

# **Trans\*forming Cyber Space and the Trans Liberation Movement: A study of transmasculine youth bloggers on Tumblr.com**

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According to a survey conducted by the blogging site Posterous in early January of 2013, Tumblr is the most popular website amongst teenagers and young adults from the ages 13-25. Just weeks before this survey was published, on December 20, 2012, the Tumblr website featured an editorial on the growing number of transgender youth that use the blogging site. This thesis seeks to examine transmasculine youth blogs on Tumblr that write about identity, embodiment, transition and trans\* liberation. Through focusing on general transmasculine blogging trends on Tumblr, along with four specific trans-identified bloggers, this study explores trans\* youth using the Internet to find community, explore their identity, and construct a political consciousness. The general conclusions of the research point to an ever-expanding category of transgender in cyber spaces, in part due to the intersectional and inclusive politics and identities of transmasculine bloggers. These bloggers' intersectional approach to identity and trans\* liberation politics challenges mainstream depictions of the transgender experience as racially white and medically based. In challenging the dominant narrative of the trans experience as a condition of being trapped in the wrong body, these youth bloggers are telling different narratives of gender embodiment and transition that contest temporal constructions of transgenderism as a timeline with a clear beginning and end point. Their radical new imagining of the gendered experience contributes to the expansive and inclusive trans\* communities online.

## Introduction to Trans\* Cyber Space

*Technology precedes social change.*  
- Jeanne Córdova

When I was coming of age and understanding my sexuality, I began to feel intuitively that the queer community I was seeking wasn't the rainbow flag waving, corporate sponsored gay community found at a pride parade. I sensed that there wasn't much space for femmey, butch-identified trans boi<sup>1</sup> divas like me in the mainstream gay movement. I didn't want to argue that I had the right to be married because my love was like heterosexual love. I knew my way of loving was nothing like heterosexual love. And as Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore says in her book *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*, I was searching for a queer community with "new ways of living, lusty for and caring for one another" (Bernstein Sycamore, 16).

The rubric of the mainstream gay movement was too limiting. I didn't feel I should have to appeal for equality through arguing queer and heterosexual sameness. My attempts to understand my gender weren't matching the tragic narrative of being trapped in the wrong body that I was so accustomed to hearing, but being a "lesbian" wasn't working out for me either. My search for a radical and diverse community led me to the Internet, and ultimately trans\*<sup>2</sup> Tumblr communities. As a self identified femmey trans-but, I began surfing the web for other narratives like my own. My geographic

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<sup>1</sup> An alternative spelling of the word boi, commonly used by transmasculine folks to indicate that someone is boyish, but not a conventional boy.

<sup>2</sup> The term trans\*, sometimes referred to as the "trans snowflake," proliferates in GLBTQA blogging communities on the Internet as a way of signaling or referencing the broader transgender community (e.g. transsexuals, transgenders, genderqueers, bigenders, gender non-conformists, etc.). Many people will choose to identify as trans\* to indicate they are a part of the community, but don't feel the need to offer any specific details or explanations of their personal gender identity and experience.

environment was a black hole for butch visibility and community, so I searched for a cyber community of transmasculine<sup>3</sup> bloggers. I wanted to understand more about who I was.

My Internet searching led me to Tumblr, a social networking and blogging site founded in February of 2007. Tumblr now hosts (as of December 2012) over 80 million blogs, geared towards a range of topics including individual life chronicles, food, community photo sharing, and historical information. Tumblr differs from other blogging sites like Blogger or Live Journal because it does not function as just a platform to write personal journal entries, critiques, or reviews, but was developed as a space to share and reblog other people's posts. Tumblr users "follow" other bloggers and repost their photos, quotes, and videos. The site is premised on the idea of sharing and reblogging other people's things, and then adding your own comments to them. Because of this unique platform it allows users a space to express their personal truths, stories, and experiences, while also linking those stories up through the idea of reblogging and sharing one another's' posts. The Tumblr platform and layout makes perfect sense for trans\* youth, like myself, hoping to find a personal and subjective community of other gender bending individuals.

I began to use Tumblr out of personal interest. I built my own Tumblr without much of a focus or purpose; it was just a showcase of my identity, as I knew it, and the things that mattered to me. I followed friends' blogs and a couple queer-related blogs that I had discovered. The more I posted, the more I found that anytime I reblogged a

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<sup>3</sup> The term transmasculine in this paper is referring to butch-identified women, masculine females, female-to-male transgenders, masculine presenting genderqueers, and any other individual that falls in this region of the gender spectrum.

post with a “trans” tag<sup>4</sup>, the post would go viral. I started clicking on the blog pages of those that reposted my #trans posts, observing the chain of reblogs. Following the series of reblogged posts consistently led me in circles; from blog to blog I would surf, eventually being lead back to the initial blogger that had begun the trail. The more I did this, the more I found the same hub of parent blogs centered on trans\* identities and issues. I was fascinated by the fact that on a website with over 80 million blogs, I could consistently be led in circles. How were all of these individuals reposting and referencing one another on their pages? I had entered into a community of individuals, all somehow intertwined and linked in cyber relationships.

Months later, I ran into a FTM<sup>5</sup> trans friend of mine and as I talked with him about my research, we found that we both followed the same trans\* blogs. At the time, I was unaware he had a Tumblr, so the fact that we had joined separately, with no cyber linkages between us, and both found the same community of blogs fueled my interest more. I wondered how trans\* blogging communities were so interconnected, filled with rhizomatic linkages that created a self-contained trans\* Tumblr community.

These communities became a central part of my life, my gender exploration, and eventually, my academic research. My involvement in trans\* cyber communities was central to my identity formation, but also my political consciousness. Trans\* bloggers

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<sup>4</sup> Tags are a way of making it possible to search blogs for specific topics. On Tumblr, anytime a blogger publishes a post they have the ability to fill in tags. Usually these tags are a pound symbol (#) followed by one word or phrase to indicate what the post is about. For example, a post with website resources about packing and binding for trans\* folks could be tagged with “trans\*,” “FTM,” “packing,” “binding,” “trans resources,” and “trans websites,” in order to allow for someone to Google search for “Tumblr + trans resources” and find this particular blog post. Tags are the same as hashtag.

<sup>5</sup> FTM is the abbreviation for female-to-male transsexuals and refers to an individual who is pursuing a sex change from female to male.

weren't just telling their stories, but also contesting dominant and hegemonic narratives about their ways of being and who they were "supposed" to be. I began this project to draw attention to the cultural and knowledge productions of trans\*masculine youth that go ignored and marginalized in queer, straight, academic and mainstream contexts.

My research and project began as a series of open-ended questions that would guide me through my data collection, although by the end of my observations, I found myself with new, different questions I hadn't anticipated. My initial questions were focused on the purposes and functions of trans\* cyber communities for both trans\* youth and the broader queer community. I wanted to explore how individuals were using Tumblr to express their personal identities, and disseminate information and resources. I also wanted to explore what made their identities, and the politics they expressed about their identities different from the mainstream queer movement. Through the research process, my data guided me to more questions. I began asking, how are trans\* bloggers creating new ways of describing and writing about identity? What is the significance of the language they choose? How does this language impact and contest dominant narratives that describe the trans\* identity as an experience of being born in the wrong body? And ultimately, how does their rewriting of hegemonic narratives forge a new anti-assimilationist queer consciousness and movement?

My findings argue that online, in virtual trans\*masculine communities, definitions and understandings of transgenderism are expansive, inclusive, and intersectional. These communities contest dominant narratives that prescribe trans\* identities as being all about the medical process of transition. The heterogeneity of the bloggers and their varying identities speak to the broader and more inclusive nature of trans\* communities

in cyber space, highlighting the fact that being trans isn't just a "white thing." I argue that the bloggers of this study are engaged in their own knowledge and language production, creating new ways of talking about identities and bodies. Their stories contest monolithic queer media depictions that only show normative, cisgender queer folks or feminine gay men, with transmasculine folks being completely invisible. Trans\* cyber communities are developing an anti-assimilationist, anti-passing, radical and intersectional approach to trans\* liberation, and they are doing it all online.

My theoretical framework for writing about trans\* cyber communities comes from a wide array of academic discourse and activist writing. Central to my paper's focus of gender identity and embodiment are queer theorists such as Judith Butler and J. Jack Halberstam. Butler's canonical text "Gender Trouble," which argues against notions of innate gender, is foundational to the blogger's contesting of the "born in the wrong body" myth. Butler's assertion that all gender is an act of learned and sustained performance implies that the correlation/pairing of certain sexed bodies with certain gender identities has been socially constructed. If all gender is performative and does not correlate to the physical body, then there is no foundation to the argument that one can have an innate gender identity trapped in the "wrong" body. Similar to Butler, J. Jack Halberstam works to deconstruct ideas about the naturalness of gender. In his book *Female Masculinity*, he deconstructs the correlation/pairing of the male body to masculinity. Trans\*masculine cyber communities enact the alternative masculinities that Halberstam historicizes and attempts to make visible. Queer theorists such as Butler and Halberstam underline all of my findings.

Another body of literature that I pull heavily from are activist texts, such as the anthologies *Nobody Passes: Resisting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* and *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*. These anthologies showcase essays written by gender rebels and anti-assimilationist activists that have political projects similar to my trans\* cyber subjects. These texts offer insights on where queer and gender theory meet real life experiences and practices.

In addition to these bodies of literature, the young field of cyber studies, has created and established research methods, such as cyber ethnography, that guided me through the research process. Virtual ethnographic practices and texts taught me how to allow cyber data to guide my research questions and conclusions. Queer cyber scholarship focuses on how LGBTQIA<sup>6</sup> communities have used the Internet as a site of cultural production and discourse. Much of this queer cyber research has emphasized the ways in which queer individuals use the Internet for coming out stories, chat rooms sex, or identity exploration via the “homepage.” These texts provided me with an understanding of what was missing from online research of queer identities. As Nina Wakeford points out in her article, “Cyberqueer,” there is “very little material on transgender experience despite the widespread participation of transgendered users in diverse cyberqueer forums” (Wakeford, 408). My research falls at the crossroads of these disciplines and bodies of literature, bringing together queer academia, with queer activism, with cyber space. My aim was to address the lack of attention being given to transgender individuals online, while also exploring the unique and radical politics of

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<sup>6</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and ally

trans\* cyber communities. My research calls for a transgendering of cyber space, cyber studies, and queer cyber studies.



## Methods and Research

Central to my understanding of how to conduct my research was Katie Ward's article "Cyber-Ethnography and the Emergence of the Virtually New Community," published in the *Journal of Information Technology* in 1999. Ward's article examines how traditional methods of ethnography, or rather, traditional research methods of the social sciences cannot be applied to cyber communities for two specific reasons: the fluid boundaries between physical and virtual, and also the fluid boundaries between researcher and subject. Ward emphasizes the reflexive nature of virtual ethnography and the ways in which cyber research calls for constant defining and redefining of reality and its' parameters.

Ward finds it essential to point out that traditional ethnographic methods are based on the assumption that community exists when individuals are in a physical or geographic space together. Traditional research methods do not attempt to analyze whether community exists, rather these methods simply explore the process that formed that community and the details and characteristics of that community. She states, "To apply such methods to the virtual suggests an underlying assumption that a community exists and in effect the research methods *construct* an inaccurate depiction of the virtual community" (Ward, 100). Ward asserts that these normative research methods don't allow for empirical evidence to drive the research. She describes the process of doing cyber ethnography as one that allows the subject of study to talk back to the researcher and shape the direction and focus of the research. Rather than a researcher entering with preconceived ideas of what they will find, cyber ethnography is defined by its

researchers' openness to the possibilities of constantly redefining reality and its' parameters. This openness blurs the boundaries between the researcher and the subject of study.

This same blurring of boundaries was discussed in Chris Ashford's article, "Queer Theory, Cyber-Ethnographies and Researching Online Sex Environments." Ashford discusses how ethnographic researchers traditionally viewed themselves as separate from the subjects they were studying and worked hard to maintain the boundaries that differentiated themselves from those whom they observed. Ashford argues that this characteristic of traditional ethnography does not hold true for virtual ethnography and that distinctions between researcher and subject are exceptionally difficult in online research. Virtual researchers often seek to move beyond the "lurker role" in cyberspace by interacting, posting, and forming relationships in the cyber communities that they research. In doing so, many researchers become attached and invested in the communities they study.

This discussion of the fluidity between researcher and subject was paramount to the formation of my approach to researching trans\* cyber communities. I am not only a fellow trans-identified blogger, but prior to beginning my official research, I was already a member of these cyber communities, reblogging individuals that would later become the foci of my study, engaging in the circulation of ideas and resources in these tightly bound cyber spheres. Separating myself from my research was never an option, so using Ward's framework of open cyber ethnography was the only viable solution.

However, contrary to Ward's argument about accessing the existence of a virtual community, I already knew from experience that these trans\* cyber communities existed.

As I stated in the introduction, my involvement with Tumblr taught me that some form of community existed between trans\* Tumblr blog pages. I didn't know how to define or describe them, but I had an intuitive and experiential understanding of their existence. My initial research question was: Why/how do these Tumblr communities exist and what purpose do they serve? This very broad question was my jumping off point; I wanted to enter my research open to the possibilities that would arise. Although this question was what initially drew me to this research, my data took me in different directions.

My initial phase of research involved seeking out trans\* blogs to follow. As I stated in the introduction, my pre-research use of Tumblr had introduced me to a few central/hub trans\* blogs. I cast a wide net, following an array of trans\* identified bloggers in order to observe themes and trends in the larger trans\* blogging community. Tumblr displays links to all of the blog pages that have reposted or "liked" a given post, so I would scroll through the list of blog links at the bottom of the screen, looking for new ones to follow. I decided to only follow blog pages in which the blogger explicitly identified themselves as a member of the trans\* community. I also looked for these trans\* identified bloggers to be posting on the topics of identity, queer politics, transitioning, or other gender related topics. I wasn't explicitly looking for political or activist blogs; I just wanted to follow bloggers who were writing or posting about gender-related topics.

After my initial search and the elimination of inactive blogs, blogs that were primarily pornography, or blogs that operated based solely on photo submissions, I was following a total of about 50 individuals. For a period of three months, I checked my Tumblr news feed daily, paying attention to the content of blogs, posts that went viral on

nearly all the blogs I followed, and political/policy-related posts. I wanted identify areas of similarity and difference among the bloggers.

Common trends emerged from my initial research. I found an overwhelming number of blogs focused on transmasculine issues, while very few were focused on transfeminine issues. This discrepancy interested me because of the historical invisibility of butch women and other masculine-of-centre individuals, an invisibility that still exists today in popular media and broader culture. I'm not arguing that transfeminine individuals have been visible, because historically all queer individuals have been subjects of erasure, especially the trans\* community; however, I am arguing that historically drag queens and male-to-female (MTF) transgenders have been more visible, historically and currently, in both the queer community and broader mainstream culture. Noticing this trend about the dominance of transmasculine blogs made me interested in the ways that the Internet and cyber communities are being utilized by transmasculine individuals. In an article published in 2003, Jan Wickman notes the upsurge in visibility of female masculinity and FTM trans individuals. In her article, "Masculinity and Female Bodies," she credits both academic and cultural trends with this increased visibility. I found myself interested in understanding if this increased visibility was a product of the large transmasculine online presence, or whether trans\* blogging, cyber communities, and virtual storytelling were a product of transmasculine visibility. At this point, I narrowed the scope of my research to transmasculine and masculine-of-centre bloggers.

Another trend I found in my initial research was the common practice of trans\* bloggers creating a link on their blogs titled "Transition." These transition links lead to

separate pages on their blogs focused on documenting their bodily changes. Transition pages commonly feature photos showing the growth of facial hair or notable changes in body appearance, videos capturing voice changes, and diary-like text describing the transitioning process. Transition pages tend to offer further description of the individuals' identity, preferred gender pronouns, and adjectives of choice. The identities detail a vast and varying community of gender bending and gender nonconforming individuals. I found that rarely were transmasculine bloggers completing "full transitions" from female-to-male. Most individuals were having conversations about "how far" they wished to transition, i.e. taking testosterone, having top surgery<sup>7</sup>, having bottom surgery<sup>8</sup>, etc. Most bloggers identified their gender somewhere in between the traditional gender binary of man and woman. Blogger's transition pages showed largely varying ideas and plans about "how far" to transition. This trend made me question the ways in which trans\* Tumblrs reflect queer counter-cultural or anti-assimilationist movements. I wanted to know: How are trans\* Tumblrs reflecting queer cultural trends to resist passing and live beyond the binary?

On their Tumblr home pages, these transmasculine bloggers are commonly posting or reposting educational or informational material about a broad range of trans\* issues. Transitioning or passing advice is commonly paired with website links for

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<sup>7</sup> "Top surgery" refers to the medical procedure of having one's breasts removed. There are two different procedures available. The most common is a bilateral mastectomy where two lateral incisions are made along the pecks and the breast tissue is removed. The nipples are repositioned. The other available surgery is often referred to as "key hole" and removed the breast tissue via liposuction. A bilateral mastectomy is more effective in creating a male contour chest, but leaves large scars. Some opt for the key hole operation to avoid scars.

<sup>8</sup> Bottom surgery refers to the medical procedures to construct a penis. Bottom surgery can be phalloplasty or metoidioplasty, but both procedures involve taking skin and tissue from other parts of the body and constructing a penis.

acquiring binders<sup>9</sup>, packers<sup>10</sup>, testosterone, or needles. These posts commonly contain information about knowing your trans\* rights, for example: in health care settings, going through airport security, or acquiring a new identification card at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Other educational posts contain statistics about trans\* rates of suicide, depression, alcohol abuse, and harassment. Bathrooms are a common conversation topic with posts frequently including gender-neutral bathroom phone apps, state-by-state bathrooms rights, and resource guides to organizing for gender-neutral bathrooms in one's own community. Some posts focus on ways of natural transitioning<sup>11</sup>, recommending supplements or workout routines over hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and medical surgeries. Trans\* bloggers also commonly repost relevant and current news articles. The wide range of information about trans\* rights, lives, and identities being posted on Tumblr led me to my research question: How do trans\* individuals use Tumblr to disseminate information about health care, transitioning, trans\*

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<sup>9</sup> Binding is a trend commonly practiced by female-to-male trans\* folks or individuals with breasts that they seek to hide or deemphasize. Binding methods vary. Some individuals use duct tape, ACE bandages, or athletic compression shirts. Others with more economic privilege or income may choose to buy commercially available binders that can resemble a sports bra or a compression shirt (depending on the length), but serve the purpose of pressing the chest down and out.

<sup>10</sup> Packing is a trend commonly practiced by female-to-male trans\* folks or individuals wishing to give the appearance of having a penis. Similar to binding, methods vary. Some distinguish between soft packing and hard packing. Soft packing may involve using a sock, a condom filled with liquid or gel, or any other object that can give the appearance of a bulge. Commercially available packers are available for soft packing that are made to look like a flaccid penis. Hard packers are made to look like an erect penis and are commonly made of silicone.

<sup>11</sup> Natural transitions are transitioning methods that do not include surgery or hormone replacement. Natural transitioning is also referred to as transitioning with vitamins and supplements. Some individuals believe that certain vitamins can help to lower one's voice, grow body hair, or change other physical aspects of the body. Natural transitioning methods can also include work out regiments that alter the shape of the body, i.e. bulking up shoulders for FTM transgenders.

rights, resources for trans\* individuals, and websites to buy products for passing and transitioning?

One more common trend I noticed was the intersectional politics of these transmasculine bloggers. As mentioned previously, these bloggers commonly posted about trans\* specific topics, but their content was not limited to gender issues. These bloggers posted about race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and immigrant status. I was fascinated by the emphasis and attention these bloggers pay to intersectionalities of oppression. Trans\* bloggers commonly emphasize the need to fight all systems of oppression – i.e. racism, sexism, classism, etc. - in order to combat cissexism.<sup>12</sup> Commonly blogged topics include: fighting a culture of slut shaming, protesting clothing chains that sell culturally appropriated products from Native nations, advocating for Palestine, and the need for acknowledging the arbitrary nature of borders in the fight for immigration reform. The intersectional analysis that these trans bloggers exhibit extends far beyond the scope of the mainstream gay community and led me to my research question: How do the politics of transmasculine individuals online radically differ from the mainstream queer movement?

By entering into my research with the openness that cyber ethnography requires, I have been able to follow my observations and let my research guide me in any direction necessary. My initial observation and participation in these cyber communities led me to a whole series of questions that would then guide the next phase of my research.

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<sup>12</sup> Cisgender is a term that refers to individuals with normative gender expressions. Cissexism is a social structure of oppression that erases trans\* identities and experiences and regards them as less valid than cisgender experiences, bodies, and ways of living.

In order to study these bloggers and questions more in depth, I decided to focus in on four different bloggers who encompass all of the earlier trends and observations I previously mentioned: transmasculinity, blog sections focused on personal Transitions, posting trans\* educational material, and politics focused on intersectionalities of identity and oppression. I wanted to more closely look at these individuals' identities, transitions, and politics, and trace the ways in which they identified themselves and their bodies through time and through transitioning. I was looking for terms that described how they defined their identities and politics. I was also looking for posts that discussed their involvement in online blogging communities. With each person's blog I went all the way back in time to their<sup>13</sup> very first posting and traced my way forward in time. I didn't clip blogs that didn't pertain to intersectional politics or their trans\* identities. I also clipped posts from the Transition sections of their blogs. I was hoping to collect enough clippings to begin to create a more rounded understanding of each individual blogger through examining their identities, politics, and transition. I was also looking for matching or the same reblogged posts between the different sites.

I chose the four bloggers based on the volume and depth of their postings. I wanted bloggers that constitute some of the major traffic hubs of these trans\* blogging communities. It was also important for me to capture the varying decisions individuals were making about transitioning; so two of the bloggers are medically transitioning, one is naturally transitioning, and the other is pre-transitioning, but very vocal about their exploration of transitioning options. The bloggers I chose are college students, non

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<sup>13</sup> Each of my bloggers have individual pronoun preferences based on their identities and points in transitioning, however when referring to them in general or collectively I will be using the gender neutral pronouns: they, them, and theirs.



college students, U.S. citizens, immigrants to the U.S., Black, Filipino, Vietnamese, white, Southerners, Californians, among other widely ranging identity differences. I find it important to acknowledge my positionalities as well, though. I am a queer and trans\*, white, middle class undergraduate student in Colorado. I have not begun any physical transitioning, although my social transitioning process as a trans\* person is ongoing. While throughout my research I attempt to acknowledge and unpack the differences and heterogeneity of trans\* bloggers, my understanding is limited by my identity and experiences. I can never fully understand or unravel all of the facets and components of my research subjects' identities.

One of the biggest decisions I had to make as a researcher was whether to inform my research subjects that they were the topic of my study. Some trans\* bloggers on Tumblr have text on their page claiming ownership of all their posts and ideas, explicitly stating that their pages do not exist for research purposes. None of the bloggers I focused on had any text on their page asking to not be researched or claiming copyright over the material. Because the blogs I followed were all public and accessible to anyone with Internet access, I decided not to inform the bloggers that I was writing about them. I was concerned that the content of their pages would change with the knowledge of my research. I wanted their posts to be organic. Although all blogging is an act of performing and representing oneself however one chooses, I did not want the focus and topics of my research to influence their performances. I also decided to leave all of their URL's and personal names true to their blog pages. Even if pseudonyms had been used, a reader could have easily tracked down the blogs from a search engine online.

The project of collecting data for this project began in August of 2012 and continued into February of 2013. As I conducted my research, I realized that what I was writing about was on the forefront of not only academic research, but also mainstream culture. In September and October I could not find any sources about trans\* folks blogging online, but by December, Tumblr featured a storyboard about the large number of trans\* youth using their website. Tumblr's editorial, "For Transgender Youth, a Home on Tumblr," features an interview with a twenty two year old trans\* blogger Lucas Fabray. Fabray discusses the popularity of Tumblr amongst trans\* bloggers because of the rich discussions happening about identity. The editorial quotes Fabray saying, "Tumblr is just the place where people are talking about identity. You see that you're not alone. You're not weird. You're having feelings that can be out there and in forms that are celebrated. That is awesome" (Ellison, 2012). Following this groundbreaking editorial, the blogging site Posterous released statistics from a study they conducted that found Tumblr to be the most popular website for youth between the ages of thirteen and twenty five (Glenn, 2013). My initial inclinations about Tumblr as a fruitful site for trans\* youth research were proven to be accurate.

Queer and trans\* bloggers also received media attention from *The New York Times* website when they published an article titled "Generation LGBTQIA" on January 9, 2013. The article highlights what they call "post-gay gender activists" who, as they describe it, are "forging a political identity all their own, often at odds with mainstream gay culture" (Schulman, 2013). The *New York Times Article* describes a new generation of queer youth using their tech and web savvy skills to build a movement. "If the gay-rights movement today seems to revolve around same-sex marriage, this generation is

seeking something more radical: an upending of gender roles beyond the binary of male/female.” (Schulman, 2013). “Generation LGBTGIA” encapsulates much of the focus of my research: a new generation of queer and trans\* youth seeking to redefine the gay movement using the tech tools of their generation.

This thesis paper is the culmination of my observations of trans\* bloggers and trans\* blogging trends. It is inherently bias, as a trans\* blogger, I can never fully remove myself from my passion and interest for the knowledge and cultural productions of fellow gender bending online activists. However, my observations and conclusions are significant; they highlight a new generation of gender activists that are actively challenging and redefining queer liberation and standards of “passing.” My conclusions necessitate the end of trans\* cyber youth erasure in academia and broader mainstream culture.

## Literature Review

The early 1990s was a fruitful period in queer academia, activism, and identity. Queer theory emerged during this time period with seminal works such as *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble." The late 80s and early 90s was also a period of an upsurge in activism in queer communities as gays and lesbians rallied behind the AIDS epidemic. In Jan Wickman's article, "Masculinity and Female Bodies," she credits this period of queer activism with creating the "gender-blending trend." She states, "New and more radical politics were developed within transgender organizations renouncing unconditional adjustment to the normative gender categories of man or woman as the principle for integration in society" (Wickman, 41). Wickman's article focuses on how both the increased academic attention being paid to non-normative gender embodiment, in addition to activist trends of challenging the gender binary led to in increased visibility of transmasculine individuals.

The early 1990s also mark the beginning of commercial Internet usage and soon there after, cyber studies. In Larry Gross's introduction to *Queer Online: Media, Technology, and Sexuality*, he states, "Queers were among the first to realize the potential of this new technology. As an Associated Press story put it in the early days of the Web, 'It's the unspoken secret of the online world that gay men and lesbians are among the most avid, loyal, and plentiful commercial users of the Internet.' (6/24/96)" (Gross, ix). Because of wide-spread queer internet usage for cyber sex, community building, story telling, and coming out, branches of cyber studies are focused on what Nina Wakeford dubbed the "cyberqueer."

This project is situated at the intersection between activism, queer academia, and the Internet as a site of commercial and academic use. In examining transmasculine youth, their blogs, and their cyber communities, I am pulling from queer theorists, activist texts, cyber studies, and queer cyber studies. This project aims to draw attention to trans\* youth, a demographic that has been largely invisible in mainstream queer activism, academic studies, and even within cyber queer studies.

To begin to situate my work within the works of queer theorists, I will first turn to Judith Butler and her foundational essay, “Gender Trouble.” In this text, Butler challenges the notion that individuals have an innate gender. Rather, Butler suggests that gender is constructed through sustained and learned performance. Butler’s text destabilizes the category of gender by challenging the notion that individuals have an inner sense of gender at their core, and in doing so, Butler challenges much of the rhetoric that has surrounded discussions of transgenderism. Quite frequently the transgender or transsexual experience is described as a conflict between one’s innate, “inner gender” and their embodied, “external gender.” Butler deconstructs the spatial distinctions of inner v. outer. Butler describes gender as a “stylized repetition of acts.” (Butler, 2500-2501). The deconstruction of myths surrounding innate gender is central to understanding the various ways that trans\* bloggers discuss and embody gender.

Butler’s text also focuses on the possibilities that arise when gender is understood as a fictive category that limits ways of being beyond the hegemonic gender binary. She states:

“That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations

outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.” (Butler, 2501)

Trans\* bloggers experiment with the performative possibilities that Butler discusses, enacting a plethora of gender performances that challenge heteronormativity and gender tyranny.

In researching and examining transmasculine cyber communities, the academic contributions of J. Jack Halberstam served as much of my framework for understanding the decoupling of male bodies and masculinity. Halberstam’s 1998 book, *Female Masculinity*, seeks to draw attention to the erasure of alternative masculinities. In the introduction, Halberstam asserts that the erasure and invisibility of alternative masculinities in mainstream culture and academia is not accidental, but rather a deliberate move to maintain the bond between male bodies, masculinity, and power and domination (Halberstam, 2). The introduction then proposes ways for resisting or contesting the monopoly that male bodies have on masculinity. Halberstam suggests, “turning a blind eye to conventional masculinities and refusing to engage” (Halberstam, 9). The transmasculine bloggers that shaped my research and conclusions embody and enact various forms of alternative masculinity that subvert the link between maleness and masculinity, and in turn, subvert power and domination. These bloggers are following Halberstam’s model of refusing to engage.

In Chapter Five of *Female Masculinity*, “Transgender Butch,” Halberstam focuses on the divide between butch identity and transgender identity in what he calls “the border wars” (Halberstam, 144). This chapter explores the upsurge in transgender and FTM transsexual visibility in recent years, while also examining how this has impacted

masculine women's identities and communities. Understanding these queer border wars over alternative masculinities was central to my understanding of youth bloggers' invention and affinity with the term trans\*, and the many ways that this identity is both revolutionary and still restricting. "Transgender Butch" supplies a context for understanding the historical and persistent conflicts among diverse communities that identify with alternative and marginalized embodiments of masculinity. The varying identities that the trans\* bloggers prescribe to (e.g. boi, trans\*, and genderqueer) must be examined as a product and potential solution to many of the trans versus butch border wars Halberstam discusses.

While queer theory and the academics behind queer scholarship have challenged heteronormativity, queer erasure, and the gender binary, queer activists have also played a central role in these projects. One of these activists is Mattilda "Matt" Bernstein Sycamore. Bernstein Sycamore began her formal activism in the early 90s in San Francisco's AIDS awareness organization ACT UP. She later founded the New York based organizations Fed Up Queers and Gay Shame. Fed Up Queers emerged after a group of activists came together to create a political funeral for Matthew Shepard. The funeral attracted thousands of individuals and ended in a horrific incident of police brutality that left some of the protestors in the hospital. Fed Up Queers formed in response to this event and centered its political agenda on police brutality in New York City during the Guiliani years. Gay Shame emerged "as a challenge to the assimilationist agendas of mainstream pride celebrations" (Ruiz, 240-241). Bernstein Syamore's activism is intersectional to the core and expands far beyond "gay issues." She states:

"What I'm interested in exploring is how intersections emerge in unexpected ways. Coalitional politics for me often means people sort of tacking on identities

to one another, like ‘My *real* issue is that I’m queer, but I’m also interested in fighting racism and classism.’ I’m not interested in that. That, to me, is like putting Post-it notes on yourself. Post-it notes fall off, and when they’re off they’re gone, and you can’t do anything with them. I’m more interested in an intersectional analysis that comes from the core; one that says, ‘I’m queer *and that means* fighting racism, fighting classism, fighting homophobia; you can’t take them apart.’” (Ruiz, 239)

Bernstein Sycamore’s intersectional approach to queer activism is visible in the social justice work she participates in, but also in the anthologies she publishes. *Dangerous Families: Queer Writing on Survival, Pulling Taffy, That’s Revolting!: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation, Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*, and *Why are Faggots so Afraid of Faggots?: Flaming Challenges to Masculinity, Objectification, and the Desire to Conform* all focus on themes of resisting assimilation, challenging the consumerism and capitalism of the mainstream queer movement, developing an intersectional approach to queer politics, and embodying queer ways of being. Hyper-critical of what she dubs “trickle-down academia,” Bernstein Sycamore’s anthologies feature essays written by community organizers, activists, sex workers, and everyday queer folks. Bernstein Sycamore describes trickle down academia as the process “by which academics appropriate anything that they can get their hands on— mostly people’s lived struggles, activism, and identities— and then claim to have invented them” (Bernstein Sycamore, 17). Her anthologies are deliberately offensive, emotional, subjective, deviant, and un-academic. Bernstein Sycamore’s anthologies *Nobody Passes* and *That’s Revolting!* were central to my examination of counter-cultural queer trends to resist passing and fight what Bernstein Sycamore calls “the violence of assimilation” (Ruiz, 237).



Similar to Berstein Sycamore's anthologies is the widely popular 2011 book, *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*. An anthology assembled by Ivan Coyote and Zena Sharman, this book showcases the writings of queer artists, poets, thinkers, bloggers, and activists. These essays, stories, and poems focus on the identities of "butch" and "femme," while exploring the multiplicity of ways individuals embody these identities. This anthology explores queer cultural trends to resist dichotomizing gender and also the lived experiences individuals have with their gender(s). These writings apply everyday lived experience to concepts of gender performance that scholars like Butler and Halberstam theorize. And although, from an academic point of view, Butler and Halberstam's writings theorize and explain these experiences, trans\* bloggers and trans\* youth are circulating texts and excerpts from *Persistence* and *Nobody Passes* far more than they are quoting "Gender Trouble" or *Female Masculinity*.

Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" is frequently cited as the foundational text for cyber studies. Haraway's discussion of the cyborg, a hybrid of machine and organism, focuses on the digital age's blurring of boundaries such as human versus animal, human and animal versus machine, and physical versus nonphysical. By challenging these constructions, the cyborg is all about transgressing boundaries and dualities. For Haraway, the breaking down of dualities allows for new progressive and radical politics to emerge (Haraway, 121). Cyborg identities, as discussed by Haraway, allow for the creation of new matrices of identity that don't rely on old ones and aren't deemed natural (Haraway, 125). The possibilities of the cyborg are open to us in the modern and digital age of computers and Internet.

Haraway's discussion of the blurring of boundaries via the cyborg is seen consistently through cyber studies texts that examine the ways in which the Internet has blurred our understandings of relationships, communities, and bodies. For example, in Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson's article, "The Anthropology of Online Communities," the authors discuss the ways in which online communication has begun to challenge social and political orders and hierarchies. Similar to Haraway, this text examines the ways that Internet usage has blurred boundaries of online versus offline, individual versus collective, and real versus virtual. Wilson and Peterson specifically apply these blurred distinctions to concepts of what constitutes a community to show the overlap between online community and in-real-life (IRL) community. Cyber studies texts show a preoccupation with online communities and how Internet ethnography can explore these communities.

Juana Rodríguez's book, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*, applies the cyber studies framework of cyber ethnography and blurred boundaries to queer digital spaces. In her chapter, "Welcome to the Global Stage: Confessions of a Latina Cyber-Slut," Rodríguez enters into online chat rooms and discussion boards to study and participate in queer online sex, identity formation, and community building. In the process she examines the contradictions between her sexuality IRL versus online. These experiences call for a "radical reconceptualization of reality," where one can see "space, place, and time begin to shift in meaning" (Rodríguez, 119). Rodríguez's cyber ethnography leads to her examination of identity construction and performance. She explores the ways that individuals perform gender in a virtual bodiless environment. Her study shows the varying and blurry ways individuals can construct and perform identity

online, and how that can be similar and different from IRL identity, with neither being more valid than the other.

Rodríguez's queer exploration of the Internet comes six years after Nina Wakeford wrote her foundational essay, "Cyberqueer." Written in 1997, "Cyberqueer" examines the possibilities that unfold from the coupling of "queer" and "cyber." Wakeford's text is frequently cited in other queer cyber studies as the real beginning of queering web scholarship and academia. Wakeford thought that through examining the Internet we could develop different understandings of queer theorists such as Butler and Sedgwick. Wakeford begins by discussing the Internet as a "queered" space because of the way that it resists an orderly cartography (Wakeford, 405). Wakeford then goes on to say that, "The construction of identity is the key thematic which unites almost all cyberqueer studies." (Wakeford, 411). Wakeford examines how "online bodies" are constructed, along with the ways in which queers create virtual communities to compensate for geographical isolation, socialize, meet friends and lovers, and seek refuge. In examining the many ways the web is a queer space and also queered through different practices and activities, Wakeford plays close attention to the queer ways of being that are still silenced, even online. Although the Internet is a vast and fairly open cultural space, hegemonies of the physical world still exist, especially when we consider that not all people have the privilege to access these discursive spaces. Wakeford also draws attention to the fact that in cyber queer studies there has been "very little material on transgender experience despite the widespread participation of transgendered users in diverse cyberqueer forums" (Wakeford, 410).

Another frequently cited text in queer cyber studies is Jonathan Alexander's "Queer Webs: Representations of LGBT People and Communities on the World Wide Web." Similar to Wakeford, Alexander stresses that queer engagement in the Internet is centered on identity and the exploration of identity. Alexander identifies queer usage of the Internet existing in order for queer individuals "to communicate, make contact with others, create community, and tell the stories of their lives" (Alexander, 77). Alexander then established what he calls the three interlocking modes of queer internet usage: varieties of representation, community formation, and movement for social change (Alexander, 82). Alexander states:

"Queers from around the world have used the Internet to reveal and represent the diversity of their experience in ways that are challenging to static notions of both identity and identity politics. Such varieties suggest the need for alternative notions of both community and social agency, and these variations of representation - at both the local and global level - speak to us not just about the diversity of what it means to be queer, but also how individuals are attempting to connect with others to create a sense of community, perhaps even political purpose and social agency across those differences and through those varieties." (Alexander, 81-82)

Alexander's "Queer Webs" examines the potential that the Internet holds for queer communities in terms of establishing identity, challenging hegemonic queer representations, and uniting for social change. All of these uses of the Internet can be seen in the trans\* bloggers that I have been researching.

Randal Woodland's essay, "Queer Spaces, Modem Boys and Pagan Statues: Gay/Lesbian Identity and the Construction of Cyberspace," examines the metaphors of space that Internet users use. Woodland then conceptualizes the Internet as a "third space" that allows for a comfortable ground between the "sociality of public space and anonymity of the closet." (Woodland, 418). Woodland's article focuses on the dominant

narrative of queer people's need to "come out" of the closet and the ways in which a tension exists between the public and the private of queer life. According to Woodland, the Internet serves as a safe in-between zone for identity exploration for queer individuals.

Much of the virtual ethnographic academic texts written on queer youth and their relationship to media and specifically digital media focus on coming out narratives, community support, and the construction of the homepage as a place to display one's identity. In Mary Gray's *Out in the County: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural Communities* she focuses on the representations of queerness that rural youth access via the Internet, and how these images construct their understandings of what she calls, "queer realness" (Gray, 124). Due to the geographical isolation that rural youth experience, Gray explores the ways in which these youth begin their queer-identity work online, seeking out individualized stories that seem more authentic than queer representations found in characters on mainstream television shows and films (Gray, 122). Gray discusses the appropriation of online images of queer realness by rural youth as a process of ingesting hegemonic identities and narratives that focus on particular ways of performing queerness, most of which is dependent on the dominant narrative of "coming out" (Gray, 125). While I found that many things Gray discusses in terms of queer rural youth internet usage do overlap with my research of trans\* cyber communities, I found that the ways in which transmasculine youth discuss identity formation and authenticity seemed to vary greatly from the hegemonic practices that Gray discussed. I was interested in the divergence between Internet depictions of gay and lesbian identity v. Internet depictions of trans\* identity.

While many books and essays have been written that focus on queer youth and the internet including, *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, *Queer Online*, and *Out in the Country*, trans\* youth presence on the internet remains largely invisible. My scholarship draws from all of these texts, pulling from Wakeford's discussion of the cyberqueer as a space for identity exploration, Alexander's claims that the internet allows for mobilization for social change, and even Gray's discussion of rural youth finding images of how to perform queer online; however, my research of transmasculine blogging communities seeks to draw attention to a faction of the "queer umbrella" that has been marginalized even within queer cyber studies. Trans\* cyber communities exhibit overlap with other queer media, while also creating different ways of exploring identity online and using cyber space to form a political consciousness. My research seeks to examine the emergence and upsurge in visibility of transmasculine online communities as something that happened simultaneously to emerging queer theory, along with queer activist trends to resist assimilation. I want to pull together queer scholarship that challenges the gender binary with cyber scholarship that challenges the distinctions between real v. virtual and online v. offline. I want to examine the ways that counter-cultural activists not seeking to pass have inspired trans\* blogging communities to shape new political consciousnesses that challenge the hegemonic queer identities that Gray proposes queer rural youth find online. I want to explore the multiplicity of ways alternative masculinities and trans\* identities exist online.

## Chapter One – Identity and Self-Naming

*I've mostly given up on trying to explore what the asterisk on my trans identity could even encompass.*

*– Loan, [tranqualyzer.tumblr.com](https://tranqualyzer.tumblr.com)*

To begin to explore the identities of trans\* bloggers, I didn't have to look any further than their blog homepages. Each blogger's page features an "about me" box on the side, with a list of identities, strung together in a project of self-naming and identifying. This chapter is focused on these identities, on how bloggers describe their multiple overlapping, converging, diverging, contradictory, and varying identities. I argue that often times those identities or names fall short when language is inadequate for describing their lived experiences. Exploring their self-naming and self-identifying practices is evidence of the fact that trans\* cyber communities are engaged in their own project of knowledge production about their gender identities, but also about how their racialized, class-based, regional identities impact their gender(s). This chapter is concerned with identities and the language (or lack of language) available for describing individual positionalities.

Beyond "about me" boxes, transmasculine bloggers' personal journals, engagement and dialogue with other bloggers, and "transition" sections define who they are and challenge the monolithic nature of identity based movements, such as the mainstream gay movement, that require them to be "just" trans or "just" queer. Although all of the bloggers from my research define components of their identities with the words trans\* and queer, their other identity descriptions are vast and varying. I am arguing that trans\* bloggers challenge the monolithic conceptions of queer identities as depicted in mainstream television, film, and Gay Pride parades. The mainstream gay movement has

strategically narrowed and refined images of the queer community to be predominately white, monogamous, family friendly and holistic. Evidence of this can be seen at Gay Pride parades, which place gay families, firefighters, police officers, churches, cheerleaders, politicians, and other not too intimidating queers at the forefront of the parade, pushing all of the leather clubs and polyamorous groups to the end of the event. In describing and listing their identities, these trans\* bloggers contest the need to make their identities “family friendly” or place a hierarchy on aspects of their identity. I am arguing that their Tumblr pages are free from the hegemony of Pride Parades where difference is hidden or sectioned off and individuals are forced to march with only one group, prioritizing one component of their queer identity over another. These bloggers describe their identities in full, putting words like “brother” next to “polyamorous,” or “riotqueer” next to “student.” In describing their identities, these bloggers are engaging and producing a new way of talking about identity and difference. This chapter argues that the rich use of language being used in trans\* cyber space produces new knowledge about how identity is embodied.

## **THE TRANS\* SNOWFLAKE**

The trans snowflake or trans asterisk is an identity that was developed and proliferated on the Internet. While formerly the word “trans” may have signified transsexual, an individual pursuing medical sex reassignment, or transgender, an individual whose gender identity does not “match” their sex, trans\* opens up whole new possibilities for understanding gender identity, embodiment, and transformation. My trans\* identity as a femmey trans-but\*ch places contradictory words in harmony. While



for many, transgenderism and butchness are at odds, for me, butch is a nod to my masculinity and to my butch forefathers and foremothers that came before me. Trans is all the ways I am at odds with my physical body. It signals transformation, an ever changing and developing body and sense of identity. And even though I am butch through and through, my gender performances can be diva-esque and downright femme. My identity would have never fit into the trans/transsexual box, but it is encompassed in the open and broad identity of trans\*.

In my research, I found it incredibly difficult to pin point any particular origin or timeframe for the trans\* identity. The best explanations come from the trans\* blogging sites themselves. When users began to ask the blog operator of [youknowyouretrans.tumblr.com](http://youknowyouretrans.tumblr.com) why they chose to classify their blog as “trans\*” and not “trans,” they offered this explanation:

“Trans\* is taken generally to mean: Transgender, Transsexual, genderqueer, Non-Binary, Genderfluid, Genderfuck, Intersex, Third gender, Transvestite, Cross-dresser, Bi-gender, Trans man, Trans woman, Agender. Whereas ‘trans’ could have been taken to mean the blog only applies to trans men and trans women. We wanted more people to feel included in submitting posts and the blog as a whole.” (Joey and Kaiden, 2011)

As these trans\* bloggers point out in their definition of the term, the trans asterisk allows for a range of differently gendered individuals to identify with this term. It creates an umbrella category for inclusivity and solidarity. Sam Killermann, the social justice blogger responsible for the website [itspronouncedmetrosexual.com](http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com), describes the origin of the trans asterisk in relation to different Internet uses of the asterisk. When conducting an Internet search on any given search engine, adding an asterisk to the end of a word or phrase prompts the search engine to find that word or phrase, along with other words or phrases that include parts of the search field (Killerman, 2012). Clearly put, if someone

were to enter trans\* into a search field, the search engine would yield results for transexuality, transmen, transgender, and so on. These two blogs offer some of the most clear descriptions of the purpose and origin of the trans\* identity, all other answers must be found in the identities and writings of trans\* bloggers themselves.

The four bloggers that were the focus of my research on trans\* cyber communities all have different relationships to the word the trans\*: some of them embrace as a central part of their identity, some only references it occasionally, and some are still figuring out what the asterisk means to them. In addition to their varying relationships to the word/identity of trans\*, each blogger has different words they choose for their identity, their gender, and their embodied experiences.

Ashton, a white trans\*man in Seattle, who blogs under the URL [transformfeminism.tumblr.com](http://transformfeminism.tumblr.com), holds the trans asterisk as a central component and constant when understanding his ever changing and evolving gender and identity. He states:

“I identify as trans\* which for me means that my gender is not binary so even though I identify as a trans\*man, I don’t fit into the “born into the wrong body” narrative that I think is what ~transsexuals~ feel like. Or other things I’ve heard is that people who identify as transsexual see it as a medical condition rather than an identity. I don’t see it that way at all and I think that my trans\*ness is a vital part of my identity. I do identity as a man for all intents and purposes but the need to have a penis/identify as male have never been manifestations of my dysphoria.” (Ashton, 2 Feb. 2013)

For Ashton, the asterisk symbolizes his relation to gender in a way that resists binary conceptualizations of the trans\* experience. It expresses his queer process and journey with gender and transformation.

## SELF-NAMING: FINDING NEW WORDS AND WAYS TO EXPRESS IDENTITY

Trans\* Tumblr bloggers use a wide range of words to identify themselves. There is no one word that can summarize all of the blogger's identities, or even one blogger's identities for that matter. Most bloggers describe their gender identity in a full range of words and terms that often are not particular to only their gender identity and expression, but encompass aspects of their sexuality, their upbringing, their racial identity, their geographic location, and a range of other identities. For example, Loan, the southern blogger who writes under the URL [tranqualizer.tumblr.com](http://tranqualizer.tumblr.com), describes their identity with a plethora of different words and terms that extend from genderqueer to transsexual to dyke. These words mark Loan's exploration with their identity, sexuality, and gender transition. In one blog they describe having previously used the identity of "dyke" to explain their gender and sexuality, and while this may no longer be how they see themselves, they maintain an affinity for the word. They write:

"I've always felt an attachment to the following titles/identities/words: dyke, butch, stud, sister. They all come with their own baggage and own power and it's frustrating to have to filter through that or feel like I can't even filter through it. What does it mean for me to be a dyke but feel no sort of connection to the realms of identities for women who are attracted to some other women? And am I really trying to be a part of some gender revolution which could, in many ways, remove the historical powers and significances that lay behind heavily gendered identities? And what does it mean for me as a POC<sup>14</sup> to identify as butch but then also identify as stud? Because there's such a cultural difference between those identities... Am I trying to paint over a heavily colonized identity with some color? And then sister? What the hell am I doing? What worries me most is that claiming these identities, finding strength and solidarity in them, really hinder the comfort levels I have with my surroundings. I just really don't enjoy the paradox of deconstructing something's gender to redefine it but ultimately still attributing it to some sort of initial framework which would affirm the gender that isn't self-defined (what kind of sentence was this?)." (Loan, Jan. 2012).

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<sup>14</sup> Person of color

Loan describes the frustrations of trying to find words to describe themselves that are in accordance with not only their gender but also their sexuality and racial identity. While “dyke” may be a central identifying word for masculine women who love women, Loan grapples with this word because of their separation from the identity of “woman.” While butch may seem a way of reconciling this, Loan points to the racialized history of butch as a white thing.

B. Cole, an activist, academic, and founder of the Brown Boi Project in Oakland, California writes about this in the anthology *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*. In the essay titled “Masculine of Centre Seeks her Refined Femme,” Cole describes growing up as a young, masculine female of color that felt excluded and erased from the category of butch. Cole writes, “I struggled with the absence of stories about people like me – queer womyn of color along the masculine continuum whose lives and loves don’t get told, who have to search for reflections of our stories in the margins of butch narratives, the constant sidekicks and stereotyped footnotes of ‘minority masculinity.’” (Cole, 127). Cole writes about the irony of the erasure of masculine womyn of color from butch narratives, because of the large numbers of masculine of centre womyn of color who have embraced and lived butch identity. “Despite this rich history and legacy, the image of what butch looks like in popular media and academic writing is overwhelmingly white.” (Cole, 130). And Cole goes on to explain that, “This locating of butchness within a specific culture, class, race, and ethnicity makes it difficult for the masculine of centre person of colour to enter into the narrative without their gender presentation, specifically their version of masculinity, being questioned.” (Cole, 132). This exclusion from the category of butch and stud is exactly what Loan is describing, and their discussion of

language mirrors Cole's essay which grapples with the lack of language available for communities of color surrounding female masculinity.

Because of the challenge that exists for masculine womyn of color to find identities that are in congruence with not only with their gender embodiment and identity, but also their racial identity, B. Cole proposes the identity of "masculine of centre," a way of describing gender identity that falls in a spectrum of femininity *and* masculinity, an identity that acknowledges the fluid and ever-changing nature of gender, but places masculinity at the center, or as the anchor. "The emergence of this new language would not have happened were it not for the ways in which masculine-of-centre womyn of color live their female masculinity through the lens of race." (Cole, 134). Cole is creating a new language to express identity, a language that is more inclusive of racial identity and gender identity. Masculine-of-centre is an identity that applies to all different kinds of individuals, regardless of sex, class or race. It is a step towards more inclusive language that also makes space for the fluidity and ever-changing aspects of gender, something that identities like "butch" and "transsexual" don't always do. Cole's creation of this term and identity is similar to the naming project and focus of the trans\* blogger in this paper.

Ultimately, it seems one of Loan's ways of reconciling the lack of language available to encompass both race and gender comes through describing themselves as a "sissy brown boi." On the homepage of Loan's blog is a block of text under a photo that describes them. Rather than complete sentences, Loan writes a string of identifying words: queer, trans, viet, yellow, southerner, sissy brown boi. My understanding of this identity is that it refers not only to Loan's gender identity as a masculine-of-centre, genderqueer, trans boi or Loan's racial identity as a person of color, but also to Loan's

gender expression and performance. “Sissy,” alludes to their weaknesses, their failures to perform boi well enough to pass as a boy. As Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore would say, sissy is all the ways they’ve “tried to pass, or failed to pass, or refuse to pass.” (Bernstein Sycamore, 7). It’s a reference to their queer ways of being and living that refuse to assimilate to a heteronormative, cissexist and racist society.

### **MANY THINGS AT ONCE: COMPLIMENTARY AND CONTRADICTIONARY IDENTITIES**

When describing their trans\* identity (emphasis on the asterisk), Loan relates to two different identities that, at first glance, may appear contradictory. Loan describes themselves as genderqueer and transsexual. Genderqueer connotes fluidity, borderlands, and the spaces in between. Many bloggers describe genderqueer as neither woman nor man, an identity that challenges the common narrative of trans being all about “what’s inside not matching what’s outside.” So this identity would seem to be at odds with transsexual, an identity that has traditionally signified medical transitioning. Transsexual is commonly seen as a move from one end of the binary to the other, while genderqueer is a floating space in the middle. However, Loan does not see these identities in contradiction. They write:

“So, it’s fairly simple actually. I identify with genderqueer (still, even amidst uncertainty) because I am still exploring genders and all of the jazz that I referenced in (dis)owning genderqueer. I identify with transsexual because I do anticipate a physical transition along with a social transition that I’ve already begun. My feelings towards my chest have changed greatly and I expect it to continue to fluctuate, so I don’t plan on top surgery but I do want to go through with hormones. In even greater specifics, I tie the words genderqueer and transsexual together because I don’t feel like a physical transition reflects/defines a social transition or vice versa. I also don’t feel like I am transitioning from woman to man. So with genderqueer, I am still searching for stable ground in

terms of my gender, but I am at least 90% in the know of what physical changes I want.” (Loan, 2011)

While Chapter Two will focus more on bodies and transitioning decisions, I wanted to include Loan’s description of their trans\* identities of genderqueer and transsexual to highlight the complexities of the identity markers that these bloggers choose for themselves, and how putting varying words together signifies a new full range of meanings.

Loan’s list of identifying words also points to the inadequacy of language when it comes to describing their experience(s). Loan cannot find a word or name that encompasses all of the varying levels of their identity. As Sandra Soto argues in her 2010 book, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*, even the word “intersectionality” as coined by third world feminists, fails to address the complex overlapping, interwoven identities of individuals. Soto states, “It seems to me that race, sexuality, and gender are much too complex, unsettled, porous (I do mean to be wordy here), mutually constitutive, unpredictable, incommensurable, and dynamic, certainly too spatially and temporally contingent, *ever* (even if only for an instant) to travel independent of one another.” (Soto, 6).

Loan’s blogging follows this process of trying to find ways of identifying themselves that encompass all of their ways of being, living, and identifying, because Loan’s experiences with queer sexuality, xenophobia, gender bending, and racism don’t exist separate from one another. These identities do not simply cross and intersect at certain points like threads all traveling in different direction, instead they are intertwined and woven together, wrapping around one another with no possibility of separation. Loan and the other bloggers of this research are engaged in their own formations of knowledge about their positionalities in the broader United States context. In these marginalized and

rhizomoatic corners of the world wide web, they are engaging in their own knowledge production to craft, explain, and make sense of their “intersectional” identities.

Loan is not the only blogger who lists their identities with a string of words. Caylo, an individual who blogs under the URL [ositodelmar.tumblr.com](http://ositodelmar.tumblr.com), describes himself as a “radical, queer, genderqueer, trans, Black/Pinoy<sup>15</sup>, mixed, polyamorous, spiritual, sober, kasama<sup>16</sup>, mangingibig<sup>17</sup>, kuya<sup>18</sup>, thinker, musician.” In these fifteen words, Caylo chooses markers for his gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and other markers of his identity such as kuya, thinker, and musician. In stringing these words together, Caylo is refusing to have the many facets and components of his identity and positionality be reduced or diminished. He is not a participant in a pride parade. He doesn’t have to march with just queer families or just Gay Filipin@s or just polyamorous queers. He is able to collect and showcase all of the elements of his identity that are important to him, with no hierarchy or center. Caylo is also able to make decisions about words like “brother,” decisions that allow him to exercise control over his identity and describe himself not only as a family member or sibling, but as a family member or sibling that fills the roll of “brother.” This can also be seen contrasted with Loan and Loan’s attachment to the identity of “sister,” despite their separation from womanhood. These word choices articulate information about childhood/socialization, the roles one fills or performs, and the varying changes in gender identity from person to person. Each

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<sup>15</sup> A name many Filipinos call themselves. Pinoy is the masculine version of the word, with women calling themselves Pinay. The word comes from the last four letters of Filipino or Filipina and then adds “-y” a common suffix in the Tagalog language.

<sup>16</sup> Tagalog word for companion, comrade, partner, or mate. Caylo’s personal meaning for the word is unknown.

<sup>17</sup> Tagalog word for lover.

<sup>18</sup> Tagalog word for brother.



blogger has the autonomy to choose their identifying words, despite the surface level contradictions.

Quin, a blogger based out of Southern California that formerly used the URL [genderbendingriotqueer.tumblr.com](http://genderbendingriotqueer.tumblr.com), but recently switched to [quentinandrew.umblr.com](http://quentinandrew.umblr.com), not only describes their identity as transmasculine, genderqueer/grrrl/boi, queer, and gynesexual, but also states, “Please do **not** call me miss, woman, lady, beautiful, pretty, gorgeous or other feminine adjectives” (Quin, no date—from their “about” section). Bloggers explicitly list their identities, pronoun preferences, and requests when referring to their gender to clarify for their readers and also create a standard of how other people will comment, respond, or blog about them. If a fellow trans\* blogger disrespects another person’s gender identity, pronoun preferences, adjective requests, or other components of their identity, there is usually a collective harsh backlash from fellow bloggers. “About me” boxes with a string of identifying words are the norm for each trans\* bloggers page, although the content of the box, along with the order in which different identities are displayed varies from person to person.

## **QUEER IDENTITIES**

One of the commonalities amongst all the bloggers was their use of the word queer as a component of their described identity. In the article, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” by David L. Eng, J. Jack Halberstam, and Esteban Munoz describe the emergence of the word queer in the early 1990s. These prominent queer scholars write:

“It was a term that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or

homosexual, natural or perverse. Given its commitment to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity, the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality.” (Eng, 1)

The multiple layers that constitute or are implied in queer identity make the term central to the identity of the trans\* bloggers of this research. For some of the bloggers, the term captures their same gender loving relationships as they evolve into what most people would, at first glance, recognize as heterosexual love. For some bloggers, the term captures their polyamorous approach to romantic relationships, commitment, and love. For Loan, that queerness is described in their “sissy brown boi” identity. Queer certainly constructs a more racially inclusive understanding of nonheterosexual romance, while also allowing openness and fluidity surrounding the sexuality of individuals in gender transition.

Tumblr blogs come with a built-in tab for blog followers to ask questions. Question seekers have the option to ask a question under their Tumblr URL name or anonymously. On these trans\* bloggers sites, anons<sup>19</sup> are norm. Ashton’s blog is not only a hub of trans\* blogging activity, but also a site alive with anons asking questions. When one anon asks Ashton, “So- you are a trans man, and you are queer? Which means, since you consider yourself a male, and that you are queer, you like men? Am I right or wrong, sorry.” Ashton bites back with a short remark that ends their interaction. He writes, “Queer is not synonymous with gay. So no.” (Ashton, 17 Jan. 2013). Although his response is short and to the point, it speaks to the fluidity and openness of the word queer. Although Ashton is man identified (FTM) and in a relationship with a

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<sup>19</sup> “Anon” is a blogging word for an anonymous commenter or question seeker.

woman identified individual, he asserts that for him the word queer is not synonymous with same gender loving like the words gay and lesbian. Queer is open to a range of embodiments of love, romance, gender, relationships, and a multiplicity of other things. Queer is not synonymous with gay.

In one of Caylo's blogs he also speaks about the queer experience being something larger than same gender loving. Caylo's blog titled, "White trans men, STFU!!" focuses on issues of privilege surrounding gender transitioning, specifically male privilege, or, as applied to white trans men, white male privilege. Caylo writes:

"As transmasculine folks, we get to look at our privilege being perceived as men in this world, regardless of if we identify like that way or not. I get male privilege all the fucking time now. Does it feel fucked up? Yes. It is nice? Yes. And guess what? I'm looking at that. And I'm making sure that I don't act fucked up and from a space of entitlement to those who are women identified, femme identified, and otherwise not male identified. Whether you like it or not, we live in a hetero, Anglo, patriarchal world and by transitioning and being perceived as men, even if we don't necessarily feel that way or identify that way, means we get access to that entitlement. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying your time being socialized as women doesn't matter. It certainly does. It means you remember what it feels like to be disrespected and treated like crap simply because you were not a man." (Caylo, 30 Oct. 2012)

Although Caylo's focus on male privilege as lived by trans men is fascinating, the part of his analysis that speaks to the queer experience comes at the end, when he acknowledges that trans men have a different understanding of male privilege because of the reality that most trans men spent their childhood, adolescence, and sometimes even early adulthood socialized as women and girls. This passage speaks to the varying levels and experiences that the queer identity encapsulates. Although transmasculine individuals may be pursuing a gender transition that leads to them being "read" as heterosexual men in broader, mainstream culture, their "queer" identities do not dissipate. Transmasculine individuals are forever attached not only to their childhood socializations, but also their

experiences with same gender loving (or opposite gender loving, which is queered through the trans\* experience). Ashton identifies as a man and dates women, but his vagina, his history of being identified by others as being in a lesbian relationship, and a his childhood socialization as a girl speaks to the varying and complex components of queer identity. I am not suggesting that “queer” is limited to gender identity and sexuality, queer is a malleable and adaptive identity that cannot be decoupled from other positionalities such as class, race, religion, and geographic location, rather, I am focusing on the ways queer identity appears in the lives of trans\* bloggers pursuing some form of gender transition.

My experiences with queer have taught me that queer is not just about my sexuality. It is not about the clothes that I wear that subvert standards of how female bodies are expected to dress. And it is not just about the ways I perform femme to further subvert those expectations. Queer is also a reflection of queer chosen family, of the interconnections that exist between groups of queer friends, lovers, and exlovers, queer is about different family structures. When I examine my experiences with male privilege – being perceived as a man, shifting privilege when I am assumed to be a gay man, and confusing resistance to such privilege because of my girlhood - I begin to understand the complicated facets of queer identity that extend far beyond the people I sleep with. Perhaps queerness can be best understood as the malleable and ever-transforming gender, sexuality, and living. While gay and lesbian identities are the static alternatives, queer is defined by camouflaging, blending, changing, and adapting. This movement is what makes “queer” so closely tied to trans\* bloggers identities and experiences, because in transition, everything is constantly changing.

## “I DO KNOW”

“I suppose the reason why I’m even discussing this right now is because I had someone ask me the other day what the asterisk means... and I had no answer. But it is interesting to see that trans\* itself is not viewed as an identity, but as an introduction to an ‘actual’ identity. Forget that, yo.

I feel like this is an extension of the distress I felt when I identified as/with genderqueer and really had no sort of language for it.

This is just the type of person that I am: I need to actively seek asylum in words, in labels, in identities. It’s not easy to just forget about these things when you spend your whole life looking for them (for always every damn part of who you are).” (Loan, Feb. 2012)

This excerpt from Loan’s transition blog encapsulates the themes of this chapter: the trans\* asterisk identity and what it means for different bloggers, a lack of language to express identity and experiences, and the process of seeking out and collecting words to self-name and self-define. Loan and all the other bloggers actively write about their ever changing identities, trying out different words or ways of expressing how they feel, and then disavowing those same identities just weeks later. It is an ever-evolving process of creating new language and mashing different identities together. But Loan’s transition page subheading reads, “I do know,” a declaration of confidence in their identity. Although it may be an ever-evolving process that is full of changes, this doesn’t make Loan confused. They maintain that they know exactly what they are doing.

## **Chapter Two – The Body in Transformation: Rupturing Linear Timelines of Gender Transformations and Challenging the “Born in the Wrong Body” Narrative**

While the previous chapter examined identity, language, and the importance of self-naming, this chapter is focused on the hegemonic narratives and rhetoric for describing the experiences that shape body and gender transformation. For decades, transgender individuals were classified as having “gender identity disorder” in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), which led to trans narrative being dominated by the “born in the wrong body” myth. This narrative creates a trajectory of a clear beginning point of dysphoria and discomfort – in the “wrong body” – and then an endpoint at which one has physically transitioning from one end of the spectrum to the other. This trajectory is always described as one directional, with a clear beginning and end point, and is often coupled with hegemonic terms like “full transition,” which indicate that there is one proper way of approaching body transformation. This narrative also links female bodies to woman identities and male bodies to man identities, creating a rhetoric that if one is man identified but female bodied, then they are in the wrong body and in need of reassignment surgery so their sex “matches” their gender.

This chapter is concerned with examining how trans\* youth bloggers are deconstructing the dominant narrative of being born in the wrong body to challenge the hegemonic trajectory of what a gender transition “should look like.” I will be using my own experiences with the internalization of discourse that taught me there was only one way to approach gender transition, along with the blogger’s experiences and decisions about transition, as discussed in their Tumblr posts. I am arguing that the gender transition decisions of the bloggers, along with the rhetoric surrounding these decisions works to rupture the one-way trajectory of dominant narratives of gender transitioning

that depict a process, which can be medically “resolved.” These bloggers are challenging this trajectory and drawing attention to life experiences and embodiments in the spaces “in-between.” Their descriptions of life in the margins contest dominant narratives that describe their identities as disorders or tragic stories of being born in the wrong body. Trans\* bloggers are reclaiming their autonomy to make their own decisions about their bodies, challenging the one-way trajectory, and validating the life and lived experiences of individuals in the gender margins.

## **THE DOMINANT TRANS NARRATIVE**

In Sandy Stone’s 1993 article, “The ‘Empire’ Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Stone outlines a brief history of transsexualism. Stone, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin and is credited as being one of the founders of transgender studies. Although her timeline is Euro-centric and USA-centric, Stone theorizes current understandings of the transsexual experience through examining some of the first studies on transsexuality, the early clinics for sex reassignment surgery, and the first Western published autobiographical works by transsexuals. In Stone’s account, she highlights the early conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality when discussing individuals with “gender identity disorder.” I argue that these patterns of conflating gender identity and presentation with sex continue to this day, and dominate much of the rhetoric surrounding transsexuality.

In Stone’s article she describes transsexuality by saying, “A transsexual is a person who identifies his or her gender identity with that of the ‘opposite’ gender. Sex and gender are quite separate issues, but transsexuals commonly blur the distinction by

confusing the performative character of gender with the physical ‘fact’ of sex, referring to their perceptions of their situation as being in the ‘wrong body.’” (Stryker, 222). In this description of transsexuality, Stone is drawing attention to the common narrative of trans being about living in the “wrong body,” and challenging this notion through asserting that it comes from the conflation of sex and gender. Stone is suggesting that one can live and perform the gender of “man” without needing to have the “matching” sex, i.e. a penis.

Stone traces back the roots of the born in the wrong body narrative in the United States to the early days of sex reassignment clinics in the 1960s. Stone writes about how the majority of gender dysphoria clinics that opened in the 1960s were working off an experimental basis, with some patients receiving sex reassignment surgery on demand, while others had to prove that they were fit to perform the gender they were transitioning into (Stryker, 227). When describing the Stanford Clinic, Stone writes:

“The clinic took on the additional role of ‘grooming clinic’ or ‘charm school’ because, according to the judgment of the staff, the men who presented as wanting to be women didn’t always ‘behave like’ women. Stanford recognized that gender roles could be learned [to an extent]. Their involvement with the grooming clinics was an effort to produce not simply automatically legible females, but women...i.e., gendered females.” (Stryker, 227-228)

Stone then goes on to describe the way that sex reassignment surgery became available to only those who could perform the paired gender of the sex they were transitioning to become, i.e. transitioning to be a female and performing woman. Because these clinics were the first, and came to their procedural processes through experimentation, once manuals began to be written by doctors or clinic staff members, this set of procedures and standards became the norm for individuals seeking reassignment surgery. Trans folks seeking reassignment surgeries would then read these manuals in order to know how to qualify for surgery and be quickly approved as fit for transition (Stryker, 228). This



process not only reinforced the coupling of male with man and female with woman, but also began to establish the idea that gender dysphoria functions on a binary system in which an individual is either one OR the other. This led to the creation of the born in the wrong body narrative as we know it. It offers an understanding of why trans\* is often seen as a shift from one end of the binary to the other, but most importantly, an upholding of the gender binary. Stone's article is primarily focused on all of the ways that trans\* identities were reduced to transsexuality and placed into Western medical definitions and understandings of trans\* experiences.

In the same *Transgender Studies Reader* anthology, Katrina Roen writes an article titled, "Transgender Theory and Embodiment: the Risk of Racial Marginalisation." Roen's article is focused on the hegemony of Western medical notions of transsexuality in determining the lived experiences of trans\* folks all over the globe. In Roen's research, she focuses on how even in cultures that have been traditionally accepting of non-binary genders and third genders, i.e. some indigenous and first nation's cultures, western medicalization of transsexuality has seeped into these communities. Roen describes it as the "the westernisation of gender liminality" (Roen, 258). Roen critiques the process of Western narratives of trans\* experiences speaking over, or louder than other narratives of gender liminality. For her, the hegemony of the born in the wrong body narrative is concerning because it was constructed primarily by and for white bodies that have the medical options and desires to change one's sex. Roen draws attention to the need to deconstruct this born in the wrong body narrative to combat the ethnocentrism of queer theory and trans\* narratives, along with combating medical hegemony that tries

to carefully fit gender variant individuals into normative boxes and certain gendered ways of being through reassignment surgery (Roen, 255).

Although these two articles offer only a brief understanding of the origin of the born in the wrong body narrative, they do provide insight on how transsexual sex reassignment narratives came to dominate understandings of gender non-confirmative ways of being and the ways these hegemonic narratives erase gender identities and embodiments that don't fall within the binary. While some individuals may feel that they were tragically born into the wrong body and that a change in physical sex will solve the majority of their dysphoria, this is not the only narrative of gender non-conformity. Trans\* bloggers seek to challenge the erasure of narratives that showcase life beyond the gender binary. Their transition decisions and embodiments that fall "in-between" the binary are stories of resistance, revision, and the rewriting of gender dysphoria narratives.

## **THE BLOGGERS**

Trans\* bloggers are actively challenging the dominant narrative of being born in the wrong body through their writing about their gender experiences, but also their decisions about how to approach transitioning. Each blogger's decisions about how to transition, what they wish to medically change about their bodies, or how they discuss their bodies, varies greatly. When I use terms like "full transition" or "partial transition" to discuss their decisions, I am referencing the ways that their transition decisions are generally perceived in relation to the dominant narrative of gender transitioning. This dominant narrative couples gender transitioning with transsexuality and the decision to medically move from one end of the binary to another. Because none of the

transmasculine bloggers I researched are seeking hormone replacement therapy (HRT), top surgery, and bottom surgery, they do not fall into the dominant narrative of full transitioning. I am careful to use these terms in quotes in order to reference the fact that these words are merely an opinion shaped by decades of hegemonic narratives that required trans\* folks to approach transition in one way. This chapter's focus, on the decisions of the bloggers, works to deconstruct these terms and challenge their meanings.

According to the dominant narrative of gender transformation, Ashton would be the blogger who is "farthest along" in his transition. Ashton began hormone HRT in July of 2012. After nearly six months on testosterone, in early December, Ashton had top surgery - a double mastectomy. Ashton writes a lot about his gender dysphoria and how much of his discomfort with his body came from his chest.<sup>20</sup> Ashton's "transition" section of his blog is full of videos and photos that document voice changes, hair growth, and chest scar visibility. Although Ashton is man-identified and seeking medical transitioning, he does not fall into the dominant "born in the wrong body" narrative, nor does he fall into dominant discourse that would categorize his transition as being from one end of the binary to the other. Ashton openly writes about his contempt for the notion that he was trapped in the wrong body, and also writes extensively about his decision to not pursue bottom surgery, clarifying that his dysphoria has never been about his clit or vagina. Ashton's decisions about his body contest a narrative/trajectory that tells him that there is a clear beginning and end point to transitioning. Ashton exercises his right to choose his own "end point."

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<sup>20</sup> "Chest" is the word that most trans\* bloggers use to describe their upper body, regardless of whether they have yet to complete top surgery. Chest is commonly preferred over boobs, breasts, or other woman gendered words.

Most similar to Ashton in terms of transition decisions is Caylo. Caylo began blogging on Tumblr right about the time that he decided to begin HRT. In March of 2012, Caylo took his first shot of testosterone. He has yet to complete top surgery, although his blog features a PayPal donation box asking for blog followers to “Help a Brotha Out!” The differences between Caylo and Ashton’s economic/financial situations is evident from the fact that Ashton began his medical transition later than Caylo, but completed his top surgery first, because of the financial support of his parents. Caylo’s blogs express his frustrations with having to be patient and wait to pursue the medical surgeries he wants. He also expresses anxiety about being on testosterone, but worrying about passing because of his chest. Caylo’s discussion of his body and transition are less concrete than Ashton’s posts. Ashton speaks definitively about knowing he does not want to pursue bottom surgery, while Caylo’s blogs express uncertainty and a desire to see where his process takes him.

Different from both of these bloggers is Quin, a trans\* and genderqueer boi who is pursuing a natural transition rather than a medical transition. Natural transitioning, also referred to as transitioning with vitamins and supplements, is a process of transitioning without HRT or medical surgeries. Some components of natural transitioning involve taking certain vitamins that are believed to increase testosterone levels, i.e. zinc, magnesium and Vitamin C. Trans\* folks following a natural transition plan also restructure their diet to include more proteins, less fats, more Vitamin C, less carbohydrates, lots of green tea, and little to no alcohol consumption. Natural transitioning plans include detailed work out regimes that have the goal of bulking up the shoulders and chest and carefully not adding to thigh or hip size. Quin’s decisions about

transitioning, as they describe them, stem from a desire to present more masculine or androgynous, but a reluctance to pass or live as a man. Quin's trans\* identity is not described as FTM and they are very clear about not wanting to be lumped into the transsexual FTM category.

Loan is the only blogger who has yet to pursue any physical transitioning, whether that be medical or natural. As referenced in Chapter One, Loan discusses transitioning as having two different components, physical and social. When describing their identity as transsexual, Loan describes beginning the early phases of social transition which can happen through articulating pronoun preferences, presenting more masculine, or coming out as trans\*. Loan states, "I don't feel like a physical transition reflects/defines a social transition, or vice versa." (Loan, 2012). Loan also articulates their fluctuating feelings about their chest and uncertainty about wanting to pursue top surgery, while on the other hand, Loan clearly articulates their desire to take testosterone. Loan's blogs are highly retrospective and self-reflexive, revealing their questioning of narratives that pressure trans\* folks to pass, that mandate "full" transitions, and that exclude trans\* people of color.

In just these four bloggers, we see four individuals at different points in their transition processes. Each blogger has different aspects/components to their gender dysphoria, for example Ashton's dysphoria stemmed mainly from his discomfort with his chest and intense desire to have top surgery, while Loan expresses uncertainty about wanting to medically change their chest. None of these four narratives match the dominant narrative of gender transition that is linked to transsexuality, the born in the wrong body narrative, or the desire to "fully" medical transition from female to male. In

telling each of their own personal stories, these bloggers are already working against the dominant discourse and rhetoric.

## **TRANSITIONING V. TRANSITIONED**

One of the questions I have continued to return to, both in my personal life and in my research of trans\* bloggers, is the question of when and why individuals refer to their transitions in the past tense, as a completed action or component of their past life history. All of the blogger's that were central to this research refer to their process as being a "transition" or in the process of "transitioning." This seems to contrast greatly with the dominant narrative of trans\* gender dysphoria that describes the trans\* process through the born in the wrong body narrative. In this narrative, an individual chooses to complete a "full" medical transition that places them in the "right" body, allowing them to then live their life as they always wanted, with the act of transitioning dissipating into the past as merely a memory of when they "transitioned." This dominant narrative suggests a definitive end point and resolution to the process. But trans\* youth bloggers are not buying into this "transitioned" rhetoric. For example, although Ashton has completed all of the components of his medical transition, he still chooses to refer to his gender as being "in transition."

I am invested in this question for a few reasons. First, it seems relevant to note how much the term "transitioned" works as a component of the born in the wrong body narrative. If bloggers and trans\* folks like myself wish to deconstruct the myth that we were tragically born into the wrong bodies, then we must critically examine the use of the word "transitioned" to describe our experiences with body dysphoria and our quests to

find comfort in our embodiment, whatever that may look like, regardless of gender identity. Deconstructing the idea that there is a proper sex or embodiment for different gender identities allows for us to imagine body transformation as a process of exploring personal and individual dysphoria, a process that doesn't neatly fit into a monolithic one-way trajectory. I question whether this process of "correcting dysphoria" or finding peace with one's body will ever have a true, neat and resolved endpoint.

Second, my personal experiences have led me to realize the ways that transmasculine folks use "transitioned" differently from transfeminine folks. While common practice for trans women involves referring to the date they had vaginoplasty<sup>21</sup> as the moment they transitioned, my observations and experiences with trans men indicate their use of "transitioned" to refer to a period of time when they began consistently passing. I find the coupling of "transitioned" with passing to also be concerning from an anti-assimilationist or radical anti-passing perspective. If the only way to be perceived as a successfully transitioned individual is through mainstreaming and assimilating into dominant culture, then anti-assimilationists that wish to challenge the hegemonies of dominant culture will always be "unsuccessfully" or "inauthentically" in transition. While for many folks, passing is an act of survival and a necessary precaution for safety, Chapter Three will examine the shift towards anti-assimilationist attitudes in trans\* youth communities, specifically trans\* youth blogging communities. If the legitimacy of one's sex and embodiment is linked to the "completion" of a transition and if the completion of a transition is linked to the act of passing, then how

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<sup>21</sup> Vaginoplasty is a medical surgery for changing male genitalia to female genitalia through the process of penile inversion. In the surgery process, the testicles are removed and the penis is inverted to create a vaginal canal.

will this impact the legitimacy of trans\* youth bloggers who are actively choosing to not pass?

### **CHALLENGING THE BORN IN THE WRONG BODY MYTH**

“Dysphoria takes on many forms and what that means depends on the person, in terms of what they want their body to look like. But the ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative assumes (generally) that there are only two genders, which would make someone like me, who identifies as a man but does not want a penis, inherently wrong, which is super not the case.” (Ashton, 2 Feb. 2013)

This passage comes from Ashton’s blog in response to an anonymous question that asked, “If people don’t feel ‘born in the wrong body,’ then why do they transition?”

Ashton’s rhetoric is constantly focused on the legitimacy of his identity as a man, despite his decisions to only do what some would deem a “partial transition.” Ashton’s blog, as previously mentioned, is a hub for trans\* blog posting and is consistently alive with anonymous questions, many of which come from other transmasculine youth bloggers that ask questions that help them to explore or validate their own identities. One of the most common themes of Ashton’s blog is his daily proclamation that having a penis does not equal being a man. In affirming his identity as a man with a clit and vagina, he is reconstructing notions that certain gender identities are “supposed” to match certain physical embodiments of sex. This goes against the early sex reassignment clinics’ ideas about qualifications for surgery as described in the “Posttransexual Manifesto.”

Personally, when I was first seeking to understand more about embodiment possibilities and ways of combating dysphoria, much of the rhetoric I heard about transition options for masculine-of-center womyn, FTMs, or other transmasculine female-bodied individuals seeking different gender embodiment mandated that there was



a specific order or trajectory of how transitions are “supposed” to happen. I was indoctrinated with the notion that HRT was the first step in the process, followed by top surgery, and finally bottom surgery. Nevermind all other relevant information that would have been helpful about changing one’s name or binding or aspects of social transformation, all I knew was that there was a “right” way to go about transitioning that didn’t allow for much delineation from the mandated trajectory. Because of this hegemonic narrative, I didn’t think I “fit” into the trans\* identity. I knew I didn’t want to complete a medical transition to become male, but I also knew that womanhood and female embodiment weren’t working for me either. The limiting information about life beyond the binary and beyond the dominant trans\* narrative left me in an idle position of unhappiness and unknowing. It wasn’t until I found trans\* blogging communities and the multiplicity of ways of being, embodying, and living gender beyond the binary, that I began to understand my trans\* identity and all of the things that *my* asterisk encompass.

In one of Loan’s blog posts titled, “Today is August 2<sup>nd</sup> and I am okay,” they echo similar sentiments. Loan blogs:

“I walk into spaces (queer spaces, trans\* spaces, or neither) and there’s just this odd atmosphere. And maybe that’s because the spaces I have access to are spaces that only acknowledge trans\* folks that admit they’ve started somewhere and are ending somewhere. I don’t know where I started, but I know that I have. I don’t know where I want to end, but I have the feeling that I’ve ended so many times just to restart myself.” (Loan, 2 Aug. 2012)

Loan’s frustration is aimed at the hegemony of the born in the wrong body narrative that mandates that gender transitioning is a correcting process that ends with a peaceful resolution. Loan is candid about the uncertainty of where their gender/sex transition will

take them and the anxiety of wondering whether any form of “resolution” or “end point” will ever exist.

The next blog that Loan posted in their “transition” section, titled “I Just Want to Be Fabulous, Damn It!” adds another layer to the critique, challenging the notion that there ever is a fairy tale ending to trans\* life and embodiment. They write,

“I wake up most days comfortable in my body – I learn to love the curves more and more and I learn to thicken my skin more and more. And it brings me to question the ways in which trans\* narratives are constructed, or how some narratives are valued over others, and what it means to write your own story, or buy into some sort of fairytale where dysphoria meets HRT and gender reassignment surgery.” (Loan, 2012)

Loan’s vocal dissatisfaction with the trans\* narratives provided to them offers another trans\* blogger’s critique of the born in the wrong body myth and one-way trajectory of transition which dominates trans\* narratives and rhetoric. Loan is skeptical to believe that dysphoria can ever be resolved with a fairy tale ending, and also distrustful of anyone who claims to know exactly where they started or where they’re going. Much of Loan’s frustration comes from their feelings that their narrative is devalued or ignored in queer, trans\*, and other spaces, because it diverges from the fairy tale story of HRT and reassignment surgery.

While Quin’s blog never explicitly offers a critique of the one-way trajectory of transitioning, Quin’s decision to pursue a natural transition subverts dominant ideas about the goals or intended outcomes of transitioning the body. Quin’s blog serves as a source for both information and advice about natural transitioning. They post general resource information about natural transitioning from books and also blog about their own workout routine, diet, and noticeable changes in body and appearance. Quin describes the aims of their natural transitioning as a desire to appear more androgynous. “I’m a

queer transmasculine genderqueer. I've been researching natural transitioning because I am interested in partial transitioning. I want my body to look more androgynous, so I've been working out and eating certain foods and taking supplements to boost my testosterone. It's quite a journey." (Quin, 26 Jan. 2012). In this passage, Quin is both simultaneously upholding and subverting notions of what transition is "supposed" to look like. Through openly articulating the desire to change their body to subvert the gender binary, Quin is challenging the born in the wrong body narrative. However through their word choice of "partial" transition they uphold some of the dominant rhetoric about what a "full" transition must entail. By using the word "partial," Quin validates the idea that a true transition involves moving from one end of the binary to the other, reinforcing ideas that the most valid genders are woman and man and other gender identities are merely identities in the margins. I would argue that through transitioning from a female-bodied lesbian, woman identity to an androgynous-bodied, third space gender identity, Quin *is* in fact completing a full and valid transition. But, with that being said, the very fact that they are pursuing this different and in-between embodiment and gender, regardless of how they define it, is a challenge to the transsexual master narrative.

Caylo's blog offers the least amount of information about their personal transitioning decisions in terms of where they anticipate their transition going. During the course of my research Caylo was taking testosterone and fundraising for top surgery. None of his blog posts indicate whether he is interested in bottom surgery. I find Caylo's transition decisions to be interesting and important to note however, especially in relation with his Pinoy and Tagalog identity. Caylo's blog page is filled with posts about his identity as a trans\* and mixed person of color. A lot of his posts are centered on his

Pinoy identity and pride in Filipino and Tagalog culture. For example, in one post he shares information about Lakapati/Ikapati, the Tagalog transgender deity of fertility. The beginning of the post reads:

“Known as a transgendered deity and one of the most understanding and kindest deities of the Tagalogs, Lakapati is the deity of fertility, fertility for the fields and crops, and protector of farm animals and crops. (**Note:** *I will use the Tagalog term “siya” to refer to he/she as Lakapati is transgendered. In Tagalog we don’t have a term for “he/him and she/her” in our language like English does since “siya” is gender neutral, meaning it refers to both he/him and she/her. Because there is no English equivalent of siya for someone who is gender neutral I will be using the Tagalog term siya here for this purpose.*) Siya was the deity who gave the gift of agriculture to mankind and Lakapati literally means, ‘giver of food.’” (Caylo, 3 Aug. 2012)

I find this post particularly relevant and interesting when placed in dialogue with Katrina Roen’s article from *The Transgender Studies Reader* about the ethnocentrism of trans\* identities and the westernization of gender liminality. Roen’s studies are specifically focused on gender variant indigenous peoples in New Zealand, the fa’afafine, and how the hegemony of western trans\* medical narratives have impacted their identities and decisions about embodiment. The results of Roen’s studies show a concern of some fa’afafine that gender variant youth will pursue medical transitioning as a result of the hegemony of western trans\* narratives, leading to the “degradation of fa’afafine identities” (Roen, 258). In other words, this dominant trope of being born in the wrong body will influence individuals to pursue medical and physical transitions, although for centuries their cultures have told them that a range of different gender embodiments and identities can exist, regardless of the sexed body.

Placing Roen’s text in conversation with Caylo’s blog and Pinoy identity displays some of the contact zones and conflicts between hegemonic western trans\* narratives and indigenous gender sensibilities. Caylo is pursuing aspects of Western medical

transitioning, while also articulating his pride for the openness and acceptances of different gendered ways of being in Tagalog culture. Because of the lack of writing Caylo does describing his personal decisions around medical transitioning, it is impossible to know whether these identities/decisions are in conflict or agreement for Caylo, but Roen's text and Caylo's blog speak to the true hegemony of Western trans\* narratives that are constructed and dependent on Western medicine.

## **INHABITING THE MARGINS**

This chapter is focused on understanding the dominant narrative of trans\* identities along with the rhetoric of being “born in the wrong body,” in order to display how trans\* youth bloggers are contesting this narrative. By discussing their transitions in terms of ongoing processes or by deciding to only “partially” transition, they are rewriting and narrative that calls for a resolved end point. Their varying identities and embodiments contest any sort of notion that there is one narrative of transition.

For me, this project has always been about displaying how trans\* youth are rewriting and contesting dominant narratives and hegemonic trajectories. But one of the key components of contesting these narratives is not only dismantling or rupturing them, but then legitimizing and validating the spaces and margins outside of the dominant narratives. Through contesting the notion that there will ever be a neat resolution or conclusion to their dysphoria, and through challenging the “end” of the trajectory, Quin, Caylo, Loan, and Ashton are drawing attention to life in the margins. And all four bloggers are careful and explicit about their belief that life in the margins is beautiful, enlightening, heartbreaking, fulfilling, tragic, and legitimate. Loan writes:

“Hot summer days make me settle into my booty shorts – white FTMs once told me about the relationships of bodies and genders, of medical institutions that I don’t trust, my momma doesn’t trust, doesn’t trust us; told me to paint body on my gender but the canvas was wrong; told me this 6785<sup>th</sup> YouTube video about T was about me but they were dead wrong; told me that the deliberateness of my gender needed a long winding narrative when I’ve always managed to have one, it just wasn’t theirs; told me in enough ways to make me avoid searching for intentional communities that spoke to me in the way their whiteness couldn’t.”  
(Loan, Aug. 2012)

Loan is declaring their distrust, dissatisfaction, and dissent of the master narrative of trans\* identities and bodies. Loan is validating who they are and their being, even if it is outside of the “long winding narrative.” While this chapter was focused on contesting dominant transition timelines and narratives, the next chapter will examine anti-assimilationist and anti-passing ways of being. It seeks to legitimize life in the margins of the gender binary, while also offering some understanding of what a life beyond passing has the possibility to look like.

### Chapter Three – Beyond Passing: Radical, Anti-Assimilationist Ways of Being

*“If we eliminate the pressure to pass, what delicious and devastating opportunities for transformation might we create?”*  
 –Mattilda “Matt” Bernstein Sycamore

Passing is the act of shifting or changing one’s behavior or appearance to blend in, imitate, or resemble others. To pass, one makes decisions to change or cover components of their being. Bernstein Sycamore describes these decisions as an act of violence against one’s self. In the quote that opens this chapter, Bernstein Sycamore proposes a world where people are free to be, without the pressure to blend in or make others comfortable. Delicious possibilities of self-expression unravel a world of tantalizing difference, of vast and varying embodiment that allows individuals to understand the potential of personal and collective liberation. And while opening possibilities for one to be exactly as they choose to be also opens up possibility for failure, devastation, and imperfection, the self-violence afflicted through assimilation is far more damaging.

This chapter’s goal is to bring the inventive ways the bloggers discuss and approach identities and bodies into dialogue with the broader mainstream queer movement to explore how trans\* Tumblr bloggers are not only contesting dominant narratives of what a transition “should” look like, but also creating radical ways of being and living that challenge the monolithic, one issue based, mainstream queer movement. The bloggers’ political agenda and approach to trans\* liberation is diametrically opposed to much of the mainstream queer movement, and the bloggers’ anti-assimilationist agenda pushes back on the gay movement’s strategy for achieving equality. I argue that

via the Internet and practice of reblogging and dialoguing with one another, these four bloggers and other virtual trans\* community members are creating an expansive and inclusive queer community that reimagines what queer and trans\* solidarity has the potential to look like.

## **WHAT EXACTLY IS THE MAINSTREAM GAY MOVEMENT?**

Throughout much of this paper I have argued that trans\* youth bloggers contest the monolithic narratives and images of the mainstream queer movement. Through my analysis of their rich descriptions of their identities in Chapter One, I argued that they are creating a new language for describing themselves that is intersectional and inclusive of all of their overlapping and converging identities. The heterogeneity of trans\* virtual communities is in stark contrast with the dominant images of queer folks seen in mainstream media. In this section, I will highlight some of the main pillars of the mainstream gay movement, while also illuminating some of the issues and conflicts over the direction of the movement and its political agenda.

In the last two decades, gay and lesbian visibility has been on the rise. Shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Modern Family*, and Ellen Degeneres' day time talk show have placed queer individuals, couples, designers, comedians, and families in nearly every living room in the United States. Support for Same-Sex Marriage is nationally on the rise, while statistics and information about the increase in support vary, most general Gallup polls show an increase of 15-20% of the American public supporting gay marriage in the last fifteen years, making the general support of same sex marriage tip over the fifty percent mark (Stark, 2012). Evidence of this can be seen in the



November 2012 elections, with Maine, Maryland, and Washington passing ballot measures that allowed for same sex marriage and Minnesota voting down legislation that would define marriage as between a man and a woman only. But what does this really mean in terms of gay liberation?

In a talk given at the University of Colorado Boulder campus titled, “A Future Beyond Equality,” queer activist and writer, Kenyon Farrow described what he sees as the four pillars of the mainstream queer movement: gays in the military, anti-gay bullying, same-sex marriage, and employment non-discrimination. Kenyon Farrow, the former executive director of Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ), an organization centered on serving the needs of low-income and homeless queer folks, questions why these issues became the pillars of the platform, the most pressing and relevant issues at the forefront of the movement (Farrow, 2013). He also raises questions about the future direction of the movement after all of these action items are “completed.” Of the four pillars, two have seen successful legislation with the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell in 2012, allowing gays to enter the military, and with the passing of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 2009, mandating that gender, sexuality, gender identity, and disability be included in the 1969 Federal Hate-Crimes Law. With two same-sex marriage cases selected to be heard at the Supreme Court in 2013, it seems as if the marriage issue will soon be “resolved,” as well. This leaves the queer political movement at a pivotal decision point for deciding the direction of queer donated dollars, lobbying attention, and political campaigns.

In an article titled, “Gay Marriage in New York: Progressive Victory or GOP Roadmap?” published on activist blogs after the passing of same sex marriage legislation

in New York in 2011, Kenyon Farrow questions the liberation strategies of the mainstream queer movement. His article traces the money that was donated to marriage equality campaigns to find that the majority of the funding came from “GOP-supporting hedge fund managers, tea party funders and corporate conglomerates,” or as Farrow dubs them, “enemies of progressive causes.” (Farrow, 2011). Farrow, a radical activist dedicated to issues of queer equity in shelter systems, prisons, and welfare programs, questions the political strategy behind the GOP support for same sex marriage. Supporting marriage, an issue that has been framed by the right wing as a “conservative value,” endorses normative and comfortable aspects of queer life. According to Farrow, as “acceptance” of LGBT individuals was visibly on the rise and the GOP began to realize that their anti-gay platform was a losing issue, they had to take a new approach to “gay issues.” By latching on to marriage, they strategically embraced gays that fit into their monogamous, family oriented, conservative, and traditional GOP image. The right wing used their funding and political clout to push marriage to the center of the queer political agenda. This strategy places their dollars in support of assimilationist, non-threatening queer ways of being, further marginalizing queers in poverty, trans folks, queer people of color, and homeless queer youth. In this regard, liberation does not come in the form of marriage equality for Farrow, despite what the mainstream queer movement has told us.

In an issue of the *Radical History Review* titled “Queer Futures,” Jason Ruiz interviews anti-assimilationist activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, who discussed their frustration with “the mainstream gay elite that sees their desires as everyone else’s needs.” (Ruiz, 241). This mirrors Farrow’s frustration with the privileged (both

economically and racially) gay elite who have taken their desire to get married and placed it at the center of the queer political platform, despite the fact that some of the most marginalized queer and trans\* folks are living in poverty with concerns over affordable housing, living in prison systems that don't have policies and procedures for dealing with trans inmates, or living in urban environments where HIV infection rates among gay men of color are on the rise. Bernstein Sycamore's critique describes the mainstream queer movement as not only preoccupied with assimilationist issues such as marriage and military service, but also as largely consumer driven, with things like "glamorous, sweatshop-produced rainbow flags, Tiffany wedding bands, [and] Gray Goose Cosmo-tinis" occupying the center of queer culture (Ruiz, 241).

In Craig Rimmerman's 2008 book, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?*, Rimmerman assess the varying strategies available to LGBTQ folks for achieving "equal status" in the United States. Rimmerman describes the "progress" of the movement, drawing attention to the increase in media attention to queers and statistics that indicate increased acceptance. Rimmerman states that:

"But for all of the so-called progress, lesbians and gay men remain second class citizens in vital ways. Fewer than one-tenth of 1 percent of all elected officials in the United States are openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual; very few transgendered people have been elected to public office. Lesbians and gay men are forbidden to marry, to teach in many public schools, to adopt children, to provide foster care, and to serve in the armed forces, National Guard, reserves, and the ROTC." (Rimmerman, 4)

In this list of ways that queer individuals are second-class citizens, Rimmerman is falling into the same mainstream queer assimilationist framework that Bernstein Sycamore and Farrow are contesting. This list of issues is displaying problems or concerns that would be most commonly faced by more affluent, educated and/or conservative queer folks.

In Bernstein Syamore's interview with Jason Ruiz for the special edition of the Radical History Review titled *Queer Futures*, she states:

“Marriage and military service and adoption and ordination into the priesthood are suddenly ‘gay issues,’ whereas things like housing, health care, police brutality, gentrification...those? As if to say, ‘Oh no, we can’t be concerned with any of that! We’re just so excited about gay cops, because if we have gay cops gunning down unarmed people of color, then we have arrived!’ It’s a nightmare of identity politics where gay becomes an end point, a rationalization for celebrating the worst aspects of dominant-culture straight identity: nationalism, racism, classism, patriotism, consumerism, militarism, patriarchy, imperialism, misogyny; every other form of systemic violence becomes a hot accessory.” (Ruiz, 237-238)

Bernstein Syamore describes this platform of queer issues that cater to the white, elite and consumerist queers as “Gaylandia.” It is a space where queer folks feel that all of the rights and privileges of straight folks should be available to them, without critically questioning the problematic or violent components of those rights and privileges. For example, because same-sex couples are unable to biologically conceive, and family is a right that they feel they are entitled to, any way of achieving an equitable position is deemed valid. Bernstein Syamore expands on this point when she says, “I think adoption – buying kids is a fascinating example of the violence that many gay people have absorbed. It legitimizes a scenario where people seem to be saying, ‘I don’t have to actually ask any questions about transnational adoption, because I’m lesbian and I *need* these kids’” (Ruiz, 238). In this context, imitating heterosexuality becomes the “end point,” or marker of true equality. Any actions taken to get to this end point go unquestioned, because they are all in the name of “equality.” Bernstein Syamore’s critique of the queer agenda and the way it privileges assimilationist or heteronormative

issues highlights one of the major points of contention over how to approach queer liberation.

## **THE VIOLENCE OF ASSIMILATION**

“The violence of assimilation” is a term coined by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore as an alternative way of understanding queer people’s lived experiences with what academia has dubbed “heteronormativity.” The violence of assimilation is a way of understanding the physical, emotional and spiritual violence that occurs when queer folks are expected to assimilate into dominant culture. Bernstein Sycamore describes it as, “the ways in which gay people have become obsessed with accessing straight privilege at any cost; it’s almost like cultural erasure is the goal” (Ruiz, 237). While the violence of assimilation can be understood as the lived trauma of queer folks who are trying to live up to heterosexual and cisgender standards of how to live one’s life, it can also be understood as the trauma that comes from the collapsing of queer identities into one monolithic category of how to be gay.

While the previous section was focused on the critiques of the mainstream gay movement and the need for it to encompass issues that affect all queers, specifically those that affect queers with multiple marginalized identities, this section is focused not on the impacts of assimilationist practices in terms of politics, funding or lobbying, but in terms of how assimilation personally, emotionally and spiritually impacts queer folks. Placing marriage at the center of the queer political agenda does not just mean that funding and resources are funneled away from programs focused on queer homeless issues and into marriage, but it means that normative, monogamous queer families are given attention

and visibility, while homeless queer youth, sex workers, and queer elders remain invisible and further marginalized.

This same heteronormativity can be seen in television and film depictions of queer individuals that typically show lesbian women as femme and completely indistinguishable from straight characters (unless of course the lesbian character is depicted as a “dyke” for laughs, i.e. the lesbian gym teacher trope) and gay men as either masculine and non-threatening, or femmey, fashionable accessories to straight female friends. The femmey, fashionable gay man of the television and film world slides into the picture because his friendship with straight women is not a threat to heterosexual male sexuality. However, butch women are invisible on television because they are seen as a direct threat to heterosexual male sexuality by suggesting that sexuality and sex can have nothing to do with men (Brownworth, 147). The most popular mainstream television shows with queer characters are primarily gay men, for example Mitchell and Cameron on *Modern Family*, Kurt on *Glee*, Lafayette on *True Blood*, Thomas on *Downton Abbey*, Vito on *The Sopranos*, Will and Jack on *Will and Grace*, the full cast of *Queer Eye of the Straight Guy*. Most of these gay male characters can be broken down into two categories: the overly feminine, fashion-forward fairy (i.e. Kurt, Lafayette, and Jack) or the hyper-masculine “surprisingly gay” character (i.e. Vito, Thomas, and Will). Occasionally, mainstream television shows will reference a female character having lesbian or bisexual tendencies, but she is *always* a femme character and the queer experiences are usually described as a thing of the past, for example Brittany and Santana on *Glee*, Samantha on *Sex and the City*, Lily on *How I Met Your Mother*, Claire on *Heroes*, or Anna on *One Tree Hill*. Ellen DeGeneres is perhaps the only exception to this

rule. The mainstream media's limited portrayal of only queer folks who appear heterosexual or are nonthreatening to heteronormativity can hardly be considered an advancement towards queer liberation, although "increased queer visibility" in the media is frequently mentioned as a sign of progress towards queer equality.

In the anthology *Persistence*, Victoria Brownworth, a famous lesbian author, columnist, and critic writes an essay titled, "No Butches, No Femmes: The Mainstreaming of Queer Sexuality." Her essay attacks the idea that "acting more straight," or attempting to pass and assimilate will lead to more equity and respect. She writes, "The promises that accompany assimilation are rarely fulfilling; they are the lure to force minorities to be more like the majority – more tolerable, more palpable, less like themselves, less Other. Meanwhile, the detriments to community, to individual self-esteem and, in the case of queers, to personal sexual identity are manifold" (Brownworth, 147). While appealing to mainstream society and heterosexuals for rights by saying "we are just like you," may seem like an effective strategy for winning equality and respect, Brownworth is saying that assimilation damages the very characteristics that make queer culture unique and worth fighting for—chosen family, gender bending performativity, and alternative family structures. Further marginalizing and excluding those with differences does not create a more inclusive world, it only accounts for those who already live with many privileges while further marginalizing those who do not. I and other trans\* bloggers, argue that the effectiveness of a movement should not be judged by those that it liberates, but those whom it leaves behind. Trans\* youth bloggers are being left behind by the goals and aims of the mainstream queer movement and rendered even further invisible by the assimilationist attempts for queer liberation. Their blogs are their

way of speaking up, talking back, and resisting the violence of assimilation. This topic of anti-assimilationist blogging will be further addressed in the section, “Life Beyond Passing.”

## **REDEFINING COMMUNITY, DIALOGUING ABOUT DIFFERENCE, AND CREATING INTERSECTIONAL AND INCLUSIVE QUEER POLITICS**

Trans\* youth bloggers challenge and reconceptualize what constitutes a community and what it means to be a part of a community. To understand the impact/implications of trans\* youth bloggers redefining community, I find it important to situate their community practices within some queer cyber studies research that is focused on community. Much of early cyber studies has been centered on the question of what constitutes a community, especially when virtual ethnographers acknowledge the blurred lines and boundaries between the dichotomies of online versus offline and physical versus virtual. In an article titled, “The Anthropology of Online Communities,” published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* in 2002, Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson discuss these blurred boundaries. Because cultural anthropology has traditionally been centered on studying communities, cyber studies calls for new and fluid concepts of community (Wilson, 455). Wilson and Peterson write:

“The idea that a community was defined by face-to-face interaction was effectively challenged long ago by scholars of the development of nationalism and transnationalism. An online/offline conceptual dichotomy is also counter to the direction taken within recent anthropology, which acknowledges multiple identities and negotiated roles individuals have within different sociopolitical and cultural contexts.” (Wilson, 456)



Wilson and Peterson go on to say that our understandings of what constitute a community cannot be broken down into categories of real versus virtual, because the two are often overlapping, blurred, and linked.

Trans\* Tumblr communities are evidence of these blurred distinctions. When I began selecting the four blogs that would be the focus of my research, I was looking for prolific bloggers that had lots of activity in terms of “likes,” comments, and reblogs, along with blogs that were rich with discussion of personal transitioning decisions. I chose Loan, Ashton, Quin, and Caylo because of these reasons, without knowing any of the connections that exist between the bloggers “in real life” (IRL). As my research unfolded and I collected more posts in each blog archive, I found that Ashton, although currently located in Seattle for college, was originally from the Los Angeles area where Quin lives. Although it is unclear whether they met first online or IRL, the two share a relationship of not only reblogging one another’s posts, but also spending time together in Los Angeles whenever Ashton is home to visit his family. Ashton is currently living in Seattle, which coincidentally, is also where Caylo lives. Their blogs do not indicate whether they have ever met in person, but they live in the same metropolitan center. Caylo’s former roommate Fabi, another trans\* Tumblr blogger from Seattle knows Loan. They met in an activist setting, and maintain a close friendship both online and IRL. These connections reveal a complicated web of friendships, community, and activism that are intertwined both online and IRL. It is hard to determine where their virtual connections end and their physical, or face-to-face relationship begin.

The reconceptualizing of fluid virtual and physical communities becomes clear in some of their posts. In one of Loan’s blog posts they write, “I’m heading out for five-

college gender queer and sexuality conference this weekend! I'd be down to have a qtpoc<sup>22</sup> Tumblr meet up/get together/say hey to me please. Something in addition to the QPOC caucus space. Or just say hey to me if you're around. :-)" (Loan, 25 Feb. 2013). Twelve different bloggers liked their post with one of them commenting "I will be there Saturday!" This blog highlights the fact that even though most of these people are interconnected and "know" each other because of virtual blogging communities, their interactions are not limited to digital spaces. While they may be "meeting" in purely virtual and bodiless spaces, many times, their digital interactions result in IRL friendships and community. This blurring of the real and virtual corresponds with cyber ethnographers' call for the reimagining of community.

While branches of cyber studies focus on distinguishing between what is "real" community, what is "virtual," and all the places where they overlap and converge, much of queer cyber studies takes virtual community as a given, a component of new media and digital relationships in a globalizing world. Queer cyber studies is more focused on purpose and possibilities of virtual community. In Nina Wakeford's foundational article, "Cyberqueer," she states, "Mainstream cyberspace has often been prompted as creating 'virtual communities' and cyberqueer spaces may compensate for the social or geographical isolation of sexual minorities by operating as a medium through which contacts can be more easily facilitated." (Wakeford, 410). For Wakeford, the purpose of virtual community is to compensate for a lack of physical community due to geographic or social isolation. This is the case in Mary Gray's book, *Out in the Country*, in which the queer rural youth she studies use the Internet as a means of finding community and

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<sup>22</sup> QTPOC is an acronym for queer and trans people of color.

understanding identity. In a different cyber queer text, “Queer Spaces, Modem Boys and Pagan Statues: Gay/Lesbian Identity in the Construction of Cyber Space,” Randal Woodland discusses the purpose of queer virtual community and how it reconstructs traditional notions of physical space. In his article, Woodland theorizes the Internet as a “third space” that provides a comfortable medium between the public and private (Woodland, 418). In this context, queer virtual communities serve as a comfortable in-between zone, resting in the divide between online/offline and physical/virtual. These authors are all conveying a sense of possibility that the Internet holds in terms of finding support and comfort in these communities or “third spaces.”

Ashton echoes the sense of community and support available to those who are isolated in a response to a question post. An anonymous asker wrote:

“Do you know where I could find queer resources/more queers just to talk to? I’m a senior in high school and even though I’m very privileged in terms of peers accepting me/ I will be leaving for a top tier expensive university, but I just feel so invisible right now. There’s the GSA and things like that, but it’s mostly straight ‘ally’ girls and focuses on G and occasionally L if you know what I mean. There aren’t any other queers at my school as far as I know and it’s killing me.” (Ashton, 17 Jan. 2013)

Ashton responds by saying, “Well you are on Tumblr, so I’m sure there are others who are in similar situations. I would just pursue tags and websites. I donno. There’s lots of queers right here.” (Ashton, 17 Jan. 2013). Ashton suggests that they should simply look around queer blogs on Tumblr to hear narratives, find resources, and feel less alone. In this case, Ashton is suggesting that community and support is not necessarily defined by geographic location or physical space. This anonymous high school student can find support and community right on Tumblr amongst all the other queer bloggers.

Quin's blog is the most resource and advice heavy of all the bloggers. They post links to webpages that provide readers with information about trans\* rights in regard to a wide array of issues such as rights in airport security, rights when dealing with law enforcement, and rights when acquiring a new driver's license with your chosen name and correct gender markers. Quin also provides links to websites where low-income transmasculine folks can purchase affordable binders and packers, along with photos and tutorials for making homemade binders and packers. Quin is also a source of information about natural transitioning, keeping followers up to date on their vitamins, works out routine, and diet. Their blog serves as a hub of community activity because of all the transmasculine community support and tips they offer.

While Wakeford, Gray, and Woodland are all concerned with understanding the purpose and impact of virtual spaces and communities, Alexander and Haraway, both fundamental scholars behind queer cyber studies, focus more on the possibilities of virtual community. In 1985, Donna Haraway authored an essay titled, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century," that theorizes the possibilities that arise from a cyborg, a hybrid of machine and organism. The cyborg destabilizes dominant binaries and dichotomies such as human versus animal, human versus machine, and physical versus nonphysical. Haraway sees the cyborg as a site of possibilities, writing:

"So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work... Another of my premises is that the need for unity of people trying to resist worldwide intensification of domination has never been more acute. But a slightly perverse shift of perspective might better enable us to contest for meanings, as well as for other forms of power and pleasures in technology mediated societies." (Haraway, 121- 122).

Haraway's quote encapsulates some of the potentials for radical politics that arise when dichotomies are broken down. And as multiple other scholars of cyber space have pointed out, the Internet is a fruitful site for deconstructing binaries. Jonathan Alexander's "Queer Webs: Representations of LGBT People and Communities on the World Wide Web," echoes the sentiment that online communities have the potential to radically transform progressive politics and use our differences to make social change (Alexander, 81-82). Because the World Wide Web works as a site of convergence, open dialogue, and plentiful information, the virtual meeting ground serves as a "space" to bring various people together, regardless of their physical lives, jobs, or other limitations, to dialogue about political and personal issues.

The Tumblr pages of trans\* bloggers are evidence that cyber space is a place of convergence, where differences come together, binaries are questioned, and progressive politics and dialogues happen. Mary Gray's research on rural queer youth found that large commercial media sites like gay.com and planetout.com operated as places to seek out information and images about being queer. While these are surely virtual meeting points for queer folks all over the U.S. and the world, they primarily exist as dating, chatting, and mainstream queer news media outlets. As Gray asserts, rural youth visit these sites and ingest a basic narrative of how to articulate queer identity, dictated by "particular ways to dress, look, and speak" (Gray, 123). Gray describes rural youth online as individuals who consume a basic narrative of how to perform gay through corporate and commercial sites. Functioning similarly to other forms of mainstream media, these sites "circulate a hegemonic grammar for the articulation of identity," but with a bit more "realness" (Gray, 125). In *Out in the Country*, online websites for rural

youth aren't operating as sites of social action or mobilization, but rather a different articulation of the same dominant narratives of how to be gay.

In my research, trans\* Tumblr communities function in remarkably different ways, with the blogs serving as sites that foster dialogue about difference, spectrums of gender identity and presentation, and anti-racist, anti-classist queer political consciousness. Because of the Tumblr platform's emphasis on reblogging one another's ideas, dialogue is the foundation of trans\* Tumblr communities. Connections between bloggers are constituted by the exact fact that they do reblog and circulate one another's posts with their own comments and narratives attached. Their interconnected web of reblogged posts is what makes the community a cohesive unit.

Tumblr trans\* communities are made up of trans\* youth telling their vastly different stories, that are often times in disagreement. Rather than searching for messages of how to properly perform or be trans, bloggers share their stories of how they *are* trans, despite differences between their trans\* experiences. On July 14, 2012, following an eruption of trans\* youth bloggers debating over what is "trans\* enough," Ashton reposted a quote from another trans bloggers that said, "Besides the whole 'trans\* enough' body policing bull shit that has been going on with the trans\* community, the issue of 'passing' has really been bothering me." (Ashton, 14 July 2012). Under the reblogged quote and a string of comments by other bloggers, Ashton tacks on his own opinion. He writes:

"This is a constant battle I have with myself. I identify as a man, which should be enough, but given the fact that we live in a society that dictates what a man/woman *should* look like, I need more. I need testosterone because I want my voice to drop. I want a five o'clock shadow. I want hips that are narrow and shoulders that are broad.

I need top surgery because I hate my chest. I loathe the 14 inches of fabric that keep me from a full inhale everyday. What I loathe more is the binder that holds it down.

Society sucks, but that does not negate my need to fulfill the image I have for myself.

I won't have full body acceptance until my chest is flat and my chin is fuzzy.

I am all too conscious of what society expects of trans\* people and how dangerous upholding these standards are, however, we should not be penalized for wanting to pass because it affirms our gender identity.

Breaking the binary is something to strive for – persecuting trans\* folks, myself included, for wanting to pass until the binary is broken is not healthy either.”

(Ashton, 14 July 2012)

In this anecdote, Ashton is challenging other bloggers' posts/ideas about what real trans\* is, while explaining his own body dysphoria and medical process. He offers one narrative or understanding of why someone would want to pass, even if passing is an enforcement of the binary. This post acquired sixteen likes, but even more than likes, twenty four different bloggers either commented on Ashton's post or reblogged it with their response and personal opinions about passing. This blogging activity enforces my argument that virtual trans\* Tumblr communities exist *because* of their dialogue and debates. Unlike rural youth on commercial sites, trans\* youth bloggers are discussing and debating what it means to be queer and trans\*, and also what trans\* and queer liberation has the potential to look like. These discussions are manifestations of the personal being political, and as Haraway and Alexander would hope for, potential sites for social change.

From my research, I found that an important distinction between queer media and trans\* cyber media can be made in terms of the scope of issues addressed. As mentioned in the section “The Violence of Assimilation,” queer popular media portrays almost entirely heteronormative or nonthreatening queers, and focuses on issues of family, anti-

gay bullying, and other mainstream issues. While Internet media has allowed for more access to images and narratives of queer folks, especially for those who are socially and geographically isolated, much of Internet media, such as gay.com and planetout.com does not work to expand the scope of issues addressed or types of queer individuals being depicted. Trans\* youth blogging and writing is distinct because of its direct focus on showing many and multiple narratives for identities, bodies, and transitioning. My data showed that not only is there a wide array of trans\* embodiments on these Tumblr blogs, but the bloggers themselves are focused on discussing trans\* liberation not in a queer vacuum, but in relation to complex issues such as trans\* political asylum, body positivity for overweight or disabled trans\* folks, lack of resources for trans\* folks in prisons, homeless shelters and deportation facilities, transphobia in feminism, misogyny in transmasculine communities, and affordable health care options for low income trans\* folks. Their political consciousnesses are not limited to discussing gender and transphobia as categories devoid from an array of other institutionalized oppressions such as sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and ageism.

Central to all four trans bloggers' pages are different social justice related issues. For example, much of Loan's blog includes not only analysis about gender, sexuality, and bodies, but also immigration rights, racism in the United States, working conditions of migrant women, and U.S. culture's pressure on immigrants to assimilate. All of these issues are central to Loan's identity. Similarly, Caylo blogs about forgotten or lost elements of his Filipino culture because of the pressure for immigrants to assimilate, the legacies of colonialism, internalized misogyny, and U.S. racism. Much of Quin's blog is focused on body positivity, trans\* inclusive feminism and challenging patriarchy.



Ashton's blog is also about trans\* inclusive feminism, and also anti-racism practices and tips for white allyship. Loan, Caylo, Quin, and Ashton all bring their identities and backgrounds to their blogging sites, but also aim for inclusive and intersectional analysis of global systems of oppression that contribute to and constitute their marginalized trans\* statuses.

## **LIFE BEYOND PASSING**

Anti-assimilationist activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore assembled an anthology in 2006 titled, *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*. The anthology is filled with short stories and essays about belonging. The opening lines of the book read:

“It’s possible to say this book began the first time someone called me a sissy on the playground (age four). Or maybe it began when my grandmother asked why all of my friends were ‘colored’ (age seven). Or when my parents first abandoned me on a soccer field amongst unknown monsters of my assigned gender (feels like yesterday). Or maybe this book started when my female friends first developed crushes on the misogynist, queer bashing boys we’d previously hated together (age thirteen). Of course I could talk endlessly about the ways in which I have tried to pass, or failed to pass, or refuse to pass.” (Bernstein Sycamore, 7)

In this introduction (to a book explicitly titled *Nobody Passes*), Bernstein Sycamore introduces the idea that *nobody* is able to pass all of the time. She introduces passing as a concept that doesn’t just apply to passing as the “right” gender but can apply to every single person in some regard. And what Bernstein Sycamore wishes to highlight is that, “in a pass/fail situation, standards for acceptance may vary, but somebody always gets trampled” (Bernstein Sycamore, 9). There is no way to simultaneously pass to please others, while staying true to oneself. In the end, one must choose between being themselves or being the person others require them to be.

On Loan's Tumblr homepage, they feature a series of hyperlinks. One link leads to TransUnrest, their transition pages, the other links are: "What I look like," "Why I caption images," "Here's a video of me talking about some stuff I do," and "Here's a video about whiteness and how to pronounce my name." Although the section titles may seem arbitrary, each link leads to a page that highlights a very distinct part of Loan's identity and political project. "What I look like" is a space to celebrate trans and brown beauty, "Why I caption images" is about Loan's dedication to addressing ableism and make their blog accessible to all, "Here's a video of me talking about some stuff I do" is about Loan's political activism, and "Here's a video about whiteness" is about Loan's internalized racism and shame and their dedication to living beyond assimilation. In "here's a video about whiteness" Loan says:

"I think that it's become significantly important for me to pronounce my name as it is in Vietnamese, in an effort to take the steps towards actually decolonizing myself and unpacking a book bag that's been full of internalization of whiteness and white supremacy. And it's true that when you internalize those things that you do a lot of violence and harm to others, but you also hurt yourself. And I have been hurting myself for a very long time, making accommodations to people because I don't have an Anglo-Saxon name. And that goes for anyone. I think for most people who don't have Anglo-Saxon names you think that you have an obligation to make accommodations to people by giving them pneumatic devices, rhyming schemes, you know, shortening your name, whatever. And so, I think it is time for an end to that. And so, I typically introduce myself as Loan, like 'student loan,' because for a really long time I would describe my name as 'complicated' or whatever... I go by Loan, but the way you actually pronounce it is low-awn." (Loan, July 2012)

The transcript of this video articulates not only Loan's desire to resist assimilating as a Vietnamese immigrant, but also articulates their desire to resist dominant culture's pressure to simplify their complex and overlapping identities to accommodate others. While Loan is blogging about not wanting to simplify their Vietnamese immigrant identity any longer, they are simultaneously blogging about their process to grapple with

wanting to take testosterone but not complete any medical sex-reassignment surgeries. This form of gender transition and embodiment is not one that is comfortable or acceptable to most people. Loan's blog captures their life in the margins and in-between spaces. What's important to emphasize in this transcript is Loan's description of the way that assimilating has hurt other people, but also themselves. Loan is describing the personal, emotional, and spiritual impacts of passing, and their decision to no longer pass in order to heal the parts of themselves and their identity that they have lost or concealed. This self-inflicted damage is the violence of assimilation.

Quin's approach to living as an anti-assimilationist involves an active resistance to gender policing or misgendering. Quin's requests to be treated as neither a man or a woman places them outside of a "born in the wrong body" assimilationist framework that says "it's okay to transition your physical sex if you are trapped in the wrong body, just make sure you complete the necessary medical changes to be the 'opposite' sex, so your gender and sex 'match' properly." Quin is not in the "wrong body" or seeking to be in the "right body." Rather, they are demanding that individuals stop making assumptions about their gender because of their body. Quin writes:

"I don't like other people speaking for me or correcting others about my gender on my behalf. I don't appreciate being misgendered or gender policing. I'm genderqueer. In public I'll go with whatever I pass as, as long as it makes me feel comfortable. I like having an ambiguous gender expression. If I know I look especially masculine I'll use the men's restroom because I feel more comfortable since there are less people and men are socialized not to make eye contact, so there's less chance of confrontation. If I get called "sir" then ok. I'll be a sir. If I get called "miss" I'll probably ignore you because you know what? It makes me feel uncomfortable and I don't have to put up with that. If you don't call me anything because you don't know what I am then fucking great because you shouldn't assume someone's gender in the first place no matter what they look like. Using words like gender specific terms of address reinforces the gender binary and erases everyone who doesn't fit in those categories." (Quin, 18 Feb. 2012).

This passage is all about reclaiming their autonomy to articulate their own gender, and not allowing others around them to do it for them. It is about navigating spaces and passing for safety reasons, but vocalizing that the decisions about when to pass and where are their decisions, and their decisions alone.

Queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz articulates this autonomy and individual decision process in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Muñoz's theory of disidentification is about the necessity of claiming or rejecting certain identities in different spaces as an act of survival. Disidentification involves ongoing, daily, circumstantial decisions that allow for individuals with multiple marginalized identities to be able to live and navigate the world. The concept of disidentification can be summarized as the daily negotiations one makes to survive. Understanding these negotiation processes as acts of survival is important when understanding bloggers' daily negotiations and decisions to pass or not pass. Anti-assimilationist ways of being don't dictate active resistance to passing everyday in every space, this is not possible or plausible, but anti-assimilationist ways of being do involve a constant process of accessing dominant culture's pressures to pass, making a conscious decision to live in opposition to assimilationist pressures, and then negotiating different spaces daily.

The first two chapters of this thesis articulate some of the ways that trans\* cyber youth are navigating dominant culture, but doing so with a critical and anti-assimilationist mentality. In articulating full and complex identities, along with making unconventional decisions about embodiment and transition, they are opposing assimilationist frameworks that have been the standard since the early days of gender

reassignment clinics. By establishing inclusive, intersectional virtual communities that challenge the mainstream queer movement, they are not complying with liberation tactics that require them to be silent about their differences and highlight their sameness in order to achieve equality. They are creating lives and identities beyond trans\* passing narratives.

### (Beyond) Conclusion

*“I see a lot of hot ass trans people of color on Tumblr who are fabulous just for living. And I don’t have enough pretty words to show appreciation for all the ways their bodies are dressed up and dressed down to dismantle this system, but also just to live.”*  
 - Loan, *transqualizer.tumblr.com*

If trans\* youth bloggers have taught me anything, it is that there are no neat conclusions. Their contesting of one-way trajectories of transition demonstrates that life cannot be resolved or neatly packaged into a “fairly tale” ending, as Loan would say. I entered into my research with a hope of understanding the purpose and function of trans\* youth cyber communities. I wanted to differentiate between the political projects of transmasculine folks online and the political agenda of the mainstream queer movement. What my data left me with was a string of questions about the inadequacy of language and the inability of dominant narratives of innate internal gender and external body conflicts to account for the heterogeneity of the trans\* community.

One of the questions that developed from my research was: how are trans\* bloggers creating new ways to describe their identities and what is significant about the language they choose? Because of the bloggers’ complex, converging, diverging, and overlapping identities, language and words that are commonly used for describing identities and lived experiences fall short. Dominant culture’s desires to classify and categorize trans\* bloggers would lump them all into a homogenous category of “transgender,” an identity that fails to account for their vastly different bodies, genders, experiences and transitions. Because of the inadequacy of language, the bloggers’ processes of self-identifying and self-naming become inventive tasks of stringing words together or placing them in contradiction for new meanings. Chapter One argues that trans\* youth bloggers are engaged in their own knowledge production about identities

and the complex factors that comprise identity narratives. My research found that not only are they coming up with inventive language to describe their gender(s)—i.e. Loan placing genderqueer and transsexual together to signify a physical and social transition to a queer non-binary sex—but also new ways of engaging their racialized, class-based, and regional positionalities in the discussion about gender identity.

The fact that trans\* cyber communities are creating and developing new language and practices for self-identification is significant for understanding the heterogeneity of trans\* communities and identities, but also plays a central role in discussions about bodies, dysphoria, and transition. After my data led me to focus on identities and self-naming, my research took a direction of understanding how identities and words that describe trans\* identities are also verbal articulations of transition processes and decisions. I wanted to understand how the language being used to describe identities was central to the contesting and challenging of the “born in the wrong body” narrative. In the case of Loan’s identity as a transsexual genderqueer, their chosen words for self-naming also tell a story about their decisions and desires to pursue a medical transition that queers the notion that transitioning is about “full” body transformation. Chapter Two argues that the transitioning decisions and gender embodiments of trans\* youth bloggers fall outside of the dominant narrative that describes transgenderism as a state of being trapped in the wrong body. By historicizing the origins of the wrong body narrative and placing it in dialogue with the bloggers’ embodiment decisions, my thesis argues that bloggers are contesting this narrative by deconstructing the idea that men must have male genitalia and women must have female genitalia. The bloggers are also contesting the idea that gender transitioning has an endpoint of becoming of a man or becoming a

woman. The bloggers are transitioning and living as many other genders that are not man or woman. Their stories tell a different narrative of a full range of gender identities that can take on different embodiments beyond the binary of a male and a female sex.

My research culminates in the question: how are trans\* bloggers using their identities, which challenge hegemonic identity practices and narratives, to reimagine trans\* liberation outside of an assimilationist framework? In Chapter Three, I argue that trans\* cyber communities not only redefine what a community is through their virtual relationships and support structure, but also redefine what queer community and solidarity has the potential to look like. In these blogging communities, the category/identity of trans\* is expansive and inclusive, using intersectional models that understand liberation as a project of combating *all* systemic oppression. Their identities, bodies, and narratives fall outside of the mainstream gay movement's assimilationist agenda. My research concludes that trans\* cyber communities imagine a movement that is not focused on assimilationist issues such as marriage and military service, but instead envision a movement that accounts for all queer folks, including gender benders, sex workers, prisoners, undocumented immigrants, and other marginalized identities.

The chapters that constitute this thesis argue that trans\* youth bloggers are using the Internet in inventive, radical, inclusive, and visionary ways. Their knowledge production around identity, challenging of hegemonic narratives, and reimagining queer and trans\* liberation were what originally brought me to the community as a fellow blogger, and later to this project as a researcher. As a trans\* youth blogger I am compelled to argue for the validity and importance of the identities us bloggers articulate online. I have deep affection for all of the bloggers I researched and their personal



transition journeys because, in many ways, their stories are my stories. While the boundaries between my subjects and myself are blurred and my closeness to this community implies a bias on my behalf, it also provides an insider perspective. My position, identity, and closeness to this community both limits and enhances my research.

As I write this conclusion, my Tumblr page and social media websites are overflowing with posts about a young trans\* first grade girl in Fountain, Colorado that has become the center of national media coverage over a lawsuit to be able to use the girl's bathroom in her school. As I surf through the newspaper articles, blogs, and commentaries about little Coy Mathis, I am reminded why this project on trans\* youth bloggers is so important. The articles question a first grader's ability to say definitively their gender identity. And when the articles do give her the benefit of the doubt, the rhetoric revolves around how tragic and difficult it must be to be born in the wrong body.

It all reminds me of my own childhood, of my black cowboy boots, button down shirt, and father's oversized black tie I insisted on wearing to my grandmother's house on Easter when I was six year old. It reminds me of the boys swim trunks I wore to the neighborhood swimming pool until all the other mothers disapprovingly scolded my mother with their eyes and whispered words. And then it reminds me of when I asked for a buzz cut in fifth grade and my mom asked if I wanted to be a boy. I told her no, my cheeks red hot with shame. Really, I didn't want to be a boy, but I didn't want to be a girl either. I knew all of that then, I actually probably knew it better than I know now. I've been on a journey to try to reclaim what I knew, what I lost from years of shame and passing and not telling the full story.

So when I see the news articles about Coy Mathis, I am frustrated that people doubt her ability to know who and how she wants to be in this world. And I'm even more frustrated that she is already being forced into a transition process or narrative that only goes one way and only has one acceptable end. For Coy and for me and for Quin, and Ashton, and Caylo, and Loan, a reconceptualizing of trans\* identities, narratives, and liberation couldn't be more crucial, because all of this classifying and boxing won't lead to some fairytale resolution. The mainstream gay rights movement won't consider the heterogeneity of our ideas and bodies in their vision of equality. And while activist texts like *Nobody Passes* tell similar stories, I'm not seeing these stories in academia. My project brings trans\* youth bloggers into the conversations happening in cyber studies, queer studies, and queer theory. Trans\* cyber communities are fruitful sites for knowledge and cultural production. These bloggers are speaking up and talking back to one another, the mainstream queer movement, and dominant cisnormative culture, somebody just has to listen. This is my conclusion from a project that implies that there are no conclusions.

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