

BECOMING “THE MAN I WANT TO BE:”
TRANSGENDER MASCULINITY, EMBODIMENT, AND SEXUALITY.

by

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Becoming “The Man I Want to Be:” Transgender Masculinity, Embodiment, and Sexuality.

Thesis directed by Associate Professor L. Kaifa Roland

Abstract

This dissertation argues that transgender men have a different positionality than cisgender men. Being raised as a girl, socialized as a woman, and then transitioning to a visible man can allow trans men to develop masculinities that do not fall into heteronormative hegemonic norms. Trans men bring the politics, social values, and experience of sexism into their identities creating different types of masculinities that cannot be encompassed by normative categories. Based on the ethnographic evidence gathered in this project, such men are identifying themselves as *trans* men, rather than solely as men. A model was developed from the data that illustrates how transitioning from one gender to another is an act that brings new perspective on how gender operates in our culture. From this viewpoint, trans men have the ability to more consciously create the sort of man they want to be.

The project centers around the axes of the value added by trans masculinities, trans embodiment, and trans sexualities. Each of these identities is found to be socially negotiated in the cultural milieu, providing an opportunity for anthropologists to more closely examine how these new identities are being formed, contested, and incorporated into society.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“As we rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth, we transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be.”

Susan Stryker (1994, 242)

In the summer of 2014, when I had just begun my field work for this dissertation, *TIME* magazine had just published their first issue with a transgender person, Laverne Cox, on the cover. The headline announced we had reached “The Transgender Tipping” point (Steinmetz 2014). Cox was receiving several honors for her role as a trans woman in prison on the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*. Her role was remarkable and significant to the transgender community because she was a trans person playing a trans character, she is an African American woman, and she played a reoccurring character with an accurate trans storyline as opposed to a more sensationalistic one. That same year, Amazon Video released *Transparent*, a comedy series whose storyline revolves around a transgender woman (played by cisgender actor Jeffrey Tambor) who transitions at an older age when her children are grown. While there has been criticism from the trans community for having a cisgender actor play the role of a transgender woman, the show is produced with consultants who are transgender and included a trans man playing a trans man for a short storyline. These shows marked a shift in how trans characters were portrayed in past decades where

they were mainly used for shock value (*The Crying Game*), moral repugnance (*Ace Ventura*), or cast as psychotic killers (*Silence of the Lambs*) (Phillips 2006).

In 2015, the trend continued. A recurring transgender character appeared on a major network series (*Glee*). Chaz Bono, a transgender man, competed on *Dancing with the Stars*. The Learning Channel debuted *I am Jazz*, a reality TV series starring Jazz Jennings, who is a transgender teenager. Caitlyn Jenner, previously known for being an all-American gold medal decathlete, publicly came out and was featured on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. President Obama recognized transgender people at the 2015 State of the Union address, marking the first time an American president said the word “transgender” in public. A transgender woman, Raffi Freedman-Gurspan, was appointed to Obama’s administration to work on his staff at the White House (Shear 2015). The first academic journal, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, published its first issues and the University of Arizona began the world’s first transgender studies program (Erbenraut 2015).

Movies and shows such as the *Dallas Buyers Club*, *The Danish Girl*, and *Transparent* featured transgender roles and have all seen cisgender actors receive awards for their portrayal of transgender characters. While it was upsetting to the trans community that trans actors were not being used to play trans characters, the awards won pointed to the fact that trans characters and storylines could be used as centerpieces. As the trans community voiced their feelings regarding cisgender actors playing trans characters, a cultural shift began around depicting trans characters in greater depth with varied storylines, and trans actors playing trans characters. The production of movies such as *Tangerine*, and *Boy Meets Girl*, along with shows such

as *Sense8* and again, *Orange is the New Black*, all featured trans characters played by trans actors with trans consultants assisting directors and writers.

It was a heady time to be doing research on transgender identities and issues, especially as an activist community member. Transgender people were not only gaining positive recognition and visibility, they were also gaining legal rights and protections.¹ By 2015, seventeen states had included transgender identities in their non-discrimination laws and policies. The Department of Justice, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Department of Labor all weighed in to resolve discriminatory practices by corrections facilities, employers, and the U.S. military (McCray 2015). The Department of Education (Lhamon and Gupta, 2016) released a “Dear Colleague” letter containing “significant suggestions” for schools on non-discriminatory and inclusive practices for transgender students. In the November 2017 elections, a white transgender woman was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates, and in Minneapolis, a trans woman and a trans man—both African American—were elected to the city council (J. Collins 2017). These achievements marked significant changes in the cultural milieu and revealed how cultural constructs are being altered through subjugated positions.

But there is always resistance when civil rights movements make progress. In 2016 a significant backlash against transgender people (and many other marginalized populations) began across the country that can be marked with the election of Donald

¹ There are problems associated with increased visibility such as increased violence, particularly against trans women of color. See *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Gossett, Stanley and Burton 2017) for more on this topic.

Trump as President. Transgender murders—the vast majority of which are transgender women of color—rose from 13 in 2014 to 28 in 2017 (Okma 2018, Human Rights Campaign 2017). Leelah Alcorn, a transgender teen of conservative Christian parents, committed suicide leaving a note published on Tumblr pleading for society to be more tolerant and accepting of transgender people (Lowder 2014). North Carolina passed House Bill 2, which required transgender people to use the restroom that matched their birth sex, and the city of Houston passed Proposition 1, a similar statute (General Assembly of North Carolina 2016, Moyer 2015). President Trump rescinded the “Dear Colleague Letter,” attempted to ban transgender soldiers in the military, and banned the use of the word “transgender” by the Centers for Disease Control (Ford 2017, S. Miller 2017, Ravitz 2017). Trump era headlines are daunting: “Legal Architect of Anti-Trans Attacks Confirmed to Nation’s Second-Highest Court,” “Parents’ Video Speaks Directly to Nominee Who Called Their [transgender] Children ‘Satan’s Plan’,” “Trump Administration Says It Will Try to Legalize Anti-Transgender Discrimination in Health Care,” and “Trump Appoints HHS Spokesperson with Ugly Trail of Anti-Trans Comments” (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2017). As one writer stated, “we’re now in the transgender dipping point” (Allen 2017).

Having completed my field work during the trans tipping point but writing about my findings during the dipping point has provided stark contrasts between the progress we as a trans community had made and the backlash we are currently experiencing. The rapid shift from gaining recognition, rights and protections to being political targets and the (re)institution of legalized discrimination against transgender people has undoubtedly affected the way I presented the findings from this research

project. I am aware of some of the ways these shifts have affected my interpretations, while others are harder for me to see. As a trans man who is embedded within queer and trans communities and whose job focuses on advocacy and support of transgender people, I am often deeply saddened, frustrated, angry, and very uncertain about the future, given the political climate's continued deterioration for many marginalized populations in the U.S.

Research aims

I shaped this research to better theorize the modifications that transgender people are making to our cultural understanding of sex, gender and sexuality, as well as how they are pushing back against hegemonic models and heteronormative standards. Originally, this project was focused on the sexualities of transgender men and their partners. In particular, I wanted to explore how sexuality changed before, during and after transition for the trans man and his partner/s. However, I found that my initial focus on sexuality was too narrow. In order to theorize sexuality, it was necessary to attend to the gender of the participants. As the research moved forward it became clear that these trans men were doing something different with their gender—they were identifying as *trans* men, as opposed, or in addition, to men. The research focus was reshaped to examine what identifying as a *trans* man meant, how it differed from hegemonic masculinity and why trans men were categorizing themselves in this way.

In order to examine the construction of trans masculinity, this dissertation tightly focuses on three fundamental aspects of identity in our culture: gender, the body, and sexuality. These aspects are fundamental to Western ways of constructing identities,

which have traditionally been shaped to be binary and opposing in nature. I work from the perspective that biological sex is a social construction (Dreger 1998, Fausto-Sterling 2000). There is not a definitive line between nature and culture as it applies to the body. Our bodies are shaped by culture and culture is shaped by practices and interactions with bodies (Butler 2004, Douglas 1982, Dreger 1998, Fausto-Sterling 2005, Kessler 1998, Lancaster 2006, Meyerowitz 2002).

The research revealed that many trans men are positioning themselves apart from and refusing, heteronormative forms of gender. They are creating identities based on trans embodiments, trans sexualities and trans masculinities that set them outside of binary, cisgender constructions of gender, embodiment and sexuality.² These new forms of masculinities, sexualities and bodies, inform us about the constructedness of these categories, as well as the limitations, consequences and possibilities of stepping outside those norms. This project looks at these fundamental aspects of personhood by examining how normative constructions are stretched or rejected by those who inhabit transgender identities and, in turn, how transgender identities are affected by normative constructions.

The framework of the dissertation follows a queer and transgender theoretical approach. This approach situates biological sex (the body), gender, and sexuality as separate, non-correlated aspects of identity.³ Whereas Western cultural

² I am not saying all trans men define themselves outside of the cisgender binary system, some do identify within this system. The information gathered in this project pointed to a unique positionality for the men in the project who identified as *trans* men (an identity, not a history).

³ This is a relatively new phenomenon as Valentine's (2007) work found these categories muddled and collapsed in his work.

understandings have long correlated physical sex to gender to heteronormative attraction, queer and trans theories do not connect these aspects together. Queer theory posits that gender does not correlate to attraction and trans theory built on queer theory by positing that the body does not correlate to either gender or sexuality (Butler 1990, Jagose 1996, Sedgwick 1990, Stryker 2008). Further, queer and trans theories were built on feminist approaches that argue all of these categories (sex, gender, and sexuality) are socially constructed (Fausto-Sterling 2000, Foucault 1990, Friedan 1997, Lorber 1994, West and Zimmerman 1987). The criteria for, and meanings of, each category have been socially determined rather than physiologically prescribed. As such, the categories are not incontestable; rather they are mutable, questionable, and can be given new meaning.

Any alteration made to sex, gender, or sexuality will necessarily affect the other categories, as all are co-constitutive and intersectional in nature (Crenshaw 1991, Nicholas 2014, Overall 2009). Transgender experiences are particularly illustrative of this as the nature of this identity is to transition from one gender to another (not necessarily “opposite”). This project reveals and demarcates trans man as a gender separate from cisgender man, trans masculine bodies apart from cissexual male bodies (bodies whose primary and secondary sex characteristics have not been altered to adopt cross-gender sex characteristics), and trans masculine sexualities that are outside of sexual categories built on cisgender identities and cissexual bodies. This is not to say that trans men are not real men, rather they are something more than and/or other than men.

Anthropological research on gender diversity

Anthropologists have a long history of studying gender diversity in cross-cultural contexts. These studies have brought to light various understandings of how gender is constructed—which is not always tied to the sexed body. Some studies have focused on sexuality, some on gender practices, and newer studies have related how gender and sexuality are not neatly separate concepts (as Western beliefs depict them), but often overlap when speaking about identity categories. For example, when studying *tombois* in Western Sumatra, Blackwood (1998) found that while these were female bodied individuals in relationships with other female bodied individuals, *tombois* (or *lesbi*) identified as men. Although they did not undergo the sorts of physical changes that transsexuals do in the U.S., they no less adopt masculine identities and consider themselves men—as do their friends and others in the *lesbi/tomboy* community.

Other identities, such as sworn virgins in the Balkans, also separate gender from the sexed body. Although the phenomenon is rarely put into practice anymore, this identity involves “females who dress and act as men,” usually (but not always) to fill a familial role when there is no male head of household or to avoid arranged marriage (Grémaux 1994, Littlewood 2002, Nanda 2014, Young and Twigg 2009). While this gendered practice does not equate sex with gender (of particular importance to U.S. transgender theory), it does follow very rigid rules around gender roles in a strict patriarchal society. Further, sworn virgins are prohibited from marrying or having sexual relationships (Dickermann 1997, 1998; Young and Twigg 2009, 123). While a sworn virgin can undertake traditionally male activities, characters, and employment, their gender role only upholds the strict patriarchy (A. Young 2000, Young and Twigg 2009).

Many other studies have focused on male bodied individuals taking on feminine identities, roles, or expression. Kulick's (1997) work on *travesti* revealed a gender that was more embedded within a sexual role. *Travesti* are generally the receptive partner during sex with other men but are not conceived as homosexuals. Although *travesti* are effeminate and often take hormones to alter their appearance, they do not think of themselves as women. Kulick (1997, 579) suggests that they are conceived of as "not men." *Travesti* are an example of the need to understand gender within a specific cultural context—a perspective that my project also incorporates (Nanda 2014, 49).

While these examples rely on systems of two genders, there are other cultural examples of third-gender traditions, particularly in India and South Asia. *Hirja* have a very long history—although one that has been heavily impacted by colonization—and constitute a gender that is neither man nor woman (Nanda 1986, 1998; Hall 1997, 2013; Hall and O'Donovan 1996, Hossain 2017). They have recently gained legal status, although not necessarily social status. They dress as women and take on feminine comportments but are not seen as women. Their original position or category as asexual eunuchs was embedded within religion (Nanda 1998, 2014). Their identity was closely associated with deities with male and female characteristics, which helped them be conceptualized as like women but not like women, and as "men minus men" (Nanda 2014, 29). They represent an identity outside of a binary system.

Other identities are also outside of binary systems but may be simultaneously more situational and more expansive. Epple's (1998) and Thomas' (1997) work on the Navajo *nádleehí* described a four-gender system that includes men, women, masculine females, and feminine males; the latter two categories make up *nádleehí* identities

(Epple 1998, Thomas 1997). These identities have been described as gay, two spirit, alternate gender, and *berdache*; none of which are all inclusive or correct yet contain parts of this identity (Epple 1998, 275). This identity is one that relies and emphasizes interconnectivity with others, is situational and flexible, while being both male and female (Epple (1998, 276). It is an identity not easily encompassed by a Western conception of gender and reveals the complexity of multiple contributing factors other than sexuality or the body.

These brief examples of anthropological studies on gender diversity illustrate the complexity of gender constructions within different cultural contexts. Men who identify as trans men are yet another example of gender variation set within a particular cultural context. They are also an identity currently under rapid change and construction. The data gathered through this project is a snapshot in time and should not be considered static or absolute. There is great variation in transgender masculinities and the men involved in this project represent only one perspective, although it was a perspective shared by the majority of men in this project.

Early understandings of trans identities in the U.S.

Magnus Hirschfeld was the pioneering father of transexual research and treatment (Hill 2005b, 316; Meyerowitz 2002, 15; Stryker 2008, 39). Working in Berlin, he wrote *Die Transvestitin* (1910), which documented case histories of what today we would understand as transgender identities. He arranged for the first male-to-female genital surgery reassignment, ran a clinic dedicated to sexualities and transgender research, and employed transgender people within the clinic (Stryker 2008, 39). Harry Benjamin was also a colleague before moving to America to become the “leading

medical authority on transsexuality” (Stryker 2008, 40). Hirschfeld’s work on “sexual intermediaries” and “inversion” were efforts to position homosexuality and the transgender phenomenon as part of natural variation.

Transgender identities in the U.S., as we understand them today, have developed through a psycho-medical lens of sex change that posited transsexuals (transgender individuals who undergo permanent physical alteration of their bodies) as wanting to move from one binary gender to the other (Benjamin 1966, Meyerowitz 2002, Stryker 2008, Von Krafft-Ebing 2012). Dr. Harry Benjamin published *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966, which was groundbreaking at the time. The book posited that gender identity (an inner sense of gendered self) was unalterable, which meant that no amount of psychological treatment would change this sense of self. This was a significant step forward from previous medical opinions and treatments that used punitive and painful measures to discourage or eliminate cross-gender feelings (Foucault 2010, Stryker 2008). Benjamin suggested it was the responsibility of physicians to help transgender people transition (Stryker 2008, 111).

By 1979, the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association developed and published the Standards of Care (SOC), which outlined the criteria for diagnosis and treatment of transsexuals (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2018). As a result of the depathologization of homosexuality in 1972, a new sexual disorder was created to absorb gender variance known as “gender dysphoria” (Stryker 2008, 14-15). The SOC guidelines were cemented into medical and psychological approaches when they were entered into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). However, the

SOC were based on white, heteronormatively gendered concepts and expectations, and set up a long series of gatekeeping measures that had to be met in order to access treatment (Ophelian 2009). While the SOC guidelines finally allowed access to treatment, they have also been a source of ire for transgender people who have made significant progress in revising the guidelines to allow greater access to care (Meyerowitz 2002, Ophelian 2009, Stryker 2008).

The SOC requirements, and transgender people's adherence to them, resulted in an incomplete and biased picture of what it meant to be transgender.⁴ First, it implied that people must be one or the other—either male or female—to be an intelligible person. Second, it tied successful personhood to full bodily transition that must include genital reconstruction. Third, it required rigid adherence and conformity to stereotypical gender norms (especially for trans women). Sex change clinics and the treatments they offered were highly controversial to hospital administrations at the time. To change such a fundamental aspect of one's identity was argued by many medical professionals to be irresponsible, harmful and unethical to the physician's oath "to do no harm." There was considerable discussion around whether treatment helped trans people or whether doctors were cooperating with a mental illness by assisting them to transition (McHugh 2014, Meyerowitz 2002, Stryker 2008). This contributed to doctors

⁴ Transgender people "adhered" to the diagnostic criteria so well because they were aware that any deviation from them would result in exclusion from treatment. Trans people have argued that the SOC's gatekeeping measures of requiring multiple mental health evaluations, "real life tests" and a series of letters attesting to gender dysphoria serve to protect health care providers rather than the needs of patients. The reader is encouraged to explore the lengthy efforts to reform and/or remove the DSM-IV SOC guidelines (Byne et al., 2018, Drescher 2010, Marvin 2010, Winters 2008).

and administrators believing such transformations were only successful if heteronormative standards were achieved. The common conception of “born in the wrong body” became the single story used to explain the complexity of transgender identities (Ophelian 2009, Sullivan 2008).⁵ My research contributes to an understanding that the ways transgender people understand and embody trans identities is far more complex than merely being born in the wrong body.

According to professionals, if a transgender woman did not embody feminine ideals or did not want reconstructive genital surgery then she was not really a woman and deemed unsuitable for transition related treatment (Meyerowitz 2002, Ophelian 2009). For example, a transgender woman needed to perform her femininity by wearing makeup, having her hair done, adopting feminine mannerisms and speech, and wearing appropriate feminine attire. She also needed to talk about how she hated her penis or sat down to urinate in order to be considered a viable candidate for medical transition treatment (Ophelian 2009).

However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, thanks largely to advances in technologies of communication, trans people have become more empowered as a community and have pushed back against rigid constructions of normative genders—successfully advocating for changes within the gender dysphoria diagnosis and treatment recommendations. Prior to the internet, communication spread slowly through newsletters, small group meetings of like-minded people, or word of mouth (Bolin 1987). Those who lived outside of major metropolitan areas could be very

⁵ See Sullivan (2006, 2008) and Bettcher (2014) for critiques of the “born in the wrong body” rhetoric.

isolated because they had less access to information and resources. With the growth of the internet in the 1990s, transgender people were able to meet others online and share their stories, experiences and strategies for accessing care with each other (Ekins and King 2010). At the same time, Stone's (1991) *The Empire Strikes Back* response to Janice Raymond's (1979) trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) article *The Transsexual Empire*, fueled the beginning of transgender studies. Increased communication allowed many to learn approaches for dealing with harassment, poorly educated doctors, and what resources they could draw on. Current population estimates for transgender identities are possibly as high as 1 million people in the US (or 390 per 100,000), a rise from studies in the 1990s, which estimated 1:11,900 for transgender women and 1:30,400 for transgender men (Meerwijk and Sevelius, 2017; van Kesteren, Gooren and Megens 1996). There are now more resources, support services, national organizations, doctors, and mental health professionals who are capable, willing and able to serve transgender people's needs.

Due to the increase in support, visibility, and population numbers it is easier to examine how they are enacting and re-shaping gender beyond the limits of older norms and understandings. The findings from this research point to a refusal of gender norms by many transgender men and the purposeful, though not always conscious, creation of a trans masculinity. There is evidence that the same is true for transgender women, as Heyes (2010, 1115) states "many MTF [male to female] transsexuals are developing their own forms of feminist consciousness and expressing their own forms of politics by both refusing certain medical interventions and asserting their right to transform medical requirements." However, in order to focus my findings, this project

did not include transgender women. Further research on trans women is required to ascertain if they fit within the same trans positionality model that was developed from this research.

Trans as gender, body, and sexuality

In documenting the descriptions and lived experiences of men who identify as trans (as opposed to transgender men who identify solely as men), I hope to illustrate how these identities differ from our understanding of those who are cisgender (genders that align with assigned birth sex). Acknowledging that transgender people are not just moving from one gender to the other gender, necessarily alters the way gender is conceived. We must also acknowledge that there are more genders than solely men and women, something queer theory has put forward since the 1990s (Butler 1990, 1999; Jagose 1996, McPhail 2004, Munro 2005, Sedgwick 1990). Examining trans masculinity as something separate from hegemonic masculinity provides new avenues for understanding the complexity of gender.

To illustrate trans masculinity as its own type of gender separate from binary constructions I have created a model based on the ethnographic evidence gathered in the course of this research. Detailed in chapter 3, this model illustrates how transgender people are positioning themselves in relation to normative gender and serves as a tool for both academicians and trans people. Moving forward, my hope is that this model will be broadened to further theorize the concept and *doing* of gender. My goal is for educators, therapists, and leaders of the trans community to use it in illustrating new perspectives and positionality offered by those who identify as trans.

For those who identify as trans and saw this model of gender during various presentations I made throughout my research, it struck a chord with them in ways they had not previously experienced when discussing and illustrating transgender identities as part of a spectrum of genders between the binary poles of men and women. The model gave them a sense of empowerment and authenticity to understanding their self in a way that does not rely on privileging a cisgender binary conception of gender that presses for conformity of trans identities within cisgender categories. It is difficult to articulate the emotional response and sense of recognition that some trans people had upon seeing this model. People's eyes lit up, some people began excitedly talking about possibilities, and others broke into broad grins. One person likened the experience to first learning about the word transgender, realizing that it described who they were and how it gave them a place in the world. Dr. Glenda Russell (personal communication with the author, 2016), a psychologist and co-presenter for one presentation, stated:

I saw that moment of recognition and demystification. I saw people move toward a description of themselves that reflected a sense of strength or ability that had been lacking before that moment...it suggested strength—good things about their identities—an experience that is hard to come by for people who routinely hear themselves described in negative terms.

Critical to examining trans as gender, I also include an exploration of the trans masculine body and the sexuality of transgender men involved in this project. Post-structuralist feminist and queer theorists have often dismissed discussions of the physical body and embodiment from conversation regarding the differences between

cisgender men and women in order to escape essentialist and biologically deterministic arguments (Fausto-Sterling 2005, Namaste 2000, 2005; Prosser 1998).⁶ However, genders are not disembodied, and our lived experiences are built on what Csordas (1990, 143; 1994) described as “bodily being-in-the-world” or embodiment. Using this approach, my aim is to illustrate how the trans masculine body contributes to the social construction of trans as both gender and sexuality. Trans masculine embodiment radically alters the assumption that female genitalia, secondary sex characteristics and reproductive systems, only occur in women, or that a male body cannot carry the physical knowledge of female experiences. Physical knowledge, such as experiencing cramps, menstruation, or childbirth, carried forward in a male body, results in a multi-perspectival embodiment rarely acknowledged or explored in discussions on embodiment, gender or sexuality.

The trans men I worked with were in various physical stages of transitioning. Some were on testosterone and some were not, some had undergone chest reconstruction and some had not, and some had socially transitioned (informing people around them that they now identify as a man) and some had not. All of them wanted to undergo at least one or more of these transition steps. I have included very little description or discussion of trans or non-binary men who choose not to undergo bodily changes, as none of the men involved in this project fit that category; the experiences

⁶ See Elizabeth Wilson’s (2015) *Gut Feminism* for an exception to this trend.

of gender and embodiment for such men likely differ significantly from transsexual men and deserve their own examination.⁷

In discussing trans sexuality, I explored the sexual orientations and practices of trans men, and the changes they have undergone through identifying as trans (as opposed to solely as men) while inhabiting a body that contains both male and female characteristics. In no way am I stating that transgender men have female bodies. Bodies that are inhabited by people who identify as men are male bodies regardless of sex characteristics. Rather, I am exploring how female aspects (as defined and termed in medical language) of the body are inhabited, enacted, and reformed when occurring in a trans masculine body. Sexuality—as both practice and identity—has rarely been explored through a lens outside of cissexual bodies.⁸ Trans bodies require theoretical approaches that do not assume normative constructions of the body or sexual categories based on normative constructions (Erickson-Schroth 2014). Instead, the rich descriptions of bodies and sexualities given by trans men inform us about the limitations of these categories.

Theoretical approaches

Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* is used throughout this project. According to Bourdieu (1984, 170), *habitus* is a “structuring structure, which organizes practices and

⁷ Transsexual, considered a contentious and often degrading term within the trans community, is used here from its medical context of indicating transgender people who undergo permanent physical changes through hormone replacement therapy or surgery.

⁸ Cissexual is sometimes used as a synonym for cisgender but here it is being used to specifically denote bodies that are not permanently changed to adopt different primary or secondary sex characteristics.

the perception of practices.” It is learned, largely unconsciously, through upbringing in our cultural milieu; it shapes our everyday practices as well as how and what we think. It is the ways we do things or the manner of how we speak (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). Although Bourdieu did not speak of it directly, *habitus* is gendered in that we learn different things based on whether we are girls or boys, or more accurately said, we are taught differently if we are boys or girls. *Habitus* is deeply ingrained and we may not become aware of it until we gain a significantly different perspective. It is not determinative but it is influential, and something we tend to fall back on unconsciously. In this project, transgender men’s enactment of a different type of masculinity, their embodiment of a different type of body, and the practice of a different type of sexuality all challenge both their own *habitus* and the *habitus* of others.

One of the frameworks I use is that of subjugated knowledges. Foucault (1980, 82) defined subjugated knowledges as “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate...located low down on the hierarchy.” The tension and negotiation between subjugated and dominant knowledges contribute to the instability of cultural conceptions and practices (Foucault 1990, Ortner 1984). Dominant culture may constrain, stigmatize, condemn or remove those who do not adhere to standard cultural norms, beliefs and practices but populations which are subjugated will create their own systems of knowledge and practices to push back against dominant systems. Subjugated knowledge and agentive actors form new discursive constructions which change and contest dominant assumptions and norms (Foucault 1988, 1995; Ortner 2006, Stryker 2006).

I also used Black feminist theory to frame this project. Patricia Hill Collins' (1990, 221) work noted that placing Black women's experiences at the forefront of consideration allows us to question Western-centric masculinist paradigms and epistemologies while offering Afrocentric feminist critiques. I believe the same is true for placing transgender experiences at the forefront to examine hegemonic masculinity paradigms. Crenshaw (1989) approaches her work through intersectionality of race, class, and gender. P. Collins (1990) points to the importance of "both/and" conceptualizations of these components in understanding the interconnectedness of systems to create subjugated and marginalized positions.

I have tried to use the same sort of approach on a smaller scale by examining how three aspects of identity (gender, body, and sexuality) intersect and interact with each other to form something that is "both/and" in regards to trans masculinity. Trans is described as something more than/other than hegemonic masculinity. I have also taken to heart the Black feminist approach that "Offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering. But revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications" (P. Collins 1990, 222), and hope that whatever knowledge found through this project on trans masculinity will be empowering to this, and other, subjugated groups.

I also rely on transgender studies and use trans theory throughout my research. Stryker (2006, 3) defines transgender studies as:

concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist

between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood.

It is through these concerns that trans theory was developed beginning in the early 1990s with Stone's (1991) "Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" article. It is a theoretical approach developed by people who identify as transgender and is, therefore, firmly grounded in experiential knowledge and subjugated positionality. Trans theory is actor oriented, paying particular attention to the agency of individuals to self-identify their gender regardless of biological sex markers, binary constructions of gender, and an assumed stasis of gender throughout one's lifetime (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 2010). It emphasizes the importance of both gender and the body to trans theoretical approaches, something I adhere to throughout this project. I add to this an examination of sexuality as a critical aspect of identity and practice, which is inextricably tied to gender and the body.

Likewise, Queer theory places importance on the agency of those who are subjugated, especially as it relates to sexual orientation. Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality* (1990), noted that while naming homosexuality allowed for the structural discipline and control of the homosexual, it also allowed for the homosexual to come into being, and therefore, speak back to systems of control. "Normative creativity," as coined by Laura Brown (1989), argues that homosexuals created their own norms

around gender, sexuality and relationships because they were excluded, therefore, free from heterosexual expectations and rules. Muñoz (1999) moved this concept further, arguing that disidentification is a political act of resistance used to create new sets of cultural constructs as opposed to identification with dominant categories or counter-identification within minority categories. Queer theory is important to this project because it questions the culturally dominant idea that there are a limited number of genders or sexualities (de Lauretis 1999, Jagose 1996, Sedgwick 1990). Queer identities can represent a queering of both gender and sexuality—something that I found trans people were gravitating towards.

Notes on language

Language used within the trans community is constantly and rapidly evolving as new terms are introduced, contested, and refined. Therefore, it is important to be clear about how I am using language in this dissertation. Transgender is often used as an umbrella term and includes many identities that stretch beyond the categories of men and women such as genderqueer, non-binary, agender, gender fluid, and transsexual. These identities cover a wide range of gendered embodiment, practices, and expressions. Transsexuals, as used here, are those who have undergone, or want to undergo, permanent physical changes to align their physical appearance to something more congruent with their gender identity (those changes are discussed in chapter 4). The term “transsexual” carries considerable baggage however, as it was developed in the medical community to denote a pathological condition (Stryker and Currah 2014). Therefore, I only use the term in specific contexts to indicate a particular difference between those who physically transition and those who do not. Although

there are transgender people who use transsexual as an identity, I use it here to indicate a particular physicality as none of the men in this project identified as transsexual.

All of the men involved in this project made use of some form of transition related changes, and all wanted to undergo permanent physical changes. Transition refers to the steps taken to alter one's appearance and social readability from their natal sex to a different gender—in this case from female-to-male. The concept of FTM can be problematic as it implies movement from one side of the gender binary to the other and limits the possibilities of embodying genders outside of the constructions of man or woman. Lastly, because it uses the language of sexually differentiated bodies (male instead of man) it might be seen to devalue those who do not undergo all aspects of physical transition. Participants in this project perceived the language of “trans man” to be a more inclusive way of describing those who see themselves as men but were assigned female at birth.

Pronoun usage can vary considerably with those who identify as trans. I have used the pronouns the men used to describe themselves. This was limited to he/him/his, and rarely, they/them/theirs. In cases where I did not know the pronouns used by a participant, author or other source, I elected to use the gender neutral they/them/theirs. While these pronouns have most frequently been used to indicate people in the plural, in the context of trans identities, it is the norm to use them in the singular.

Outline of content

Chapter 1 has introduced the project's aims, the context of this research, and the various contributing theoretical frameworks. Chapter 2 discusses the methods, sites, and limitations of this project. Chapter 3 uses ethnographic data to explore how trans men are constructing trans masculinity, their refusal of hegemonic masculinities, and introduces a model of trans positionality. Chapter 4 explores the embodiment, physical differences of a trans masculine bodies and the meanings trans men, and others, give to trans bodies. Chapter 5 examines the sexualities of transgender men, how they enact sexuality and how sexualities are negotiated between partners, potential partners and social situations. In chapter 6, I conclude and summarize the findings of the study and possible implications for further consideration.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

The population of transgender people is notoriously difficult to estimate because standard demographics do not include a transgender category. One current estimation for the U.S. population is 0.6%, or roughly 1.9 million people (Flores et al. 2016). Further, many trans people choose not to disclose this aspect of their identity. Those who are transgender may have few opportunities to meet or know other trans people and there may not be any local physical community to be a part of. For example, regarding solely grad students, staff and faculty at my university during the period of my research, there was one other graduate student, two faculty members, and one staff member (myself) that I knew identified as transgender on a campus that has over 5,000 graduate students and 6,500 staff and faculty (Poppin 2015, CU Analytics 2016). Using the 0.6% estimate there should have been 39.⁹ This illustrates one of the challenges of working with a transgender population—that they often choose not to disclose the transgender aspect of their identity due to the stigma associated with being transgender, the dangers of discrimination, and economic disadvantages many of them face. In order to access this population a variety of research methods and sites were used.

⁹ These figures do not consider the fact that transgender people have low rates of employment estimated at 35% full-time, 15% part-time, 15% self-employed (James et al., 140).

Fieldwork was conducted for 21 months (from July 2014 through March 2016) through (1) interviews with self-identified transgender men and their partners, (2) watching and interacting with transgender men and their partners on YouTube collaboration channels, (3) presenting workshops and interacting with trans men and their partners at four transgender conferences, and (4) working as a full-time staff member at a university LGBTQ center and volunteering with a community LGBTQ center. The different sites and methodologies used were all aimed at gaining thick descriptions of what it means to identify as a trans man—their experiences, their identities, their embodiment, their sexualities—and how they fit into and alter cultural constructions of gender and sexuality.

As a white, middle-class, college-educated transman, I had certain experiences in common with most of the participants. Differences between us included age—as I was in my mid-40s and most of the men were in their 20s—and the absence of a parental/familial presence for my part in comparison to their connection, and sometimes dependence, on families. My trans-ness however, gave me a particular connection and the participants granted me a level of trust that would have taken longer to earn had I not been part of the community. Having socially and physically transitioned a number of years ago through chest reconstruction surgery, radical hysterectomy, and testosterone, I share a similar embodiment and certain experiences with many of the trans men in this research. I am well-versed in the issues of terminology, political movements, medical, mental health, and societal issues of the transgender community. I have been an activist in the transgender community since I transitioned and have participated in many public education campaigns, testified in

front of policy makers, worked on committees to create more inclusive environments on my campus, volunteered with community LGBTQ centers, participated in trans leadership institutes, and chaired planning committees for trans conferences.

I approach my research through the lens of “activist anthropology” and as one who is personally invested in the political struggle under study (Ch. Hale 2006, Ortner 2016). I ascribe to practicing anthropology in ways that work toward social justice as suggested by Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ (1995, 409) “politically committed and morally engaged anthropology,” Faye Harrison’s (1997) “anthropology for liberation” and “as agent of transformation,” and Gayle Rubin’s (2011) queer and feminist commitment to critiquing normative sex/gender systems. I chose to study “my own” people because I am deeply invested in making life more livable for trans people, and I believe in the liberatory power that transgender experiences and perspectives offer people of all genders. As an activist, my aim is not to create a utopian world, but I do ascribe to Appadurai’s (2013, 299) suggestion that anthropologists, “be mediators, facilitators, and promoters of the ethics of possibility...which can offer a more inclusive platform for improving the planetary quality of life and can accommodate a plurality of visions of the good life.” I am a man who is transgender; I have faced some of the same challenges experienced by those who participated in this research and am empathetic to their struggles. I am cognizant that this study is not highly critical of the trans community or our practices. That is because my aim was to work in concert and conversation with trans communities while using my trans positionality to add to the conversation; my goal is ultimately to empower trans people while educating cisgender people to the possibilities of expanding gender.

Autoethnography

The bulk of my research comes from sources beyond my own experience but I do include portions of autoethnographic work. Reed-Danahay (2009, 28) notes that “Autoethnographies place personal experience within social and cultural contexts and raise provocative questions about social agency and socio-cultural constraints.” When appropriate, I have used my own experience to extend conversations or offer a different perspective. As a transgender man studying transgender men, it would have felt artificial to avoid making use of this methodology but I tried to do so in a limited manner. My experiences and perspectives are only one example among many.

Autoethnography is also a “phenomenological inquiry, it turns to lived experience in a deeply reflective way to bracket ‘the taken-for-granted meanings’ of an ethnographer’s life and self (Sotirin 2010 in Lancaster 2011, 46). I used autoethnography in this way to convey the embodiment of being trans to the reader. Assuming that the majority of readers of this work will have cisgender embodiments, I have tried to convey and articulate the “taken-for-granted meanings” of living in a trans body.

Interviews

After gaining IRB approval, recruitment of participants for interviews was chiefly done through snowball sampling. All participants read, signed, and were given a copy of the approved IRB consent form, which included their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews were digitally voice recorded with the permission of the interviewee and transcribed at a later date. Each participant was informed that all

identifying information would be removed from transcripts and all names would be changed to pseudonyms.

Initial participants for interviews were garnered from contacts within local trans communities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one or with their partner at locations chosen by interviewees, allowing each man to choose the degree of privacy desired. These locations included coffee shops, restaurants, outdoor locations, and office space. Interview scripts were broadly designed to cover basic histories of their identity as trans men, when they began transition, what bodily or social changes they had made during their transition, sexual identities before, during or after transitioning, and relationships with partners and family. Interviews initially lasted 60-90 minutes and were followed up with one to three additional sessions. Interviews developed in an organic fashion allowing multiple topics and themes to emerge. The initial focus of the dissertation research had prioritized sexuality, followed by how trans masculinity contributed to or altered sexuality. However, it became clear that the data obtained prioritized masculinity, followed by how transgender bodies and sexualities contributed to and altered masculinities of trans men and vice versa. Data was coded into themes, subsets, and outliers which are addressed in chapter 3 on trans masculinities, chapter 4 on the body and embodiment, and chapter 5 on trans sexualities.

A total of 8 interviews were conducted following the above methods. All of these men (and one partner) were white, two were Jewish, one described themselves as spiritual, and the rest were secular. All of these men came from middle-class backgrounds and were college-educated. None had experienced complete rejection

from their parents but many had strained relationships with siblings or one parent. Men who were interviewed ranged in age from 20 to 35 years old. In an effort to gain a wider set of perspectives and include more diverse participants I encountered relevant YouTube channels (see below). Men from YouTube were not interviewed but I communicated with several through the comment section, Facebook messenger, or email. I met one participant at a conference who later started his own Facebook group and I continued contact through that venue.

Participant observation

The bulk of my participant observation was conducted while I worked as the Assistant Director in the GLBTQ resource center on the University of Colorado Boulder campus, where I had extensive interactions with the LGBTQ community. The center hosted or co-sponsored a wide variety of over 100 programs a year, such as: Safe Zone trainings, movie nights, campus climate presentations, diversity and inclusion trainings, queer related student groups, lavender graduation, ice-skating nights, pool parties, queer student leader retreats, a peer education team, and our biggest event, the TRANSforming Gender Conference which grew from an attendance of 150 in 2014 to over 700 in 2018. The center's space consisted of a lounge with several couches and chairs, computers, a small library of LGBTQ films and books, and was staffed with two full-time professional staff (myself included) and a number of part-time student staff. Part of my job was serving as a resource for transgender students, staff and faculty in answering questions, finding resources and addressing problems faced on and off campus. Due to the nature of my position as a supervisor of student

employees, and the fact that many students saw me as a mentor, friend or confidant, I did not include any of the students who frequented the center as interviewees.

Working daily in a center filled with queer students allowed me to listen and participate in many discussions on transgender identities, contestations of those identities, and their potential in changing gender norms and identities for trans and cisgender alike. Many students, mainly in their late teens and early 20s, came into their queer identities while in college, which gave me opportunities to hear them ask questions about the particularities of trans and LGBTQ identities as they explored where they fit and learned more about the various identities lumped together in queer community. Some students participated in peer-to-peer education on trans 101 topics and, given my project, it was quite enlightening to listen to the nuances of difference between gender identities among trans and cisgender students.

Serving trans students as a resource specialist widened my knowledge on the issues trans people face in their daily lives, both on and off campus. Transgender students faced problems such as: using a chosen name (e.g. Mary) while legal names (e.g. Martin) appeared on class rosters, housing databases, and school records, encounters with professors who repeatedly used incorrect pronouns and thus outed them to classmates, being housed with transphobic roommates, locating gender neutral bathrooms, navigating health insurance to access treatment, finding culturally competent therapists, experiencing a high degree of harassment and discrimination, coming out to family members, how to go about socially transitioning, finding doctors who had experience working with trans patients, or dealing with intolerant parents, to name only a few. I am happy to say that through the work of many committed

individuals on the University of Colorado campus numerous changes have been made to facilities, policies and procedures resulting in top 25 ranking for LGBTQ inclusive universities in the nation (*CU Boulder Today* 2015, Campus Pride Index 2017).

I also volunteered on a transgender committee for the community LGBTQ center that served Boulder County. The organization was making a concerted effort to ascertain the needs of the transgender community in order to provide better services and support, and created a committee consisting of transgender members to assist them. Many of the same problems that students faced occurred in this older demographic as well. However, this population also tended to struggle with employment discrimination, access to housing, affordable health care, transitioning in the workplace, or while being a parent or a spouse. Losing jobs, housing, partners, and children was a frequent consequence for those who transitioned in middle-age. The committee ran several events that included a “Transgiving” dinner in order to provide a space for trans people who had been cut-off from their families due to transitioning—a space where they would not be judged, misgendered, or belittled. We held education presentations aimed at cisgender audiences, town hall meetings to ascertain what issues and needs the community was facing, hosted picnics for trans people and their families, held movie screenings about transgender issues and communities, ran a public education campaign through bus advertisements, and participated in Pride events where we spread the word about local resources.

YouTube videos

The internet has allowed trans people to communicate and form communities on a larger scale than was possible before the early 1990s (Ekins and King 2010). Through

venues such as Facebook groups, Tumblr blogs, personal web pages, instant messenger, and transgender resource sites, trans people form communities, discuss and debate terminology, take political stances, and support each other (Gauthier and Chaudoir 2004, J. Hill 2005, O’Riordan 2005, Whittle 1998). But one venue has had more effect than others, as Horak (2014, 572) notes, “YouTube has almost single-handedly transformed the trans mediascape.” In the summer of 2014, when I began my research there were 240,000 videos labeled “ftm” (female to male), and in 2017 there were 426,000.

YouTube provides a unique venue for trans men (and other subaltern populations) to create communities, share information, and deconstruct any universal story to explain being transgender or the experiences of living as a trans person (B. Miller 2017). YouTube vlogs are a method for transgender people, largely in their late teens and 20s, to counter portrayals of trans people in the media as well as the ways that medical models have historically pathologized the trans individual (Namaste 2005, Serano 2007). This platform served as a space for knowledge production—and policing—between the trans men who produce videos and the public that watch and engage with those videos (Ekins and King 2010, 216; Marcus et al. 2016, B. Miller 2017, Warner 2002). The internet has served as space for “identity promulgation and development” (Ekins and King 2010, 26) where various understandings or definitions of trans-ness are put forward and spoken back to—by trans people and cisgender people—in a relationship that is sometimes “strenuous and bitter” (Ekins and King 2010, 28).

YouTube vlogs are a “naturally occurring” form of accessible data for ethnographers made by individuals who want to share something of themselves, their

experiences, and their opinions, with viewers (Silverman 2007). Created in 2005, YouTube can serve as a cultural and historical archive (Laurier 2013). For my project, in some cases, there were years of data available for channels and the men involved. This gave me valuable longitudinal data and insight into what topics they found particularly important as they returned to them repeatedly. It also served as a way to access information through an observational perspective allowing for the collection of data without interference from the researcher (Lafferty and Manca 2015, 91). Following Ginsburg's (1994, 8) suggestion to "recognize the complex ways in which people are engaged in processes of making and interpreting media" allows anthropologists to examine the "relation[ship] to their cultural, social, and historical circumstances" (in Wilson and Peterson 2002, 455).

Many anthropologists have noted the value of using anthropological methods in studying virtual worlds and digital data (Boellstorff 2008, 2017; Giglietto, Rossi and Bennato 2012, Jackson 2012, Marcus et al. 2016, Snodgrass 2016, Wilson and Peterson 2002). Jackson (2012, 484) noted that "'the diasporic' and 'the ethnographic' have, in a sense, gone 'digital' as advanced modalities of mass mediatization create and re-create forms of sociality and even intimacy that demand and reward critical attention." Using the internet and virtual worlds "has the potential to make ethnography more collaborative and social, which would seem appropriate for a discipline that itself aims to comprehend shared culture and social experience" (Snodgrass 2016, 144). When conducting ethnographic work, an anthropologist should immerse themselves in the culture of their subjects and if that culture is being constructed online—as it is with trans men—then the researcher must also immerse themselves in that space.

Participating and observing in this space “is useful for seeing what kinds of practices and beliefs emerge as members of a particular culture interact with each” (Boellstorff 2008, 76).

Given the breadth of content available, I chose to focus on the vlog style of collaboration channels. These channels were composed of a group of four to seven trans men and designed to share their points of view on one question per week. Each man produced his own video (around 10 minutes) to be shared on his day of the week (Marvin on Mondays, Tim on Tuesdays, etc.) and the question was developed by someone in the group or suggested through commentary or messaging by viewers and subscribers. This resulted in 52 topics covered in a year’s time. Some men remained with their channels for years, others came and went within a period of weeks or months. Between the men who produced videos and the community of largely trans people who watched them, a communal production of trans culture occurs in these groups.

I used data from seven different trans channels for this research; three were designed for trans men of color, two had no men of color, and two were designed by and for partners of transgender men. Transcriptions of YouTube videos were completed for over 100 men. Many of them only stayed on a channel for a brief period of time but others were on the channels for months or years (from which I drew most of my data). Examples of questions and the wide-ranging topics included:

- Working while trans, coming out at work
- Being outed, coming out to your family, how to be prepared for getting kicked out of your house, going stealth

- Dealing with your monthly “curse,” feeling dysphoric about hips, feet, chest, height, lack of facial hair, lack of a penis
- How to bind, how to pack (wear a prosthetic penis), dress like a man, shop in the men’s department, how to shave
- Transgender resources, finding a therapist, doctor, surgeon and local support
- Being a man, masculinity, feminism, radical feminists, transphobia, internalized transphobia
- Dating while transitioning, after transition, partner’s identity, dealing with families, raising children, wanting children
- Sexuality, dysphoria in the bedroom, using toys and prosthetics, consent, HIV, AIDS
- Political views, activism, Pride events, dealing with school policies, attending all-girl colleges
- Choosing a name, changing documents, dealing with “dead” names, pronouns and people not using pronouns, being outed, being misgendered
- Trans in the media, Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, Cisgender actors playing transgender characters, transgender models, passing privilege
- Things missed in childhood because you weren’t a boy, how to navigate men’s locker rooms and bathrooms, handshakes and hugs, men’s humor
- Trans suicide, trans murders, dealing with transphobia, self-care, Trans Day of Remembrance, dealing with depression, violence against trans women

While topics such as these (and many more) were suggested, the conversations often circled back into previous vexing questions or complex issues such as what makes a

man, how sexualities apply to trans men, or how their conception of gender has been altered by going through this trans experience. All of this was talked about in informal and inviting ways where their personal lives and viewpoints were discussed and shared openly. Being able to watch these diary-like weekly vlogs allowed me to document how these men began and ended relationships, transitioned from female to men, debated the pros and cons of transitioning while continuously deepening their understandings of themselves and the gendered systems they are embedded in. I observed in them how gender operates in our society in deeply personal ways.

Trans men on these channels often visibly shared physical changes to their bodies. For the men who had completed top surgery, it was a common practice to make the vlog while shirtless. Some talked openly about doing so and some never made mention of why they were shirtless. For those who spoke about it, there were a number of reasons discussed, but many of the reasons were buried in subtext. One reason was clearly related to pride in finally having a male chest with which they could at last comfortably inhabit their body. They wanted to share that they finally felt “whole” in that aspect, as well as sharing what a trans masculine chest looks like including nipple size, placement, and scars. They portrayed a sense of boyhood freedom and pride in being shirtless, while shedding the years of discomfort (emotional and physical) of dysphoria around their chest. There was always joking when talking about this aspect of showing their chests, such as “Hi, this is sexy Jason coming at you.” Another reason for going topless was clearly around feeling and owning one’s masculinity—it was a way for these men to claim they were men. As more than one person put it, “what is manlier than walking around without a shirt on.” It was also clear

that many of these men did not feel comfortable going shirtless in public (unless at a Pride event or with a group of trans men) where their masculinity might be called into question should anyone realize their trans status due to the unique nature of scars related to top surgery. Being shirtless on YouTube was one of the rare opportunities to express this form of masculinity.

All of the collaboration channels were unrestricted and public, however, all names associated with the people on those channels have been changed to pseudonyms. While I wanted to honor several trans men's desire to use their real names and identities, I felt it was irresponsible to do so in the current and rapidly changing anti-trans political climate. Furthermore, while the channels were set as public at the time I conducted my research, should a trans man decide to withdraw he can erase or limit access to those videos—something that could not be altered if I used his real name in this work. Therefore, I felt it was ethically unwise to use their real names. I should also note that while it is standard academic practice to include YouTube urls similarly to textual citations, due to protections written into my IRB—and because several of the channels have been deleted, relocated, or are no longer active since I conducted this research—I have not included the web links to reference individuals speaking from YouTube.¹⁰

Conferences

Another source of information was gained by attending and presenting at four transgender conferences across the country. These conferences were largely non-

¹⁰ Future researchers may contact me directly for urls if interested in conducting further research involving these online communities.

academic, most of them being designed by and for transgender people to create a physical space of community and provide education on a wide variety of transgender issues. All conferences were open to trans men, trans women, partners, families and allies. At each of these conferences I gave presentations on the preliminary findings of the research on how trans men were framing their masculinity and sexuality. These sessions generated discussion and questions that allowed me to refine the findings and explore topics more deeply. It also allowed me to interview trans men at conferences who were interested in participating in the research.

One conference was specifically designed for trans people of color, one for LGBTQ identified people, and the other two conferences were for trans people in general. The Black Trans Advocacy conference was attended by roughly 150 trans men and women and was in its 4th year. This conference was created by and for trans people of color in order to recognize and address the unique issues, concerns, and experiences around being a trans person of color. Over 50 workshops were given over a week's time. I sought permission from the administrators prior to attending and was informed that it was not a closed conference, although I saw no other white men in the sessions I attended. Creating Change, the "largest annual gathering of activists, organizers and leaders in the LGBT movement" is designed for various identity groups (mainly LGBTQA+) to learn and work together as we move forward in our political projects and to provide community, support and share resources" (2015 National LGBTQ Task Force).¹¹ The conference, in its 27th year, was attended by over 5,000

¹¹ Prior to 2014, the LGBTQ Task Force was named the Gay and Lesbian task force. The name change was completed as a response to increased pressure by its constituency to be more

people, held hundreds of workshops and institutes, and several well-known LGBTQ leaders gave keynote addresses.

First Event, held annually in Boston, is a conference for transgender people, friends, families and allies. It was attended by roughly 350 people and offered about a hundred workshops over a three-day period. The conference was in its 35th year—one of the oldest trans conferences in existence. Lastly, the TRANSforming Gender Conference, now in its 11th (2017) year, is held at the University of Colorado-Boulder and, as mentioned above, has multiplied two-fold in attendance between 2015 and 2017. For several years, I have attended, participated, and now chair the planning committee for this event. The conference now hosts over 50 workshops over a day and a half with multiple transgender leaders giving keynote addresses.

At each of these conferences, transgender men make up smaller percentages of attendees than transgender women, LGB or ally populations. Although I could not compile official numbers, my estimates of trans men attending (opposed to other identities attending) were 20% trans men at the Black Trans Advocacy conference, 1-2% at the Creating Change conference, 5% at the First Event, and 10-15% at the TRANSforming Gender Conference.

Including transgender conferences as field sites allowed me to accomplish several things. First, I gained access to different geographic locations (Boston, Dallas, Denver and Boulder) which helped me to gauge whether trans identities or experiences were being constructed differently due to local effects. Second, the demographics of

inclusive of the entire queer community and to emphasize the need for continuing work beyond marriage equality (National LGBTQ Task Force 2014).

people attending conferences were distinct from both the interviewees and YouTube participants, largely being older and including more African American and mixed-race individuals. Third, giving presentations at each conference allowed me to present my research findings to date and refine them based on the discussion generated during those sessions. Fourth, I was able to attend many different workshops or events and network with many different trans and allied people to further my own education and to garner deeper and more comprehensive perspectives.

Since there were always few trans men (and hence a limited number of workshops dedicated to trans men) I, and several other people who attended my own presentation, ended up going to other workshops together, which often resulted in further conversation around topics of trans masculinity. Workshops covered a wide variety of topics such as:

- Debunking the Masculinity Myth
- Below the Belt: Genital Surgery for Men of Trans Experience
- Trans Advocacy in Rural Communities
- Race and the Trans Experience
- Transgender Self-Empowerment: Building Communities for Resilience, Safety, Health and Life
- Social Transition for College Students
- Navigating Cis-Trans Relationships
- The Intersection of Trans and Fat Body Politics
- How to Explain your Body when it comes to Sex
- Deconstructing Masculinity: Male Privilege

- BROTHERS Web Series & Trans Masculine Visibility in the Media
- Guilt, Shame and Fear: Confronting the Emotional Legacy of Transphobia
- FTM Top Surgery: Show and Tell
- The Men's Room: FTM Speech, Voice and Communication Changes and Challenges

Listening to questions, comments, and viewing their interactions in other workshops allowed me to add more detail regarding how they understood and enacted their masculinity and sexuality. Integrating this information with new and different perspectives learned from various workshops felt very much like rolling a snowball—building ethnographic knowledge exponentially. Trans conferences, where there was a concentrated environment of trans people and trans perspectives, served as a petri dish for rapid ethnographic research and learning.

Limitations

Some of the limitations to this research are related to my positionality as a trans man who is a white, middle-class professional in my mid-40s, working at a predominantly white university. This gave me limited access to people of color in both my participant observation and interviews. While we did not have high percentages of students of color in our population we did have a diverse population of LGBTQ students, staff and faculty with different racial backgrounds, nationalities, ethnicities, and religions who were part of the everyday life in the center and contributed their perspectives to conversations with those who identified as white, middle-class from the U.S.

It was due to a concern of having limited access to those who did not identify as white, that I searched YouTube in hopes of connecting with a broader demographic of trans men that I encountered several collaboration channels. Within this genre of vlogs, there was still an imbalance between channels having white trans men and those created by trans men of color. Those who were white were often frustrated that their groups were very homogenous along racial lines, but seemed to have little success in recruiting more ethnic or racial diversity. The channels consisting of trans men of color were purposefully designed to exclude white trans men (although I do not know if any white men auditioned for the channels) in order to address the different needs and perspectives of trans people of color (TPOC). One significant difference between these two groups was that TPOC men tended to stop producing posts within a few weeks or months, meaning that the information I was able to gather from their vlogs was not as in-depth or longitudinal as many of the white trans men. These men did not give reasons for exiting the project and generally just stopped making videos, nor was there acknowledgement from other members of the channel as to why men left the channel. This gave the impression that it was not a purposeful exit, unlike some white men who left over “drama” behind the scenes, depression, or having too many obligations. Other than pure speculation I have no knowledge of why they left. My educated guess would be that it was too time consuming, there was not enough reward to participating in the channel, or other obligations became more pressing.

Geographical limitations of snowball sampling were among the reasons I chose to include transgender conferences as one of my research sites. It allowed me to gain other perspectives from different parts of the country, which flushed out many of the

descriptions around trans masculinity. YouTube channel participants let my reach go even further afield as people participated from many different countries such as: Scotland, Australia, Sweden, Canada; others were living in Western countries but were originally from Taiwan or China. I reached out to the administrators of each YouTube channel to gain permission to use information from their channels for my project, which was given. However, as I did not have ways of contacting all of the men who had participated in the channels (past and present), I was not able to contact them individually. As they were public channels designed in part to “help educate people” I included data from these men, though I have not included the weblinks for reasons of security.

Using the primary points of access to interviews, conferences and YouTube, also limited the demographics to those who were largely middle to upper class, had consistent access to internet, video recording devices (phones or cameras) and who had time and commitment to talk about transgender issues at length. Further, due to my full-time employment, which provides me access to healthcare needs, I had a limited amount of time, and was often constrained to locations nearby for interviews and participant observation.¹² However, because I was a member of this community there never felt a time when I was not doing participant observation. Even when I was the sole trans person among cis people, I was always watching gendered interactions

¹² Health insurance and access to trans competent doctors were critical as I was experiencing health conditions related to medically transitioning. Finding trans competent health care and insurance that will cover trans related care is one of the many challenges trans people face. This was a major reason the study was based out of my home university.

between people and how I was being treated differently in comparison to when I identified as a butch lesbian.

Lastly, the research done here is a snapshot of a rapidly evolving community and social climate. Most of my fieldwork was completed under President Obama's administration, which was very favorable to the LGBTQ community; transgender people gained wider recognition, political power, and rights and protections during his time in office. The final process of writing up this research occurred during Trump's presidency. Under Trump's administration LGBTQ have been losing rights, are being attacked both politically and physically, and seeing people who have anti-gay and trans records being appointed to political offices. Such open hostility will undoubtedly shape how the transgender population positions and understands itself in ways that my research cannot predict for the future.

Participants

Please see the appendix for further contextual information on prominently featured participants.

CHAPTER 3

TRANS MASCULINITY

“What’s the last thing in the world that I want to be? A white man? Yeah.”

Boy I am (Feder and Hollar 2010)

“I never truly wanted to be a ‘man.’ In fact, the idea was repellant to me.”

Sam Bullington (2013)

“I was safe because I had become what I came to think of as one of the ‘invisible people,’ a transgendered person who ‘passed’ so well that no one suspected they had an ‘other gendered’ past...The problem was that I didn’t really feel good about myself when I allowed myself to think about being ‘invisible’ and I certainly didn’t feel like a man.”

Patrick Callahan (Rohrer and Keig 2010, 81)

The above statements are voices of transgender men. Their thoughts may seem confusing and contradictory as transgender people have often been portrayed as wanting to transition from one gender to the other gender. It is not intuitive to think that someone who wants to physically transition from female to male would hold strong negative views towards men and manhood. What does it mean to reject being a man, and yet, choose to move forward with hormone treatment and surgery in order to be recognized as a man? What does it mean to say ‘I wish I could pass as trans’ rather

than wishing to ‘pass as a man’ (Rosskam 2009)? It is through these seemingly contradictory perspectives and actions that trans men are creating a new type of masculinity, termed trans masculinity, and altering the cultural construction of gender categories as a whole (M. Brown 2016). Based on ethnographic data collected, I show how trans masculinities diverge from, and frequently reject, hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities, while simultaneously creating a masculinity based on queer and feminist values.

While trans men may have affinities with cisgender men—they do identify as men after all—they differ from them in many ways. This project examines those differences along three separate axes: masculinity, embodiment, and sexuality. While this chapter focuses on masculinity being created by trans men, it is unrealistic to think masculinity is entirely separate from a person’s sexuality and/or gendered embodiment. However, in order to tease out how trans masculinity departs from normative masculinities I will largely leave the discussion of these other aspects to the following chapters.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe trans men’s conceptions of trans masculinity as derived from their gendered experiences, histories and practices. Using the ethnographic data gathered during this research, I illustrate how trans men are forming a masculinity that is not a reproduction of hegemonic norms. Trans masculinity, for the men here, is demarcated by having a history of being raised, socialized, and perceived as a girl/woman, living for years or decades in a body marked by female characteristics, and gaining new perspectives on sexism and male privilege through transitioning. These factors all contribute to the practice of trans men identifying as *trans* men instead of, or in addition to, a man. Further, I discuss how and

why trans masculinity is a refusal of heteronormative and hegemonic masculinity and, in turn, how normative masculinities cannot contain trans masculinity.

To set the stage for discussing masculinities, let me lay out the definitions I am working with. Hegemonic masculinity has been defined as “the pattern of practices (things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women” and is the “honored way of being a man and required all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 3). In other words, hegemonic masculinity reflects dominant, normative behavior that reinforces heteronormative values and patriarchal practices. Heteronormativity, as used here, describes the “institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent...but also privileged” (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548). Heteronormativity is a privileged position that “can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the person and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment” (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548). Heteronormative expectations are constantly referenced, consciously and unconsciously, to maintain the status quo of a patriarchal system and hegemonic masculinity constituting a heterosexist culture.

Trans masculinity

From my research, I have developed a model that illustrates how the identities of transgender people fit in relationship to a binary construction of gender (Figure 1).¹³

¹³ Positioning trans identities in this way acknowledges, and allows for, the significant differences between trans men and trans women regarding how both groups form and experience their gender in contrast to, and in conjunction with, a patriarchal culture. The experience of trans women moving from a position of masculine privilege to feminine

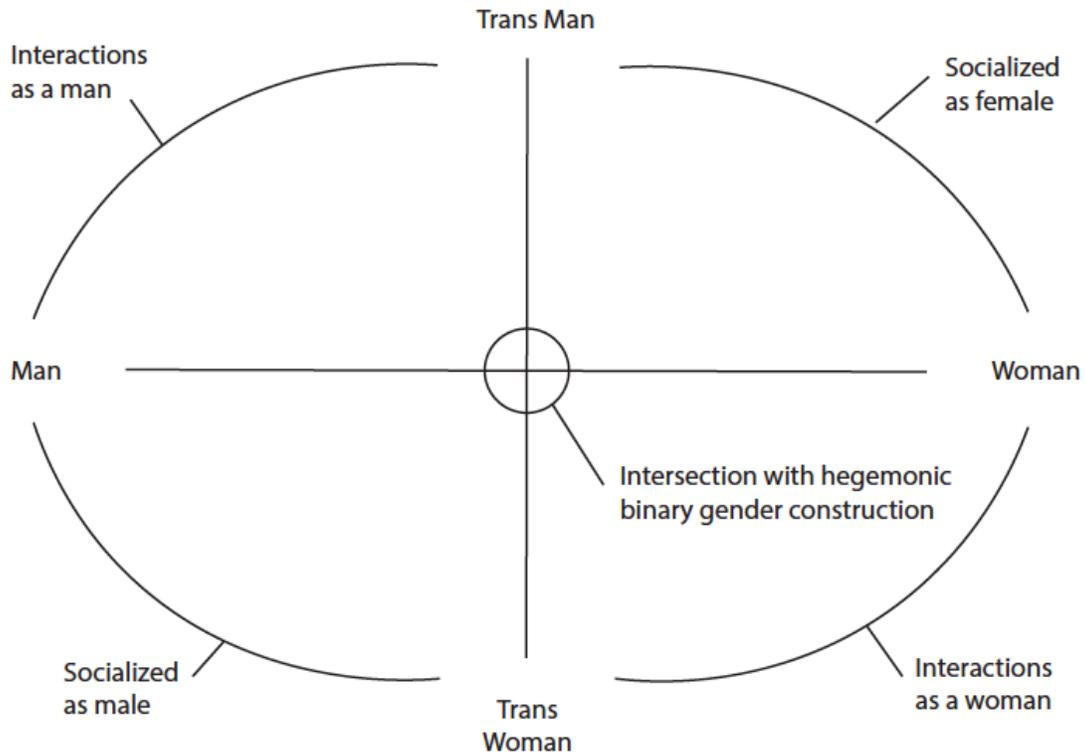


Figure.1. Transgender Positionality Model.

The model is based on how a growing number of trans men, in this study and within the larger trans community, are positioning themselves as trans men rather than solely as men. The model of transgender positionality depicts trans identities set perpendicular to a spectrum of gender located between the binary poles of men and women. This is a change from earlier models that depicted trans identities as moving from one end of the male/female spectrum to the other end or somewhere in between.

Positioning trans identities in this way separates trans people from the confines of

subjectivity is very different from trans men shifting from feminine subjectivity to masculine privilege, although both experiences afford one to better see the articulation of gender and power (Coston and Kimmel 2012, 97). Since my study focused on trans men and their construction of masculinity, I will not delve further into the differences between experiences of trans men and trans women but the topic needs further research.

binary gendered systems based on cisgender constructions. The arc between “trans men” and “women” represents the ownership of being socialized as a girl/woman (highly discouraged in years past) and carrying forward that knowledge and experience into manhood. The arc between “trans men” and “men” represents the trans masculinity that these men are now living (and currently creating). Trans men are men, but they are men of trans experience. Their masculinity cannot be understood without acknowledging how their past and present gender shapes their masculinity in a patriarchal society where they have experienced the world from a woman’s point of view.

The positioning of trans identities outside of, and yet intersecting with, normative gender constructs illustrates several important points. First, trans man as an identity category, is separated from hegemonic masculinity. Second, it denotes a position that can acknowledge being socialized as a woman and currently living as a man (Schilt 2006, 466). This is akin to P. Collins “outsider within.” perspective of Black women working for White households where they gained a “special standpoint on self, family and society” (P. Collins 1986, 514). It is a way to embrace one’s full history of gendered experiences. Third, the position outside of the binary construction indicates that trans people gain a new perspective of how gender operates in our society. Chopra (2004, 37) noted that “gender intervenes to block the process of knowing about the construction of knowledge.” However, trans men are afforded opportunities to better see and experience the construction of knowledge from a new viewpoint because of their multi-gendered experience. Living as a man who has been socialized as a woman, provides an opportunity to see society’s construction of gender from a

distinct perspective where one can redefine, or entirely reject, masculinity and manhood while still becoming a man. Although it is difficult to explore each of the three aspects separately, I will attempt to focus on each one individually to draw out important differences. In reality however, the lived experiences of being trans weaves the three aspects together, thus creating a multi-faceted trans perspective.

As stated earlier, transgender men are identifying as trans man rather, or in addition to, man.¹⁴ This practice serves to demarcate their masculinity and embodiment as separate from cisgender masculinities and embodiments and as something that cannot be contained within hegemonic constructions of gender in general, and masculinity in particular. It communicates their gender in ways that both intersect and depart from binary conceptions of gender. With the experiences of living as one gender and then another (not necessarily binary or opposite), it is not surprising that trans people have different conceptions and lived experiences of gender than cisgender people. As Talusan (2016) writes:

Some have insisted that our genders be read according to established definitions. But the deeper truth is that by the very nature of our lives, our genders are necessarily distinct from those of cis people. We may be men and women, though some of us are neither or both, but we are not the same men and women as our cisgender counterparts. In that difference, however, lies

¹⁴ I want to acknowledge and point out that not all trans men identify as trans. Some do not consider themselves trans after they have transitioned, feeling that they have resolved a birth defect (a female body) they were born with and are now simply men. Those individuals see themselves as fitting within the binary construction of cisgender men. I did not have any men who were still living as stealth come forward to participate in this study.

radical potential: our power to disrupt homonormativity, both within queer culture and the world at large.

Many trans men are embracing this “radical potential” to embody a masculinity that rejects norms of masculinity that are misogynistic and toxic.

One of the main contributors to trans masculinity is that these men have “first experienced their lives as girls, then as women with female embodiments. They have been exposed to the oppressions which women and girls are subjected” (M. Brown 2016, 72). All of the men in this study had spent the majority of their lives as women, living in bodies perceived to be female, and having their sexuality understood from a female bodied position.¹⁵ They all grew up forming their identities and relationships with the world based on being perceived as women. Not all of them knew or felt that they were a man from an early age and struggled for years trying to embody a non-normative femininity. These experiences and circumstances are a foundational piece of why trans masculinity is set apart from hegemonic masculinities. Their experiences were also affected by geographical location, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, education (although almost all were in college or had gone to college), religion and other intersectional identities, which will be discussed as applicable (Hale 1998).

Transforming cisgender masculinity

Why is the discourse around trans masculinity expanding? First, because cisgender masculinity does not encompass trans men’s experiences and identity;

¹⁵ I use the word “perceived” because many trans men deny ever having been a woman. Instead, they might say that they lived in a body that people looked at and assumed to be female, which then led them to assume that they identified as a woman. It is a subtle but important difference that helps break down the single story of being “born in the wrong body.”

second, men who identify as trans are critical of hegemonic practices that maintain sharp gender distinctions and power differentials between men and women (or men and all other genders). Butler (1988, 519) argued that gender is “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (emphasis in original), but many trans men are not drawing on the same stylizations and acts that cisgender men do. This is in part because those norms were not congealed in their youth through a long process of being socialized as a male, but also because they are rejecting behaviors and attitudes that denigrate women, uphold patriarchy, and promote hypermasculinity.

For the trans men that constructed their masculinity while living as women, it looks and feels different than masculinities formed through heteronormative, homosocial, cisgender experiences. Willy Wilkinson (2015, 137), in his book *Born on the Edge of Race and Gender: A Voice for Cultural Competency*, spoke to the different (and sometimes contradictory) masculinity he embodies: “The [people’s] assumptions are still wrong. No longer a manly woman, I have become a womanly man. Yet my masculinity is decidedly female, butch to the core. I am a gentleman of a different stripe.” The experience of living as a woman and being able to more clearly see the different ways men and women are treated once they have transitioned, is akin to (but not the same as) double-consciousness as described by W.E.B. Du Bois ([1903]1994). This term described the ability to see one’s own group’s experiences while also seeing your own personhood and experiences through the eyes of others. Men who identify as trans have the ability to see through the lens of their old identity as women, as well as through the eyes of men, as they view other genders and police masculinity.

Scout's experiences help to illustrate this aspect of trans masculinity. Scout, in his early 20s, identifies as a white, Jewish, upper-middle class trans man who has been part of the queer community since his pre-teen years. Scout had previously identified as a lesbian and then as genderqueer before coming out as trans and deciding to transition. He had completed top surgery two years prior to our interview, had been on testosterone for about one year and passed well as a man—albeit a very short man at around five feet. Regarding his experience with cisgender masculinity he said “I did not see a version of masculinity that reflected anything that I experienced or aspired to be.” He needed a space where he “could explore masculinity that didn't look like my brother's masculinity or my dad's masculinity because neither of those are the kinds of masculinity that I experience.” As Scout continued with his thoughts about defining his trans masculinity he stated, “I am someone who will always define myself as a *trans* man or a *trans* guy. I will never drop the 'trans' because it feels very much integral to my current identity, not just a means of becoming a man” (emphasis Scout's). For Scout, trans not only represented the process of becoming a man but also the destination of being a man. Identifying as trans separates him from cisgender men and the trappings of heteronormative masculinity. Trans, for him, is also a self-empowering identity; he does not want to be perceived as a cisgender man who expresses and embodies normative masculinity. In order to combat this assumption, he frequently comes out as trans to people he will be interacting with on a regular basis.

When Scout was asked to define his masculinity, he referred to it as “a gentler masculinity,” one that included “physical affection” and “sensitivity.” According to

Scout, trans masculinity was the “carrying through of those feminine pieces” previously learned while growing up as a girl and being socialized as a woman. When he was going through transition and people began reading him as if he was a cisgender man his experience of masculinity changed. Scout was uneasy with this phenomenon and stated: “I have a strange relationship with passing, I can’t decide if I want to or not...I find that in those situations where I know I am passing as a cis man I am really uncomfortable and that is why I always carry the trans part through because that is where it feels comfortable.” As a manner of practice, Scout never states “I am a man,” but rather states “I am a trans man” when identifying his gender to others. He frequently comes out to people rather than letting them read him as if he were cisgender.

Passing, as used in the trans community, refers to the ability of a trans person to be socially perceived in accordance with their gender identity as if they were cisgender (Pfeffer 2016). This parallels, yet differs from racialized conceptions of passing, which Kroeger (2003, 7) defines as “when people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be.” Passing, in racial contexts, was done historically to gain access to opportunities and privileges that were systematically denied to Blacks. Kroeger (2003, 8) further notes that “Passing never feels natural. It is a second skin that never adheres.” By contrast, passing in a transgender context is not necessarily done in order to access privilege (although there are advantages to passing); rather, it is specifically undertaken to feel more comfortable in one’s skin.

Passing relies on our cultural habitus around gendered dispositions, expression, bodies, and actions (Bourdieu 1977). If something about our gender breaks with our

cultural habitus around gender norms then our gender may be questioned and delegitimized. It is through trans men's subtle difference in gendered habitus that often results in people noting that they are "a different sort of man," as one trans interviewee stated. Practices such as being more affectionate, talking with our hands, using feminine gestures or speech patterns (often noticed subconsciously) can out us as trans. Passing can be a problematic concept and one that privileges a certain type of transition and gender enactment. However, there are real advantages to passing that revolve around safety and security. The increased risk of violence and lack of employment, housing, etc., when one is read as trans is real and will be discussed further in chapter 4.

Stealth, another concept used in the trans community, is related to passing. To be stealth, also called "going stealth," describes the act of passing as cisgender and making no effort to inform people otherwise.¹⁶ It is similar to remaining closeted as a gay or lesbian. Going stealth in the trans community generally refers to long-term practices such as working at a job or in all facets of daily living as opposed to short everyday encounters such as going to the grocery store or having dinner at a restaurant; in the latter cases, one might pass without making any intentional effort. Stealth relies on the normative conditioning we have around reading physical characteristics as gender (if you look like a man you will be assumed to be a man), such as body size, musculature, voice pitch, size of hands, etc. (Butler 1990). Stealth is often undertaken to avoid discrimination against being transgender and some have

¹⁶ This practice was highly encouraged by doctors treating transsexuals in years past as it was believed that the only path to acceptance in society (Benjamin 1966, Ophelian 2006).

compared it to “closeted” sexual minority identities (Pfeffer 2016). It is an active and intentional state of being that closely manages one’s gender and gendered past and is usually done for concerns of safety.¹⁷ It may be that they are embodying “aspirational normalcy” described as “the desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented” (Berlant 2007, 281). It is exceedingly rare for trans men who are out to criticize trans men who are stealth, given that most of them recognize that it is a personal decision and a trans person has the right to go stealth after working so hard to become men.

For Scout, and many of the other trans men I spoke with, there is a discomfort when they are not known or seen as trans men. Feinberg (1998) also lamented this condition stating: “in a non-trans setting, calling me ‘he’ renders my transgender [identity] invisible” (in Spade 2006, 322) and Green (2006) has written about the dilemma of choosing visibility as trans or as a man. I would argue that for the men in this project, they want to claim both positions—recognition as a man and to be visible as trans men. This position has often been hard for cisgender people to understand, as they assume the end goal is to fulfill the gendered expectations to such a degree that a trans person is undetectable as trans. Comments made by cis people such as “I never would have known,” “you turned out so well, I can’t tell at all,” or “I had no idea you used to be a woman,” are not necessarily appreciated by trans men because such

¹⁷ There has been considerable discussion within the trans community regarding passing and stealth, the detrimental effects it can have on the community and trans individuals, as well as the notion that it upholds binary gender norms rather than working to deconstruct and expand the norms. See Kailey (2013), Roberts (2013), Rose (2013), Sandeen (2013), and Cr. Williams (2013) for examples.

comments erase their identity, experience, and community belonging. Such comments simultaneously imply that trans men want to emulate normative masculinity and embodiment as the pinnacle of gendered achievement.

Still, these attitudes should not be misconstrued to mean that trans men are not men. As one trans man stated:

Although I want people to first and foremost see me as a man I want them to recognize the experiences I have as a trans man. However, setting out to mark this difference does not mean that I am ever inviting them to see me as a female, because I am not. The end point here is that I am male but I was not born male and therefore I request that society recognizes this difference. This means, for my part, that I must be up front about my experiences (Henry 2017, 110).

This commentary emphasizes one of the key aspects of identifying as a trans man—that we are not women regardless of bodily configuration. Much of the media coverage on transgender issues and transphobic legislation focuses on the issue of biology, giving credence to a biologically deterministic argument that trans women are not women, rather they are men wearing dresses and pretending to be women (Serano 2016). The inverse assumption about trans men and their potential danger to women or children is not as readily discussed. The differentiated attention between trans men and trans women speaks to the rules of the broader gender order.

A young trans man who used the county's LGBTQ community center, came into their office one day upset about his living situation in an apartment building. He stated that he had a "shitty experience" the day before and shared: "I was wearing a t-shirt

that said ‘this is what trans looks like’ in an elevator with a couple of other men. One of them looked at me and said ‘so you’re a dude?’ I said yeah and then he goes ‘but if I ripped your pants down, I bet I could still fuck you.’” The encounter was intended as a threat on multiple levels, and it was also a refusal of his identity as a man based on the (assumed) presence of a vagina and/or the lack of a penis. Countering such refusals, some trans men argue that they are more than men, specifically because of their unique history of experiencing life with a female body and not growing up being molded by heteronormative masculinity in the way that cisgender men are. In contrast to transphobic opinions, trans men are not less than cisgender men, they are men with multiple gendered perspectives and experiences.

My own experiences echo those of Scout. In structured settings, such as teaching classes, doing public speaking, or meeting new co-workers, I am very uncomfortable if others think I am cisgender and do not know I am trans. In order for me to have any connection with people, I need them to know I am trans. My experiences and positionality are very different from cisgender men. If people do not know I am trans, then they cannot understand my meanings and perspectives, specifically because their point of reference is generally normative masculinity based on cisgender upbringing and identities. I need people who I will have any sort of sustained interaction with, to know I also carry female knowledge and experience with me. The carrying forward of that female experience and knowledge is what makes me

the man I am today.¹⁸ I need people to know I may not fit into stereotypical types of masculine thought and behavior because those are based on cisgender experiences.

Intersectionality and masculinity

As with third wave feminism, masculinity studies acknowledge multiple types of masculinities rather than a single monolithic masculinity (Connell 1987, 2000, 2005, 2012; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kimmel 2009, 2013, 2018; Sussman 2012; Whitehead 2002). Through the intersectionality of different aspects of identity—such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, geographical location, disability, and sexuality—distinct norms and masculinities have been created. Consideration and examination of these intersections is critical to understanding how various masculinities are constructed, against which norms they operate, and how such intersections affect the construction of masculinity and the lived experience of being a man. Trans masculinity falls into this paradigm of multiplicity and is emerging as another type of masculinity.¹⁹ This masculinity calls attention to other types of intersectionalities that have not typically entered the conversation such as bodily configuration and trans sexuality. As a category and intersectional node, transgender masculinity has the potential to call into question and mark cisgender masculinity much like homosexuality marked heterosexuality as a point that could be challenged (Foucault 1990).

¹⁸ Were it possible I would prefer that everyone I interact with—the grocery clerk, the waitress, the barista—know that I am trans but cultural norms continue to encourage people to make gendered assumptions about others, therefore I am always assumed to be a cisgender man.

¹⁹ I recognize that there are multiple types of trans masculinities. I tend toward using the singular masculinity here in order to define the general type of masculinity adopted by the men in this particular project. I am illustrating one type of trans masculinity and it remains to be seen if it will become a dominant form within trans masculine communities.

Usually, but not always, trans masculinity is claimed by coming out and living openly as trans. Tiq Milan, an African American leader, national speaker and educator in the trans community, stated: “Since coming out and being visible, the burden of secrecy is gone and I have the space to be the man I want to be. I can really look at the tropes of masculinity and choose which to engage in and which not” (Milan 2016). For Tiq, it was only through rejecting his stealth status that he gained the freedom to decide what sort of man he wanted to become. Living as stealth can make it difficult to adopt masculinity outside of hegemonic norms, as expressing non-normative masculinity may invite cisgender people to call into question the trans man’s gender. For those who identify as trans (not solely as men), they found heteronormative masculinity to be overly confining and incapable of encompassing their masculine practices, values, and history as a trans person.

For Tiq, identifying as a trans man allowed him to create a masculinity more authentic to his life experiences. This raises the question as to why Tiq was not able to embrace the type of masculinity he wanted without coming out as trans. Previous types of masculinities, including female masculinity, have been based on cisgender norms.²⁰ During a TED talk titled “The urgency of intersectionality,” Crenshaw (2016) stated “when facts do not fit with the available frames, people have a difficult time incorporating new facts into their way of thinking.” Transgender masculinities are frames that have not traditionally been included when examining masculinity. It is only

²⁰ Halberstam’s (1998) work on female masculinity provides a closer comparison to trans masculinity than heteronormative masculinity. However, it still remains tied to cisgender embodiment and therefore, is dissimilar in important ways.

possible for a trans frame to come into being when we acknowledge the intersectional nature of trans and masculinity. A frame of trans masculinity relies on trans men being visible in some way as *trans* men. While trans men may enact a different type of masculinity from the norm—even if he does not claim trans—openly being seen as trans creates an intersectional identity apart from being seen as a normative cisgender man. Other aspects of identity such as race, class, religion, etc. add to what Crenshaw (1989, 1994) argued was greater than the sum of their parts.

A trans frame is a recent development that has come to light through the increased visibility of trans men and is dependent on being out as trans. Trans masculinity, as a category, has come about from a shared set of experiences and values around combating and rejecting hegemonic norms. Increased visibility has been the result of an increase in population numbers, visibility, and trans people's ability to communicate among themselves, largely through YouTube channels, blogs, online forums, and an increase in face to face interactions. These modes of communication are relatively recent developments, occurring mainly since the early 2000s. These advances have largely been among white trans men though. In comparison, the experience of trans men of color in this project has been very different. For example, the vast majority of trans men of color in this study did not have other trans men of color they could confide in, ask questions of, or exchange information with face to face as they moved forward in their transition. In an effort to change that, several YouTube collaboration channels, by and for trans men of color (although not a closed group and open to viewing by anyone), had been started. As a result, networking among trans men of color has increased.

Trans men of color

The intersectionality and racialization of trans men of color played an important part in their experience (as it also did for white trans men). Two of the trans men I watched on YouTube channels had parents who still lived in their native Asian countries. Both men had been living in Canada and Australia since childhood and presented Westernized views of gender construction and how transgender identities fit into this system. However, when talking about masculinity norms, they drew upon stereotypes of Asian men; this was also the case for African American men and White men respectively when attending to broader masculine norms. As I argued earlier, it is impossible to decouple a trans man's masculinity from his trans-ness, it was also impossible for these men to decouple their masculinity from their racial identity.

Tian is a Taiwanese young professional who has lived in Canada for the last 20 years. His parents returned to Taiwan several years ago and he is the only person in his family to remain in Canada. He had undergone top surgery about 3 months before helping to form a YouTube channel dedicated to trans men of color experiences. He participated regularly for about six months before eventually leaving the channel, but he occasionally posted videos on his personal YouTube channel to update his followers. He had a small, slight body frame, short black hair styled in a masculine way, a flat chest, dressed in men's button-down shirts and visually looked like a man. However, he has a high-pitched feminine voice as he was not on testosterone; he was not planning on taking it stating he wanted to change his body through natural supplements and body building. This circumstance meant that he was usually read as a man until he spoke, at which point people categorized him as a woman. Tian

identified as a man and had no desire to identify as genderqueer or non-binary, although he revealed to viewers that the mixture of gender characteristics (flat chest and very short hair) he carried with him often resulted in being read this way.

In one of his videos for the channel we see him wearing a plain white V-neck t-shirt in a white room dusky with shadows except for the light from a dim lamp somewhere in the foreground. It appears to be night and he was not as energetic or animated as he usually was. The topic had been “coming out” but in the course of the 14 minute video, Tian drifted into the concept of manhood. He told viewers he had no desire to adopt many of the norms associated with masculinity, nor did this refusal affect his concept of being a man: “I feel like being a man has such a big connotation to it, there are so many things you have to live up to—not live up to—but there are so many things or criteria that you must have to be a man and I don’t have those criteria and I don’t need them, I don’t want them.” He is creating a masculinity apart from those norms, yet also always in reference to those norms, which he framed through stereotypes of Asian men such as “being good at math, working extremely hard, and striving to be a provider for the family.”

For Tian, he was always aware he did not fit Asian (his terminology) ideals of masculinity and spoke of it frequently. In one of his vlog posts, where Tian begins in his kitchen – pointing out the well-organized liquor cabinet behind him – he begins by greeting viewers then says, “wait, is there something wrong here?” The shot then changes from him wearing a shirt to not wearing a shirt and asserting, “there, that’s better.” He then goes on to talk about his family, cultural pressures, and his masculine identity. In describing “Asian” masculinity, he said one must be “quiet, really humble,

really shy, really polite, really closed, follow rules, conform to society, conform to roles—you can't be yourself.” He framed this against Western masculinity “where you are expected to think for yourself, be outspoken, be your own individual self;” he explained that between the two he did not know how to act. He went on to state that “We want to be ourselves, but we all also need to belong and have a sense of belonging, and in order to have that you need to identify with something, or someone, or an area [geographical] and I don't feel like I have that.”

This quest for belonging was part of Tian's interest in participating on a YouTube collaborative channel for trans men of color. While he had explored and watched many videos by trans men when initially figuring out his own identity (claiming that YouTube was how he learned to be trans), he was acutely aware that nearly all of the men were white and none of them were Asian. He had also attended a large Pride event where he walked with some other trans men (without his shirt on), where he again was painfully aware of the fact that he was the only Asian person he saw. These experiences re-awakened his past experience of wanting to be white so he could be “normal” when he was a child, which was a feeling he did not like. He felt as though there were no mentors for Asian trans men and that Asian voices were not being heard in the trans community.

Although Tian is on a public channel, he has not shared his identity to everyone he knows. Specifically, he has yet to tell his extended family, further complicating the ways he embodies his transgender and masculine identities. Translation of his identity is an issue adding to the difficulty of sharing his transition with his family. In neither the Mandarin language nor his natal culture is there an accurate word or concept to define

his Western transgender identity. This was concerning for Tian as he was going back to Taiwan, where all of his extended family live, for the first time in several years and he was very unsure how he would present himself—if he would be seen as male or female—and how that would reflect on his parents. His parents were also concerned about his appearance and how it would reflect on them. His father went so far as to ask Tian to wear a bra while he was visiting—a request Tian refused—in order to be read as female. For Tian, he believed none of his extended family would know what transgender meant or be able to understand it if he explained it. Underlying this was his belief that “I have already caused my parents so much pain and hardship, I don’t want to make it worse.” In the end, he decided he would not do anything to appear more feminine and would let his extended family make whatever assumptions they would without correcting them. It was a very difficult decision for Tian though, trying to balance his own values of being a trans man and yet not wanting to have his gender identity and expression reflect negatively on his parents. It was clear to Tian his decision could be detrimental to his family but felt he could not go to Taiwan “in drag as a woman.”

Masculinity norms were spoken about on all of the trans men of color (TMOC) channels. Trans men who identified as African American tied their trans masculinity to norms around Black masculinities, which they describe as “hard,” “aggressive,” and “violent,” while acknowledging that this was an effect of media portrayals. Sampson, an African American trans man who felt bound by stereotypes related to being Black in America, stated: “to be a black man is a specific experience driven by media stereotypes of violence—that all black men do drugs, have fathered many children with different mothers, only work manual labor jobs, and white people are shocked when

we speak eloquently.” Another African American man described Black masculinity as “stereotypes of [a man] who get[s] into fights, sleeps around, snarls, doesn’t smile, doesn’t hug.” While none of the African American men aspired to these stereotypical portrayals of Black masculinity, they felt their masculinity would be measured against this depiction of Black manhood. Many of them wanted to embrace what would be considered feminine characteristics. Malik stated “these [stereotypes] are outdated and bullshit—men can be anything—loving, caring, passionate, sensitive, sweet, soft, emotional. These traits are not only women’s traits—that is bullshit.”

Many of the trans men in this project, regardless of race and ethnicity, saw their connection to emotions as something that not only separated them from stereotypical depictions of masculinity but as something that elevated their masculinity as a more positive type. The trans men involved in this project felt more freedom to create a masculinity not constrained by such norms and societal rules. They had previously been allowed to express themselves more freely and saw the absurdity of now being required to give that up simply because they were now visible as men.

This valuation of trans masculinity above heteronormative masculinity became most apparent when these men were discussing what Black women wanted from Black men. Franklin, a Black trans man in his mid-twenties, described dating Black women as follows: “Women put a lot of pressure on men to own a car, a house, be employed, earn good money—you need to appreciate women, buy them things, take them out to dinner and if you can’t then you are inadequate as a significant other.” This statement also revealed a strong difference between African American men and White men involved in this study. White men did not speak about pressures they felt from

women to be a certain type of man. If anything, there was more discussion around how their non-normative masculinity served as a positive aspect that might attract women to them.²¹

Other African American trans men also felt their masculinity was measured by qualities Black women valued in men. Paxon, an African American graduate student of engineering in his mid-twenties, framed trans men in this way: “we aren’t the biggest guys out there, we might not be the most macho because of our female socialization, we might be more in tune with our emotions.” This assertion pointed to physical, behavioral, and emotional differences between trans men’s masculinity and cis-normative African American men/masculinity; this is something White men spoke about but less frequently. Paxon had no intention of altering the way he inhabits his masculinity to fit with the expectations of Black masculinity but clearly understood the phenomenological differences between trans masculinity and cisgender masculinity.

Keen, an African American trans man in his mid-twenties, made several videos on a short lived TMOC channel that lasted a few months. For a segment talking about “my story” he appeared in a white tank-top neatly tucked into jeans that were a bit too big. He was wearing his standard snap-back baseball cap backwards and a gold chain necklace. Standing in front of plain white door inside his apartment he remained animated throughout the video leaning in, then stepping back, using his hands to emphasize his words and speaking passionately. Keen also noted that his masculinity

²¹ As the Black men were not available to speak with or contact via social media (as they had all dropped off and the channels were inactive at the time of my analysis) I was not able to explore this important difference involving class and race.

is affected by his girlfriend's perception of Black masculinity. He stated, "Who is the toughest, best off, has the best car? That is the culture my girlfriend grew up with and she *expects* all that." Her expectations made him feel as if he was not living up to being a man. In his experience, women would not date men unless you were "making a lot of money and are showing it off." Because he does not meet those masculine requirements, he does not feel as though he can date anyone or that anyone will date him. He has no misconceptions that he is masculine but is acutely aware of how he does not meet the masculine expectations of the women he wants to date; still, he is unwilling to adopt this sort of hypermasculinity.

While these Black men all felt the pressure of measuring up to those qualities, they also understood cisgender men were not meeting the expectations of women either. One of them stated female expectations only added to the sense of Black men being "crabs in a barrel," a reference to cultural beliefs about pulling down those who try to rise above the rest. Each of these men felt they did not meet the expectations, which concerned them in being able to find a partner, yet they had all made conscious decisions to reject those norms of Black masculinity. They would rather create and embrace a masculinity that included the things they learned through their experiences as women in a sexist and racist society. As Bo, a Black man in his early 20s, stated in a video lamenting being considered not a "real man":

I was privileged to be born biologically female to understand that the hardships that a woman goes through. That makes us trans men special because a cis male will never ever get to experience that. They will never understand women on a level that we do, they will never understand

society and the different restrictions that were built into the society that we live in that is hindering women. These stupid notions of what it means to be a real male, a real man...Get that shit out of here, get those outdated masculinity fucking traits out of here. No one has time for that.

Paxon was also very attentive to the differences between Black and White masculinities. In a vlog about race Paxon spoke from an outside location on an early spring day. With the bright sunshine streaming through bright green leaves behind him, he holds the camera in front of him so we can only see his head and shoulders as he sits next to a brick wall. Wearing a black long sleeve t-shirt, a backward baseball hat with his short dreads tucked to the back, and his ear buds wrapped around his neck Paxon stated: “there is a tension based on our ancestors’ experience with slavery, which makes us tend to stick together around our commonalities.” While he identified with the commonalities of being Black in a country with a long and ugly history of slavery and racism, he was also aware that he did not want to share commonalities with Black cisgender masculine experiences. Instead he saw his trans masculine identity as an “opportunity to be a new man and break stereotypes” in a way that resonated with Mark Anthony Neal’s theorization of “the new Black man” (2005). The need Paxon perceived for a new Black manhood evolved specifically because his experience was not the same as a cisgender Black man. In his advice to other trans men of color Paxon stated: “Don’t be afraid to stand up as a pillar in your community and make sure your voice is heard. Step in and represent...interrupt sexism when you see it or hear it, don’t be afraid to be the sort of man you want to be.” Paxon was

pushing Black trans men to stand up for a version of masculinity that diverged from misogynistic practices.

Yet many Black trans men also felt a pressure to conform to the cultural norms of Black masculinity so people would not suspect them of being different, and undertook more cis-normative performative practices in situations where conformity was an advantage. Not conforming to Black masculinity norms placed these trans men at risk of violence—both emotional and physical—or erasure as someone who was considered neither man, woman, nor Black. At the same time these Black trans men were mindful that being a Black man is in itself, dangerous. Appearing in a video posted from his living room where viewers can only see the front door and windows behind him, Paxon wore a black beanie and t-shirt while describing the dangers of being a Black man. “Being a Black man can get you killed. They are [imagined to be] dangerous, violent, aggressive, don’t love their wives or children, they are [called] dogs, not faithful, liars, Black royalty,” but went on to say “we have to figure out how any of that applies to us—I don’t care if white people accept me, I won’t be something I am not and I also will not devalue education and I will not be a misogynist.” Paxon wanted to be seen as a man, but not a man who fell in step with stereotypes of Black or hegemonic masculinity. He was actively embodying a different sort of masculinity which could incorporate his feminist values and experiences as a female. At the same time, he knew that becoming a “black man is different than becoming a white man.” By actively deciding what masculine aspects he wanted to identify with and what aspects he wanted to reject, he created something outside the norm. Rather than conceiving of

trans masculinity as abnormal or 'not a man,' he framed it as another norm, one that is different yet valuable.

However, these men's experiences suggest that trans men of color are more restricted in the types of masculinity that they can embody. In comparison, white trans men do not face the same degree of reprisal for adopting non-normative masculinity; said another way, there appear to be more ways to acceptably embody white manhood. Several white trans men noted that once they passed all the time it didn't matter how feminine you were, you were still viewed as a man—and many of these men wanted to keep certain feminine aspects of their lives. For trans men of color, this was not their experience:

For the Asian (from Asia but living in the west) trans men on YouTube that I followed, both used (in their words) Asian stereotypes of normalcy and success as markers of masculinity—although neither one of them wanted to fit in this masculinity. However, neither one of them spoke about their masculinity in comparison to White American stereotypes of being overtly masculine. For example, Jourian (2017, 133) noted that one Asian American trans student compared himself (and other Asian men) to White “dude-bro masculinity,” described as “being attractive, strong, and cool.” A cisgender Asian American man revealed how they also struggle with to meet the White cis-masculine norm: “We were seen as weaker, inferior, so the word masculine and Asian never really coexisted” (Munce 2018).

African American men want to position themselves as separate from the stereotype of 'the violent Black man.' They noted that once they passed as men they were perceived as suspicious, threatening, and dangerous (Jourian 2017, 132). As one

participant in Jourian's (2017, 132) work noted he tried "'to not be the angry Black guy' when in predominantly White environments 'with no backup or support'." In this instance, he was clearly performing a more acceptable (to Whites) form of masculinity—although it was one he found to be “exhausting” (Jourian 2017, 132). These examples indicate that cultural constructions of acceptable masculinity for different racial groups may constrain the options available to trans men of color when compared to White standards.

Being trans and a man

Growing up as trans can take many different paths. Some know from a very young age that are not being seen as the correct gender. For others, it takes decades to come to this realization. For those who exhibited cross-gender behavior at a young age many of them adopted masculine expressions and interests. As one trans man stated “When I was younger I embraced all the [masculine] stereotypes just so I could be seen.” For him, the disconnect between how others saw him and how he felt himself to be was in such opposition to each other that he felt he had to adopt hypermasculinity in order to overcome the assumptions people made based on his female body.

Many trans men take this approach during childhood and some may never move out of stereotypical and often misogynistic behaviors. Cultural tendencies to assume that sex equates with gender meant they had to enact masculinity in ways that would minimize those assumptions and make themselves more legible. Had they inhabited male bodies they would not have been forced to perform such hypermasculinity to ensure others were seeing their masculinity. Men who exercise various forms of

hypermasculinity may opt to remain stealth once they have transitioned, although further study into this subpopulation is needed to address such an assertion.

For other trans men, such as those involved in this project, once they began passing as men rather than women, their relationship to femininity changed. When viewed as women they had consciously and unconsciously resisted feminine aspects about themselves because it only served to reinforce society reading them as female. Many of the trans men I spoke with were only embracing their femininity now that they looked like men and no longer had to fight to be seen. Dozier (2005, 305) also noted this change, stating that once trans men were “socially recognized as men, they tended to be more comfortable expressing a variety of behaviors and engaging in stereotypical feminine activities, such as sewing or wearing nail polish.” Once trans men were seen as men, they felt they could finally relax their masculine performances and embrace some degree of femininity they had held at bay when people perceived them to be women.

For the trans men who had this experience they felt that embracing these feminine characteristics allowed them to be a more authentic, whole, and happier person, but it was something they could only own once they were being read as male. Being seen as a man was crucial to their ability to embrace any feminine aspect of themselves. This ability to embrace one’s feminine inclinations also provided another perspective to draw from as they developed their masculinity from their now visibly male body. For those who were not yet being read as men, they struggled to express femininity because it inhibited others from viewing them as men.

In my own experience, this is also true but not something that I became conscious of until after talking with other trans men. During my own transition period, I recall being asked by a friend what kind of man I was going to be. At the time, I thought this was a ridiculous question because in my experience I had been masculine all of my life. I thought I would just be me—only with a different appearance—because I had come to frame my previous experience as trying to pass as a woman. Every time I had attempted to align my behavior, preferences, or attire with my female body it was a complete failure as it made my skin crawl, my brain hurt, and felt completely unnatural. Anything feminine, when applied to me, made me extremely uncomfortable and was not a position I could hold for any length of time or with any conviction. Wearing feminine clothing caused me great stress because I knew I did not fit into societal feminine ideals, and I felt as if I did not have an ounce of female in me. The discomfort I felt and the masculinity I embodied as a woman affected the way I functioned and occupied space in a sexist world as a masculine woman. From an internal standpoint, it was a constant painful discrepancy that I was measured against feminine standards rather than masculine standards. Moreover, I did not have the language to describe this feeling—I did not encounter the term transgender until I was 39 and transitioned when I was 40 years old.

Once I transitioned and people read me as male, I assumed I did not need to “decide” what sort of man I was going to become; I simply had to stop attempting to be female. In short, I thought I already was the man I was going to become and there were no decisions to be made. As I progressed in my transition though, I realized there was a lot I did not know about being a man. Perhaps more accurately, I was not

prepared for the difference in expectations and assumptions others place on you when they categorize you as a man. I realized that I would indeed have to decide what kind of man I was going to become precisely because I was not solely a man. As I was seen more and more as a cisgender man I became increasingly uncomfortable with what cisgender manhood signified. I found myself not just needing to learn how to be a man but needing to find a different type of masculinity capable of including my past experiences as a girl/woman and my feminist values and practices.

As a visible trans man, I now have more space and confidence to embody feminine practices and ideals. I would personally rather face the critique of not being a “real” man than letting others assume I am just one of the guys. For example, when I was living as a female one of my hobbies was cross-stitching. It was not something I was ashamed of, but it was a secret I did not share with others because I knew it would reflect poorly on the masculine woman I was at the time. My current hobby is knitting. In my early transition I would have been very reluctant to knit in public because I had little confidence in establishing myself as a man. As it became clear that others saw me as a man, I found I liked to knit in public because it disrupts the notion that masculinity cannot include knitting or other purportedly feminine hobbies. While it may not mark me as trans, it at least serves as a way to mark my masculinity outside of hegemonic norms.

Becoming a trans man

Having established that trans men are men, I have also argued that they are men who have the opportunity to develop a masculinity very different from hegemonic norms specifically because of their experience of living as women. Tony, a young white

trans man in college who comes from a wealthy, privileged (his words) family experienced this sort of development as he grew into his trans masculine identity. His story is illustrative of what it means to be outside of the norms expected for men and masculinity, and to become a man while having the ability to see the articulation of gender more clearly. He had completed top surgery, was taking testosterone, and always passed unquestionably as a man.

In his video on being one of the guys, Tony stands in his bedroom after he just got back from playing rugby. He is still wearing his muddy t-shirt and shows viewers his taped ankle saying he is coming to us complete with injuries. We can see some of his messy room behind him where there is a removable pull-up bar for door jams on the floor next to his rugby cleats to one side of the door, and on the other side we see his bed and nightstand which is cluttered with Kleenex, a hat, deodorant, pens and papers. On the floor are dirty clothes thrown in a corner along with sports bags. Tony clearly takes the time to edit his videos as we can hear and see jump cuts where he has edited something out and a new thought starts. In this video we see his light and sparse mustache and chinstrap beard. In describing what it meant for him to be a man he stated:

I am not genderqueer or gender fluid, I am not one of those people who doesn't identify as trans because I am a trans man. Clearly defined, I am trans, I am a man, and because of this I always feel like a male and I always feel like a man. I never question whether I am a man or not. I know I am. Now I am about to contradict myself: As someone who always knows I am a male, who never questions it, who never feels less manly or

male, there are tons of times when I don't feel like a man. I mean I don't feel like one of the men. As a trans man...that is one of the shittiest feelings, to feel entirely like a man but at the same time not feel like one of the men.

For Tony, this problem had both internal and external aspects to it. First, he passes as a cisgender man and is not marked with any visible difference so cisgender men and people expect him to be well-versed in heteronormative masculinity. However, Tony, like many other trans men included in this project, was not well-versed in male culture and did not feel entirely comfortable in the company of men, especially when in homosocial groups. Trans men who felt similar, while acutely aware that they did not feel like 'one of the guys,' also did not always *want* to feel like one of the guys. Sometimes they wanted to be more than a man, different than a man, or something other than a man. They needed a way to separate themselves from cisgender hegemonic masculinity.

In a vlog where Tony got off topic and started talking about being stealth, viewers see him wearing an unbuttoned shirt with the tails tied at the bottom so they can see his toned chest and abs. He is standing in the corner of a room with a dark blue wall and a large bulletin board behind him covered with papers and pictures layered one upon another. On one side of him we can see a computer monitor on a small desk. As usual he talks rapidly, is bursting with energy, and gestures a lot. Tony explains that when he started college, he initially did not tell anyone he was trans and enjoyed being stealth, stating "it was great at first and I got invited to everything and

made lots of friends.” However, it only took a short period of time before he realized he no longer wanted to be seen as just a man:

I also wanted people to know [that I was transgender] and it was hard to go through testosterone changes and not have anyone to talk to about them. I started telling some people but it would also make me feel miserable. I wouldn't want to talk to them anymore, I didn't want to be around someone who knew that about me. Eventually I was just paranoid and on edge... My friends were getting closer, I wanted them to know and I wanted to be an activist. I used to say I was just like every other guy, but I really am different than most people and I kind of want to embrace that now. Where I used to want to shove it away and hide it, now I am proud of it.

For Tony, being a man but not feeling like one of them revolved around knowing he was different from other men based on his experiences. This in turn, affected his ability and desire to embody masculinity in the same way cisgender men did. He was very clear that he initially did want to embody normative masculinity and simply be seen as a cisgender man. He worried that people would not view him as a man if they knew he was trans. He had not been socialized as a man, which meant he did not have a shared history with cisgender men. However, he recognized that this was not sustainable, comfortable, or affirming for him because it meant he had to hide parts of his history and could not be authentic to his experience of living in two worlds. As he progressed in his transition and grew into his trans masculine identity he realized that it

was the fact that he had a different experience that allowed him to explore embodying a different type of masculinity.

For a long time, Tony stated he felt as though he “was a spy and was somewhere he wasn’t supposed to be and that people could see that.” He reflected that because he had not been socialized as a man, he did not know the norms of things such as handshakes, physical distance, or how men talked, forcing him to constantly assess his behavior. In college, he played rugby for the first time on an all-male team and was hyperaware of the differences between himself and his teammates. Not only did he constantly assess and compare his physical abilities to the other men, but he was also constantly assessing his interactions with them. He worried if he was saying the right things in the right tone at the right times. His experiences around the hypermasculinity associated with contact sports such as rugby, made him feel as if such masculinity held little room for non-normative masculinity, let alone his transness. Once he came out as trans he could let go of the constant self-assessment and comparison. He was no longer constrained by the expectations of cisgender heteronormative masculinity.

Trans men are highly cognizant that their masculinity may differ from cisgender masculinities and how their upbringing does not align with other men. Scout spoke about this: “I think in a lot of ways I didn’t know my own masculinity until I saw it, and for me that was looking at trans masculine genderqueer folks. The way masculinity had been reflected to me before was that there were certain ways to be a man and if I wasn’t any of those then I wasn’t a man.” Here, Scout illustrates how trans masculinity, as a position outside of normative masculinity, allows greater freedom in creating

something different. Had Scout been born a male and been socialized as a male, he would probably have adopted a masculinity that looked very similar to his father's or brother's masculinity, which Scout considered traditional and normative. He would most likely have done so without question, having no other experiences to draw on. However, because that was not his experience, he was able to exercise greater agency over his masculinity and what sort of man he would become. Had Scout not been exposed to genderqueer masculinities he might not have decided to transition, again having no other models to draw on. Deciding to become a man (rather than remaining genderqueer or lesbian as he had previously identified), he had the opportunity to step back and examine masculinity. Experiencing a delay in attaining maleness in combination with a female history, allows trans men to adopt something outside of the norm that is a more comprehensive reflection of who they are and have been.

Normative masculinity and trans masculinity

It was often challenging for the trans men here to articulate being masculine *and* trans masculine, and the differences between the two. The unwritten blueprint for being a trans man involves transitioning via HRT and top surgery, but this generation of trans men are leading the way for a different path through the use of YouTube channels to discuss what trans and trans masculinity can be; many specifically argued that there is no one way to be trans.²² This generation has begun these conversations to fill the void they felt in not having access to such resources. It is the tension between

²² Generation does not refer to age in this instance but to trans men who have transitioned within the last 25 years who are of various ages. Cohort might be a better term but I am referencing the larger population of men beyond those involved in this project.

being a man and being a trans man that instigates much of the conversation. Ian, a 22-year-old, white, Scottish trans man in his first year of transition—who was recording outside in the evening while sitting on the steps to his front door—described himself in this way:

I identify as a masculine-ish type person, as a trans man, a trans dude, but I also identify as masculine, although I am not very traditionally masculine. While some guys talk about textbook definitions of masculinity and the gender roles we have associated with being masculine, I really don't fit into any of these at all. I am not very tough, I am not very strong, I am just not very manly and I don't really want to be, but I don't think that means I can't be masculine. I think that we need to redefine masculinity so that it can encompass more people.

This echoes many of the other trans men I interviewed. They felt the definition of masculinity needed to be expanded, as well as the rules around what constitutes normative masculinity. These trans men are certain of their own maleness and masculinity but are also acutely aware that their maleness and masculinity may unapologetically depart from norms.

Cal, a white, Canadian trans man, is a leader in the trans community and has spent 10 years on YouTube discussing trans masculine experiences, issues, and viewpoints. Cal has become an internet personality, with thousands of followers and has made thousands of videos about trans issues, his own perceptions as a trans man, and helping to expand perspectives on what it means to be trans. He has helped recruit dozens of men to participate on his channel over the years and does public

speaking on various trans subjects. Across his years of documentation on the channel, viewers watch him grow from a young undergrad student, to a grad student, to a post-graduate. In his thoughts about trans masculinity and what it afforded him, Cal was specific:

I came across the term 'trans masculinity'...and really enjoyed that term because in a lot of ways, it is not just, you know, it's not really just transgender masculinity, like people that aren't assigned male at birth...but it is also transforming masculinity. Like having all sorts of people from all different life experiences and from all different gender identities taking on this term...and redefining for themselves and being able to say this is me, I am masculine, this is me. I don't need to fall into any sort of stereotyped gender category or fill any gender roles to fit that identity and I think that is really a powerful term.

Cal went on to state: "I think the words masculinity and femininity are really useful for a lot of people to identify with, but they can be extremely limiting or even scary if we can't redefine them and look at them through another lens other than what patriarchal society has deemed appropriate for either of these identifying terms."

Similar to many other trans men included in this study, Cal described how transness formed his masculinity in comparison to normative masculinity, often leading to defining one's masculinity in contrast to, and in contention with, heteronormative masculinity. It is this desire to redefine and expand masculinity that makes the term and category of trans masculinity resonate with so many trans men. The term is a more inclusive and accurate description of their positionality, their experience, and perhaps

most importantly, because it empowers them to be both male and something more than, or other than, male.

Trans masculinity allows them to own and take pride in holding both femininity and masculinity as part of their male identities. Sean, an African American trans man stated:

I have the best of both worlds. Even though I wasn't a feminine woman, I was a strong Black, independent woman, and I was proud of that and now, living as a black man, I'm even prouder because I understand that I don't need to fit in this stereotypical 'box' of what black men should act like. I don't need to be over-aggressive to get my point across or put on this macho façade. I can be authentic. So, for me, my masculinity and femininity are the same—they co-exist—giving me a balance within myself that I'm proud of. I'm a gentle soul who takes no shit, LOL (M. Brown 2016, 70).

As Sean noted, he came to a point where he knew he does not need to conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity, especially around being hypermasculine. Many trans men are able to see that such hypermasculinity in cisgender men may also be a façade. Because trans men were not raised and indoctrinated as men, they are afforded a certain perspective not easily attained by cisgender men around the rules, expectations, and norms of hegemonic masculinity. As I noted in my field notes on this subject, "once you break the rules [around gender], it is much easier to see how foolish the rules are in the first place—it allows you to question why they are even rules. It also

allows you to keep breaking the rules because nothing happened—the world didn't end—when you did it the first time.”

The concept of breaking rules and not being beholden to normative expectations is one that has been developed in lesbian and gay literature that has been termed “normative creativity” (L. Brown, 1989, 452). Because there are no rules for homosexual relationships, gays and lesbians are free to create their own. The same is true for trans people. They can follow the established rules of gender or they can invent new ways of conceiving and enacting gender—something younger trans people are increasingly choosing to do. Obviously not every trans person identifies as trans rather than, or in addition to, man. Those who decide to go stealth and never reveal their history of being raised as women, may feel hegemonic constructions of gender are comfortable for them. For those who do identify as trans in addition to man, it has resulted in the establishment of a different type of masculinity and identity.

Trans masculinity and the LGBTQ community

The breaking of gender norms, roles, and expectations is not always an intentional or conscious undertaking by trans people. It is often the result of having an expanded set of gendered experiences, of enacting masculinity in a different way. Cisgender people often see trans people as unusually gendered or transgressive because of the narrowness of cultural gendered expectations. For example, trans men, particularly those who described their masculinity as sensitive, caring, or gentle, often get perceived as gay even when they are in a relationship with women. In a vlog about masculinity Cal appears to us from his bedroom where he sits in his swivel desk chair turning back and forth as he talks to the camera. Shooting the video so viewers can

only see his head and upper torso, he wears a plain t-shirt and his hair was dyed blue at the time. Regarding his own masculinity he stated:

People think I am slightly more effeminate anyways...I am pretty flamboyant, I talk with my hands a lot, I can have a very expressive voice, I like wearing tight clothing, I like...a lot of gay things, I am...read as a gay man very often and I am perfectly okay with that and just because I enact those traits doesn't mean that I am not masculine or that I can't be masculine or that I can't identify as masculine, because there are times in my life when I do identify as effeminate and that is just as much a part of my identity as when I identify as masculine.

Cal is aware his feminine characteristics and gendered behavior, coming from a male body, is reflecting on his masculinity, which in turn, affects how his sexuality is read. Effeminate masculinity, in U.S. culture, is typically used as evidence of male homosexuality (Pascoe 2007). Cal is not attracted to men and does not identify as gay, but he is untroubled to be read as gay. Unlike many cisgender men he does not feel his masculinity is being questioned or threatened by this misreading. Tony felt very similar to Cal, in that he does not feel his masculinity is any less masculine by being read as a feminine masculinity. Tony stated "I do hold myself in feminine ways or have some feminine mannerisms but I am the boss of my own gender identity."

In one of our interviews occurring in my office at work, Scout talked openly about his sexuality. He has had similar experiences of being read as a gay man and also attributes it to his trans masculinity. He added, "straight masculinity really scares me." This is an interesting statement as Scout is attracted to women which—based on

a system of sexuality linked to sexual object choice—should categorize him as straight (and this aspect of trans identity will be explored further in chapter 5). So why does straight masculinity not fit and instead scare him? One of the reasons he gave is that he has always been in the LGBTQ community. All of his identities (lesbian, genderqueer and trans) have placed him in the LGBTQ community and he felt most comfortable there. For Scout, the queer community allowed him to explore femininities and masculinities that did not fall into the norms. We had several conversations about this topic, and one nice fall day while we sat drinking coffee on a rooftop terrace, he shared the following:

I have talked with several of my trans guy friends—who either identify as gay or are with cis men or are with other trans guys. And one thing that I always identify within their stories—because many of them were out as lesbians before transitioning...the lesbian identity allows for a certain amount of gender fluidity that a straight identity does not. And I think that in my story...me coming out first with sexual identities was always about my gender identity and it was always about looking for that extra inch to be able to move within gender boundaries.

Here we see how experiences of being gay or lesbian plays into queer constructions of gender in addition to sexual orientations. For Scout, looking back on this period in his life, he sees those identities as ones that allowed him greater flexibility in expressing his non-normative masculine gender. It was less about sexuality for him than it was about gender.

Scout also described his early childhood as not reflective of the typical trans story. When I first met Scout, prior to his physical transition, he appeared very masculine with a shortly cropped head of black hair, a flat chest because he wore a binder, and straight through the waist and hips. His voice was deep for a woman, he wore masculine clothing and was often read and categorized as a boy (he looked very young) or butch lesbian. But this had not always been his way of expressing gender. In another conversation in my office, where I sat in my desk chair and he sat on the other side in one of the utilitarian office chairs, we put our feet up on the desk and talked about coming to consciousness of being trans. He said:

When I think about being really young, like three or four—I know a lot of trans people describe this ‘knowing’ but that was never me—ever. I wore dresses, my favorite color was pink, I played with dolls in the basement for hours—I was really happy to do it. I think it wasn’t until late elementary school when I started wearing more boys’ clothes and those kinds of things, and it was never about needing to be masculine, it was about needing to feel comfortable.

This is not the classic story we are told about trans people and their experience of childhood. Typically, childhood experiences of trans men are depicted with them being repelled from anything that might associate them with femininity such as dresses, dolls, or playing the role of mother during make-believe games (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Research suggests there is no single-story for trans-childhoods, and that much of the commonality in the popular “born in the wrong body” narrative

was likely shaped by the APA diagnostics that were the gateway to desired medical interventions (Bettcher 2014, Ophelian 2009, Serano 2007),

Trans masculinity as feminism

Another aspect of being a trans man, and one that has had a significant impact for many of the men in this research project, is identifying as a feminist. For some trans men, this was part of their experience prior to identifying as trans or transitioning. For other trans men however, it was an aspect of their identity they did not develop until after they transitioned, began experiencing male privilege, and could see the inequality of gendered interactions more readily. Beyond personal feminist values and practices, trans men are also contributing to feminism as a whole. As Michael Brown (2016, 33) states “Not all trans men identify as transmasculine, and those who do may not agree on levels or types of masculinity. What is an undisputed fact, however, is that trans men are redefining what it is to be masculine. In doing so, they are also confronting and aiding in the role of feminism in society.”

Transitioning from being seen as a woman to being seen as a man allows, and sometimes forces, a person to recognize how gender is operating around them in a patriarchal heteronormative society. Being treated and interacting with others as a woman is usually very different from being treated and interacting with others as a man. It is not always easy to see the differences when you live in only one gender. From a cisgender point of view, understanding gender and the ways we treat people because of their gender, can be difficult due to the limiting effects of having a single perspective. I use an analogy of being a person at the end of a single file line of people and trying to see the person at the other end of the line. From that vantage point one

can only see fragments of what a person looks like, how they act, or how they are being treated by others. One can only lean over so far while your feet remain stuck on the normative gender line between men and women. However, stepping off the line and moving to a different position (as illustrated in the model on transgender positionality from the beginning of the chapter) allows one to see normative gender more clearly and broadly. Stepping outside of normative gender constructions allows one to see the full range of gender expression, gender identities, and, to a much greater extent, how gender is operating in our society. Experiencing interactions as a man, allows you to compare those with how you were treated as a woman. Being treated as a man also allows you to see the ways you don't fit manhood or don't want to fit.

Along with attaining a new perspective, many trans men also suddenly gained privileges simply because they were being seen as a man—a jarring experience for most of them. The trans men I worked with described changes such as “people suddenly listened to me,” “people looked to me as if I was an expert,” or “now that my voice is deeper it comes across as more authoritative.” For many trans men, this also means contending with those privileges. Drew, a college student in the mid-west who appeared regularly for a number of months on a trans channel, stated: “I think we need to make an effort to analyze the privilege we are given and to not dominate conversations...not that we don't have anything to say but I think it is really easy for men to dominate conversations.” Joe, also a college student from the mid-west and majoring in gender studies, held a similar belief: “Ever since I came out as trans I have taken care to make sure I am aware of the space I am given access to and aware of

the privilege that I might gain—both contextual privilege and passing privilege.” Finally, Cal echoed a similar stance, stating “I think as trans guys we are in a very unique situation in that we should take more advantage of the position we now hold—in making all spaces somewhat safer and more welcoming for all sorts of identities and for female voices.”

The similarity between these men’s statements arises from their tangible experience of being afforded male privilege when, as one trans man put it, “fifteen minutes ago I was viewed as a woman,” and speaks to the pervasiveness of male privilege in our culture. The fact that these men are not only aware of their newfound privilege, but that they want to ensure their voices are not heard more often, or with more authority than women are afforded, is an example of how trans men are enacting feminist values. As an aside, ensuring women are afforded primary space to speak out by trans men, may mean that trans men are remaining voiceless. When these men were women they were not afforded voice and authority and now that they are men they are purposefully giving up voice and authority to ensure women’s voices are heard.

Many trans men try to interrupt (or hope to once they are read as men) sexist comments—especially when they are in male homosocial spaces. As Schilt (2010) noted in her work on trans men in the workplace, many trans men are shocked to hear how cisgender men talk about and treat women when among other men. Schilt (2010) noted that cisgender men talk about women in sexually explicit ways, belittle women’s intelligence, criticize their emotionality, and speak about them in degrading ways. As one trans man noted “I find that most men don’t share my views about how women

should be respected” (M. Brown 2016, 135). Trans men who found themselves in these situations had to make choices about whether or not to speak out and interrupt those sexist conversations. Some trans men are comfortable doing so. However, some trans men are worried that if they do speak up their trans-ness might be exposed and they won't be viewed as men (Schilt 2010).

Fear and safety concerns often affect trans men's ability to openly inhabit alternative masculinities. As Green (2005, 297) noted, “trans men...were quite conscious of the ways in which masculinity is interpreted as power, of the ways it confers privilege, but also of the ways masculinity places them at risk. Part of that risk is the violence that men visit on other men, but part of it is the fear of being persecuted as trans men too.” Trans men are constantly vigilant, often hypervigilant, about the types of masculinity being expressed around them in order to remain safe. Identifying and living as trans is a constant series of negotiations around being able to express one's trans-ness. Yet, it is through these constant negotiations that trans people become aware of gendered norms and gender operations that cisgender people tend not to see.

For those who were feminists before transition, they find their feminism is interpreted differently now that they are viewed as men. Feminist views coming from a male body are received differently than when they were seen as women. If a person does not know the man purporting those feminist views is trans, then those values are called into question and criticized as ‘what could a man know about a woman's experience?’ However, knowing a man is trans, affords them greater authenticity as feminists precisely because they have experienced what it is like to live as a woman.

But trans masculine feminists can sometimes find themselves at odds with both cisgender men and women as they may not be accepted as “one of the guys” (Schilt 2010) when among men, and may not be accepted as a feminist because he is now a man (Feder and Hollar 2006, Nataf 1996).²³

The act of transitioning and passing forces one to notice the stark differences between being treated as a man or a woman. Many trans men are taken aback when they are suddenly being treated differently because people view them as men. For some, this meant that they came to feminism after they began passing, specifically because those differences were now more visible to them. Being able to pass as cisgender allows trans men to see how the articulation of gender works because they are constantly aware—usually hyperaware—of how they would be treated differently if they were still being seen as women. It is probably not surprising that trans men are creating and expanding our notions of masculinity. How could being raised as a girl in a patriarchal society and being treated as a woman in a misogynistic culture not result in a different experience of maleness and masculinity than cisgender men? We cannot yet know what long term effects or changes transgender people will have on gender writ large, as the community and movement is still in its infancy. However, we can see that the presence of trans people and the issues they face is forcing society to

²³ Here, I am pointing to the tension that exists for certain feminists, such as Raymond (1994), who deny trans people’s ability to embody a different gender. There has also been tension between the lesbian community and transgender men as these men are viewed as abandoning the cause while simultaneously gaining the privilege of their oppressor. It is not my intention to imply that only women can be feminists.

reconsider how gender is conceived, embodied, and enacted as press coverage continues to grow at the national and global levels.

Summary

I return to the model of transgender positionality which began this discussion on trans masculinity. The empowerment so many trans men found in visualizing their experience of gender as trans, in addition to and yet separate from man, was perhaps one of the most heartening experiences I had with this research. The model is a visual tool reflecting the practices being undertaken by trans men. It serves as a tool that enables trans people to better see how they are positioning themselves in relation to normative masculinity while taking nothing away from their form of masculinity. In a transphobic world where much of trans people's time and energy is spent on dealing with harassment and overcoming structural discrimination, it is important to see what is good and unique about being trans, that their positionality as trans is valid. The model also serves as a tool for cisgender people to see new constructions of gender.

Trans men have borne sexist discrimination when they were perceived as women and now experience discrimination and harassment because they are trans. Both sets of experience play into why they are creating a different type of masculinity. By presenting this model to the trans people I worked with and at trans conferences, it allowed them to see a visual representation of their gender as they are living it. It was also a moment of empowerment for them (and for myself)—and in a world where they face innumerable challenges to surviving on a day-to-day basis—it was a reminder that they are doing something important for the understanding of gender and gendered practices in our society. I believe it also gave them a sense of solidarity and community

through seeing other trans men position themselves in similar ways. From the excitement of trans men who spoke to me about the power of this model for framing their identities and using it to educate others about trans identities, I believe it is one of the crucial results to come out of this research.

Being transgender forces one to assess and evaluate the ways they express and enact their gender in comparison to dominant cultural practices around femininity and masculinity. For the majority of trans men involved in this research, they did not want to inhabit those hegemonic norms. Rather, they are constructing their own form of masculinity. As Meredith Talusan (2016) stated, “for me, the power of being transgender lies not in the idea that I was always meant to be like everyone else, but precisely the ways in which I will never be like other people.” For the trans people who do not want to assimilate into heteronormative genders, they are redefining what it means to be a man or a woman, and creating new genders unable to be contained by older, binary constructions of gender.

Trans masculinity often involves rejecting stereotypes of masculinities, and for many, openly identifying as trans. Many cisgender friends and family found this idea of wanting to be seen as trans, to be an odd position for trans men to take. As some stated, “why transition if you don’t want to be seen as just a man?” For trans men, it is not that they do not want to be seen as men, rather it is that they do not want to be seen and treated as if they are cisgender men.

CHAPTER 4

TRANS MASCULINE EMBODIMENT

“All of this gender theory crap is not just theory, it’s people’s lives. It’s not just a couple of academics or something that feminists talk about to try to disseminate the patriarchy...it’s our flesh and our blood and our pain.”

Enough Man (Woodward 2005)

“You’re going to butcher your body, if you decide to do this, you will be dead to me. If people ask me about you, I will tell them you’re dead.”

Father of a trans man (Murray, Reiger and Byrne, 2015)

“He read me as this adult male and potential predator and it broke my heart.”

Jackson (M. Brown 2016,141)

Csordas (1993, 135) stated “embodied experience is the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world.” Trans people’s embodiment is fundamentally different from cisgender embodiment and this chapter explores the implications of trans embodiment. Trans men are usually hyperaware of their embodiment because it does not conform to societal expectations based on sex and gender. Whether you are spit on and called a “fucking tranny” because your body does not look like a man’s, assaulted because your body doesn’t have a penis, or denied medical treatment because you are a man with a uterus, there are physical

consequences to living in a trans body (Davis 2001, Ravishankar 2013). Bodies, especially genitals and secondary sex characteristics, are imbued with meaning and alterations to them creates new meaning (Douglas 1966, Edelman and Zimman 2014, Laqueur 1990, Meyerowitz 2003, K. Young 1989, Zimman 2014). The re-embodiment that transsexual men experience through transitioning from female to male creates a unique history of physical and emotional knowledge, that I refer to as trans masculine embodiment.

Anthropology of the body starts from an understanding that our physical body is a social and cultural phenomenon rather than simply a facet of nature (Douglas 1966, Gallagher and Laqueur 1987, vii; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 7). Trans masculine bodies, with or without the use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or gender confirmation surgery (GCS), provide a vehicle for examining cultural, as well as agentive, constructions of the body. In this chapter I will follow previous anthropological approaches to the body and embodiment, along three structural levels: as artifact, as social body, and disciplining of the body (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 7-8, Soukop and Dvorakova 2016, 518).

In examining these aspects of the body, I will be using the paradigm of embodiment which recognizes that we “think and act through our corporeal selves (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1991, 409). Embodiment disrupts the Cartesian notion that the body and mind are separate entities, as well as foregrounding both experience and subjectivity (Csordas 1999, 148). Strathern and Stewart (2011, 393) noted that “embodiment does not simply refer to the body as a bounded entity but rather to the body, and the person, in their surrounding environment,” a particularly useful point

when talking about trans people and the interpersonal environments which they affect, and in turn affect them, through their transition. The emphasis on subjectivity and experience also allows for a theoretical approach directly developed from transgender people themselves.

To understand trans embodiment I will first focus on the body as artifact, explaining what the trans body is (or can be). I will detail how it is altered, what is physically gained, lost and emotional changes that might occur through transition. Following Bordo's (1999, 183) suggestion that "we need to get down and dirty with the body on the level of its practices," I will also discuss how these changes to the body affect everyday practices.

Next, I will explore the social body. As initially developed by Mary Douglas (1966, 1982), this approach noted that the body was representational of the cultural meanings applied to nature, or in other words culture is written on the body. Douglas (1995, 69) also noted that the physical experience of bodies is always constrained by social categories through which they are known. Trans men, who alter their bodies reposition the social category by which they are understood and through which they experience the world (Cromwell 1999, 32; Prosser 1998). These bodies usually have a mixture of male and female sex characteristics, a circumstance some trans men label as a hybrid body, which I use throughout this work. Cultural practices, especially related to social positions such as race, class or sexuality, also have material effects on the body and how bodies are conceived (Adair 2002, Collins 2005). I will explore the constraints put on the trans body through social understandings and meanings we

apply to bodies in U.S. culture. As Soukup and Dvorakova (2016, 518) state the body is “suspended in a web of meanings woven by people.”

Lastly, disciplining of the body explores how the body is regulated, surveilled and controlled, as applied to both individuals and populations (Foucault 1988, 1995; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 8). Simultaneously, disciplining of the trans body also contributes to the cultivation of the trans self (Foucault 1988, 1995). As Shield stated “one’s identity is not just about his or her own self-identification but is also about the intersecting larger social structures and the power differentials that are associated with belonging to a certain group or groups,” and in this case transgender bodies in particular, intersect with a number of structures with power differentials that affect their identities (in Nagoshi and Brzuzy 2010, 433). The trans body is highly regulated, tightly controlled, and heavily policed by the state and medical institutions (Meyerowitz 2002, Stryker 2008). These forms of power and control contribute to trans individuals reinforcing these forms of discipline themselves, which can further their subjugated position (Foucault 1980, Pylypa 1998). The permanent changes trans people make to their bodies are regulated by numerous gatekeeping practices controlled by doctors, therapists, and the state. Over time these institutions have outlawed cross-gendered expression (such as clothing), prevented doctors from treating transgender individuals, deemed being transgender a mental illness, institutionalizing those who did not conform to gender norms and required trans people to go through an inordinate number of steps to receive care (Meyerowitz 2002, Stryker 2008). These practices limit legal rights to full personhood.

In a society that uses cisgender norms to understand bodies, living in a trans body requires constant negotiation and alterations of meanings. But trans bodies are also affecting cultural understandings of how sex and gender are constructed in our society. Inhabiting a trans body, and experiencing the altered meanings attached to that body, are part of what separates transgender identities from binary identities (Aboim 2016, Connell 2001, 2012, Green 2005, Prosser 1998, Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy 2014, Rubin 2003). This shift in meaning is a central factor to the separation of trans masculinity from hegemonic masculinity (Whittle in Self and Gamble 2000, 93). These approaches allow an understanding of the features of the trans body, how bodily practices are altered with physical change and the perceptual changes afforded to trans men—all of which make up trans embodiment.

Framing the body

Anthropologists have a long tradition of studying the periphery in order to further understand the center (Appadurai 1986). The trans masculine body lies on the periphery of Western cultural norms regarding what male bodies are because they are not born with male genitalia and do not naturally develop male secondary sex characteristics. The transsexual male body is re-created in a literal sense through physical transition via testosterone and/or surgery, as well as non-physical means. These reconfigurations, however, do not result in a normatively sexed body—or one that is cissexual male. Instead, it results in a body that looks and often sounds male, but has “female” genitalia. It is a body that carries female history, unconsciously adopted female bodily practices and may perform masculinity in non-traditional ways (Cotton

2016). Recognizing trans physicality and embodiment requires a reconsideration or expansion of the culturally constructed categories of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Western cultural systems have relied on a binary model of physical sex characteristics, to assign bodies to male and female categories and hence men and women (Butler 1990, Fausto-Sterling 2000, Meyerowitz 2003). Only within the last 20 years has there been a shift to recognize bodily configurations on a spectrum that includes intersex bodies. The spectrum model more accurately depicts the range of natural variation in sex characteristics—a phenomenon that doctors have historically been intervening in through surgery to artificially enforce a binary sex model (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2012). Trans men, however, are creating new body types that have hybrid mixtures of female and male primary and secondary sex characteristics. Not only do trans masculine bodies contribute to a trans masculinity but they are expanding cultural understandings of sexed bodies. The following section will detail the physical changes that result from permanent transition related to HRT and GCS, as well as non-permanent transition practices such as binding or packing. All of the trans men in this project had undergone some form of transition (medically or non-medically).

Body as Artifact

Not all transgender men make alterations to their body—whether permanently through hormone replacement therapy (HRT), gender confirmation surgery (GCS) or less permanently through chest binding (compressing breasts to create a flatter chest), packing (wearing a prosthetic penis), or clothing. From a trans theoretical perspective any physical body, regardless of genitalia or secondary sex characteristics, can be a

man, woman or something in between or apart from based solely on how an individual identifies (Chodorow 1995, 517; Meyerowitz 2002; Stryker 2008). It is a matter of how one feels or identifies internally. Men who choose not to transition with HRT and/or GCS, may face greater challenge in being recognized as men in their day to day interactions because they may inhabit what looks like a female body and our Western cultural habitus categorizes bodily characteristics according to gender.²⁴ The body they inhabit, however, makes them no less men.

Many trans men use binders to give their chests a more male appearance and relieve some of the dysphoria they feel about their bodies. Binders are specially made of dense, minimally stretchy material in a tank top style garment. They are extremely uncomfortable to wear as they restrict breathing, compress the rib cage and the spine, and have been known to cause cracked ribs. Binders are also constant reminders that one has breasts—a cultural symbol of womanhood in our society which therefore, are a source of frustration and apprehension of again being misinterpreted as a woman. All of the trans men in this project had experienced varying degrees of anxiety around their masculinity, maleness, and how other people perceived them when not wearing a binder in public. When I saw Jeff one day, he said, “I guess I’m not trans today.” Without prompting, he added that he was not wearing his binder that day. Although it was said in jest, it communicated the degree of frustration he had with his breasts, his binder, and having a body that was at odds with how others saw him. It also is

²⁴ It should be noted that *habitus* is formed through racial identities, communities, and practices. See Bonilla-Silva, Goar and Embrick (2006), Horvat (1999), and Sallaz (2010) for examples.

important to note that he did not say “I guess I’m not a man today.” The referencing of trans over man highlights the role of the binder and bodily transformation to his transness.

In other instances, trans men are openly displaying the hybridity of their bodies—as men with breasts. In 2014, the first trans men’s bodybuilding contest was held in Atlanta, Georgia. More than one of the bodybuilders competed without having had top-surgery (Figure 2) (K. Murray 2015). By defying the notion that men cannot have breasts—as well as the notion that if you have breasts they need to be covered—these men are creating new definitions of what male bodies are. Even for the men who had completed top surgery, showing their trans bodies was revolutionary. As Neo Sandja, the event founder, stated about the competitors: “The people who show up to this competition have a statement: I don’t care what the world defines as a man or a ‘real’ man. I come here to show that I’m proud to be trans and I’m proud of my scars. I don’t want to hide them” (Bella 2015).²⁵

Another bodily practice undertaken by some trans men is wearing a prosthetic penis, known as a “packer.” These are molded from a cisgender penis and testes and create a realistic bulge which may facilitate a male appearance. For some men, wearing a packer enhances their sense of maleness and relieves dysphoria around not having a normative penis. Some choose to wear it all of the time and others wear one only in certain instances, such as at work or for job interviews, in order to ensure

²⁵ Contestants were judged based on three different weight classes: “Whether you’re on hormone replacement therapy or not, or pre-op or not, all weight classes will be judged equally” on mass, definition, and stage presence (TransFitCon 2017).

normative masculine contours. Sometimes it is worn “to feel sexy,” when going out to clubs or bars.



Figure 2. Competitors at the first transgender men’s bodybuilding competition. Credit Bryan Meltz for Al Jazeera America.

For the men who do wear a packer consistently, they may develop strong emotional and physical connections to it, feeling as if it is a part of their body and *is* their penis. This was made apparent for me when I needed to purchase a new packer only to find out that the model I used was no longer available making me feel distraught, sad, personally affronted; I felt as if my manhood had been denied. It also prompted me to inform my cisgender male roommate that his privilege allows him to never worry that his dick will go out of style.

This project revealed that relatively few trans men packed on a regular basis, which disrupts the assumption that all trans men want a penis or believe that the penis is symbolic of maleness. Some trans men see their “female” genitalia as perfectly

sufficient for embodying a male body and therefore, do not feel a need to mimic cisgender normativity or to augment their own genitalia. They understand that genitalia are not inherently tied to manhood or womanhood; rather, culture has constructed those beliefs and assumptions (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2012; Meyerowitz 2002). From this trans theoretical position, there are no female or male genitalia; rather there are genitalia, regardless of shape and size, that belong to men and women. As Chase Strangio (2016) states,

I was assigned female at birth, but I have never had a female body. If it takes longer to convince the world of that than it would to simply say that I was born with a female body but am now male, I am invested in that longer path, because ultimately we will all be better off when we can challenge the idea that our body parts define us.

From an anthropological examination of the body as artifact, all of these practices are undertaken to give the body new meaning for both the individual and those who interact with their body. In our current culture as a whole, there is no category of non-sexed, non-gendered bodies. In other words, cultural practices do not allow for us to look at someone and make no assumption about their sex and gender. My personal experience in the trans community, combined with my participant observation working at a queer resource center, revealed that there is a concerted effort to change the practice of assuming gender based on bodily appearance within these communities. Introductions are made with an inclusive practice of asking what pronouns people use. This allows people to define their gender rather than succumb to assumptions based on body types.

Permanent physical transition through testosterone

The most common method of permanent physical transition for trans men is through taking testosterone. This has numerous masculinization effects on the body (see Table 1). These changes are the most effective means of aligning one's body with phenotypical male traits and therefore, of being perceived as a male by others. Yet for trans men, there are effects from testosterone that cisgender men do not experience and the pace of changes is significantly accelerated compared with cissexual puberty. Increase in energy and sex drive usually begins within days of starting HRT, deepening of the voice generally begins at the three-month mark and peaks at six months to a year, clitoral growth can begin in weeks and reaches its maximum in 2-3 years, increase in body hair can begin within weeks while beard growth slowly begins at six to twelve months and usually takes several years to fully develop (hair growth and baldness is highly dependent on genetics). The rapidity of changes means that trans men can transition from being read as a female to being read as a male within a matter of months.

The experience of going through this second puberty differs from cisgender puberty. Trans men are more prepared for the emotional effects of puberty—having gone through one already—and are generally more educated about the physical changes that will occur. However, trans men have not learned male intragroup knowledge of bodily changes and the social meanings behind the changes, as cisgender boys do. Further, many trans men do not have in-person contact with other trans men to talk with, compare experiences or watch the physical changes. Not

having been socialized as a boy/man while growing up and not always having access to other trans men going through this stage, is an important factor in why YouTube has

Physical Effects of Testosterone	
Thicker and tougher skin	Larger pores, oilier skin, increased acne
Sweat and urine will have a different odor	Decrease of fat in the hips, thighs and breasts (minimally)
Redistribution of fat to abdomen	Face will become squarer and more angular
Increased muscle mass	May gain/lose weight
Thickening of vocal cords, resulting in lower pitch	Increased body hair
Receding hair line, male pattern baldness	Facial hair
Perception of pain and temperature may change	Look significantly younger (often by a decade or more)
Bigger feet	Increased energy
May affect coordination	Changes in brain structure (European Union for Neuropsychopharmacology 2015)
Sexual Effects of Testosterone	
Increase in sex drive	Clitoral growth
Changes in erotic zones	Orgasms will feel different, usually with an increased peak
Sexual orientation may change	Vaginal wall thinning and possible dryness
Increased sexual fluid production	May gain “female” ejaculation
Sexual fluids will taste different	
Emotional effects	
May experience narrower range of emotions	Interactions with people may raise different emotions
Interests, tastes, past-times may change	
Effects of testosterone on reproductive system	
Cessation of menses, although these may return years after beginning testosterone	Possibility of increased risk for cervical cancer
Increased difficulty in producing ova (but can still conceive)	
Risks associated with testosterone	
Heart disease	High blood pressure
Liver disease	High cholesterol
Sleep apnea	Polycythemia (thickening of blood)
Bone density changes	Seizures
Migraines, or worsening of migraines	Type 2 diabetes

Table 1. Physical, sexual, emotional effects of testosterone and risks (Deutsch 2015, European Union for Neuropsychopharmacology 2015).

become the site for trans community (Horak 2015). YouTube allows trans men to share information around physical changes, visually demonstrate those changes, and share practical knowledge (shaving, male bathroom etiquette, “bro” handshakes, etc.).

The degree to which bodily changes are discussed on YouTube revealed a high level of both anxiety and excitement concerning transition related changes. Trans men were excited about some of the changes and considerably worried about others. Just like puberty in cisgender men, there is no way to predict exactly what bodily changes will occur nor any way to avoid unwanted traits. Many of the men related that they delayed starting HRT for years because they were worried about the unknown factor of bodily changes. Some of the concerns were around hair loss, increased anger, and more rarely, increased sex drive. However, all involved in this study who were on testosterone were extremely happy with the results (even those who experienced unwanted effects) and simultaneously questioned why they waited so long.

Although visible changes from taking testosterone usually occur rapidly, those changes often result in being read as a teenage boy regardless of age (even for those who are in their 40s or 50s). As Ian’s experience illustrates, “When I do pass, it is as a 15-year-old male and I don’t think of that as passing.” We see Ian in a video he records while sitting in a chair in his living room with high ceilings. His orange tabby sleeps curled up behind him on a couch next to cream colored walls. Below a decorative molding in a corner nook, there is an easel with painting supplies nearby. He wears a well-worn plain gray t-shirt with his hair slightly tussled. He speaks with a female pitch as his voice has yet to deepen. He went on to explain that he and his girlfriend were

having dinner in a pub one night when the wait staff approached her and said: “It’s 10pm and after that we don’t allow minors in the establishment.” In this moment not only did Ian lose his status as a man by being read as a child, but he also lost his status as a boyfriend. Regardless of the fact his body was being read as a male, this was not a moment of being read in a way that affirmed who he was. As a graduate student, Scout was often read as a middle school student. One 50-year-old trans man began getting carded again when he bought alcohol. In my experience people did not believe me when I told them I had a 20-year career prior to grad school. It is an unusual experience to lose a decade or two (or even three) for 5 to 10 years of your transition.

Permanent physical transition through surgery

There are two main types of gender confirmation surgery trans men undergo.²⁶ The first, and usually the most desired, is “top surgery.” This consists of chest reconstruction with a double mastectomy and nipple grafts (depending on breast size). Statistics show that 36% of trans men have had top surgery and 61% want to have it (James et al., 2016). The second is commonly referred to as bottom surgery. There are two main options for bottom surgery: metoidioplasty (referred to as meta) or phalloplasty. Meta surgery involves separating the enlarged clitoris (due to testosterone) from the suspensory ligament and labia minora creating a micro-penis and may include urethral repositioning which enables trans men to urinate through their phallus. Phalloplasty is the construction of a penis through skin grafts taken from

²⁶ There are other types of surgical operations trans men have such as hysterectomy, vaginectomy, scrotoplasty, body contouring, facial masculinization and others. All of these are rarely undertaken.

elsewhere on the body (usually the forearm) and involves surgeries done over at least a year's time (Rashid and Tamimy 2013). Both are rarely undertaken as statistics show that two percent have had metoidioplasty (25% want to), while three percent have had phalloplasty (19% want to) (James et al., 2016). None of the men in this project had undergone bottom surgery and only two discussed it as a serious possibility in the future.

Some of the reasons for not wanting bottom surgery were that it does not result in a fully functioning penis capable of natural erection. It requires the insertion of a rod or a manual inflation device. Elongation and re-routing of the urethra also has a high incidence of complications and failure at 19-26% and creates significant scarring elsewhere on the body (Adams and Grenier 2011; Rashid and Tamimy 2013). While trans men cite these factors as reasons for not wanting a phalloplasty it should not be assumed as the determining factor. Most trans men indicated they were very pleased with their own neo-phallus. HRT can result in greater girth and lengthening (up to 4-5 cm) of the clitoris to roughly the size of one's thumb at maximum (Bowers, 2018).²⁷ The enlarged clitoris is termed a neophallus and seems to have become a defining feature of transsexual men's bodies. Many partners of trans men, or those who desire sexual encounters with trans men, list this as a desirable feature and say it contributes to their attraction to the trans masculine body (although sometimes fetishized). The way trans

²⁷ For comparison, clitoral size in cissexual females ranges from 5-35 mm (Verkauf, Von Thron and O'Brien 1992). See Gibson (1996), Park (1995), Traub (1995), Somerville (2000) for histories of medicalizing the clitoris' size in relation to lesbianism or racial identities.

men embody and use their neophallus gives new meaning to male genitalia which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Nearly all of the trans men in this project had experienced cisgender people asking invasive questions about the physical nature of their transition—especially about their genitalia. While the new embodiment that trans men experience is part of what creates trans masculinity, constant interest in the physical nature of trans bodies by cisgender people is bound by cissexual norms of men having (or not) a cis-normative penis, which limits conceptions of non-cissexual bodily configurations.²⁸ In other words, the body matters to trans people in part because of dysphoria but also because cisgender people make the trans body matter through their constant questioning or outright refusal of trans bodies. Further, trans men continuously encounter the assumption made by most people that *all* trans men want *all* of the characteristics associated with male bodies (physical, mental, and emotional). Yet, this is not the case. Cal, early in his transition, connected with his female anatomy stating, “I really like my boobs...I don’t want to have surgery just because I am trans.” Drew, recording from his basement apartment, vlogged on the “born in the wrong body” rhetoric: “I wasn’t born in the wrong body, I was born in my body.” For the trans men who identify as trans (rather than solely as men) there is considerable flexibility around bodily

²⁸ Cis-normative penis, in this context, refers to the typically larger sized organ on cissexual men that is capable of erection and penetration. I acknowledge that cisgender men’s penises come in many different sizes with different degrees of functionality. Normative penis size and function is also racialized, given that “sexual stereotypes are used to ascribe sexually based attributes to a person based on their race” (P. Wilson et al. 2009). In this project I mean to reference a penis of average size and functionality found on a male cisgender body.

configurations and recognition that they do not need to fully adopt physical, mental, and emotional aspects of cisgender men to be men.

Change in habitus

Trans men are creating new body types through the choices they make regarding what aspects of transition to undergo. Living in a body that has transitioned, or is in the process of transitioning, brings with it changes and opportunities to experience the world differently. One of the grounding features of Bourdieu's *habitus* is the repetitive and largely unconscious nature of bodily practice (Lock 1993, 137). Going through transition disrupts one's *habitus*, which can provide jarring awareness, new perspectives, and different senses of embodiment. These new bodily forms change the way society has traditionally understood sex and gender. The bodily being-in-the-world experienced by trans men disrupts the *habitus* they have previously acquired, which in turn, contributes to a trans masculinity.

As we casually talked in my office with our feet up on my desk, Scout explained his views on embodying a non-normative male body:

I feel like I would be more comfortable with having a penis, so I think that is pretty consistent—that it would be more comfortable, but I am not sure it feels like the ideal. I am not sure ideal exists for me. I think there is something about the trans-ness of my body that feels important, the queerness of my body—but that also feels uncomfortable. But a resolution of that discomfort feels like it would negate some of the queerness of my body and that feels really important to me.

Scout's idea of comfort centered on the idea that he would have less dysphoria around his body and be able to more easily navigate male-only spaces where the body is more exposed (locker rooms, pools, etc.). The queerness of his body, something he deeply valued, expanded in two directions. The first is in not having normative male genitals and the physical experiences that go along with having a penis and testes such as: erections, wet dreams, ejaculations, standing to urinate, having a bulge in one's underwear, the size of one's penis, etc. The second, is in having a body that has trans aspects (trans surgery scars and trans genitals) and the physical experiences that go with those aspects. His trans body is part of what makes him a trans man. Having a body that does not fit, that is unruly, and that is not contained by binary norms is core to his identity.

Ian had similar thoughts around his body and his identity and posted a vlog about them while sitting in a darkened kitchen one evening:

I don't look at a cis guy and see a reflection of myself or my desired self. I don't. And I think that is also part of my hesitation around bottom surgery and bottom dysphoria. Like what is that saying about me then because so much of my self-conception is around being a very different version of a guy and I value that. I have only wanted to be cis when the marginalization is too intense, when it feels like it would be easier. It's never out of—it doesn't feel out of any sort of genuine desire to be cis—it's solely out of ease.

Ian and Scout articulate the importance of both their trans bodies and identities remaining outside of cisgender norms. The nature of their trans bodies is equally as important to their trans identities as the trans masculinity they enact.

The social body

The act of transitioning from one gender to another is one that must be done publicly, positioning it in the cultural realm. While it is a personal decision to come out and an individual act to transition, it is also a (constant) negotiation and reframing of one's body and gender with others. Transitioning involves the participation and work of those around a trans person making studies like this one ripe for anthropological analysis. In a real sense, families, friends, and lovers must transition with them and adjust to having a son, brother, father, boyfriend or husband rather than a daughter, sister, mother, girlfriend or wife. In other words, the culturally determined signs change for everyone when a body transitions from female to trans male. Living in a body now viewed as male, the meanings of that body now fall into cultural expectations and assumptions associated with maleness and masculinity, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The nature of physically transitioning puts a transgender person on display as one develops new secondary sex characteristics such as facial hair or a lower pitched voice. Because of the rapidity of changes brought on by surgery and/or testosterone, the resignification of the body can be rapid as well. And yet, the public has a limited understanding of transition practices, expectations, and experiences. As Scout stated "It feels like all of the sudden there is—at this time of the 'transgender tipping point'—people know what trans is but they also don't, they know what it 'should' be." Many

people still do not have a basic definition of transgender, are working off of old stereotypes and misinformation, or do not know that trans men exist because they are only aware of trans women as they are typically sensationalized in the media. For the trans men in this study, their family, friends, and lovers had only a rudimentary understanding of what being transgender included or what transitioning involved. All of the men felt that they had to spend an inordinate amount of time explaining both their internal sense of manhood and the particulars of transitioning. There are not enough reference points or widespread examples of trans men for cisgender people to see and frame what a transgender man is. Society as a whole, is limited to framing people as male/female and have difficulty conceiving any identity in between or outside of the binary.

Trans men of color from non-Western cultures

For some trans men, especially those who were immigrants from non-Western countries, there was no translation for the word or concept of “transgender” in their native language, making it very difficult to talk with family about their identity. Quan was a young man in college who participated in a TMOC channel for a short period of time. He had attended school in Australia since childhood, but his parents still live in China. He appeared studious with glasses and neatly coiffed hair, sitting in his room with a full bookcase behind him. Quan was very fashionable, and appeared in a variety of styles including a dress shirt buttoned all the way to the collar with a stylish bowler hat, a men’s cardigan with a black t-shirt underneath topped off by a chic hat, or a designer snap back baseball cap with a carefully distressed baseball shirt. Through the course of his postings, he had yet to undergo any physical form of transition although

he very much wanted to. Quan told his parents about his trans identity via an email as they do not speak English and he does not speak Mandarin fluently. Initially, his mother responded that “she had no idea I was going through this and it was very brave of me to tell them about it and they will try their hardest to understand the whole situation.” Quan was elated at this, stating it was the best possible response he could have hoped for “even though they have no idea about everything.” However, within a few hours his mother sent another email which he summarized as: “she was 100% against any medical procedures I wanted to have done and that I should just be happy having had this revelation that I am a boy and continue living life having that knowledge.” Quan was crushed by this response, as he does not see it as a tenable solution. He has no desire to live with the knowledge that he is a man without being able to transition and communicate that fact through his body.

Similar to some other trans men in this research, Quan and his parents stand on opposite sides of the fence. He sees his future and possible happiness tied to changing his body, while his parents do not support any change to his body. In describing his mother’s expectations, Quan explained:

What she wished for me and my sisters is for us to be normal, to have a normal life and never do things that will kind of set us apart from the norm because that is so much more difficult...being normal wouldn’t cause us that much drama, and therefore, we’d be safer and happier. ‘I [his mother] don’t want you to be really successful, I just want you to be normal.’

Quan had already obtained a letter from his therapist that would allow him to begin taking testosterone but he would not move forward without the support of his parents, which left him extremely frustrated. The primary reasons his parents refused to support Quan's transition centered on his body. They steadfastly did not support him changing it in any way, nor did they understand that he wants top surgery but not bottom surgery. They cannot conceive of why he would want to end up with such a non-normative body and view such an outcome as one that would prevent him from achieving happiness in life.

Tian, introduced in chapter 3, also had difficulty with his parents. Again sitting in his kitchen with his liquor cabinet behind him and his shirt off, he asserted that he "could not involve his parents in his decision, or even a discussion, so I decided what I needed [top surgery] and did it." He was thrilled with the results and finally felt as though he was able to inhabit his body as it reflected his authentic self. At times Tian enjoyed disrupting people's expectations around gender during the early stage of his transition. However, as time went on he felt increasingly conflicted and wanted to "fit somewhere." This went beyond the confusion his body caused for others and involved his life-long sense of not belonging due to being Taiwanese in Canada—a country he referred to as "full of white people." As stated earlier, Tian felt that we all need to belong and his lack of clear gender to others combined with his lack of family nearby and lack of other Asian trans men left him feeling very isolated and alone. He joked in one of his videos that if anyone wanted to adopt him to get in touch with him.

Since childhood, his body was seen as "different" and framed as "other" due to phenotypical differences between himself and white people. He did not feel like he

belonged in either Asian or Western culture. Starting with his very first video—where we see very little of his surroundings as he has tucked himself into the corner of the room so that viewers can only see his head and shoulders—this sense of being a “halfie” with cultural ties to both his homeland of Taiwan and his adopted home in Canada was evident (Abu-Lughod 1991). This bifurcated cultural identity, combined with being “gender confusing,” was a circumstance that affected his embodiment and relationship with others. In fact, he said it was his sense of non-belonging that drove him to participate in a YouTube channel devoted to trans men of color: “so other Asian people could see and hear someone with a similar experience and embodiment.”

Relationship dynamics

Physical changes to the body can come at a high price for many trans people in relationship. It is not uncommon for couples to end their relationships while one partner is transitioning due to – and the cultural impact of – being in relationship with a differently gendered partner. Kip, an Australian trans man in his early 30s, had identified as a lesbian prior to understanding he was transgender. While Kip was not an official vlogger (at the time), he often appeared with his partner who was part of a “partners of trans men channel” and talked about his experiences openly. With his previous lesbian partner, he came out to her as trans after they had been together for a few years. She responded by giving him an ultimatum. According to Kip, “she essentially said that there was no way in hell that I want to be with a man, I am a lesbian and if you have any surgery done then there is no point in my being with you if that is the case.” Her breaking point revolved around the physical loss of female body

characteristics—particularly the breasts in this case—and the addition of male characteristics.

As with Quan’s parents, who could not support any physical change to his body, and Tian’s experience of knowing he could not even have a conversation with his parents about the physical changes he needed to make, the body remains a site of contention between cisgender and transgender people. A quote that opens this chapter by the father of a trans man – “You’re going to butcher your body, if you decide to do this, you will be dead to me. If people ask me about you, I will tell them you’re dead” – reiterates this unease. While there are exceptions as I have noted, most cultural systems place great importance on recognizing the differences between male and female bodies, and the reactions of these loved ones to the notion of their family member altering their body caused great emotional upheaval.

Many other trans men had similar experiences with their partners and it was the physical changes to the body that were the major source of distress. For some, it was an attraction issue; they simply were not attracted to masculine bodies. For others, it was more about how they would be interpreted after their partner was read as a man. Lesbian partners saw it as a loss of their lesbian identity because people would no longer recognize their identity if they were with a man (discussed further in chapter 5). For some, it was difficult to be in relationship with a man due to a personal history of sexual assault by men. They felt a loss of safety in transitioning from a relationship with a female body, which they did not feel threatened by, to one with a male body that signified violence for them.

Trans men and their partners (who were cisgender women), may have similar anatomy, especially prior to any form of medical transition. However, those aspects get categorized differently when embodied by a trans man. Ashley, who was a lesbian, staunch feminist, and graduate student in women and gender studies, was in a relationship with a trans man who was on testosterone, had completed top surgery but not bottom surgery. Ashley's videos were posted from her living room while she sat on her couch—usually in pajamas or other comfortable clothing—after her long days at school. Her boyfriend never appeared in the videos but she often noted where he was while she was making the video (he was usually at the gym, with her describing him as a “health nut”). Regarding the similarities and differences between their bodies, Ashley explained:

We do talk about his body in terms of gender exclusive male words because I see him as male, like I said, I don't ever look at Jason's body and think, 'oh, it is just like mine, it's female,' I just don't. It is different than mine and it's different than a bio guy's, but it's not like mine. We do use male language and gender specific language when we talk about his body... because it just makes more sense and it's also what he uses, what he feels good about, and what turns him on, and when you are having sex with someone you want them to be turned on.

Relabeling Jason's anatomy enables the two of them to maintain his trans masculinity and acknowledge that while his genitalia may be anatomically similar to Ashley's it is not understood as female or cissexual male.

As time went on however, Ashley's use of male terminology and sleeping with a man, triggered "a lot of stuff" around her history of being sexually assaulted by men. She was not sure if it was being in relationship with a man (for the first time) or that she felt so safe with him, that past anxieties and fears were surfacing in the bedroom for her. What she did note and pointed out, was that conversations about trans people and dysphoria have focused on the trans man and not their partners. She emphasized that trans men are not the only ones with body issues in the bedroom. She and her partner had been very sexual initially in their relationship and part of the reason why was because, while he was clearly a male, he also did not have a penis similar to the ones she had encountered during sexual assaults against her in the past. She felt that if his body had more closely resembled cisgender men she would not be in relationship with him. For her, encountering a trans masculine body enabled her to experience a different type of male body and masculinity—one that was male and masculine in a very different way.

The trans masculine body can be viewed as one that is "safer" because it lacks a traditional penis. Sam is a white trans man in his 40s, who has been out and actively involved in the trans community through many endeavors. I met Sam while he was a professor at a university in the western U.S. Over the years that I have known Sam, he participated in a number of endeavors for the trans community including the establishment of a transgender choir, speaking at trans conferences, and giving graduation addresses. Sam had recently stepped down from teaching, and now—in addition to other employment—offered professional cuddling services. The manner in which he markets his services echoes Ashley's statement in demarcating a trans male

body as one that offers a safer masculinity than cisgender males. Sam's advertisement reads: "As a female-to-male transsexual, I offer a unique experience of safety: the unusual combination of masculine protection and feminine nurturing. I also offer the healing opportunity for people to physically bond with someone who looks and feels like a man but doesn't have a penis." This deliberate marketing of a trans masculine body differentiates it as one that offers something cisgender bodies cannot—even if conceived in rather essentialist ways.

Similar to trans masculinity being both something more than or other than hegemonic masculinity (as discussed in chapter 3), the trans body is being framed as something more than or other than a cisgender male body. Trans men recognize the value of having non-normative male bodies. This is a significant departure from the many instances reported by trans men of being told they are not "real men" because they lack a penis. While all of the trans men felt much more comfortable in bodies that were being read as male, there were also less positive effects of being read as male in society. One of the effects that trans men noticed was the danger their new bodies instilled with regard to women and children. As soon as their bodies were read as male, they were often treated as a potential threat. Many trans men reported women crossing the street to put more distance between themselves and the male body they saw. This was a double-edged sword, as it meant they were being read as men, but they also did not want to be read as threatening or dangerous. In fact, most were very disturbed by eliciting such responses especially as many of the men had done the same thing when they were female and thus knew the fear and cautionary tactics of walking alone as a woman. They adopted certain tactics in hopes of making females

more comfortable in these moments, such as giving them more space on the street, jingling their keys if they were coming up on a woman, or dropping back from them so they weren't following closely. Keen stated, "I wanted to shout to them that I wasn't like that and they didn't have to cross the street."

As men, they were also no longer trusted to be alone with children. Jackson was saddened that he was now viewed as a potential predator. He described sitting in an airport waiting for a flight when he noticed a little girl of six or seven playing a few seats away. When he looked at the father to smile and acknowledge her cuteness, he saw that the father was glaring at him with malice because Jackson was watching his daughter. Jackson, as quoted at the beginning of this chapter, stated: "He read me as this adult male and potential predator and it broke my heart" (M. Brown 2016, 141). This incident is also an example of being socialized by other men regarding acceptable behavior, in this case, around children.

Other trans men noticed the loss of touch once they were read as men. People (both men and women) no longer gave them hugs, put a friendly arm around their shoulder, or a hand on their back. It was viewed as a stark difference between being treated as a man versus a woman and was a significant loss that left them feeling very isolated and craving human touch in ways that they had not realized they missed.

Disciplining trans bodies

Disciplining the body, as described by Foucault (1988, 1995), can be examined by looking at how the body is subject to cultural norms and controlled through institutional and societal demands. The disciplining of the trans body is apparent in the institutional ways alteration of the body is controlled when it comes to changing sex

characteristics (rather than enhancing them, such as breast augmentation, which has no similar gatekeeping requirements). Transgender bodies have traditionally been conceptualized—institutionally and societally—through the lens of a “sex change” or the transformation of a body to anatomically match natal female or male bodies, with emphasis on genitalia (Benjamin 1966; Califia 2003; Meyerowitz 2002; Stryker 2008). The notion of sex change inherently relies on a binary construction of sexed bodies with a simplistic one-to-one correlation of breasts/vagina to women and penis/testes to men. In fact, over 35 U.S. states require that a trans person undergo at least one GCS procedure before they are allowed to re-classify their sex on a birth certificate (four states will not amend even with GCS documentation) and 16 states require it for changing gender on a driver’s license (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018). In addition, the medical treatment of transgender people was initially framed as if all trans people were disgusted by, and wanted to get rid of, their birth genitalia (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 576-577; Benjamin 1966; Califia 2003; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Meyerowitz 2002; Stryker 2008). This was summed up as the “born in the wrong body” narrative, which is an oversimplification of how trans people understand their bodies (Meeuf 2017, Mock 2012, Talusan et al., 2016, Thom 2015, Westrick 2014).

Being trans is not a monolithic experience. Many trans men in this project gave rebuttals to being “born in the wrong body,” noting it was not the way they experienced their trans bodies. It may be less about hatred or discomfort with one’s body than it is about embracing something else. In a speech, Filipino trans rights activist, Sass Rogando Sasot (2010) addresses the issue of disciplining with the

powerful assertion: “I am a human being who is neither in a wrong body nor trapped in a wrong body...I am not trapped by my body, I am trapped by your beliefs.”

Institutional control and access to medical treatment

As mentioned above, bottom surgery techniques currently do not result in a fully functioning penis—one capable of natural erection. It also may result in some loss of sensation and be aesthetically different in comparison with cissexual penises. A full phalloplasty and scrotoplasty requires multiple surgeries, usually done over a one to three-year period, is costly (\$12,700 - 21,250) and requires significant skin grafts from either the forearm, groin, thigh or back (Philadelphia Center for Transgender Surgery, 2018). While top surgery is also expensive (\$5,000 - \$12,000), it requires only one surgery and is, by far, the most common surgical alteration for trans men (Trans Media Network, 2018). Insurance coverage for such procedures is still rather uncommon, although it was on the rise late in the Obama administration due to the Affordable Care Act that removed the exclusion of gender reassignment treatments (National Center for Transgender Equality, undated).

Many trans men struggle to pay for surgery.²⁹ Some of the social problems trans people face, such as being disowned by family members, and difficulty gaining

²⁹ Paying for surgery is related to economic class. However, men in this project rarely talked about issues of class in their videos, interviews, or during discussions at conferences. This was likely a function of their predominant white middle-classed backgrounds. Further, trans men may have full insurance coverage but the transition-related care required is excluded or deemed cosmetic and therefore, not covered. Many of the men in this project were also attending college, which meant they did not want to take on further debt and had no ability to save money at the time. Lastly, some of the men were covered under their parents' insurance but could not access that coverage as their parents did not support physical changes.

employment and housing means they may not have access to insurance, educated healthcare providers, or funds. Furthermore, due to the gatekeeping nature of gaining access to HRT and surgical interventions—such as seeing a mental health professional to be assessed for and diagnosed with gender dysphoria in order to access medical transition—many men prefer not to, or cannot afford to, undergo such requirements (Ophelian 2009).³⁰ Such people may access care through other channels such as the black market, foreign doctors, or other trans people willing to share hormones.

There has been a recent movement toward an informed consent model (Cavanaugh, Hopwood, and Lambert 2016). This model removes some of the gatekeeping requirements and emphasizes the agency and self-determination of trans people to decide what the correct path of treatment is for them. In the same way that people make informed decisions around taking birth control or undergoing plastic surgery, informed consent models do not require being diagnosed as mentally ill or the need to “prove” they are transgender in order to access treatment, such as living for a time as a male to prove they are serious about transitioning—referred to as the “real-life” test in the initial versions of the SOC (American Psychiatric Association 1980, 2000, 2013).

The expense and gatekeeping nature of accessing care prevents many men from being able to attain the treatment they need and contributes to high levels of depression and suicidal ideation (Hass et al., 2014). Surgery and HRT can be lifesaving treatments for trans people (Tannehill 2016). Kip, who had short hair styled in a crew

³⁰ See *Diagnosing Difference* for an examination, from the trans perspective, of the gatekeeping nature of the mental health and medical institutions (Ophelian 2009).

cut, was a tall man and sturdily built. He loved music, and had a small room full of guitars, keyboards, and drum sets so he could write and record. He transitioned on testosterone during the year that his girlfriend was active on the trans partner channel, and completed top surgery as well. However, he had put off socially and physically transitioning for “eight or nine years” because he did not have the financial resources to undergo top surgery. He did not want to begin transitioning until he could have top surgery given that his chest was “huge” and he thought he “looked stupid when he binded.” Kip did not want to look like a man with facial hair and a deep voice while walking through life with a “giant chest.” Being a man but not being able to live as one for nearly a decade can take a significant toll on a person.

Financial concerns disproportionately affect trans men of color.³¹ One of the methods trans people use to raise funds for medical care are online sites such as Kickstarter or Gofundme. One man of color lamented that Black trans men tend to receive far fewer donations to their surgery funds than white trans men. Furthermore, for trans men who have African ancestry, their bodies are more prone to keloid scarring which can often require surgical revisions—yet another expense they may have to undertake. Lastly, trans people of color face greater degrees of discrimination—including refusal of care—than white trans men (James et al. 2016).

Depending on what country a trans person is located in, which surgeon they choose, and where that surgeon is located, there may be additional expenses for

³¹ Trans men may gain an economic advantage (although not necessarily a social advantage) when compared to their previous gender as they access a wage system that favors men over women (Schilt 2010). However, Black and Latino men on average, do not see the same degree of wage increase (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018).

travel, food, and lodging. There are very few surgeons doing these surgeries due to a lack of knowledge, inexperience, concern with liability, or transphobic beliefs (Feldman 2008, Jaffee, Shires and Stroumsa 2016). This can create lengthy wait times (sometimes more than a year) before a trans man is able to see a medical provider who specializes in GCS. These delays add to the other difficulties in accessing care and seem intolerable for trans people, especially as one's circumstances can change rapidly while living in this liminal state. Accessing a doctor who is knowledgeable about HRT is also difficult (Feldman 2008, Jaffee, Shires and Stroumsa 2016). The trans men in this study from countries with socialist healthcare (such as Canada or the U.K.) reported having to wait months to see the one doctor assigned to such cases in their geographical region. In the U.S., finding a trans competent doctor may mean traveling to major cities to find a doctor who is willing to be educated on such care.

Transgender Bodies and the State

The transgender body has frequently been the topic of regulation (or refusal) by the state which in turn—and following the Foucauldian (1990) process—has prompted LGBTQ people to demand recognition from the state. The reliance of Western concepts of gender correlating with the sex of a body has triggered numerous transphobic responses by all levels of governance. In 2016, House Bill 2 was passed in North Carolina, a “statewide policy that bans individuals from using public bathrooms that do not correspond to their biological sex” (Kopan and Scott 2016). This bill deemed the sex of an individual (as determined by their genitals) to be determinate of gender irrespective of transition-related changes or gender expression. The rhetoric around the bill was that it would prevent men from dressing up as women to gain

access to female restrooms where they would presumably commit acts of perversion or violence.

Ironically, this law affected many cisgender people whom the bill was supposed to be protecting. Numerous cisgender women, who were androgynous or looked masculine in appearance, were harassed and had their gender called into question by people who felt compelled to act as bathroom police (DeRienzo 2016, Papenfuss 2016, The Young Turks 2016). Several videos were posted by cisgender women who were confronted by men as they entered female restrooms. The women were questioned because they did not meet the expectations of normative female bodies or feminine appearance in the eyes of the men who confronted them. These cisgender women were greatly angered that someone would question their gender, the female-ness of their body, and that people felt the need to try to police who used which bathroom.

Simultaneously trans men who are read as if they were cisgender, began to take pictures of themselves in women's restrooms with captions such as "do you want me in the restroom with your wife?" (Figure 3). These men were pointing to the absurdity of being forced by the law to use a restroom based on their birth certificate rather than their gender. By aligning themselves with cisgender politicians, they were bolstering the idea that all men are dangerous and present a threat to women and children. It implies men and women cannot safely be in such spaces together. The earlier U.S. Civil Rights movement also involved access to bathrooms and which bodies were allowed to be together in such spaces, but transphobia has focused attention onto gender and genitals in ways not previously seen.



Figure 3. Example of photo campaign against transphobic bathroom legislation in North Carolina (Hughes 2015).

Violence toward transgender bodies

As a trans person, it is virtually impossible to disregard the danger of living in a transgender body, which is directly tied to being visibly trans (especially for trans women of color) (Gossett, Stanley and Burton 2017). Concerns around safety are often at the forefront of our thoughts, affect our daily interactions, future plans, relationships with families and partners, and impact our ability to meet basic needs such as

restroom visits, housing, medical care, or employment. The vast majority of physical violence against trans people occurs to trans women, and especially trans women of color.³² The number of trans people murdered in the U.S. in 2017 was 28, up from 27 and 21 for 2016 and 2015 respectively; the vast majority of these deaths were trans women of color (Schmider 2016, Kellaway and Brydum 2017), which reiterates the finding that trans people of color have a more tightly constrained sphere of gender enactment. Furthermore, there is little doubt that the actual number of murders is higher because trans people are continuously misgendered by the press and police (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). It is sometimes months before the trans community recognizes they have lost yet another person. Not only is a person lost to death, but their identity as trans may also be lost and is not always recovered by the community.

Losing so many people to violence is bad enough, but it is often the degree to which their bodies are violated and discarded that frames how the trans community understands these deaths and the danger of being trans in U.S. society. In many of these murder cases the violence is extreme and continues post mortem. Brandi Bledsoe was found in a driveway wearing only underwear, with a gunshot wound to her chest, plastic bags over her head and hands, and head trauma (Ferrise 2016).

Rae'Lynn Thomas, was murdered in her own home in front of her mother, when she was shot twice and then beaten to death by the mother's ex-boyfriend (Ralston 2016).

Goddess Diamond was found burned beyond recognition in her car, but the cause of

³² See the separate 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey reports on Black, Latino/a, American Indian and Alaskan Native, and Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander for statistic examination of how these demographic communities are differently impacted (NCTE 2015).

death was a blunt force trauma (Sledge 2016). Amos Beede was found some time after he had been severely beaten, suffering multiple broken bones and died from head trauma (E. Murray 2016). Dee Whigham was found dead with 119 stab wounds, mostly to the face (WLOX 2016). Kayden Clarke, was shot and killed by police when they responded to his home after being notified that he was suicidal (Ellis 2016). As Mara Keisling, the Executive Director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, states “These women’s [and men’s] bodies are feared as so inherently deviant that their attackers contend it is justifiable to destroy them” (Brydum and Kellaway 2015).

While murder is the most extreme and tragic end to a transgender person’s life, other forms of violence affect large proportions of the transgender population. The U.S. Transgender Survey, conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality in 2015, revealed dismal statistics regarding the pervasiveness of physical violence and verbal harassment. The survey, the largest to date, received responses from 27,715 individuals living “in all 50 states, District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and U.S. military bases overseas.” The data shows:

- Nearly half (46%) of respondents were verbally harassed in the past year because of being transgender.
- Nearly one in ten (9%) respondents were physically attacked in the past year because of being transgender.
- Nearly half (47%) of respondents were sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime and one in ten (10%) were sexually assaulted in the past year.

- Nearly one-quarter (24%) have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner, compared to 18% in the U.S. population (2015 James et al.).

While these statistics reveal the degree of violence that has occurred to transgender people, they do not reveal the effects this high rate of violence had on those who have not experienced it personally. Every trans person in this study, as well as those known personally to me as a member of the community, was acutely aware of violence against the trans community even if they had not experienced it themselves. Almost all the men in this study had experienced forms of verbal harassment and some had experienced physical forms of violence. All of the trans men practiced preventative measures in order to limit their chance of experiencing violence ranging from not disclosing their identity for fear of retribution to fleeing their homes to avoid physical violence. Media coverage of transgender murders, combined with online video uploads of violence against transgender people, has taught trans people to be hyperaware of the dangers of cisgender society.

Four months after I began to physically transition, a transgender man, Colle Carpenter, was attacked in a bathroom and had the word “it” carved into his chest (Zonkel 2010). Colle Carpenter was a 26-year-old graduate student at California State Long Beach and although he did not know his attacker, the assailant knew his name and that he was transgender prior to the attack. This attack, occurring at a moment when I was literally becoming the same type of man Colle was, shaped my own experience of trans embodiment and verified the danger of inhabiting a trans body in a transphobic society. Speaking at a rally after the attack, Carpenter stated, “For those

of you who don't know why 'it' is such a derogatory term...it takes away a person's humanity. It takes away their personhood. It makes them less than human" (Behrens 2010). How could such an act not affect me as I inhabit that same kind of body as Colle? His experience informs my own—and other trans men—and shapes the degree of caution I practice as I walk through the world.

Similar to the extreme violence evident in the murders of trans people, the nature of physical attacks often goes beyond the act of assault and serves to demarcate trans bodies as particularly deviant and inhumane. *Capturing Hate* (Witness Media Lab 2016), a report conducted on 327 internet videos depicting assaults against transgender people, revealed that these videos garnered "89,223,760 views with 601,300 'shares'" and were usually categorized as "entertainment." Ninety-nine percent of total ratings were "likes" with viewers giving comments such as "LOL," "hilarious," or "thumbs up." The comments associated with these videos clearly "blame gender nonconforming people for the violence and hatred perpetrated against them" and "suggests a rigid defense of a gender binary, especially the presumptive appearance, mannerisms and dress associated with those roles" (Witness Media Lab 2016).

Behaviors in the videos, as well as viewer engagement, show open enmity to any gender transgression and are illustrative of the transphobia in our culture. The report also notes that:

The ongoing engagement with these videos and the hostility expressed by viewers are compounding acts of discrimination that traumatized individual victims, but have broader consequences for gender

nonconforming communities as a whole. They are a persistent reminder of the threat to the physical and emotional safety of people who identify beyond the gender binary...and has a chilling effect on all gender nonconforming people (Witness Media Labs 2016).

In addition, the majority of these videos (64%) are posted on YouTube, which has a policy against “hate speech that encourages or incites violence” based on race, gender, and sexual orientation among other social categories. That these videos remain accessible would seem to violate their own policy. It is indicative of the systemic acceptance of violence toward transgender people and their bodies.

For many trans people, life in the everyday world remains too precarious to look beyond fulfilling their basic needs of food, shelter, and employment. Systemic discrimination occurs in nearly all aspects of life including bullying in K-12 schools, disproportionate levels of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, high levels of police harassment and incarceration, inordinate levels of homelessness, discrimination in medical services, eviction by family, and loss of parental rights (James et al., 2016). The systemic level of discrimination occurring in so many aspects of life contributes to very high rates of depression with 40% of the trans population having attempted suicide, compared to 4.6% in the cisgender population (James et al., 2016). I set the framework of violence against trans people here because it is crucial to understanding transgender embodiment and the experiences of the trans men involved in this project. As one of the opening quotes states: “All of this gender theory crap is not just theory, it’s people’s lives. It’s not just a couple of academics or something that feminists talk about to try to disseminate the patriarchy...it’s our flesh and our pain” (Woodward

2005). The anger and frustration expressed by this trans man speaks to the experience of living in a trans body and the cultural effects on such a body. These struggles and the emotional experience they represent sometimes feel as though the academics who use transgender bodies, experiences, and identities to theorize about gender do not acknowledge the costs being paid by trans people (Prosser 1998).

The violence and discrimination against trans people shape how they move through and interact with the world. The constant reality of living in a transphobic culture, of having one's body policed, of encountering discrimination in so many different aspects of life can be quite difficult. On the other hand, experiencing this sort of discrimination based solely on the fact that one does not meet physical or behavioral gender norms allows us to see the effects of a binary construction of gender in a way not often available to non-trans people.

Summary

Trans perspectives on the separation of sex and bodily characteristics of gender has been included in academic approaches for decades. Perhaps what has not been included is that the physical characteristics of trans bodies is not simply a movement from female to male (or vice versa). Rather it is often a transition from female to trans male—something more than or other than cissexual men. As we have seen from the ethnographic perspectives above, trans men are finding empowerment in their hybrid bodies, in having bodies that are scarred and marked as trans rather than cis. The more widely it becomes known what a trans masculine body can encompass, the greater the disruption to the normative classification of sex and gender. The more that

those systems are disrupted, the greater effect it has on all bodies to break free of strict binaries and adopt practices or expressions outside of those norms.

The body matters to trans men because of the often-painful mismatch they experience in having characteristics that do not match an internal sense of self. The trans body matters to cisgender people because it unsettles the foundational nature of sex correlating with gender. The vehement reactions of cisgender people (whether loved ones or strangers) makes the bodies of trans people important on a daily basis. And yet, regardless of the discrimination, harassment, and danger of living in a trans body, there is something optimistic about forming new body types and embracing dynamic aspects of male and female.

Trans identities are not just about moving from one gender to the other. Rather they are about moving from one gender to something different; whether that leans more towards male or female, it still remains outside of cisgender identities. The trans body is something unique, which stands apart from cissexual bodies and contributes to trans experience and identity. The new meanings created by and about these bodies will need to be incorporated in studies of the body.

CHAPTER 5

TRANS MASCULINE SEXUALITY

“I am interested in girls and I identify as a trans guy, essentially, because I don’t identify as a guy who likes girls, I identify as a trans guy who likes girls and that doesn’t make me straight in the same way.”

Noah, trans man vlogger

“It’s a weird switch honestly, from being a complete lesbian butch to a straight man—it’s a real mind fuck.”

Cal, trans man vlogger

“She is not attracted to men—she is attracted to me.”

William, trans man vlogger

The above quotes from trans men speak to the disruption that trans masculinity and embodiment had for these men regarding their sexuality. As Cal states above, a trans man’s sexuality is perceived differently when they become visible as men through medically transitioning, in his case moving him from a lesbian category to a straight category. Noah emphasizes that there is something about identifying as a trans man and the embodiment of *trans* masculinity that makes his straight sexuality different from cisgender heterosexual men. William’s quote, regarding his partner’s attraction to him but no other men, points to the fact that trans men are seen by their partners as

something more than, or other than, cisgender men. Sexualities are also constructed through our partner/s' gendered embodiment, sexuality identities and practices.

This chapter examines the sexuality of trans men through the interplay between gendered embodiment, erotic desires, and a history of sexual practices—a nexus termed “sexual *habitus*” by Schilt and Windsor (2014, 734).³³ Sexual *habitus* provides a framework to examine trans sexuality at the level of the individual as well as larger sociocultural structures through which sexuality is defined, maintained, and policed. The dynamic process between the individual and cultural systems allows us to examine how trans men are *doing* sexuality through their non-cisgender embodiment and trans masculinity. This in turn affects their “sexual behaviors, ideations, attitudes, identities and experiences” (Gagne and Tewksbury 2002, 4) while incorporating their history of living as women (or being interpreted as women). This framework allows us to more closely scrutinize the ways in which gender affects sexuality and sexuality affects gender. Because sexuality incorporates both gender and the body, it allows a point of entry into exploring how gender can affirm, disrupt, or expand sexuality, as well as how the body is marked with gendered meanings, especially in the realm of intimate encounters (Boellstorff 2007, 27; Inckle 2007; Schilt and Windsor 2014, 734; Williams, Weinburg, and Rosenberger 2013, 729).

Trans sexuality

Trans sexuality, as I use it here, refers to the change in sexual *habitus* that trans men undergo. It involves the many shifts they must manage as they transition (socially

³³ Sexuality, as used here, encompasses an individual's sexual identity, desires, and practices as lived through trans embodiment and trans masculinity.

or medically) and become visible as men. Being read as a male, affects how others read your sexuality (and that of your partner/s). Inhabiting a hybrid body—one that may have female and male sex characteristics—shifts the type of people who will be attracted to such a body. The types of sexual practices enacted through this body might also change (in dominant/submissive behaviors, manner of gratification, etc.). The language used to describe or define anatomy and sexual acts shifts to apply masculine or neutral terminology to give the body new meaning (Zimman 2014). The language used to describe sexual acts and orientations may also change to recognize the changed gender of a trans man (and perhaps the gender of his partner/s as well). Erotic desires may shift from one gender to a different gender. These possibilities will erode or fracture previous sexual *habitus* and affords a trans man new perspectives on sexuality.

Heteronormativity relies on cisgender identities and cissexual bodies to construct sexual categories such as hetero-, homo-, and bisexuality (G. Rubin 1975, Schleifer 2006). As West and Zimmerman (1987, 145) noted “If one wishes to be recognized as a lesbian (or heterosexual woman), one must first establish a categorical status as female.” Sexual relationships are “crucial to establishing gender and sex” and simultaneously “sexuality creates meaning about and through the sexed bodies and gendered identities of both individuals involved in an erotic interaction” (Schleifer 2006:68). Yet, trans men disrupt normative constructions of sex and gender by inhabiting differently configured bodies and trans masculinities. In fact, as I will show, many trans men include their trans-ness in their sexual identities, such as “trans gay,” to demarcate their sexuality apart from normative categories.

Transitioning from being viewed as a woman to being visible as a man means that a trans man's sexual identity will be perceived differently. For example, if a trans man remains attracted to women before and after transition, his sexual identity (as read by others) will change from being read as a lesbian to being read as a heterosexual. However, many of the trans men who remained attracted to women after transition struggled with identifying as a heterosexual man. For significant numbers of trans men, their object of attraction shifts as they transition (Bockting, Benner, and Coleman 2009; Schleifer 2006; Schilt and Windsor 2014). For example, they may go from being attracted to women to being attracted to men. For these men, such a shift results not only in them being perceived differently by others (changing from lesbian to gay man) but also in shifting their own sexual identity as well. Any of these changes can, and often did, result in culture shock, as these men were not socialized as men or in the sexual identity they now fell into. Further, partners of trans men experience their own changes in sexual identity as their sexuality changes from being read as a lesbian to a straight woman. Lastly, inhabiting an altered body—particularly in regards to sexual characteristics—also affected the sexual practices undertaken and managed by both trans men and their partners.

Prior sexual identities

The history of a trans man's sexual identification (lesbian, straight, bisexual, etc.) carries with it values and practices affecting how he will embody a sexual identification after transition. While culture, writ large, gives us a framework for how the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality are defined and constructed, subcultures give us different ways of understanding and enacting those same categories (Butler 1990, 1993,

Foucault 1990, Sedgwick 2008). For trans men who were part of the lesbian or queer community prior to transition—as were the vast majority of trans men involved in this study—experiences of their bodies, sexualities and gender have been shaped apart from, and in response to, heteronormative culture. Obviously queer and heterosexual cultures are not entirely separate, but the “normative creativity” (L. Brown 1989) of queer culture has offered trans men different ways to approach aspects of the self in regards to gender, sexuality, and the body. As illustrated in the discussion on trans masculinity in chapter 3, there is an upswing of trans men rejecting heteronormative masculinity and creating a different type of masculinity. It should not be surprising then that trans men are also reframing their sexuality as something different from or as a rejection of heteronormative sexuality.

In listening to the trans men involved with this project, many spoke about the different ways they frame their past, present, and perceived future sexualities. The medical rhetoric of trans people universally feeling disgusted by one’s natal genitalia, and therefore being too uncomfortable to have sex, is largely untrue and too simplistic to describe trans sexuality (Cromwell 1999, 131; Latham 2016). While some trans men do have a high degree of dysphoria, others do not; but no man in this study completely abstained from sexuality regardless of how dysphoric they were. The various ways they adapted their sexuality, created new sexual identities, and altered sexual practices suggests researchers and theorists need to expand the parameters of sexuality and how sex, gender, and sexuality are co-constructed (Richardson 2007).

Most trans men in this study identified as lesbians prior to their transition.³⁴

Some felt this identification and their participation in the lesbian community was a good fit before transitioning; others felt it had always been problematic but had no other category to align with while being seen as a female. Cal's experience aligned with the former position: "When I was a lesbian, sex wasn't an issue at all, it was fine." For him, being sexual in a female body was not a problem and in fact, he liked female aspects of his body such as breasts. He did not experience body dysphoria to a degree that impeded him from being sexual with other women. Now that he has transitioned through HRT and top surgery and is seen as a man, he has no desire to disown his lesbian past or claim that it was just a temporary or ill-fitting identity in his progression of becoming a man. For him, just as his history of being socialized and treated as a girl/woman has created a different sort of masculinity, his sexual past has created a different kind of sexuality. Having been a lesbian in the past and adopting the values developed through his inclusion in that community, played a crucial role in how he has embodied his masculinity. Being a man who lived as a woman who loved other women has given him a history that cisgender, heterosexual, or homosexual men cannot attain.

Just as he does not fit within the cisgender category due to his trans identity, the categories of hetero- or homosexuality also cannot contain Cal's sexuality, as his

³⁴ There is evidence from studies on sexuality that this holds true for the larger population of trans men as well, although if researchers supplied a category of "queer," then a smaller percentage of trans men identified as lesbians or as having an attraction to women. See Devor (1993), Katz-Wise et al. 2016, Meier et al. (2013), Rowniak and Chesla (2013) for a broader discussion.

way of describing his past and present sexuality illustrates. In a vlog talking about sexuality, Cal sits at his desk in his messy room with a blue, pink, and white striped trans flag decorating the wall behind him. Though he is wearing a comfortable flannel shirt and looking a bit tired as he rubs his eyes, Cal briefly waves one of his textbooks, *Gender, Sex, Sexuality*, in front of the camera as he settles in:

I went from a lesbian relationship then to a straight guy, that really felt weird for me, it didn't feel right. Then, when I was single and passing, that is when this stuff [sexuality] became weirder. It was really weird to have people just assume right off the bat that I was just straight. But then I went into a relationship with another lesbian and that was weird, to still identify as a straight male and be with a lesbian, but then I started to feel more like my old lesbian self—a lesbian trans guy.

The topic of sexuality remained in Cal's thoughts. He frequently returned to these reflections to further refine and articulate his identity and position. Several months later—as he progressed in his transition—Cal appeared again in his bedroom wearing a different plaid flannel shirt with the trans flag still in view behind him. Explaining that he was once again tired because he had been spending all of his time in the library preparing for exams, Cal returned to his connection to the lesbian community:

I identified as a lesbian trans guy. The reason I did that was because I did not feel good being labeled as straight, that is totally not who I am, even if I just date women. I don't know, it was really weird, it really sucks because you don't belong anywhere and it really sucked because you are

in the middle, the lesbians won't take you, the straight world kind of sucks—but then I found the label queer.

These reflections illustrate Cal's dissatisfaction with hetero and homonormative categories because neither encompassed his identity and sexuality. For Cal, his identities as a non-cisgender man and as a previous lesbian, alters his ability to fit established constructions of sexuality because they are based on cisgender bodies and norms (Valentine 2003, 124). Further, and perhaps more pertinent to this discussion, he also has no desire to fit into these norms. Cal was comfortable with the lesbian partners he had after transitioning even though he identifies as male. His partners saw him as male and he was attracted to women—all of which should have categorized him as a straight man if he relied on normative sexuality. He felt that identifying as heterosexual, the only cultural category available to him as a man attracted to women, was not suitable because, as Cal stated, that is “totally not who I am.” He does not have the history of growing up as a man with a heteronormative attraction to women, but instead grew up with a homonormative attraction to women. He now finds himself in uncharted territory where he is unable to fit into the available categories.

Queer identity, community, and culture

My experiences of trying to identify with gender and sexuality categories are similar to Cal's. During my own early stages of transition, I identified as “a gay, male, and lesbian.” For me this meant I was first and foremost a man regardless of whether or not I had male genitalia. Second, stating I was gay and lesbian meant I was solely attracted to those men and women who identified as part of the LGBTQ community. I

was in no way attracted to straight men or straight women. For me, my values align closely with queer values around accepting difference, celebrating diversity, living outside of gender norms and relationship expectations, and fighting against homophobia. Further, all of my experiences have come from or through my lesbian identity and the queer community. Being queer is the only way I have experienced the world.

Part of my formative history during my 20s involved participating in activism against statewide homophobic legislation that would have allowed legal discrimination against LGBTQ people (Elections Division, State of Oregon 1992). From those experiences, my membership in the queer community were solidified. My political commitment to the queer community, fighting for LGBTQ rights, and combatting homophobic and transphobic legislation has been a foundational aspect of my personhood. Growing up and being called a “fucking queer,” a “dyke,” and hearing “are you a boy or a girl?” have all shaped how I have approached the world. For me, the political aspect of being queer has been as important and fundamental as my queer sexual orientation. There were many men in this study who echoed this position. They too, strongly identified with the values of queer culture.

For trans men who shared similar positions and were attracted to women, being identified as a straight man was inaccurate, uncomfortable, and often repulsive. It was a social identity they had no experience with previously, and it had often been a category of people who had condemned, vilified, and stigmatized them when they identified as lesbians or masculine women. For these men, they found the category of heterosexual male inadequate and inappropriate once they were being read as men.

Scout was one of the men who had negative experiences being read as a straight man by people. When asked to describe his own sexuality Scout stated “I use the word queer and I am primarily attracted to women. Straight doesn’t seem like a comfortable identity to me even though I can see how, from a very far distance, it might look that way.” Speaking further about people assuming he is straight, Scout stated: “I love it when well-intentioned cis people try to correct you on your identity. Like the number of times I have had cis people tell me that I am a straight guy—like no, I am not. They are like, ‘but you are a man,’ and I am like—‘maybe—if I have to be.’”

Scout used his trans-ness as a factor to differentiate both his gender and his sexuality from heteronormativity. He identifies as a trans man and not simply or exclusively as a man. He is pointing to the fact that he is not a cis-normative man, and this demarcates his sexuality as one that cannot be encompassed by heterosexuality. This distinction was echoed by many trans men who, when asked to define or describe their sexuality, stated things such as: “I am a gay trans man,” “a trans guy who likes men, women, and everything in between,” or “I am trans straight.” Some men made conscious decisions to include their trans status within their sexual identities, but many did this subconsciously and were not aware of it until I pointed it out to them. When asked why they included information about their gender identity in their sexual identities, the summary of responses revolved around the importance of marking their transgender identity and experience in addition to the male identity. They stated, in sum, that they needed to point to this difference of gender because it alters and differentiates their sexuality from traditional sexual identities based on cissexual bodies and cisgender identities (Valentine 2003). As one man put it, “without the knowledge

that I am trans, people and potential partners won't be able to understand both me and my sexuality.”

When Cal found the category and label of “queer” he felt he had found an identity that encompassed his non-normative gender as well as his non-normative sexuality (Sedgwick 1990, Serano 2013). The term queer, as understood within the LGBTQ community, has been repurposed from its pejorative use and come to stand for a community, an identity, a political stance, and an academic field (Jagose 1996; Lewin 2002, 121; Love 2014, 172; Sedgwick 1990, 1993; Stimpson and Herdt 2014, 15). As Katz-Wise et al., (2016, 81) found in their study on sexual fluidity in gender minorities: “for many individuals, the queer sexual orientation identity label allows for greater flexibility than other identity labels, in that the term does not specify the directionality of attractions.” Further, “the use of queer to describe sexual orientation may also represent an active refusal to endorse more traditional sexual orientation identities...or it may indicate alignment with feminism and queer activism” (Katz-Wise 2016, 81; Serano 2013).

Queer identities can be most broadly defined as outside of the norms regarding gender and sexuality, and as a political stance, queer is a call to fight “the regimes of the normal” as a response to the marginalization experienced by many LGBTQ people (Warner 1993, xxvi). As queer does not entirely abide by binary sex and gender systems, it is an ever-expanding category (Butler 1993, Halperin 1997, Jagose 1996). While queer and trans studies are intertwined and closely related, they are not one and the same. Both are concerned with destabilizing the categories of gender and sexuality, but trans studies includes a focus on embodiment and the body, particularly

its meanings and modifications (Love 2014, 174). The body is a crucial site of difference for trans people, especially for those who opt to transition medically as discussed in chapter 4. Because sexual practice is so often tied to genitalia, and because most trans men have non-normative male genitals (when compared to cissexual men), the body plays a crucial role in understanding trans sexualities (Schilt and Windsor 2014, 741; Williams, Weinburg, and Rosenberger 2013, 720).

The body queered

Hetero- and homosexuality are based on both the sex and gender of each partner involved. This has meant that heterosexuality assumes not only an opposite gender attraction, but an opposite genital attraction as well. In other words, heterosexuality implies that women are attracted to penises and manhood, while men are attracted to vaginas and womanhood. For homosexuality, it is assumed both partners are attracted to, and share, the same gender and genitalia. For transgender men, these constructions do not work. The notion of same or opposite gender and genital attractions do not apply as they have destabilized and stepped outside the norms for sexed bodies and gendered embodiment, another reason some men have adopted queer as a label.

More information around one's gender identity and physical characteristics must be added in order to fully express how a trans person identifies. As stated earlier, many trans men included the fact that they are trans within a description of their sexuality not only to emphasize their differentiated gender but also their trans body. If we try to apply normative understandings of sexual orientation, then homosexuality in my case would require me to be in relationship with another trans man who has completed the

same medical procedures and treatments (HRT and top surgery) as I have. Only in this way would the requirements of homosexuality be met through a same-gender and same-sex (body) relationship. Yet, for some trans men, this type of relationship could be misinterpreted by outsiders. As one trans man said, “I dated an FTM but we were both pre-T and pre-op so everyone thought we were lesbians.” When being read in this way, such an assumption negates not only the sexual identity of these men, but their gender identity as well because only women can occupy a lesbian identity in a system based on cisgender categories.

In addition, many trans men indicated a strong preference for hooking up or being in relationship with other people who identify as queer. One trans man stated, “I have dated people who identify as lesbians, which I won’t do again. I have dated people [women] who identify as straight, which I prefer not to do, like they have dated cis men and I don’t find myself fitting that. My current girlfriend identifies as queer.” One of the reasons he did not want to date women who identified as straight was because they had already been “exposed to straight masculinity” and therefore, had certain “expectations around what a male/female relationship should or would look like” based on heteronormative practices. Scout, when discussing gender identity and sexuality stated: “Queer people don’t really see gender in the same way as straight folks.” In both of these men’s estimation, heteronormative men and women are embedded within narrower, cisgender experiences and expectations and had no framework to expand their definitions of sex, gender, and sexuality to include trans identities. The foundational nature of using heteronormativity to understand a person’s

positionality and identity often forces trans people to frame their identity in contrast to those norms.

Lesbians and trans men

Noah, a white college-aged trans man, illuminated the difficulty in defining sexualities using traditional categories, as well as the need to incorporate trans when discussing sexuality. Expanding on his earlier comment at the onset of this chapter, he stated “I am not straight in the same way that you are not a lesbian if you are a cisgender man who likes girls. You are only lesbian if you are a girl or a trans guy or someone who is able to identify with some essential aspect of femininity [femaleness] who likes girls.” Such a viewpoint goes beyond essentialist constructions of “sex equals gender” and notes the importance of gendered experience as it applies to trans men who were raised as women.

Many of the trans men in this study argued, sometimes vehemently, that the category of lesbian did not include trans men because it would negate their identification as men. Other trans men, however, did not hold such strong views on the subject. Noah’s observation acknowledged that trans men and cisgender lesbians share a history of living as a woman and having values formed by those experiences. It is through this experience trans men might fit within this category. Trans people, in instances such as these, are pointing out that gendered histories and experiences contribute to sexual (and political) orientations. This position is possible by expanding our understanding of trans identities as additions to, and/or refusals of, categories of gender, as well as the sexualities based off of those genders.

For the men who did not see lesbian as a category that trans men could occupy, it often appeared to relate to the length of time that they had been passing as men, the security of their own masculinity, or their adherence to heteronormative categories. Many felt being with a lesbian called into question their maleness and masculinity. With lesbians defined as women who love women, then being in a relationship with a lesbian meant they would not be viewed as “real” men. Keen, for example, portrayed himself as fulfilling traditional male dating roles, such as paying for dinner, buying gifts for his girlfriend, and generally being “in charge” of the relationship. This, in addition to his lack of participation in queer community and his often hypermasculine gender expression appeared very heteronormative. Regarding lesbians, he stated: “I would not be with someone who called themselves a lesbian because I am not a female.” For the trans men who used this framework they did not do so from a misogynistic standpoint such as, “it is bad to be a woman.” Rather, their stance was “it is bad if people view me as a woman because I identify as a man.” As Chapter 3 explained trans masculinity, part of identifying as a trans man, in addition to or in lieu of man, often includes holding a feminist stance and valuing women and femininity. Rather, their position centered on the fact they, as individuals, had transitioned to be seen as the men they are. Being in a relationship with a lesbian, calls into question the manhood they have spent years coming to terms with and achieving through transition.

For some trans men who found the lesbian category problematic, it revolved around bodily similarities as well as a partner’s maintenance of the lesbian label. In talking about lesbians who date trans men, David, a young Latino-looking man from the Midwest, appeared sporadically for a short time on a TMOC channel. He dressed in

a muscle shirt or tank top most of the time and spoke with emotion and high energy about this topic:

I am not sure that [a lesbian] is a person who is really respecting the trans guy's gender identity as a man, because if you are saying you are a lesbian and you are purposefully finding trans guys to date, you are really just boiling that person down to their genitalia, which is offensive to trans guys. I don't necessarily agree with lesbians who purposefully date trans guys but don't change their labels.

And yet, in the same discussion, David then said about the lesbian he is currently dating, "I don't think she is disrespecting me, why shouldn't I respect her identity just as she supports mine?" The tension between these two positions, held by the same individual and said in the same stream of thought, illustrates the difficulty of trying to situate oneself within a system based on cisgender understandings of sex and gender. Generally speaking, it is not common to conceive of lesbians who would be attracted to men, but as we saw in Noah's case it is possible to hold that identity and attraction based on the shared history of living as women and loving women. However, it does require an expansion of the category of lesbian and thinking beyond the binary system of understanding gender and sexuality.

Identifying one's sexuality is not easy if you are still trying to understand and identify your gender. Many of the trans men here spent painful years knowing they were different and did not fit, but not knowing they were trans. The concept and terminology of trans is now spreading at a more rapid pace but most of these men came into their identity without many resources on the topic and rarely knew it as a

possibility while growing up.

Tony's experience with this emphasizes the difficulty discerning sexual orientation and gender identity, a problem that occurs frequently in both the medical field and in the general public (Meier et al., 2013). He stated:

When I was young I had a hard time separating sexual orientation from gender identity when you don't fit into the binary construction. I liked guys [sexually], but I also wanted to be a guy and guys like girls, so I dressed in masculine clothes, which made everyone think I was a lesbian. People were like, 'no woman who looks like that would be interested in a man.'

This created an interesting dynamic for Tony: He was being misclassified by others (being read as a lesbian due to his masculine gender expression) and was misclassifying himself as straight by trying to like girls, because he thought that is what men were supposed to do. Once he understood the language of being transgender he then understood his sexuality as being a gay man because he was a man attracted to other men, regardless of being perceived as a woman. However, none of his identity development could occur until he was introduced to the transgender concept which offered a way out of using cisgender categories for his gender and sexuality.

Partners of trans men

While undergoing physical transition resulted in a recategorizing of their sexuality, the partners of these trans men also struggled with their sexuality after transition. Sometimes the challenge was in losing the visibility of their own identity as in the case of partners who identified as lesbian. Other times, a person's visible sexuality remained, as in the case of straight women, but they struggled internally due to the

cultural construction of men not having a vagina. Yet other partners struggled with the lack of a cis-normative penis because it interrupted their sexual practices and felt ill-equipped to work with trans men's anatomy. Many partners also questioned their understanding of sexualities as well as their own sexual identification, which often resulted in expanding old categories, adopting different ones, or inventing new ones.

According to the men in this project, cisgender straight women who had only experienced intimate heterosexual practices with cisgender men had a harder time reconciling male-ness and masculinity with a body marked by female primary and/or secondary sex characteristics. However, this did not necessarily mean they did not see trans men as men. It did, however, affect how these cisgender women conceived their own sexual identity. Some of the straight women were unable to reconcile their attraction to transgender men specifically because it involved interacting with men who had what they interpreted as female genitalia. The deficit of a penis and presence of a vagina in these instances marked trans men as "incomplete" and not the sort of man with whom they could pursue a sustained intimate relationship. These perspectives, according to the trans men, threatened the gender identity of a trans man because their lack of normative male genitals disqualified them from being men in these women's eyes.

For other straight women partners, there was a negotiation and exception made in their understanding of sexuality with a trans male partner. Keen's experiences with some of his partners illustrates this point. While his partners recognized and treated him as a man, they could not do so when referencing intimate encounters. Keen stated, "I have dated straight and bi girls who have said 'I am not a lesbian; I don't like

girls—but I like Keen.” For Keen, statements such as these led him to feel as if his female partners were not seeing him as a man because of his genitals. Being in relationship with him, even though he identified as straight, was something they had to make an exception for in order to avoid classifying themselves as lesbians. Keen felt his partners’ focus on the meanings they associated with female genitals left them unable to cope with their own heterosexual identity even though they saw him as a man outside of the bedroom. For these women, the trans body and its “female” aspects, were the primary factor in determining their own sexuality. Experiences such as these illustrate the importance that the trans body has for constructing sexuality for both the trans man and his partner/s.

Not all trans men felt their previous history as a lesbian, or within the lesbian community, was appropriate or something they were comfortable inhabiting. In a vlog that Keen posted while standing out on a sidewalk—wearing his typical outfit of a tank top, gold chain, baggy pants and a snap back hat—he talked about his relationship with his past lesbian identity: “I hated calling myself a lesbian, I was ashamed of it, I didn’t connect with the term.” As he explained, his unease with the term related to the fact that he had always identified as a straight man, but while his body was being read as female no one could recognize that aspect of his identity. As Keen stated “I was proud to be trans once I knew what it was; it was immediate—I knew that was me. Before that, I never felt connected with myself, I was never whole or knew who I was.” For Keen, he knew that “lesbian” did not fit but it took him years to understand that it was due to his gender rather than his sexuality.

Shifts in Desire

There can also be a shift or widening in sexual attraction when a man transitions on testosterone; one study found that 40% of transgender men reported a shift in sexual orientation (Meier, et al., 2013; Williams, Weinburg, and Rosenberger 2013, 734). This shift usually moves to an expansion of their attraction to include being attracted to “both genders” (language of the researchers) and I would argue from data collected in this project to multiple genders (Meier et al., 2013). A smaller percentage move from being solely attracted to the “opposite” gender from what they used to be attracted to. This occurs often enough to be referred to as the “gay myth” within the trans masculine community and suggests that “taking testosterone will turn you gay.” Each trans masculine YouTube channel I watched (and many I did not include in this study) dedicated time to discussing this possibility. Some men – notably those whose sexual attraction had not changed – thought it was just a myth and that testosterone could not affect sexual attraction. Other trans men, and particularly those who had experienced a change in sexual attraction, believed testosterone had affected to whom they were attracted. In fact, studies have shown as many as two-thirds of trans men, post testosterone therapy, say they are not strictly heterosexual (Bauer et al., 2013; Clements-Nolle 2001; Iantaffi and Bockting 2011; Rich et al., 2017; Williams, Weinburg and Rosenberger 2013). Katz-Wise et al. (2016, 81) stated that “it appears as though sexual fluidity in attractions should be considered an additional potential ‘side effect’ of testosterone use among trans masculine individuals.” While testosterone may or may not alter a trans man’s object/s of attraction, I would suggest a high percentage of trans men identifying as not solely heterosexual reflects the difficulty of relying on a

binary system limited to cisgender bodies in order to categorize sexualities. I turn to my own history to illustrate how these systems have affected the way I understand and frame my sexuality. Please note that what follows involves personal or intimate revelations.

My own sexual attraction and orientation has changed significantly since I transitioned. I previously identified as a lesbian and was only attracted to other lesbian women but now find myself almost entirely attracted to men. This newfound attraction was surprising, shocking, and a relief all at the same time. First, I was surprised because I had never been attracted to men previously and was initially unsure if I was experiencing body envy or sexual attraction. Further, I had not known this was even a possible effect of transitioning. Had I known this possibility, it would have lessened my chief reservation around transitioning – that I did not want to be viewed as a straight man. To suddenly find myself attracted to male bodies and male genitalia was disconcerting and unsettling as I had no reference point to understand it or no knowledge of how to enact this attraction. On the other hand, it was also a huge relief that I would remain squarely in the queer community, transitioning from one version of being gay to another. Specifically, I felt my values could and would remain as visible as they had always been and I would still be accepted in the only community I had known. Remaining gay and being in gay spaces, such as bars or LGBTQ community centers, meant I could also be seen as the person I had always been – queer through and through.

However, I do tend to get read as straight outside of gay spaces by cisgender people, which is unsettling as I was very rarely seen as a straight person prior to

transitioning. Like Tony, I was a very masculine female and cisgender people assumed I must be a lesbian because of my masculinity. My homosexuality had been on display seemingly all of the time and allowed me (or perhaps forced me) to live openly as a lesbian. Now however, I have to assert my homosexuality when in heteronormative spaces in ways I did not need to do as often when I was viewed as a very masculine woman.

Still, I struggled with this new attraction and identity at times because I had no idea how to navigate gay male culture. Having been familiar with, but never participated in, gay men's spaces I was particularly worried about my ability to fit and be accepted within this identity. For me, this was a three-pronged problem. First, I did not have any history of being socialized as a male or being in homosocial male groups. In my mind, this meant I was not drawing off of the same base knowledge that other gay men were. The second aspect revolved around my non-normative body. Reading through hook-up ads of gay men I felt I could not be a "top" for men who wanted to have anal sex, nor could I be a bottom for men who wanted to give a blow job. Lastly, I had no cultural language or experience to draw on in order to navigate the cultural spaces of gay men. I did not know the etiquette of touch, how to communicate attraction, the different sexual practices in the bedroom, or the male energy brought to these encounters. All of this led to a tremendous amount of insecurity in how to *be* a gay man for me.

My sexuality changed in other ways as well. My sex drive increased significantly with testosterone and the thought of sex became much more interesting and exciting than it had ever been before. It was now more consuming, always being at the

forefront of my thoughts than it had been as a female. I was more visually interested in bodies and their physical characteristics (all bodies at first and then solely men's bodies). In speaking with my male friends, this was all echoed back to me in how they experienced their own sexuality and sex drive when they went through puberty, which gave me reassurance that this was not all in my head, nor was I unconsciously embodying a stereotype of men objectifying bodies. As another trans man put it: "when you hear stereotypes of how all men think about sex...it is true beyond what I imagined" (Coffin 2017). Putting it into practice was intimidating and anxiety provoking as – having been a lesbian – I had no sexual experiences with men or male bodies. Because I had no natal penis/testes, I could not even draw masturbatory knowledge for working with this equipment so to speak. Further, my own genitals were changing (clitoral growth) and responding differently than they had when I was not on testosterone. I found I craved vaginal penetration, started experiencing female ejaculation, and enjoyed different sorts of clitoral stimulation than I previously had. All of these factors prevented me from enacting my new male sexuality with another man for years after I had transitioned.

While I have now been with many different men, it is also a source of frustration for me as very few of them identify solely as gay – a fact I find causes me to question my own maleness or ability to be gay at times. In my experience, I do not have what gay men want (a penis) and I do have what they do not want (a vagina). It is a two-fold problem, and one that is inherently tied to inhabiting a hybrid body. Despite having completed top surgery, having a full beard, balding, and always passing as a man, the fact I have female genitalia affects any possible intimate encounters I have. People I

am intimate with need to have some sort of attraction to that genitalia – which in my experience has not been gay men. While, from my trans perspective, I can frame male bodies as having either male or female genitalia, cisgender men often have a difficult time framing a male body as one that has a vagina, especially during vaginal-penile sex.

When a friend asked me why it is important to me, whether I am with a straight man or a gay man, I had to ask myself why indeed did I care? For me, like Scout, it is about the fact that queer people “do not frame gender in the same way,” but it is also that queer people do not frame sexuality in the same way either. I have slept with mostly bisexual, men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM), heterosexual married men, or on rare occasion, men who have no experience with men—and I find that the sex between us is not like queer sex. Queer sex is not just about the acts and genitals involved, it is also about holding a different set of values and not having expectations around gender roles, expression, and practices in the bedroom. Queer sex, in my experience, is about a greater amount of equity in the bedroom, enacting practices that do not necessarily replicate heteronormative acts, and more balanced sexual energy. For me, I find these men to be too constrained by heteronormative sexualities and expectations because that is the framework they are drawing from.

A queer couple—Saha and Lauren—gave an interview in an issue of *them* (an e-magazine that focuses on the queer and trans community) about queer sex (*them* 2017). Saha identified as a cisgender straight man while Lauren described themselves as a non-binary trans person just recently on testosterone (but without top surgery). They felt there was something unique about the sex they have because of Lauren’s

gender identity. Lauren stated: “I remember Saha saying when we first started dating that I didn’t have sex like anyone else, he goes ‘this is really different, like you are really different, there is something different here.’ I honestly think that was very gender related whether or not I was a boy in bed or just really—there was some sort of disconnect with the way I performed.” The suggestion here is that queer people have greater freedom from normative gender roles in sexual encounters by embracing different ideations, embodiments, and practices.

Returning to the body in sexuality

Almost all of the men in this project have transitioned medically or planned to do so. For those who had transitioned, all did so either through testosterone, top surgery, or both, but none had bottom surgery. As stated in chapter 4, less than five percent of men who transition undergo any form of genital reconstruction (James et al., 2016). These bodily configurations and physicalities are important to trans men’s experiences as sexual beings, as well as to partners as they must also adjust their understanding of what a male body can be, how to interact with that body, and how it affects their own sexuality.

Intimate relations between bodies can have the power to affirm or erode a trans man’s confidence in his embodiment and masculinity. The language trans men use to describe their hybrid bodies must be altered because of cultural meanings attributed to body parts – especially sexual characteristics (Jackson and Scott 2010, 148). By using terms such as clit-cock or mini-dick, trans men are indicating to their partners how to frame their anatomy, which reinforces that they are men, while at the same time something in addition or other than cisgender men because they differentiate their

genitals from cis-normative penises (Zimman 2014). Such terminology may also indicate or imply how they would like their anatomy to be interacted with. For instance, researchers working with trans men noted that a partner was instrumental in helping a trans man inhabit a masculine sexual embodiment “because she dealt with [his] penis like it was any other penis” (Williams, Weinburg, and Rosenberger 2013, 730). Other practices such as position or being the insertive partner can also bolster an embodiment of male sexuality and one’s gender identity as a (trans) man (Rosario 2005, 186).

I met Tiggan, a 50-something mixed race (Filipino and White) trans man, at a trans conference with his wife where they attended my presentation. He had just come to an understanding that he was trans within the previous few months and would end up starting to transition two weeks after I met him. He went on to found a Facebook group for trans men over age 50, through which I followed him and occasionally “spoke” with him on that venue. In a YouTube video posted to his personal channel, he described his body as “hybrid.” This allowed him and his partner to occupy both new and old identities. He stated “Although I love presenting as male, I do not want to lose my identity as a lesbian, and although she [Tiggan’s partner] now presents as a straight female, she also wants to maintain her identity as a lesbian.” Identifying his body as hybrid—intentionally marking it as both male and female—was a way to signify not only his non-normative body, but also his lesbian self. For Tiggan, having been a lesbian for all of his life, he was very reluctant to give up this aspect of his identity. His politics and social values were very much tied to being a lesbian, as was his history of experiencing discrimination from heteronormative society because of that identity. Furthermore, his

partner had come to her lesbian identity later in life when they had met a few years earlier. In order to honor the many years of her struggle to know and inhabit that identity for herself, he did not want to dishonor her by erasing it. Thus, the acknowledgment of his hybrid body and not using male terminology for his genitalia, allowed for a more flexible use of the categories of his body, his relationship, and lesbian identity (as both a political and sexual identity).

Many trans men need to be explicit with potential partners regarding what to expect in regards to genitalia as there is a cultural assumption about what genitals should be present for men (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 131). This is done due to concerns around safety, for if such information is not disclosed prior to an intimate encounter there is a substantiated risk of violence. Again, the limits of cultural assumptions that gender equates to genitals has left no room for alternative configurations. We do not look at men and think that some of them have vaginas and micro-penises—although we should (West and Zimmerman 1987, 131).

Other trans men were comfortable using female terminology in reference to their male bodies. Buck Angel, cited as the first trans man to enter the mainstream porn industry, has sold himself as “the man with a pussy;” no doubt a sensationalist tactic to bolster interest (Hunt 2013, Angel 2014). While he is contributing to increasing awareness of trans masculine bodies through the porn industry, within the trans community Buck’s tactic is met with unease. Some trans men worry that framing trans men in this way calls into question trans men’s masculinity and maleness because the mainstream argument against trans people has often centered on “you aren’t a real man unless you have a penis.” Trans men may, anatomically speaking, have this

anatomy (a “pussy”) but few conceive of it in such blatant terms. Many trans men find the term “pussy” only applicable to female bodies and if applied to themselves risks their identity being refused. The trans men in this project who enjoyed being penetrated chose to use “bonus hole” or “front hole” to refer to their anatomy. These terms were used by both the trans man and his partner/s as a way to ensure that having penetrative sex with a trans man does not result in feeling like they were having sex with a cisgender woman (Williams, Weinburg, and Rosenberger 2013, 736; Wooden and Parker 1982).

Sexual energy, drive, and pleasure

Other bodily changes brought on by testosterone were described not only as an increase in libido, but as something that differed significantly from the sexuality they experienced as a female bodied person. In a self-reflexive piece written by Sam that was read at a conference that I also attended, he described his male sexuality as “being immediately accessible, urgent, and extremely rewarding” which differed from his sexuality when he was not on testosterone. For him, experiencing sex when he was living as a woman, was “approached very slowly and carefully, with much emphasis placed on building trust and establishing safety.” Sam, as a prior lesbian who remained with his lesbian partner before and after transition, noted he had also developed an attraction to men while transitioning, describing it as “an intense hunger to be sexual with them.” In my own experience, I also found myself bringing a different energy to sexual encounters than I had previously known. Changes such as these that involve a sudden and unexpected change in attraction, different sexual energy, and new sexual

practices shape a trans sexuality. In other words, it alters our entire sexual *habitus* and a new one must often be created.

For Sam and his partner, not only did his transitioned body alter the way they were seen as a couple (moving from lesbian to straight), but they had to “explore the new heterosexual energy between us.” This new aspect of their relationship was the result of Sam being read as male not only by people outside of their relationship, but by his partner as well. Seeing Sam as a man and feeling the change in his sexuality, both in nature and practice, meant that their sexuality underwent a change. While Sam had the same genitalia as before he transitioned for the most part, their sexuality was not the same in how they related to each other during affectionate or intimate encounters due to his trans masculinity, trans embodiment, and his trans masculine sexuality.

In some of the videos I watched, men stated that they had not allowed partners to touch their genitals or chest during sexual encounters prior to beginning testosterone due to body dysphoria. They had previously tried to be sexual and learned they had “no go” zones where, if touched there, they would immediately be turned off and discontinue any intimate encounter occurring at the moment. Keen had experienced this and said he had not been on the “receiving end of sex” for three years stating he had taken his pleasure from pleasuring others. He only became interested in receiving sex after being on testosterone. For many men, testosterone may decrease or erase such dysphoria entirely (Irwig 2016). This may allow them to access eroticism and pleasure with their genitals to a greater degree than experienced before or perhaps for the first time (Schilt and Windsor 2014). For most trans men, it also increases sexual

pleasure immensely and alters the intensity and duration of their orgasms, which contributes to their desire to participate in sexual encounters. Again, I will turn to my own experiences to illustrate the implications of this new aspect of sexuality. The following section contains explicit and intimate knowledge.

For myself, as a middle-aged trans man who had spent all of my life identifying as a lesbian, I previously enjoyed sex with women where the focus was not necessarily on vaginal penetration. After testosterone however, I found I deeply craved penetration with a penis and male partner—something I had only conceived of as heterosexual when I was a lesbian. While I also enjoy “back door sex”—a sex act commonly associated with gay men—and identify as gay, I find that I often prefer vaginal penetration with men. This has made it challenging for me to frame the act of having sex with men as solely a gay sex act even though I identify as a gay man. This may be the primary reason that bisexual or heterosexual men are most often the types of men who respond to my dating or hook-up ads—gay men rarely seem interested in vaginal penetrative sex. This was reinforced through the fact that my ads posted to gay hookup sites, such as Scruff or Grindr, received very few replies while ads on all gender platforms, such as Craigslist, garnered ten times as many responses.

I struggled with this newly found sexual pleasure of vaginal penetration, writing in my field notes how my identity as a gay man has been enacted:

It's very weird to suddenly have my vagina 'work' and be interested in penetration. It makes it difficult to identify as gay – because not only do I have no experience with gay men, but now I am having, and enjoying –

really enjoying – being fucked by a dick in my vagina, which seems like a very un-gay thing to do.

Looking back on this entry it seems clear to me that I was framing this new-found interest in penetrative sex as a heterosexual practice, not only because it involved penetration, but because I was now desiring a penis to do the penetrating. Even when I had practiced penetration as a lesbian it was always done with fingers or toys, which meant I did not frame it as a heteronormative way of having sex. Furthermore, I felt my maleness and masculinity was in question because I identified as a gay man, but only men who had previous experience with female bodies seemed to want to engage in intimate encounters with me. I wondered whether or not such bi and hetero men saw me as an actual man due to the fact that we were having penile-vaginal sex. It was also clear that some of them did not according to the language they used during sexual encounters with me.

When discussing this with a friend of mine, he asked if I wanted bottom surgery so I could have more normative male genitalia. I said something to the effect of “no, I wouldn’t because sex is a thousand times better than it has ever been before – the orgasms are amazing.” I did not want to undergo any sort of surgical procedures that might alter the new-found pleasures I was experiencing. Other trans men frequently echoed this position and offered variations around “my sex life is too good now to risk losing it” (Angel 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016; Schilt and Windsor 2014; Williams, Weinburg, and Rosenberger 2013). It is a complicated and confusing position to hold at times. There are certainly days where I wish I did have a normative penis as it would give me access to gay men’s community in ways that I cannot gain in my current

embodiment. However, the experience of living with this hybrid body has given me access to such unique insights around embodiment, gender, and sexuality that I cannot say that I wish I had been born a cisgender man.

While testosterone may ease dysphoria to a large extent, once a man has top surgery their dysphoria may shift from their chest to their genitals, which was expressed as being increasingly aware that they were lacking male genitalia. Simultaneously, they may gain both a greater desire to be sexual with a testosterone driven libido and heightened sensitivity in their genitalia (Angel 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016). Drew, standing in his bedroom wearing a sweatshirt and slouched beanie, made a vlog responding to a prompt about surgery, during which he went a little off track. Drew had transitioned a couple of years before and was feeling more settled in his identity as a passing man. Regarding his sex drive he stated:

I didn't really want to have sex before I was on T, but after I went on T, I wanted sex, I wanted to have sex and you know I felt some inadequacy and I felt sometimes like the anatomy that I had was wrong but most of my dysphoria went to my chest. After I had top surgery I had no more chest dysphoria. I am done with that. It's an amazing feeling, but with that comes, or for me, came bottom dysphoria. Now sexually, like in the bedroom I feel inadequate, I feel like something is missing down there. I feel like I have the wrong parts and I feel like what I do with my girlfriend is 'wrong.' Not that the action is wrong, just that what is happening for me isn't—it's just not correct in my mind. It's not what I want to be

happening. And what I am doing isn't what I want to be doing and what she is doing to me isn't what I want to feel anymore or have done to me.

Cal had similar sentiments, and posted them on a video about dysphoria while he was on vacation in Florida. Sitting on a couch in a room painted yellow with photographs of flowers behind him and a set of string lights, he said: "I have some discomfort because I feel that it [his micropenis] doesn't look how it is supposed to look. It's not like I feel I am missing something...but I feel like something should be there...although by default that would mean I am missing something." However, neither of these men wanted bottom surgery, an act that might solve the problem of not having "something down there." This stance was echoed in Schilt and Windsor (2013, 741) where "only half of the trans men said their ideal bodies would have a penis and...were typically unwilling to risk the negative potential outcomes of surgery."

Not all trans men have an increase in bottom dysphoria after beginning testosterone and having top surgery. Tony had severe bottom dysphoria that had lessened after being on testosterone. While he now felt comfortable with his anatomy and being sexual, early in his transition he stated: "With the bottom area, I am more uncomfortable with it because I feel like I don't quite know how to use it [his vagina] and I feel like if I got more accustomed to how it works maybe I would like it more." In an article for *The Advocate*, one trans man described his new connection with his vagina as:

I personally will always remember the exact moment I realized that my genitals were OK — that my vagina was a part of me and that is was OK to be a man without a penis — and it was through masturbation and

orgasm. It was one of the first times that I penetrated myself, and I felt a bit guilty that I actually climaxed. It was a weird feeling to enjoy my vagina for the first time — it had always been something that I was not connected to and even hated. But that orgasm changed everything for me. It was really a turning point in my identity and my self-love (Angel 2016).

For this man, his sexual use of his vagina served to bolster his gender identity as a man regardless of the female nature of his genitals and the cultural expectation that men must have penises and should not have a vagina.

Navigating one's genitals, body configuration, intimate practices and sexual identity (of self and partner) is challenging for trans people while using a form of categorization that relies on binary constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Tony and Marcus, his gay male partner, made a video together to answer the posed topic "dating." As they sat together getting ready to speak on the topic, they playfully wrestled with each other, played on their phones, and generally goofed off until they got themselves together. Both wore baseball hats and jeans with Tony in a t-shirt and Marcus in an unzipped sweatshirt with no shirt on. Their conversation illustrates the struggle of using normative categories to define trans sexuality:

Tony: Do you feel like dating a trans man affects your sexuality? As a gay man? Didn't someone ask you if you now identify as queer?

Marcus: That did happen, like, 'now that you are dating a trans guy, how do you identify?' And I was like, what do you mean? They were like, 'you know Tony is trans, right?' Yeah, duh. 'Do you identify as queer now that

you are dating Tony?’ My understanding of queer is that it can be more encompassing, but I’m a guy and Tony is a guy—so I am gay.

Tony: You are only attracted to men, right?

Marcus: Yeah.

Tony: In bed you are attracted to me?

Marcus: Yeah.

Tony: Which is a female body [Tony is on T and has had top surgery]. So, do you think you could ever be attracted to a woman? What is it about men that you are attracted to, since clearly it is not only their anatomy, because you can be attracted to female bodies, what makes it that you can’t be attracted to women? And if you are attracted to masculinity then why wouldn’t you be attracted to a masculine woman? And if you are attracted to feminine men then why can’t you be attracted to feminine women?

Marcus: I don’t get boners for girls, I am just not turned on by women.

Tony: I guess it is the same as the question of why are you gay? You just can’t answer it.

This discussion between Tony and Marcus was posted on a YouTube channel in response to questions voiced by cisgender people around sexual categories and the nature of being with someone who is a man, but has female genitalia. These questions and answers suggest the inability of heteronormativity or homonormativity to encompass people who hold trans masculinities and inhabit non-cissexual bodies.

Trans people who are purposefully inhabiting hybrid bodies require new categories of sexual identities to encompass both their masculinity and their sexuality.

Summary

The fact many of the trans men I worked with included “trans” within their sexual orientation (e.g., gay trans man) points to the failings of sexual identities based on cisgender norms and cissexual bodies to include gender diversity. This allowed me to explore the idea that there is a trans sexuality and note the differences between this position and others. The ethnographic data supported the notion that trans sexuality—in practices, identities, and desires—is a significantly different experience from cisgender experiences.

The trans body and trans sexuality are inseparably intertwined. Stepping outside of normative constructions and identifying as a trans man (as opposed to man) and inhabiting a non-normative body results in a destabilization of current categories used to describe straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual sexualities. Many men have adopted queer as a viable sexuality because it is not based on specificity (Meier et al., 2013). While we are in this rapidly developing gender revolution it is impossible to predict exactly how or if new sexual categories will come into being and interplay with each other, but it is certain that encountering new genders and new body types will require us to expand sexualities beyond those constructed on binary genders and body forms.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

One of the descriptions I have personally used to articulate my positionality as a trans man is that I am a man who was raised as a woman. I spent decades trying to pass as a woman—with miserable results—before I realized there was a reason I could never feel comfortable as a woman. Because I was raised as a girl, lived as a woman, and was a lesbian for as long as I can remember I have become a very different sort of man. Had I been born with a male body I would have been raised among boys, conditioned to conform to masculine expectations, and would have never become the sort of man I am today. At times, it feels as if I am a man who has virtually nothing in common with men. I still feel much more comfortable in the company of women than I do with men. I am happy that people can now look at me and recognize me as a man, but I do not always think of myself as a man. I am something entirely different altogether. In the words of Robert Frost, “I took the path less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

When I first began this dissertation project I was focused more on the sexuality of trans men and their partners. I knew several men who had identified as lesbians previous to transitioning whose sexuality was now perceived as if they were straight men and they struggled with being seen as such. Rather than feeling pleased with their new normativity, they were unhappy. They felt very uncomfortable, and continuously worked to describe their sexuality and manly attraction to women while being men as

something other than heterosexuality. Many of them were troubled to lose the community with whom they had come of age, developed feminist values, and participated in LGBTQ community. As I began exploring the social nature of sexuality, more and more of the men in my study kept returning to aspects of their masculinities which set them apart from hegemonic masculinity. Eventually it became clear that trans men and the type of masculinity they were embodying underpinned all other aspects of their personhood. The way these men were constructing and enacting their masculinity was the wellspring from which they understood and positioned themselves in relation to other men, women, and their partners.

As a trans man myself, I also knew that I was doing masculinity in a way that often marked me apart from other men but I could not articulate exactly how that was happening. Many trans men I encountered during this project also had the same experience and they struggled and stumbled, just as I did, to find language to describe how their masculinity differs from cisgender masculinity. We often couldn't coherently describe the differences between how we were feeling, thinking, and acting when compared to normative masculinity, but there was a recognition between us in our flailing attempts to depict those differences. It is difficult to articulate being masculine all of your life, finally being recognized as a man and then understanding that masculinity, as our culture commonly understands it, cannot contain your practice of masculinity.

With the data I was gathering about how these men were framing and enacting their masculinity I saw that even explaining gender as a spectrum rather than binary poles was not encompassing trans men's identities. The models we used during

educational and training presentations around gender did not capture how trans men were defining and enacting their gender. I needed a different way of depicting gender. I began developing a different model that would address their distinctive positionality.

Many of the men involved in this project stressed the trans-ness of their manliness. They identified themselves as *trans* men rather than just men. They said they were trans gay men or trans straight guys. The emphasis on their trans-ness was not just a description of how they became men or part of their history. It was something that marked them as more than and other than cisgender men. It is not that trans men are more than *or* other than men; rather, they are both at the same time. Their previous embodiments, gendered experiences, and sexualities have resulted in a very different kind of masculinity.

The model, which positions trans men in a perpendicular position to the binary gender spectrum between cisgender men and women, allows trans men to identify as *trans* men rather than, or in addition to, men. It positions them in a way where they can own, embody, and carry forward the knowledge and experiences of living as women, being socialized as a woman, and embodying a female body. Occupying a position outside of the binary, but still intersecting with it, is a more accurate depiction of how these men are identifying as trans men as opposed to solely as men or somewhere along a spectrum of genders. Once I embraced the *trans* in trans masculine, I had located the focus of this dissertation.

Trans masculinity

Many trans men, myself included, developed feminist values while we lived as women in a sexist society. We learned how to manage the derogatory comments,

street harassment, and leering stares. Most of us lived as masculine women and experienced the criticism of our failed femininity from our mothers, as well as other women (and men) because we did not fulfill societal expectations for femininity. Our masculinity is shaped by all of the above experiences and it was one of the reasons trans men in this project cited for rejecting and purposefully fighting against hegemonic masculinity.

For some men the realization of differences between how women and men are treated came after they transitioned. The stark disparities of the differential power, both consciously and unconsciously given to men, became most apparent once these men were visibly male. Trans men reported people giving them more authority, looking to them as if they were experts and people giving way to them. As people who now have visibly male bodies, they have also seen the fear they cause in women when they follow too closely on the street, when their glances are seen as intrusions, or when suspicion is cast on them if we are alone with children. These effects of being a man have also shaped their masculinity. The ways in which trans men are doing masculinity are informing us “to reconsider the nature of masculinity and the various ways with which it can be engaged” (Zimman 2012, 213).

Trans masculine embodiment

For the trans men in this project, their bodies and embodiment also played a significant role in shaping their trans masculinity. The vast majority of trans men in this project were on testosterone, underwent top surgery, and have no plans to undergo bottom surgery. Some trans men described their bodies as hybrid in nature, but this was often as much a political stance as it was about the physicality of their bodies. The

political stances revolved around honoring their partners' lesbian identity, a past membership to the lesbian community, or not wanting to embody a cissexual male body. Hybrid bodies never meant that these men referred to their bodies as both male and female; rather, it acknowledged that men can have vaginas, breasts or menstrual cycles. Having connectivity with women in their lives around what it is like to inhabit a female body also shaped their masculinity.

Their new physicalities after transitioning also set them apart. While these trans men share many of the same secondary sex characteristics as cisgender men, they also differ in significant ways. Most of the trans men in this project gained clitoral growth due to testosterone, were very satisfied with their “mini-dicks,” and were not interested in pursuing bottom surgery to create more normative male genitals. This aspect of their embodiment was something they felt strongly about, as this new anatomy separated them from both cissexual men and women. This difference contributed to and solidified their positionality apart from the binary spectrum in the trans positionality model.

For the trans men who had completed top surgery, most finally felt “right” in their body. They felt that their body finally matched what they had been picturing themselves as. Many of them spoke about going to Pride events where they would go bare chested as an experience of joyful freedom to finally embody their maleness and be in a place where the scars across their chests had meaning. They bear their scars with pride. After years of experiencing the dissonance of having bodies that did not align with an internal sense of self, the transformation of the physical self was

extremely powerful for these men. The experience of altering the physical self in radical ways contributed to a trans embodiment.

Trans masculine sexuality

These men's physicality and embodiment were fundamental to how they constructed their sexuality, as was the sexual community they belonged to prior to transition. The effects of testosterone on these men transformed them from being viewed as female to male, which in turn affected the ways their sexuality was interpreted. Most of the men in the project had identified as lesbians, or participated in the lesbian community, prior to transitioning. For many of them, they remained attracted to women after transitioning but struggled with being classified as heterosexual men even though people saw them as men attracted to or in relationship with women.

Heterosexuality, as a category, was ill-fitting because it relies on cisgender constructions of gender, embodiment, and sexualities. Trans men felt that hetero or homosexuality was not capable of including their sexuality as those categories rely on cisgender embodiments. Many men felt that the category of queer was a better fit as it does not rely on either normative gender or normative sexuality. For the men who identified as trans in addition to man, queer represents a greater freedom from constraining cultural assumptions around binary genders and sexualities.

Trans men often experienced significant changes to their sexuality after beginning testosterone, including an increased sex drive, expanding interest in different activities, or a change in what gender/s they were attracted to. These changes also had significant effects on how trans men constructed a trans sexuality.

Negotiating new sexual communities, such as gay men, polysexual, or straight, required learning new norms, access points, and practices. Trans men's histories of (most often) non-heteronormative sexualities were also brought forward into these new relationships and communities. Most of the men in the project had intimate encounters with people who had never been with a trans man nor his unique physicality, which resulted in constant negotiations and education around their bodies and sexuality. These shifts resulted in losing their old sexual *habitus* and developing new ones.

Many partners or people who had intimate encounters with trans men expressed a new-found preference or appreciation for trans men's body type. Partners also noted a difference in the *je ne sais quoi* of a trans man's sexual actions and energy during intimate encounters that they enjoyed and trans men attributed to a combination of their different sexual histories, combined with the effects of testosterone and exploring relationships while embodying a hybrid body. All of these factors contributed to building a trans sexuality that was distinctly different than their previous sexualities and from heteronormative sexuality. Their trans sexualities also added to the positionality of their trans masculinity. The gendered, embodied, and sexual cycle is interconnected.

Limitations of the dissertation

As discussed earlier, the trans community is relatively new and as such, it is still defining itself as it simultaneously grows and changes. The language used to describe ourselves, the categories we have created, and the ways in which we define ourselves continue to change. Even now there can be significant differences in how people define some of the most basic language used within the trans community. As the

community continues to grow and expand, new terminology, new ways of conceptualizing our identities, and new methods of explaining gender to cisgender people through a trans theoretical approach will be introduced, discussed, put into use, and perhaps discarded. My point is that these identities and the community formed around them are changing so rapidly that it is difficult to keep up. Future research will need to track such changes and ascertain if trans men remain attached to trans in the same way they were in this project.

Another gap in this dissertation is that all of the men in this project had made use of medical transition or would go on to transition. Therefore, trans men who do not medically transition and those who identify somewhere in the non-binary realm are not represented in this research. This is significant in that their embodied experiences may be significantly different as they typically do not “pass” (and often do not want to pass) in the same manner as those who have transitioned. Their perspectives and experiences are critical to expanding what it means to adopt a trans masculinity and if such a position holds true to their identities.

To reiterate a point made earlier in this dissertation, more research needs to be done specifically with trans women to ascertain if the trans positionality model applies to their experiences. Trans women often face significant challenges when it comes to “passing” and may not be as willing or able to adopt a position of *trans* femininity as trans men are to adopt *trans* masculinity. Further, trans women are at higher risk for having their identities refuted and facing violence because of their more visible non-conformity to expected sex characteristics (e.g., big hands, taller stature, broad shoulders, deeper voice). Trans women face significantly higher safety concerns and

likely take precautions around how they manage social interactions and gendered behaviors in order to mitigate those dangers. These differences may currently prevent them from wanting to inhabit a position of trans-ness over being seen as solely a woman.

In the future, some consideration should be paid to the ages of men when they transition. This study sample was largely composed of men in their 20s and only four were 30 years old or above. Discovering and/or disclosing that one is trans happens at different ages for different people and there may be some relationship between stage of life and whether they choose to adopt trans masculinity or a more normative hegemonic masculinity. Other factors, such as sexuality prior to transition may also significantly affect whether trans-ness is adopted as the vast majority of participants who identified as trans men in this study had spent their formative years in the lesbian community. Further, research on trans sexuality suggests that sexual fluidity (as opposed to more binary sexualities such as homo/heterosexuality) may be higher in those who were “at an older age” when they came into their trans identity (Katz-Wise et al. 2016, 78). Research needs to be conducted to account for the experiences of those who transition in their adolescence prior to puberty.

Factors such as family dynamics, religious practices, or regional location may also affect trans masculinity. The degree of rejection or acceptance by family members and the amount of support a trans person has during the initial years of transition may play an important part in being able to embody a non-normative type of masculinity. For those men who relied on parental approval and were rebuffed, their ability to move forward with their transition was stalled because of the lack of support from families

and their consternation about bringing shame on their parents. Degree of connection, geographical distance from family, and cultural beliefs about the centrality (or not) of family also should be more closely examined for their effects on trans masculine identities.

Lastly, another limitation of the study is that I did not focus on trans men who had gone stealth. Such men may or may not adopt positions of trans masculinity. Stealth men, by their nature, are hard to find as they are rarely known as trans men. The two men who had been stealth and were now living as trans men had done so in order to take on advocacy work for the trans community, as well as to live more authentically. They felt a relief at being able to diverge from hegemonic norms of masculinity by becoming visible as trans. However, without a concerted effort to locate and include stealth men it cannot be assumed that they enact their masculinities in the same way as the trans men in this project did. Nor did I include anyone who has de-transitioned and these individuals might provide valuable insights on their shifting embodiments and gender.³⁵

Moving forward with trans studies

Examining how trans men are constructing trans masculinity, trans embodiment, and trans sexuality (and simultaneously rejecting hegemonic masculinity, cisgender embodiment, and heteronormative sexuality), is an opportunity to study culture change and the creation of a new identity. The U.S. has seen a rapid increase, particularly since the 1990s, of people identifying as transgender and living outside of gender

³⁵ Literature on detransitioning is just emerging. See Levine 2018, Marchiano 2017, and Yarbrough (2017) for information on the subject.

norms. Further, with the advent of better and more widespread medical professionals willing to treat transgender individuals more and more people are making use of transition related care. These factors are altering the previous cultural understandings of what men and women are—socially, physically, and sexually.

As many have suggested, it appears we are in the midst of a gender revolution (Couric et al., 2017). It is difficult to predict what the outcome of this gender expansion will be, but my study suggests it will have lasting effects on how our culture frames gender. There is hope that the trans movement will help deconstruct hegemonic masculinities, assist in creating more equitable treatment between a variety of genders, and break down rules around the way we enact and express gender. Through trans studies, anthropologists have an opportunity to study both how new identities and communities are formed as well as how the culture in which they are embedded struggle or accept, accommodate or refuse, such identities and communities.

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APPENDIX

PARTICIPANTS

The participants listed alphabetically in the appendix are those whose quotes appear often and prominently in this research. Greater context for these trans men and their partners is shared to better inform the reader of their positionality and other identities. Other participants who are more rarely quoted are given context within the dissertation text where appropriate.

- “Ashley” is a 25-year-old white cisgender woman attending graduate school on the East Coast whose research interests focus on transgender issues. She has been in relationship for two years with a stealth transgender man. She previously identified as a lesbian with “strong lesbian feminist politics,” and has struggled maintaining her queer identity while with a trans man in what, from outward assumptions, looks like a heterosexual relationship. Ashley made weekly videos on a channel designed by and for partners of transgender men and was on the channel for approximately a year.
- “Cal” is in his early 20s and is a white Canadian trans man who spent several years transitioning by starting, then stopping, and eventually re-starting testosterone. He took a similar path for top surgery by scheduling, cancelling, and then eventually having top surgery. Cal was the longest participating member among all of the collaboration channels. Once he completed transitioning he looked and sounded as if he was a cisgender male, although he did state that when he spoke French on the phone, callers would perceive him

as female. He described his sexuality at different times as lesbian, fluid, bi and straight. He is a trans advocate and an internet personality, having documented his transition on YouTube and participated on a trans collaboration channel for more than 10 years.

- “Drew” is a 23-year-old white trans man living in the Midwest. He has struggled to find understanding and support from his family, which is a frustration and sadness to him. During the time of the research, he was well into his transition, having been on testosterone for two years and completed top surgery some time ago. He passed easily as a man and identified his sexuality as a straight man, although he had previously identified as a lesbian. Drew remained with the trans collaboration channel for over a year.
- “Emma” is a 31-year-old white cisgender woman and the partner of Kip. Before she was with Kip she described herself as not being “hetero, homo or bi” and was attracted to people’s personality more than their gender. After being with Kip and becoming more involved in the trans community she now describes her sexuality as pansexual. Emma remained on a YouTube collaboration channel designed by and for partners of transgender men for a year and was frequently joined by her partner during videos.
- “Ian” is a 24-year-old white trans man living in Scotland who was just beginning his transition and would start testosterone during my fieldwork. He often felt like he did not receive meaningful support from his friends, who were cisgender, and found his deepest support through on-line venues, particularly YouTube. He struggled with his inability to pass as a man during the majority of fieldwork and

his self-confidence was low because of it. Ian was on and off of YouTube collaboration channels for two years.

- “Keen” is a 23-year-old black trans man living in the South. He is taking testosterone and binds his chest as he has not had top surgery but plans on doing so. He “grew up in the lesbian community” but “only because there was nothing that fit better” and currently identifies as a straight man and has had several straight cisgender girlfriends. Keen was an originator of a trans collaborative channel for men of color and remained active on the channel for 9 months. He later developed his own personal channel where he further documented his transition and discussed issues relating to transgender identities.
- “Kip” is a 31-year-old white trans man living in Australia. He delayed transitioning for “seven or eight” years because he wanted to wait until he could afford to have chest reconstruction surgery. He began taking testosterone and had top surgery during the research, after which he passed very well as a man. During my research, he was in a relationship with a cisgender woman who whole-heartedly supported his transition for the three years they had been together. Kip had been in several relationships he described as lesbian but knew he always identified as a straight man. Kip and Emma (above) frequently appeared together in her YouTube videos about partners of transgender men.
- “Quan” is a 19-year-old Chinese trans man who grew up and lives in Australia. He is currently not on testosterone nor has he undergone any surgery although he very much wants to. He socially lives as a man while attending college. He

does not have support from his family, who still live in China, and there has been great difficulty conveying what being transgender means due to cultural differences. He describes his sexuality as absent due to his lack of bodily changes. Quan was a brief participant on a collaboration channel for trans men of color.

- Sam (not a pseudonym) in his late 40s, is a white trans man who had transitioned years ago, has had top surgery, takes testosterone and passes unquestionably as male. He holds a PhD in Anthropology and teaches for a women and gender studies program at a university on the West coast. He is in relationship with a cisgender woman whom he was with prior to transition and identifies as polyamorous. Although he had no doubt that he identified as a man since he was young, Sam is a staunch feminist who had misgivings about, and even delayed, transitioning because of how it would affect his politics and relationship with the world. Sam is an active transgender advocate who has spoken publicly at trans conferences and other venues.
- “Scout” is a 21-year-old white, Jewish trans man who previously had chest surgery and had just started testosterone therapy in the course of my research. He had begun graduate school and was studying rhetoric focusing on transgender performativity. He came out to his parents three times: first as a lesbian, then as genderqueer/non-binary, and finally as a trans man. He had solid support from his family and friends and was an active member in trans advocate projects. I interviewed Scout several times and he was very committed to the project of sharing his story and participating in this research.

- “Tian” is a 28-year-old Taiwanese trans man who grew up and lives in Canada. Tian had just completed top surgery but was very reluctant and undecided about taking testosterone. He had a very short masculine haircut, a very slight build, and a flat chest that allowed him to pass as a man until people heard his voice, which still sounded feminine. He is not out at his places of employment, extended family, and does not have support from his parents. Tian was an originator of a trans men of color channel and very committed to sharing his experiences as an Asian trans man.
- “Tiggan” is a 50-year-old mixed-race trans man living on the East Coast who had realized he was trans two weeks prior to our meeting at a conference. At that time, he was in relationship with a lesbian who also came into that identity in middle age. He transitioned via testosterone and surgery within the period of my field work and now passes as a man all the time. They are raising her son, in his early teens, from a previous marriage. Tiggan and I met at a transgender conference and I followed him through his transition, through interviews and as he documented it on YouTube through a personal channel and a Facebook group he started for trans men over 50 years of age.
- “Tony” is 20-year-old white trans man from the East Coast attending a private college. Tony always knew he was a man, had severe body dysphoria and began to transition as soon as legally possible (age 18) with the support of his family. Since having top surgery and beginning testosterone, Tony passes all of the time as a man. Tony identifies as a gay man and has always been attracted to men, although he did identify as a lesbian throughout high school believing it

would boost his masculinity. Tony participated regularly on a trans masculine YouTube channel for more than a year.