a gender-inclusive bathroom sign and the soft glow of a computer screen where a trans man watches videos of someone like him for the first time. To recognize the partiality of queer worldmaking is not to reject its radical roots for a politics of incrementalism. Rather, it is to call attention to the plurality of ways in which queer worldmaking happens and recognize the queerness of each instance.

This attention to plurality and partiality necessitates attention to specificity. This thesis identified three modalities through which trans men on YouTube engage in queer worldmaking: time, subjectivity, and caring relationalities. Each of these modalities suggests a different attribute of a queer world and demonstrates specific ways in which the trans men on YouTube move toward actualizing that attribute. A queer world intertwines past, present, and future to avoid teleological understandings of personhood. A queer world contextualizes norms in order

---

to recognize queer subjectivities on their own terms, not in relation to normative subjectivities.

Finally, in a queer world all beings can care and are cared for through the recognition of situated needs. Additionally, the move to understanding modalities of queer worldmaking allows for the identification of specific possibilities and constraints of each modality. Perhaps the clearest example from this thesis is the constraints of an intelligible transmasculine subjectivity because of the inevitable exclusions whenever boundaries of intelligibility are set. Overall, modalities of queer worldmaking maintain accountability to the material realities of queer lives in the present moment and provide specific ways to move beyond those constraints towards a queerer world.

A focus on the modalities that bring a queer world into being also helps to crystalize the relationship between rhetoric and worldmaking. The relationship between rhetoric and queer worldmaking is two-fold. First, this theoretical junction calls attention to the rhetoricity of worldmaking. A queer world can and should be envisioned from a variety of disciplinary vantages, but rhetoricians are uniquely positioned to comment on the process of worldmaking. Returning once more to Poulakas’ definition of rhetoric as “the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible,” positions rhetoric as the bridge between the here and now and the possibility of the future. The appropriate may initially appear as contradictory to queerness. However, in the context of queer worldmaking, I view the appropriate as that which is grounded in the present conditions. The appropriate does not presume a queer utopian orientation to the current moment. Instead, it is keenly aware of the constraints of normativity and looks to the possible for the queer utopia on the horizon.

---

Rhetoric moves us towards the imagined potential of what could be, but always keeps one foot in the quagmire of what is. As such, the modalities of queer worldmaking are rhetorical endeavors. In the specific case of this thesis, YouTube videos are rhetoric because they connect to the present moment through the practice of documentation while also imagining and enacting a world that is more hospitable to trans men. This dual purpose is both the rhetorical and worldmaking function of the videos. Rhetorical criticism, as a methodology and a practice, attends to this matter of what rhetoric does. From the early focus on rhetoric as persuasion through the shift to rhetoric as influence, rhetoric is not merely discourse because rhetoric does something in the world. Rhetoric is a technê, a productive art. To this end, this thesis is a work of rhetorical criticism—as opposed to qualitative analysis of discourse—insofar as it is concerned not only with describing how and what the videos are, but also how these videos help to create a queer world. This is to say, rhetoric is a primary way that a queer world is made.

Second, queer worldmaking highlights the queerness of rhetoric. Explicitly rhetorical studies of queer worldmaking not only help to justify the rhetorical significance of queer rhetoricians’ work, but also suggest that rhetoric more broadly may have an underlying current of queerness. Certainly not all rhetorical scholarship engages with queer bodies, lives, and experiences, but reading theories of rhetoric and queer worldmaking together highlights the way rhetoric itself is tied to the queer conditions of possibility, undecidability, and contingency. Various strands of rhetorical theory embrace these “queer” conditions to greater and lesser degrees. Sophistic and neo-Sophistic rhetoric, as seen in Poulakas, are particularly strong examples of the latent queerness of rhetoric. By contrast, Aristotle’s more formulaic and rule driven approach to rhetoric deemphasizes the elements of rhetoric that can be seen as queer. More contemporarily, critical rhetoric emphasizes contingency particularly in connection to
ideology. This move provides more resources to think through the possibility and undecidability of rhetoric, even when it is less explicit in critical rhetorical theory. Turns to affect within rhetorical theory also rely heavily on ideas of possibility, undecidability, and contingency. Far from a comprehensive account of rhetorical theory’s queerness, this list provides a few touchstones that gesture to the range of ways these queer topoi manifest in rhetoric. Moreover, naming these topoi that are pervasive through much of rhetorical theory as queer is an attempt to epistemically de-marginalize queer rhetoric.

The queerness of rhetoric is a de-essentialized understanding of the concept that, as Rand notes, “unhinges queerness from a specific sexual or political standpoint, but it does not desexualize or depoliticize the implications of the queerness of agency.”4 Even still, there is a danger in broadening queerness so much that all of rhetoric falls under its domain. If everything is queer, it is easy to lose attention to specific, material concerns of queer people. We still need rhetorical studies that explicitly focus on queer lives. Claiming that there is a queerness of rhetoric does not erase this need. If anything, it should enhance that commitment. For embracing rhetoric’s queerness is—to borrow a phrase from Morris—a way to “stay our home ground and render it pink.”5 This move discursively centers queer subjects. Queer rhetoric ceases to be a fringe area of interest and becomes intimately tied to the core of what rhetoric is.

This centering of queerness is tied to another contribution of this thesis: transmasculine specificity. It may seem that such narrow specificity pushes the study further to the outskirts of rhetorical studies. However, I argue that the tendency to group all trans experiences together


under one umbrella is evidence of how trans and queer rhetoric has been marginalized. Trans experiences are so far from the mainstream purview that nuances within trans communities are often overlooked. Transfeminine, transmasculine, and non-binary are all radically different trans experiences. Studies that seek to make claims about trans experiences more broadly run the risk of erasing the material differences that shape experiences specific to certain trans subjectivities. This thesis focused on the experiences of trans men on YouTube not to claim that trans men are more important to study than trans women or non-binary trans people, but because that specificity allowed me to attend to the nuances of transmasculine experiences through trans men’s rhetoric. For example, testosterone serves as a significant resource of rhetorical invention in the transmasculine YouTube community. This role is not the same as the one estrogen plays in the transfeminine YouTube community. Moves to retrieve trans and queer rhetoric from the margins help to frame this kind of specificity as an asset of the scholarship rather than a limitation.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As highlighted in the secondary research question, I have attended to some of the affordances of the YouTube platform in order to understand the queer worldmaking potential of trans men’s use of YouTube. However, there are several methodological limitations of this thesis that should be addressed. First, I only analyzed the videos themselves, not the comments responding to the videos. The practice of commenting and some individual comments were addressed in the videos themselves, so I was able to understand the role of commenting in the transmasculine YouTube community indirectly. However, a more robust and direct engagement
with the comments section would offer insight into how that feature of the YouTube platform can help to shape community interaction.

Additionally, this study is limited in terms of what kinds of channels and channel creators were included. As stated previously, I believe the specificity of the focus on trans men in this thesis is one of its contributions, but there are several other limiting demographic characteristics to the sample included in this study. Perhaps most fundamental to the study, all of the channel creators were pursuing medical transition. The majority of trans men on YouTube pursue medical transition with only a small minority documenting a non-medical transition. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that all trans men on YouTube follow the medical transition path. The emphasis on medical transition tacitly points to the absence of attention to class in this thesis. Medical transition can be a very expensive process and many trans people are unable to afford it. While some channel creators discussed the financial hardships of transition, it did not play a significant role in the analysis in this study. Additionally, all of the channel creators included were U.S.-based and in their late teens through twenties. There is a large group of trans men on YouTube who fit this demographic description, but there are also many who do not. Experiences of transition differ significantly based on geographic location and age. This makes having a more limited sample productive in some ways, but a future study that attended to wider diversity in this regard would be beneficial. Finally, while this study has sought to attend to the racial dimensions of the transmasculine YouTube community, more work could and should be done to better understand how norms of whiteness pervade.

The methodological objection could be raised that I did not interview channel creators and therefore could not capture their sense making process. While this is a useful objection and a future study including interviews would likely prove compelling, I believe that the choice to
focus on the publically available videos was valuable for this study. This thesis did not seek to answer questions of individual intention or sense making. Rather, the focus was on how the videos and channels, individually and collectively, participated in a project of queer worldmaking. The use of public videos and not interviews allowed me to look for patterns without being influenced by a channel creator’s stated intention. This is certainly not to say that I know better than the trans men creating these channels or that channel creator’s intentions and understanding of what they are doing are unimportant. It is only to say that interviews would not have addressed the questions of this particular study.

These limitations provide the basis for several potential areas for future research. Studies of trans uses of YouTube from more varied methodological perspectives could contribute to a deeper and wider understanding of a key site of vernacular trans discourse. In addition to interviews as a potentially useful method, big data methodologies that can address algorithms and circulation would help in understanding how the YouTube platform enables and constrains trans YouTube communities. For example, attending to the algorithms and circulation patterns as they differentially affect trans people of color and white trans people on YouTube would provide another layer of insight into how the norms of whiteness are conveyed through the technology itself.

A second area for future research related to trans people on YouTube is comparative work. Comparative work can attend to the specificity needed in trans studies while also accounting for a wider range of experiences. Comparative work could serve to address some of the demographic limitations of this study including national context, race, and class. This kind of work would be beneficial for understanding the differences and similarities of transmasculine, transfeminine, and non-binary trans people on YouTube, for example. Additionally,
comparative work could prove fruitful in understanding different genres of channels that trans people create on YouTube like individual, collaborative, transition, and educational. Finally, comparative work could address differences and similarities between the affordances of YouTube and other forms of vernacular trans discourse including other social media, print media such as autobiographies or zines, or archival work.

Beyond ideas for future studies of trans people on YouTube, this thesis also presents possibilities for future engagement with queer worldmaking, rhetoric, and trans studies. More specifically, this thesis has brought up new questions for me about the idea of passing and the role it plays in trans experiences. In particular, chapters one and two teeter on the edge of a critique of passing, questioning passing as the *telos* of transition and the adequacy of trans men becoming intelligible as passing cis men, respectively. It was beyond the scope of this project to engage with the concept of passing in a more robust way on its own. However, I was consistently struck by the salience of this dominant discourse of passing in the vernacular discourse of trans men on YouTube and how the vernacular engagement with passing both opened up and precluded new possibilities of queer worldmaking. As a result, this thesis sparks questions for future research about the connections between dominant discourses, trans vernacular discourses, and queer worldmaking.

In closing, this thesis emphasizes the importance of trans voices. As trans people continue to be increasingly visible in mainstream media, it is perhaps easy to turn to these dominant texts to try to understand trans lives. Analyzing and critiquing these texts is valuable work and should continue in increasingly nuanced ways. However, we must be careful not to let these mainstream texts take the place of trans voices. Mainstream media representations of trans subjects are more often than not created by and for cisgender people. As a result, these texts tell
us a great deal about cisgender reception of transness and very little about trans lives. In focusing on dominant discourses of transness, it becomes all too easy to let cis voices or trans voices that have been shaped, edited, and approved by cis perspectives become our point of understanding trans rhetoric. This is not to say that we should not engage critically with dominant discourses of transness, only that we should be careful not to overstate what we can learn about trans people from them. As critics in this moment of increased mainstream trans visibility, we are in a position to resist this cis-washing of transness by uplifting and amplifying trans voices. Trans people have done the queer work of worldmaking long before mainstream media recognized our existence. Rhetorical criticism of queer worldmaking cannot be done without trans vernacular voices.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society.* London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983.
