

TOWARDS A TRANSGENDER SUBLIME: THE POLITICS OF EXCESS IN TRANS-
SPECIFIC CULTURAL PRODUCTION

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Towards a Transgender Sublime: The Politics of Excess in Trans-specific Cultural

Production

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This dissertation offers a corrective to limited interpretations of the category transgender across literary and medical discourses, as well as visual culture and new media. Most often, the term transgender is used as a stable category of personhood, or, alternately, as an umbrella term that encompasses all sex and gender variance. Such usage results in reductive models in medical and educational contexts, as well as closed narrative structures in literary and popular cultural depictions of trans-subjectivity and embodiment. By contrast, I understand “transgender” as a proliferative matrix that produces representations of rapidly shifting embodiments and identities that exceed sex/gender categorization. I theorize the effect of proliferation as the “transgender sublime” to account for encounters with representational excess—whether in public health settings or popular culture—that can overwhelm perception and unsettle familiar ways of knowing. Insofar as it demands an interpretive practice based on “shimmering” mobility, this phenomenon harbors a transformative potential: a politics of transgender sublimity promotes categorical excess as a means to enable new modes of subjectivity.

In the first chapter, I critique a widespread educational model called the “transgender umbrella.” I identify the manner by which it represents, in visual form, the taxonomic excess that conditions transgender sublimity. The second chapter is an ethnographic study of a trans-specific harm reduction program that negotiates binary-gendered HIV-prevention strategies in public health worlds. I argue that by recoding binary-gendered institutional practices, such programs re-contour social imaginaries through mobilization of categorical and representational excess. Chapter Three analyzes trans man Thomas Beatie’s online autobiographical account of his pregnancy that is accompanied by a photograph of his pregnant body. I argue that visualizing “the pregnant man” occasions an incitement to discourse about how the sight of a pregnant man renders viewers speechless: speechlessness being symptomatic of a representational limit that signals the transgender sublime. The final chapter critiques the “wrong body” trope found in psychological and medical literature, as well as in transsexual autobiographies that follow the Bildungsroman structure. I compare this with *My Right Self*, an online photo-narrative project that uses the excesses of transgender sublimity to imagine and represent alternate wor(l)ds.

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, queer theory contributed to Gay/Lesbian and Feminist Studies whereby the “queering” of sexual and gender norms revealed sex and gender to be socially constructed. This critical move allowed for non-normative sexualities and genders to aid in deconstructing the naturalized status of the normal. By the end of the 1990s, however, transgender theorists had taken issue with queer theory’s appropriation of transgender identity and embodiment as the paradigmatic instance of gender performativity. Critics argued that this use of “transgender” primarily in the service of denaturalizing gender norms erased the specificities of trans-people’s lives, particularly the violence directed at individuals who violate sex/gender systems. While the erasure of trans-identity and everyday gender violence is an ongoing concern, this dissertation contends that erasure is only part of the story. That is, there has also been a highly visible—and in many ways equally challenging—*proliferation* of trans-identity, embodiment and categorization simultaneously taking place. As such, my project intervenes in this contentious history of feminist, queer and trans theorizing to argue that the category transgender has fueled a vast profusion of gender identity categories, modes of embodiment, cultural practices, political discourses and social imaginaries.

Most often “transgender” is used to denote either a stable category of personhood or an aggregative umbrella term that encompasses all sex and gender variance. However, my research further demonstrates that transgender also functions as a matrix for producing rapidly mutating embodiments and identities—all exceeding sex/gender categorization. I call the effect of this categorical, discursive and sometimes material

excess the “transgender sublime.” My use of the concept transgender sublimity is as a way of talking about the ineffable and often overwhelming aspects of transgender. To develop my argument, I explore the aesthetic, discursive and political aspects of trans-specific excess across a range of cultural production that includes activist educational umbrella models, public health surveys, media images of trans-male pregnancy, trans-art photographic self-portraiture, representational debates about trans-sexed bodies, and autobiographical transition narratives that reject either/or (M/F) gendered foreclosure.

As noted, the category transgender has, from the early 1990s onward in the U.S., been defined as an umbrella term. I argue in Chapter One that the “transgender umbrella” has given visual shape to an emerging social movement and at the same time fostered individual identity formation, networking, activism, media representation, social service provision, as well as artistic and cultural production. In this way, transgender operates like a standard identity category that delimits the boundaries of individual subjectivity, bodily being, group belonging and cultural activity. However, at the same time that transgender consolidates identity—and thus defines who is or is not a member of the category—it also generates newly unclassifiable formations of gender identity and embodiment. The latter appear as representational excess in cultural objects and texts, and signal the a-categorical effect of a transgender sublime.

This seeming contradiction embodied by transgender demonstrates the manner by which categorical consolidation and a-categorical proliferation (and excess) are related. That is, the imaginary that draws *all* non-normative genders and trans-sexed embodiment underneath the transgender umbrella also creates the idea that *all* ways of being non-normatively sexed and gendered are possible. So it is that the gathering in of all sex and

gender variance under the umbrella is responsible for the presumably infinite generation of new identifications and embodiments. In the end, the ever-inclusive imaginary of transgender leads to its expanding, excessive and a-categorical aspect that conditions a transgender sublime.

“The sublime” is a term from classical aesthetic theory that I repurpose in this dissertation by drawing upon its history as a concept that, as Cultural Studies critic Dick Hebdige claims, constitutes an “impossible object.”¹ The impossibility of transgender poses a specific interpretive problem that hinges on the fact that trans-sexed bodies and genders are by definition in motion—the prefix *trans* literally means to move across boundaries. This transversal quality encompasses various slippages as transgender denotes a fixed identity, an aggregative grouping and the literal action of boundary crossing. In this project, my concern is primarily with boundary crossing that produces an excess—of categorical types as well as of representational signification—found in the aesthetic elements of trans-specific cultural production.

Following theories of the sublime, new formations of gender identity and trans-sexed embodiment can occasion an overwhelmed response. And while cognitively overwhelmed responses are symptomatic of a sublime encounter—in relation to excessively large objects or unfathomable infinitude—such affective reactions to representational excess are not the primary focus of my analysis. Instead, I concentrate on articulating the aesthetic properties—predicated upon representational excess—that appear as the precondition for the transgender sublime to emerge. However, whereas the discursive, categorical and material excess of trans-ness resists easy interpretation, my

¹ Dick Hebdige, “The Impossible Object: Towards a Sociology of the Sublime,” *New Formations* 1 (1987): 47-76.

goal is not only to demonstrate that transgender is inherently interpretively resistant. That is, resistance invites an engagement with a specific aesthetic of trans-ness that provides productively disorienting excess we can draw upon to develop ethical, and thus political, ways to navigate encounters with a transgender sublime. At the outset of this project, then, I argue that it is not useful simply to eliminate excess through use of reductive categorical schematics, humanizing portraits of trans-sexed bodies, new diagnostic criteria, or foreclosed gender transition narratives. Instead, trans-generative excess becomes a means to unsettle normative interpretive practices and to create new modes of subjectivity.

An instance of excess signification produced by an interpretively resistant aesthetic of trans-ness is found in Chapter Three. There I read a photograph entitled “Transcock,” a visual close-up of testosterone enhanced erectile tissue that displays representational excess via an image that defies singular interpretation. In particular, the scale of the genital tissue appears to be uncertain as it is positioned next to a ruler that reads both feet and inches. As is, the phallic flesh seems to vacillate between registering as an incredible two-foot penis or as a two-inch phallus that eludes easy recognition. The indeterminacy of this image thus requires a politically motivated interpretive practice that engages, and does not eliminate, the representational excess of such a complex aesthetic presentation.

To articulate my politics of transgender sublimity, in each chapter I propose an ethical methodological approach to representational indeterminacy and the problem of excess signification. In the case of “Transcock,” I neither argue that it is unreadable (beyond representation) nor do I attempt to fix the meaning of the image with a specific

interpretation. To negotiate this potential interpretive impasse, I develop a reading practice that neither tries to eliminate sublimity nor tries to contain its representational excess. Instead, I demonstrate the manner by which various shifting interpretations pertaining to the image “Transcock” constitute its meaning. As such, I advocate a reading practice that actively engages a body-image or body-boundary that is in perpetual motion. To anchor my theory, I employ French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s concept of “shimmering” to argue that sublime oscillations of image, body and text call for readings derived from interpretive mobility. And I offer this theoretical approach as an ethical way by which to navigate a transgender sublime.

While it is beyond the scope of my project, what makes transgender sublimity different from other theories of the sublime is that it pertains to a politics that extends beyond aesthetic consideration toward social change. Although my theorizing applies mainly to cultural objects and aesthetic forms, it has social justice political implications based on enabling new forms of subjectivity. Such subjectivity, born of engagement with representational excess, is nimble enough to negotiate difference on its own terms: without assimilating to a reductive norm or, alternately, by positing the incomprehensibility of radical otherness. Throughout this dissertation, then, I aim to promote an interpretive method that relies upon holding incongruent registers of meaning in mind—such as men with pregnant bodies or two-inch phalluses.

Field and Method

This project situates the interpretation of a range of texts within the interdisciplinary field of transgender studies. As an emerging rubric for analysis, transgender studies began to take shape in the early 1990s and reached a milestone with the 2006 publication of *The Transgender Studies Reader*. In her introduction to the reader, Susan Stryker outlines the scope of this field that engages with a wide range of sexual and gender variant identities. She writes:

Most broadly conceived, the field of transgender studies is 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 the 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. [. . .] Transgender studies enables a critique of the conditions that cause transgender phenomena to stand out [as seemingly anomalous] in the first place, and that allow gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background.²

Given the complex dimensions of embodiment, personhood, subjectivity and social norms indicated in Stryker's quote, it is clear there is much work to be done through a critique of the "conditions that cause transgender phenomena" to appear anomalous and thus allow "gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background." The work of critiquing the conditions that produce transgender as the constitutive outside of normative gender depends upon interdisciplinary inquiry. This is because the seeming

² Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Stephen, Stephen and Stryker, Susan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

eccentricity of transgender crosses all discursive domains and fields, including the social sciences and psychiatry, physical and life sciences, as well as the humanities and the arts.

My dissertation models the interdisciplinary quality of transgender studies through an analysis of a wide range of cultural production. To do so, my approach necessitates the integration of ethnographic “thick description,”³ discourse analysis, and Foucauldian-inspired bio-political critique combined with visual studies, aesthetic and narrative theory. This methodological mash-up method compares to Judith Halberstam’s “queer methodology” as articulated in her introduction to *Female Masculinity*.

On account of the interdisciplinary nature of my project, I have had to craft a methodology out of available disciplinary methods. Deploying what I would call a ‘queer methodology,’ I have used some combination of textual criticism, ethnography, historical survey, archival research, and the production of taxonomies. I call this methodology ‘queer’ because it attempts to remain supple enough to respond to the various locations of information on female masculinity and betrays a certain disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods. (9-10)⁴

Halberstam’s stated “betrayal” and “disloyalty” to disciplinary constraints is demanded by the study of a wide ranging—what elsewhere she calls “rangy”—subject matter. As her subject matter crosses disciplines and cultural contexts, her method too must be “supple” enough to perform similar crossings. This discursive situation necessitates a bricolage methodology that is able to access and negotiate various “locations of information.” At the same time, while transgender and gender nonconforming individuals appear in Halberstam’s analysis of female masculinity, the queerness of her critique is also formed from a purposeful avoidance of imposing identity types, particularly the label “lesbian,” on her subjects of inquiry.

³ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation Of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1977), 3-32.

⁴ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1998).

Like Halberstam, my method could be considered queer in the sense that requires a “supple” technique that “respond[s] to the various locations of information [...] that betray conventional disciplinary methods.” However, unlike Halberstam, I do not conduct my analysis from the impulse *not* to impose an identity. Rather, I base my approach on the status of transgender studies as an emerging locus of critical inquiry that traverses multiple disciplines. The disciplines currently vying for ownership of transgender and include, among others, law, medicine, psychology, political science, literary studies, public health, philosophy, media studies, queer theory and gender studies. As such, by working within this challenging trans- or multi-disciplinary moment of scholarly production, my analysis requires a methodology flexible enough to address such varied, and often conflicting, “locations of information.”

In addition to research breadth and interdisciplinary inquiry, another important methodological issue in transgender studies concerns the relationship between academic scholarship and community. Trans-identified philosopher C. Jacob Hale articulates his position on this issue, explaining:

Transgender studies is a nascent interdisciplinary field of studies in which, and about which, everything is contested. [...] The tenet fundamental to my selection [of texts for this bibliography] is that transgender studies is constituted by its grounding in practices, conceptions, norms, and problematics of transgender community and communities, rather than by topic alone.⁵

Hale’s claim is appropriate for the purpose of my research because the impulse that initially led me to use ethnography favors the idea of a “grounding” methodology that anchors itself in the “practices, conceptions, norms, and problematics of transgender community and communities.” However, as I soon discovered during my fieldwork stage

⁵ C. Jacob Hale, “Introducing Transgender Studies into the Undergraduate Philosophy Curriculum,” *APA Newsletters*, Vol. 98, no. 2 (Spring 1999).

of research, the trouble with relying solely on a community-centric approach is that it prevents one from interrogating the concept of “community” itself. In fact, Hale’s preferred method potentially inhibits the critical examination of the discursive construction “the transgender community” as it is derived from an imaginary that productively enables individual identity formation and political activism, but at other times (and in different locations) enacts the erasure of its conditions of production.

As a consequence, my methodology derives in part from ethnographic participant-observation that is more “grounded” than some of the other theoretical approaches to the texts and contexts I analyze. Unlike Hale, however, my work is not entirely grounded in the community concept because that limits my ability to examine a political imaginary that constructs the very idea of “the transgender community or communities.” So, to borrow from Halberstam *and* Hale, perhaps the best way to describe my method is as a “grounded” and “supple” one that instigates a critical rapprochement between different discursive practices and contexts of knowledge-production. As well, at the same time that I draw together these disparate “locations of information,” I remain critical of concepts such as “community” and related gender categories and terms.

Aesthetics and Trans-specific Excess

Feminist philosophers Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer claim that “[t]he greatest theoretical continuity within the Western tradition in aesthetics extends only since the eighteenth century, although roots of modern ideas go deep and have

parallels as far back as classical antiquity” (5).⁶ The original etymological meaning of “aesthetic” was restricted to sense perception with the German “ästhetisch” and French “esthétique” both deriving from the Greek “aisthetikos” that means “sensitive” and “aisthanesthai” that means “to perceive, to feel.”⁷ The term aesthetic was then popularized in English, by Kant, who proposed a definition as “the science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception.”⁸ Later, Kant adopted German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten’s expanded usage of the concept in his *Critique of Judgment*. Baumgarten was the first to appropriate the word aesthetic, which had always implied visceral sensation, to also mean the critical judgment of taste or a sense of beauty.⁹ Through his revision, the aesthetic was given additional range as it pertains to subjective judgment of taste and beauty, and thereby constituted its modern usage. For Kant, as well as other philosophers, particularly those following the German tradition, an object’s sensual and pleasurable effects must be applied to intrinsic considerations of “harmony” and “perfection”—to the form of the work itself.

While it is a vast field of philosophical inquiry, my interest in the aesthetic is specific to the way that it addresses the contemplation of form. As I have argued, the discourse of transgender produces the special effect of a-categorical excess. And what draws the seemingly disparate discursive locations and objects of study together in this dissertation is a concern with the aesthetic via an analysis of the formal properties of trans-specific cultural production and its resultant representational excess. Most notably,

⁶ Brand, Peggy Zeglin and Korsmeyer, Carolyn, “Introduction: Aesthetics and Its Traditions,” in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, ed. Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

⁷ “Online Etymology Dictionary,” n.d., <http://www.etymonline.com/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1970).

my conceptualization of transgender sublimity derives from an a-categorical proliferation that disrupts conventional formal structures such as standard gender categories as well as normatively sexed bodies. As such, it is the manner by which transgender excess defies categorical formation—and interpretation—that necessitates examining its aesthetic properties, particularly those aspects that stretch the limits of normative perception and representation.

The Sublime

“The Sublime” is one of the key concepts of eighteenth century and Romantic aesthetics; however, it has an even longer, if contested, history dating from a tenth-century manuscript.¹⁰ Sublimity typically refers to an encounter with, and an affective response to, an awesome and terrifying view of nature. “The Beautiful,” by contrast, is the domesticated other with which the sublime is regularly paired and is characterized as delimited, bounded, contained, harmonious, and controlled. Whereas the beautiful makes objects easier to apprehend, the sublime is predicated upon a viewer’s difficulty in perceiving the immensity of a natural object. The result is a sublime encounter—a “man versus mountain” moment—whereby the subject feels overwhelmed and terrified when engaging an incomprehensibly vast sight. As such, magnitude is one hallmark of

¹⁰ D.A. Russell, *Longinus on the Sublime* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). The Sublime is attributed to Longinus, although the author is generally considered unknown, and was originally used for rhetorical purposes. However, it was subsequently applied by philosophers to the investigation of psychological responses to objects that invoke a mix of fascination/terror or titillation/fear that exceed a perceiver’s cognitive capacity to comprehend. Two canonical philosophers contributing to the literature on the sublime are Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* and various other writings including “Of the Dynamically Sublime in Nature” and “Analytic of the Sublime.”

sublimity. Kant calls such physical immensity the “dynamical sublime,” which occurs when one encounters an object considered dangerous by virtue of its sheer size or force; the object is so proportionally imposing that the beholding subject becomes terror-filled as a result.

On the other hand, Kant proposes the “mathematical sublime,” which I discuss in Chapter Two, as an effect of contemplating infinity whereby the subject experiences the incapacity of human faculties of imagination to grasp limitlessness.¹¹ In this case, it is not the physical size of an object that poses a threat to subjectivity, but rather, the *idea* of an unbounded infinitude that confounds comprehension. Hebdige elaborates on limitlessness and the subject’s incapacity to reason, noting:

the sublime challenges the act of judgment itself by suggesting the possibility of limitlessness. The sublime mixes pleasure and pain, joy and terror, and confronts us with the absolute Other – the limitations of our language and our capacity to think and judge, the fact of our mortality. In Burke’s and Kant’s category of the sublime, reason is forced to confront its incapacity to deal rationally with the infinite.¹²

I read Hebdige’s theorization of limitlessness and the incapacity of rationality to deal with infinitude to be associated with the fear of losing oneself. By linking the sublime with an imaginative “abyss” Kant explicitly addresses this loss of self in infinitude:

The mind feels moved in the representation of the sublime [...], while in aesthetical judgments about the beautiful it is in *restful* contemplation. This movement may [...] be compared [...] to a quickly alternating attraction toward, and repulsion from, the same object. The transcendent [aka the sublime] is for the Imagination like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself. (97)¹³

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1951), 51.

¹² Hebdige, “The Impossible Object.”

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*.

In interpreting this passage it is important to note that feminist theorists have elucidated upon the type of “self” who fears its own loss¹⁴ They contend that this is a masculine gendered and normatively embodied figure who is none other than the white male bourgeois Enlightenment subject. What risks being lost is this subject’s privileged position as defined in opposition to a non-normatively embodied or gendered other. In the face of this potential loss of normative selfhood, the sublime could be said to perform a deconstructive function that renders fictional the nineteenth-century notion of subjectivity that is based on masculine autonomy and interiority.

In making this claim I do not intend to say that a transgender sublime should be equated with postmodern celebrations of the failure of totalizing subjectivity. In this way, I follow feminist theorist Suzanne Stewart’s warning:

The problem with so many postmodern theories of the subject is the elevation of the failure into a general condition of all subjectivity, a failure that is then celebrated as necessarily subversive. The result is an equation of a whole series of terms: masochism, trauma, the sublime, and the demonic all become names for an enigmatic site that holds the place of self-dissolution in the name of a critique of all normativity.¹⁵

So, while a transgender sublime might not lead to the subversion of normative subjectivity in all instances, this result is not really my primary intention. Instead, my use of the concept rests upon Kant’s claim from the previous passage that the mind finds itself “moved” toward and away from an object. Kant describes this movement of mind as “alternating” between desire and disgust. This alternation constitutes an ambivalent relationship of a subject to an object that at once attracts and repulses—thus agitating,

¹⁴ For critical elaborations on the topic of sublimity and masculine subjectivity see Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Suzanne R. Stewart, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-De-Siecle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 10.

exciting or overwhelming the senses. If applied to my concept of transgender sublimity, individuals are “moved” by their inability to mentally master and “restfully contemplate,” using familiar categories, all of the trans-generative bodies and identities that are possible. This condition of being moved includes physically going toward or away from an object, as well as feeling overwhelmed by the sensory dimension of the sublime encounter. In the case of the latter, a psychical shutting down can become protection against the terror of boundary collapse and the loss of self at the edge of abysmal limitlessness.

It is the abyss of representational limits that concerns me most, and as such Kantian conceptualizations of the sublime apply to my study if understood through more contemporary theorizations such as George Hartley’s *The Abyss of Representation*. Hartley reinterprets Kant’s “problem of the sublime” as not simply pertaining to an encounter with an overwhelmingly large object or natural force. He turns a literal encounter with a physical object into a discursive one by defining sublimity as an effect of representation reaching its limit: [t]he abyss that opens up and threatens to swallow us in our experience of the sublime is nothing but the abyss of discourse itself” (23).¹⁶ Hartley thus redefines Kant’s formulation of the sublime discursively, in that our “primary mode of relating to the world is through representation,” therefore representation “must operate within the limits of our discursive understanding” (23). In this way, Hartley addresses a central problem pertaining to theories of discourse and representation: the inability for an excess of signification to be apprehended via interpretive schemas already available to a perceiving subject.

¹⁶ George Hartley, *The Abyss of Representation: Marxism and the Postmodern Sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

Because one of the main problems of sublimity is also proportionality—specifically, a mind-blowing sense of vastness—Hartley connects this representational failure with imaginative defeat by asserting that

[t]he problem for the imagination is that there are some objects in nature that exceed our capacity for sensible comprehension; while the imagination can apprehend the multiple sensible attributes of the object, the object's vastness confounds our ability to comprehend it—that is, to join all of these apprehended moments into a unified image. We are still concerned with a purely aesthetic experience—we have concept in mind when we experience the sublime—yet the feeling we experience is not pleasure but now pain. The imagination is pained by its failure. (34)

In this passage, Hartley echoes Hebdige's claim: "reason is forced to confront its incapacity to deal rationally with the infinite." But he further suggests that imagination, while operating conceptually in relation to aesthetic judgment, is experienced as pain precipitated by the mind's failure to grasp the vastness of infinitude as a unified whole.¹⁷ Following this inability to grasp the whole, Hartley usefully distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime by suggesting that beauty involves a "purposiveness" of the powers of the faculties "in producing schemas for understanding" whereas the sublime "is painful in that it confounds this schematic process" (38).

Hartley elaborates on this point by saying:

Apprehension is one of the jobs of the imagination, which is simply the immediate formalization of units of intuitive material. But the imagination's other job [...] is comprehension. It must unify these apprehended moments into a single representation in preparation for that representation's relationship to a concept [...] and] the fleshing out or making concrete [...] of a concept. The sublime, however, is the experience of being confronted with an object that cannot be comprehended, an object that keeps the scanning movement of apprehension continuously in motion.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 34.

¹⁸ Ibid., 37

The crucial distinction Hartley makes here is between apprehension and comprehension; that is, the various and variable apprehended moments of perception must be translated, via a subject's comprehensive faculties, into a unified conceptual whole. However, the discursive abyss frustrates the unification of "intuitive material" into a concretized, conceptual whole and reveals the inability of imagination to master—via a process of schematization—this sublime situation that therefore causes pain.

I similarly claim that the ungraspable and unimaginable infinitude precipitated by transgender proliferative excess frustrates imagination and cognition in that it does not allow for the comprehension of a unified whole. The result of excessive proliferation is representational rupture that manifests in the failure of normative schematics to contain various transgender imaginaries. Thus, Hartley's emphasis on schematic understanding and its failure in an encounter with sublimity is directly relevant to my own observation of transgender schematics—whether categorical ("transgender") or diagrammatic ("transgender umbrella")—that also fail in their attempts to contain discursive proliferation and a-categorical excess.

Arriving at this point of representational limitation, I extend Hartley's analysis by taking his notion of discursive failure one step further to propose that such failure can be a productive phenomenon. That is, as I will discuss later in this introduction in relation to Judith Butler's work on fantasy, the abyss of representation does not always lead to the impossibility of meaning and interpretation. Instead, it can be the point of departure for as yet unimagined modes of being and becoming that exceed social norms and aesthetic formations. I will now turn to the details of each chapter in order to further animate my claims.

Chapters

I begin Chapter One, “The Profusion of Things,” by historicizing the category transgender through a critique of the “transgender umbrella.” This graphic model plays on the idea of sheltering gender non-conforming individuals from the “hard rain” of discrimination. In a manner compatible with what Foucault describes in *The Order of Things*, the umbrella gives a visual shape to an emergent political grouping and thus constructs the very community it purports to simply mirror or represent. First published in the historic 1994 San Francisco report on “Investigation into the Discrimination Against Transgender People,” the umbrella diagram has since spread nationally and internationally to become the most recognized activist educational model. The transgender umbrella gathers non-normative gender terms underneath its infinitely elastic canopy; and it further drives an imaginary that asserts the inclusion of *all* sex and gender variance—transsexual man/woman, drag king/queen, gender queer, transvestite, cross-dresser (etc.). At the same time as transgender performs this aggregative function, there is also a simultaneous profusion of identities and bodies generated by transgender. As such, the umbrella diagram that attempts to confine sexual and gendered nonconformity to a taxonomic logic results in a failed attempt to tame and contain the unruly excess produced by the ever-expansive transgender imaginary.

This chapter demonstrates how trans-identity and embodiment often escape both graphic modeling and taxonomic schematization. It also identifies proliferative excess as primary conditioning dynamic of a transgender sublime. I conclude that while an encounter with transgender sublimity may be disorienting or disturbing, it also has the potential to produce a politics capable of utilizing its transformative power. However, this

political promise is eliminated if the excessiveness of transgender is reduced to a schematic diagram that offers cognitive intelligibility at the cost of a radical, qualitative, transformation of subjectivity.

My second chapter, “The Transgender Demographic Imaginary in US Public Health,” extends discussion of trans-specific excess through ethnographic study of public health practices. Here I addresses the interconnections between institutional politics, social justice and ethics by looking beyond textual considerations toward materially grounded institutional operations. I argue that activist claims about the erasure of transgender people in public health settings elides the proliferation of gender non-conforming identities and embodiments in these same spaces. To illustrate this point, I analyze the a-categorically proliferative aspect of transgender that leads to data analysis problems that center on debates about how best to count and categorize trans-identified and gender non-conforming people in research. Specifically, I critique the variable, often contradictory, “sex” and “gender” questions from a range of HIV needs assessment studies. Taken together, different research methods and their categorical imaginaries make visible the instability of trans-specific classification work and further confirm the generative and transfiguring power of a-categorical excess.

I conclude with a documented response to transgender excess developed during my time as director of the Trans-health Information Project (TIP), a Federally-funded HIV prevention program. Faced with ill-fitting binary gendered (male/female) safer-sex street outreach packets, the staff developed the “TIP Menu”—a color-coded set of materials named Diva, Girlfriend, Sister, Daddy, BoiScout, and Stallion. The non-binary multiplicity of TIP outreach kits corresponds to the representational excess of transgender

sublimity. As such, the TIP Menu represents an ethical mode by which to work with, and not against, a transgender sublime.

I next turn to representations of trans-sexed embodiment in Chapter Three, “*Sublime Mutations: Reading Images of Trans-male Embodiment*.” I analyze graphic photographs of trans-male pregnant bodies and trans-sexed genitals to argue that these images enable an encounter with an absolute Other who appears to exist in excess of normatively sexed and gendered embodiment. I use the case of Thomas Beatie, a pregnant trans-man who is the subject of recent popular media attention, to articulate the aesthetic conditions of representation surrounding trans-male pregnant bodies in contexts ranging from the mainstream press, LGBT news magazines, Internet blogs and trans-art photography. I include both Beatie’s autobiographical account of his pregnancy and the photograph of his prominent “baby bump” from the *Advocate.com*, the latter being the national LGBT news magazine’s online site. Transgender proliferation is seen in the thousands of reactions to Beatie’s pregnant body that disseminated in the blogosphere, as well as in talk shows, magazines and newspapers—including a *New York Times* article headlined “He’s Pregnant, You’re Speechless.” Ironically, the images and discourses surrounding “the pregnant man” occasion an incitement to discourse about how the sight of a pregnant man renders viewers speechless. In this case, speechlessness indicates a cognitive overload response to a representational limit that signals a transgender sublime.

In contrast to the images of Beatie, I analyze self-portrait nude photographs by trans-identified artist Loren Cameron. Cameron clearly draws upon the aesthetic of “the beautiful” to facilitate the visual assimilation of his abjectly embodied difference. However, in the end transgender sublimity shadows the images and texts of both Beatie

and Cameron; this representational excess thus requires a politicized reading practice. In order to circumvent the effects of sublimity that provoke a psychical shutting down, I propose an interpretive practice nimble enough to navigate the sublime oscillations of visibly trans-sexed bodies. My theory is based on Bachelard's concept of "shimmering" and proposes a reading practice that allows holding incongruent registers of meaning in mind at the same time.

My final chapter, "Wrong Bodies and Right Selves: Narrative Structure and Trans-sublimity," begins with a critique of the "wrong body" trope found throughout psychological and medical literature, as well as in transsexual autobiographies that follow the Bildungsroman narrative structure. I juxtapose this model with a new media photo-narrative project called *My Right Self*. The images and narratives of *My Right Self* are predicated upon a paradigm shift away from medico-psychiatric discourses whereby "the story" of wrong embodiment reproduces binary sex and gender categories and related narrative uniformity. By contrast, the *My Right Self* aesthetic represents the articulation of widely varying accounts of identity, embodiment, sexual orientation, and gender transition trajectories—not all resulting in hormonal and/or surgical alteration. As such, a linear and foreclosed standard gender narrative is transformed into an open-ended aesthetic collage of gender non-conforming images and discourses.

Taken together, *My Right Self* stories and images signify a bioethical shift in sex/gender transition narratives that counter the medical discourse of wrong bodies that dominated cultural debates up until the early 1990s. *My Right Self* instead demonstrates that representational polyvocality promotes multiple figurations of gender identity and embodiment. In this way, right-self narratives that draw upon the polyvocal excess of a

transgender sublime provide a source from which alternate words and worlds are imagined. By ending with this consideration of narrative structures, my project further emphasizes the politically productive excess of an emergent trans-specific aesthetic.

Edging Toward a Politics of Transgender Sublimity

Much of my analyses in the chapters to follow depend upon a representational failure that is fueled by an excess of signification that often appears uncontrollable and uncontainable. While strategies that attempt to tame trans-specific excess vary—umbrella diagram models, epidemiological categories, beautiful images of trans-sexed bodies, or closed narrative structures—the common thread in each instance of failed containment is that representation inevitably reaches its outer limit. So too, as stated, Hartley defines the sublime as an effect of representational limits; however, I take his notion of discursive failure a step further. To do so, I follow Judith Butler, whom I discuss in Chapter Four, in order to postulate representational and categorical failure as a productive phenomenon. In Butler’s theory of fantasy, for example, failure does not always lead to the impossibility of meaning, interpretation and representation. Instead, fantasy can open up possibilities of *becoming* that exist in excess of current social norms and standard aesthetic forms.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler speaks of “the critical promise of fantasy.” Her formulation of fantasy is not so much an account of the unreal as it is the positing of thinkable possibilities that challenge normative constructions of the “real.”¹⁹ That is, Butler argues for the critical promise of fantasy by stating that it can “move [...] us beyond what is merely actual and present into the realm of possibility” (28). Fantasy in

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2004), 25-6.

this sense can enable the formation of new aesthetic structures that are linked to the imagining of potential identities, embodiments and subjectivities, as well as of different social worlds. In this sense “fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses” (29).

In the context of my dissertation, the representational foreclosures that thwart the re-imagining of social worlds necessitate a politics predicated upon possibility. As Butler argues, such horizons of possibility are not luxuries but necessities, especially for people struggling simply to register within hegemonic social structures through use of categories that constitute them as recognizable subjects. Yet there is also a necessity to think beyond normative categorical structures that leads Butler to comment:

Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent.

[...] The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity.²⁰

Here I take Butler’s notion of fantasy not to mean a fairy tale, although as I argue in Chapter Four in relation to Jan Morris’s transsexual memoir, some fairy tale-like narratives can assist in imagining a possible self that might otherwise be unrealizable. Instead, the potentiating sense of fantasy Butler describes is *already* present as the unthinkable excess within—and extending beyond—existing frames of representation. So too, Butler’s enabling fantasy is inherent in the excesses of a transgender sublime.

This understanding of fantasy applied to my project suggests that it *is* possible to make political use of the sublime excess that extends beyond conventional boundaries of

²⁰ Ibid., 23, 31.

what is considered real. And so, I propose that in addition to mobilizing pragmatic political efforts like legal recognition and the creation of social services programs that we move towards a politics of transgender sublimity. The latter promotes, and does not eliminate, the vital excess that de-realizes restrictive social norms and generates new possibilities for being and becoming. A politics of transgender sublimity moves beyond the critical necessity of pragmatism and toward an equally necessary politic of the possible.

However, pragmatic politics and transgender sublimity are not entirely opposed. That is, a practical example of imagining possible worlds arises from the productive power of fantasy embodied in the TIP Menu, as discussed in my outline of Chapter Three. TIP's recoded safer sex kits follow Michel de Certeau's definition of a "tactic": a temporary move made within category-driven systems to create momentary disruptions of normative systemic functioning. As such, TIP's safer-sex street outreach packets are an example of a pragmatic tactical response that constitutes an ethical way to navigate the excesses of transgender sublimity. In fact, the TIP Menu draws upon and does not foreclose the transgender sublime. Furthermore, TIP tactics evince a recoding practice that creates temporary ruptures within binary-reproducing public health systems. That is, because public health depends upon categorization and standardization, the TIP Menu utilizes classification practices at the same time it breaks the normative codes framing bodies, identities and sexual desires in institutional contexts. While the outreach packs operate according to a bio-politically conservative logic that shapes individual behavior, they also affect the radical re-contouring of social worlds through a mobile alternate imaginary.

Like Butler's productive notion of fantasy, the transfiguring effect of sublimity is suggested by editor Adam Phillips commentary regarding Edmund Burke's writings on the sublime. Phillips claims that Burke's sublime is "a way of thinking about excess as the key to a new kind of subjectivity" (ix).²¹ This understanding of the relationship between sublimity and new modes of perception directly pertains to my own observation of the potentially transformative power of a transgender sublime. Throughout this dissertation, then, I contend that while encounters with trans-specific excess are risky—especially if a psychically defensive shutting down occurs—they also carry a political promise. That is, engagement with a disorienting aesthetic of trans-ness can unsettle familiar ways of knowing enough to enable a new ways of perceiving and being. As such, this project aims to articulate the conditions necessary for a politics of trans-sublimity predicated upon the transfiguration of subjectivity and the envisioning of (other) possible worlds.

²¹ *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

CHAPTER ONE

The Profusion of Things

During the early phases of my fieldwork for the ethnographic portions of this dissertation, it seemed transgender umbrellas were everywhere. I encountered them at community conferences, Trans-101 workshops, and even at major public health venues such as the American Public Health Association's annual conference.¹ If not the first, then one of the earliest umbrella graphics is from the historic "Report to the San Francisco Human Rights Commission" created for the passage of a citywide "gender identity" nondiscrimination ordinance in 1995 [Figure 1].²

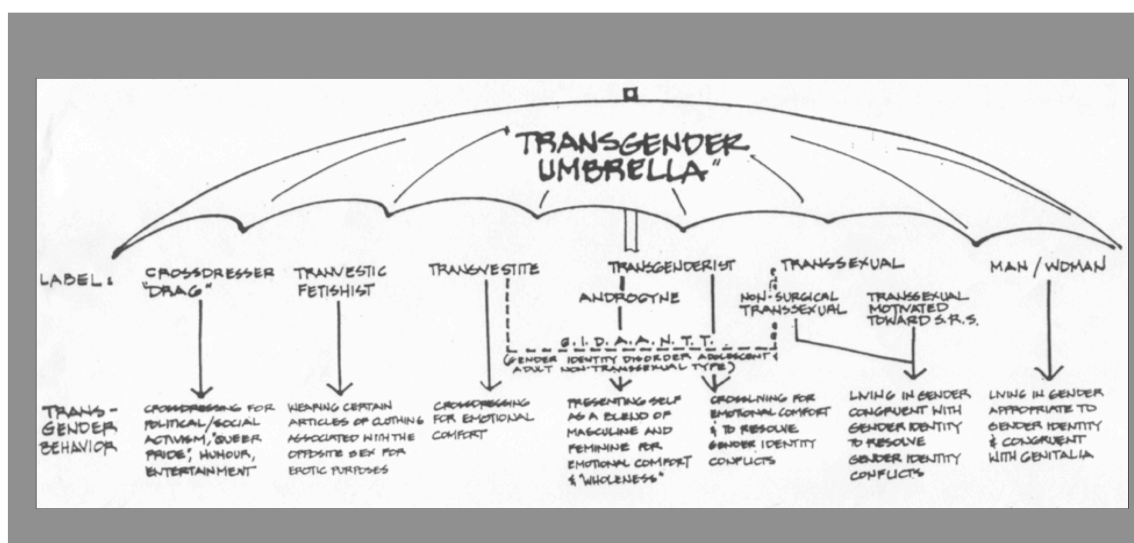


Figure 1

¹ 130th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association, Pennsylvania Convention Center (9-13 November 2002).

² James Green, *Investigation into Discrimination Against Transgendered People* (Human Rights Commission of San Francisco, September 1994). This report was released in September of 1994 and the ordinance that followed it was signed into law in December of 1994; it went into effect 30 days later in January 1995.

The San Francisco public HRC hearing,³ report and ordinance set a precedent for the entire country and, by extension, led to the widespread dissemination of this educational model. In every version, the image of an opened umbrella encompasses a broad range of sex and gender variant terms underneath. This version of the umbrella shows the far left space occupied by “crossdresser ‘drag’” and culminates on the right side with “man/woman” in order to denote an embodied transition to “living in [a] gender appropriate to gender identity and congruent with genitalia.” Underlying this trajectory is a continuum that creates an implicit hierarchy of realness, moving from the least embodied descriptor “drag” to the re-embodied and unmarked categories “man/woman.”

For now, I note that this umbrella, like many others, contains mixed discursive registers by including medical and non-medical (community-derived) terminology.⁴ For example, “G.I.D.A.A.N.T.T.” or “gender identity disorder adolescent or adult non-

³ For a community-based account of the hearing and work leading up to the ordinance, see: “San Francisco Human Rights Commission Public Hearing on Transgender Discrimination,” *Tnt: Transsexual News Telegraph* (San Francisco, Summer 1994), 8-9, 25.

⁴ According to James Green, author of the 1995 San Francisco HRC report, the umbrella diagram was “created a year or so earlier [than the report/ordinance] (possibly as early as 1992) by a trans woman and graphic artist, Thalia Gravel, who was partnered at the time with local (super trans-friendly) therapist Luanna Rodgers, one of the SF Human Rights Commission’s key advisors in dealing with transgender issues at that time.” Green goes on to explain the mixture of medical and non-medical terminology, saying: “In the early 90s, there was no real collective political consciousness among trans folk, and [political] analysis was just beginning. There was lot of reliance on medical validation [...] both as a vehicle for education, but also as a shield from [institutional/authority] abuse. It was a historical moment that we quickly moved beyond once we realized we had the ear of politicians and social justice institutions, but the idea of an umbrella stuck as a way to broaden the categories. I would say we began moving beyond the medicalized model around the same time, and I believe that [creation of this graphic] was aiming for [...] a visual image of how diverse we are and how easy it is to misunderstand trans people, partly because of historical medicalization we’d been subjected to, but also because of basic human ignorance about gender and sex.” Email correspondence, James Green, August 2009.

transsexual type,” was first published as a psychiatric diagnostic category in the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* version *DSM-III-R* in 1987. Also included in the *DSM-III-R*, as well as on the San Francisco umbrella diagram, are “transvestic fetishism” and “transsexualism.”⁵ However, other terms existing under this umbrella, such as “transvestite” without the sexual component (i.e., “for emotional comfort” - Fig 1), were not part of the official *DSM* psychiatric taxonomy, and neither were terms such as “androgyny” or even the distinction made between “non-surgical” transsexuals and those “motivated toward S.R.S” (i.e., sexual reassignment surgery). In particular, the inclusion of non-*DSM* terminology signals input from trans-identified and gender non-conforming individuals at a historical time, early to mid-1990s, when the social network enabled sorting process fast outpaced the medical establishment’s ability to categorize, classify and contain.

At the time (1995), the San Francisco umbrella gathered beneath its canopy gender identities and bodily configurations not previously considered an obvious grouping. However, since that time, combining of all these types most often goes unquestioned.⁶ The play on protecting various at-risk people from the hard rain of

⁵ This version of the DSM was published as a revision of the DSM-III (1980). Notably, publication of the DSM-III was accompanied by intense controversy over whether mental disorder classifications should be subsets of medical disorders. Included was a final clarification on this matter by the taskforce working on the revised (DSM-III-R) version: “Each of the mental disorders is conceptualized as a clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome.” Quoted in R Mayes and A.V. Horwitz, “DSM-III and the Revolution in the Classification of Mental Illness,” *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 41, no. 3 (2005): 249-267.

⁶ The early to mid-1990s, in general, was the time in the United States when trans-specific political activism started to take on a collective character. This coincided, probably not coincidentally, with the first appearance of the transgender umbrella diagram. Historians have documented this political emergence, including Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*

discrimination is easy to infer. This provides a clue as to the commonality of the individuals gathered together because, to some degree, all are vulnerable to similar forms of social exclusion based on having a trans-sexed embodiment and/or a non-normative gender expression. It is not accidental, then, that this diagram emerged from a historic legal victory precisely because neoliberal political rights in the U.S. rely on establishing an identifiable social class.⁷ Thus, the umbrella gave a powerful visual shape to an emergent political grouping based on a shared form of discrimination, and, following Foucault, actually constructed the very community it purported to simply mirror or represent.

This observation on the productive power of “transgender” follows Foucault’s argument in the *History of Sexuality* that discourses can both enforce repressive social controls and operate at the same time as a “‘reverse’ discourse.” His classic statement about a reverse discourse claims “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy [...] be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (101).⁸ The same can be said of “transsexuality,” emerging first in the 1950s as a medical term used to classify bodies and identities that by the 1990s were more commonly called “transgender.” Ironically, “transgender,” beginning in the 1960s, was used in order to counter medicalization but by the mid-1990s had become fully integrated into medical discourses. That resistant categories such as “transgender” can be appropriated back into medical taxonomies fits

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008).

⁷ In public health contexts a legal “class” is alternately termed a “population.”

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

well with the Foucauldian understanding of power as both repressive and productive, implicated and enmeshed everywhere with bodies, identities, pleasures *and* institutional regulatory mechanisms.

Productive and repressive power dynamics are integral to negotiations concerning the meanings and boundaries of categories such as transgender. In her article “Seeking Refuge Under the Umbrella: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Organizing Within the Category Transgender,” anthropologist Megan Davidson explains that “different constructions of the category transgender, who it includes and excludes, are not simply negotiations of a collective identity but, more significantly, negotiations about the boundaries of a social movement and that movement’s efforts to effect social change in the United States” (61).⁹ Davidson goes on to

suggest that the specific policy goals and broader vision of social change forwarded by trans activists are conceptualized in and through differing visions of the category transgender, although these differing visions are often elided in public consciousness by the category transgender itself and the notion of a unified umbrella implied within it. (61)

From a political standpoint, the “differing visions” of the category transgender that are “elided in public consciousness” are obscured, as Davidson notes, by the “unified umbrella implied within it.” The latter obfuscating factor is what I call umbrella logic: an imaginary that perpetuates the idea that *all* gender variant expressions and trans-sexed bodies should naturally be grouped together. For political policy purposes, this reasoning does make sense. That is, based on the necessity to protect the broadest range of people from non-normative sex/gender-based discrimination, even individuals who do not

⁹ Megan Davidson, “Seeking Refuge Under the Umbrella: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Organizing Within the Category Transgender,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of the NSRC* 4, no. 4 (December 2007): 60-80.

identify as transgender, or some variant thereof, are included in order that protective ordinances such as the one passed in San Francisco have any political teeth.¹⁰ But as anthropologist David Valentine notes, political necessity of this type results in a dual function of the category transgender: it is used as a specific label for self-identification but also operates as a non-specific collective term encompassing non-normative behavior and/or embodiment and related social effects.¹¹ The umbrella, then, is an image denoting the literal coverage of a broad range of both trans-identified and non-trans-identified people.

To understand better where the imaginary behind the “transgender umbrella” comes from, in this chapter I will discuss the term as it is linked to the umbrella model and related “continuum” concept. In the process, I elaborate on the internal tensions and contradictions of “transgender” that lead to it being a dually functioning term operating sometimes categorically and at other times a-categorically. My focus is not only on what draws existing types in under the umbrella, but also on what generates newly mutated

¹⁰ In an interview with Jordy Jones, he explains: “I was male co-chair of the San Francisco Transgender Implementation Task Force when we developed it. Not the umbrella, which was circulating in the culture at the time, but the list of identities—the loooooong laundry list—that fit under it. [...] Key to understanding where we were coming from is that we were writing for policy wonks, not for gender theorists. This point often gets lost in discussion of the mixed history of the term ‘transgender’ as identity category and as a policy or legislative category (N: “perceived gender identity and expression” has replaced “transgender” as preferred legal wording because it is both more descriptive and does not have to rely on a laundry-list of terms to protect.) For example, in placing a ‘feminine man’ or ‘transsexual’ under the umbrella, we were not suggesting that fem guys and post-op TS folks should identify as transgender. Rather, the idea is, if someone who is under the umbrella is discriminated against, they have legal recourse under SF law. It has very little to do with identity per se. Wonks need things spelled out; useful policy reports should leave little room for interpretation.” Jordy Jones, “Interview with the Author,” May 2008.

¹¹ David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007).

identities from within. It is this excessive, a-categorical and proliferative effect that conditions the transgender sublime. I use “the sublime” in conjunction with “transgender,” here, because of a concern with proportionality as the ground for an affective overwhelmed response. Size, particularly overwhelming magnitude, is a precondition for a sublime response—a viscerally embodied experience that begins in the mind of a beholder. In terms of “transgender,” this reaction happens as a result of its excessive, a-categorical and proliferative aspect. What I argue is that while an encounter with transgender sublimity is risky—especially if a psychically defensive shutting down occurs—it also holds a transformative promise: chancing a close encounter with the transgender sublime might just be worth the risk.

(A) History of the Category Transgender

To illustrate how the category transgender has fueled the various forms of cultural production I address in this dissertation, I provide a brief history in order to elucidate its dual operation as both categorical and a-categorical. This terminological double valence—as a gathering space and a proliferative matrix—is embodied in the range of cultural and political discourses and social practices that transgender enables. For most of its history, the category transgender has had a wobbly existence in the United States, first meaning a specific formation of gender transgression—cross-gender living without bodily modification¹²—and later used as an umbrella term to encompass *all* sex and

¹² For elucidation on the usage of “transgender(ist)” as a specific term of identification, see: Prince, Virginia, “Seventy Years in the Trenches of the Gender Wars,” in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, ed. Richard Ekins (London: Routledge, 2007), 469-476; Robert Hill, “‘As a Man, I Exist; As a Woman--I Live’: Heterosexual Transvestism and the Contours of Gender and Sexuality in Postwar

gender variance. As such, the range of identities, behaviors and embodiments that are often grouped under the umbrella are numerous and appear to proliferate on an almost daily basis.

The term “transgender” came into widespread usage in the early 1990s; however, versions of it have been around even longer. The earliest known use dates from the late 1960s, when variants of the term circulated among predominantly white, middle-class, male-birth-assigned individuals who presented in a feminine manner (comportment, identity and dress) most of the time.¹³ During that period, the noted individuals who championed related terms such as “transgenderal” or “transgenderist” included Ari Kane in New England and Virginia Prince in Southern California. In fact, Prince has since become historically enshrined as the originator of the term “transgender.” At the same time she has been criticized for using it to separate otherwise presumably “normal” individuals like herself—a male-birth-assigned, male-identified feminine presenting *heterosexual*—from the “sexual perversion” of “fetishistic transvestites,” as well as from any association with homosexuality.¹⁴

America” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007); Virginia Prince, Richard Ekins, and Dave King, *Virginia Prince: Pioneer of Transgendering* (New York: Haworth Medical Press, 2005).

¹³ See: Hill, “‘As a Man, I Exist; As a Woman--I Live’: Heterosexual Transvestism and the Contours of Gender and Sexuality in Postwar America”; Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*; Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*; Stryker, *Transgender History*.

¹⁴ Leslie Feinberg, in *Transgender Warriors*, claims that “Virginia told me, ‘I coined the noun transgenderist in 1987 or ’88. There had to be some name for people like myself who trans the gender barrier – meaning someone who lives full time in the gender opposite to their anatomy. I have not transed the sex barrier. Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), x. However, David Valentine in *Imagining Transgender* asserts that “[m]ost authors give credit to the activist Virginia Prince for her coinage of the term ‘transgenderist’ in the United States sometime around the 1970s (e.g., Doctor 1988, Frye 2000, G. MacKenzie 1994), though its actual origin in Prince’s writing is less than clear

Prince and others used “transgender,” or even “transgenderist,” to signal their living fulltime as female without surgery or hormones, and to distinguish themselves from “cross-dressers”—people presenting across gender lines only part-time or, in terms of “transvestic cross-dressers,” for the added purposes of erotic gratification.¹⁵ They further differentiated themselves from “transsexuals”—individuals holding a deeply felt sense of being born into the “wrong body”—who often seek medical intervention to alter their physical sex characteristics in order to live permanently as a different gender.¹⁶ Starting in the 1950s, “transsexualism” was a term largely used for medical diagnostic purposes and also functioned as a normalization strategy to distinguish transsexual-identified individuals from others, like cross dressers, who were seen as having a choice, unlike “true transsexuals” who often claimed they were “born that way.” Transgenderists (or transvestites as they were originally called) such as Kane and Prince not only exempted themselves from the category “transsexual,” but they were also excluded

and a more complicated history of its origin has been suggested by Robert Hill (2007).” *Imagining Transgender*, 32.

¹⁵ Meyerowitz notes that Prince “worked to create a transvestite identity that explicitly excluded both homosexuals and transsexuals. [...] For Prince, transvestism was a ‘gender expression,’ not a ‘sexual deviation,’ and transsexual surgery was a ‘tragic mistake’ for transvestites, who were ‘biologically males and heterosexually oriented.’” She goes on to note that Prince ultimately “hoped to dissociate MTF [male-to-female] transvestites from the taint of both sexual deviance and effeminacy.” *How Sex Changed*, 181.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9. For the purpose of her research, Meyerowitz uses “both transsexuality, a term often used today, and transsexualism, an equivalent term used more often in the 1950s and 1960s, [to] refer to conditions in which people hope to change the bodily characteristics of sex. (The terms apply whether or not the individual has undergone surgery.) Those who identify as transsexuals often describe their quest to change sex as a deep, longstanding, irresistible longing, and irrepressible desire to live and appear as the other sex” (9). Definitions of “transsexual,” including mine here, vary and go so far as to include individuals who identify as “non-operative” transsexuals, thus disrupting the very core sense of the term based on a desire for bodily transformation. Such are the myriad definitional contradictions that attend trans-specific terminology both historically and (cross) culturally.

through a medical vetting process—differential diagnosis—that relied upon a behavioral, psychological and terminological sorting process.

In her groundbreaking 2002 study *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, Joanne Meyerowitz connects differential diagnostic practice to a “taxonomic revolution” that began in the 1960s. Differential diagnosis is the technique used by doctors to gain a “clearer sense of who qualified as a bona fide transsexual and who did not,” mainly for purposes of treatment—hormones and surgery.¹⁷ Meyerowitz claims that beginning in the 1960s, “[doctors] created and refined a new schema of sexological classification that elaborated distinctions between transsexuals and more familiar ‘deviants.’”¹⁸ For example, she explains that Harry Benjamin, the noted endocrinologist who began treating trans-identified individuals (with hormones and referrals for surgery) long before his U.S.-based peers, created a six point scale “modeled on Alfred Kinsey’s hetero- and homosexual continuum.”¹⁹ Benjamin placed on one end of his scale “‘pseudo’ transvestites who had only ‘sporadic interest’ in crossdressing” along with “‘fetishistic’” and “‘true’ transvestites who derived sexual pleasure from crossdressing,” and on the other side put “three categories of transsexuals, culminating in the ‘high intensity’ transsexuals with ‘total “psychosexual” inversion.’”²⁰ Thus, Benjamin created a continuum that, according to Meyerowitz, “allowed doctors to distinguish

¹⁷ Differential diagnosis is the systematic method of diagnosing a condition by differentiating it from other medical and/or psychiatric disorders.

¹⁸ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 169.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

conditions without creating mutually exclusive categories or snapshot pictures of unchanging patients.”²¹ At the same time, she notes that,

[w]hile the doctors wrestled with definitions and diagnoses, self-identified homosexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals engaged in a parallel practice in which they tried to distinguish themselves from one another. They hoped to make themselves intelligible to others and also to convince doctors, courts, and the public to accord them dignity, rights, and respect. Some chose to align themselves with other sexual and gender variants or wondered out loud which of the existing categories best embraced their sense of themselves. But mostly, it seems, they hoped to explain their differences. In a sense, they constructed and affirmed their own identities by telling themselves and others how they differed. For some, the social practice of taxonomy involved a “politics of respectability.”²²

Prince, Kane, and countless others practiced a social sorting process predicated upon defining the contours of one’s identity based on a fundamental exclusion: “Who I am is as much about who I am not.” This emphasis on difference—defining oneself through naming and then negation of supposedly lesser or “perverted” others—is how socially entrenched hierarchies of realness and respectability are formed. Such “social” taxonomic differentiation was common to mid-twentieth-century formations of trans-specific and gender nonconforming identity.

In 1991 author and trans-activist Holly Boswell made an important intervention regarding terminological debates with her article “The Transgender Alternative,” published in a community-based journal *Chrysalis Quarterly*. Boswell argued for an understanding of “transgender” that “encompass[ed] a whole spectrum” of gender variance.²³ Anthropologist David Valentine observes that Boswell’s innovative deployment of the term “advocated for a position of crossgender identification which

²¹ Ibid., 176.

²² Ibid., 176-77.

²³ Holly Boswell, “The Transgender Alternative,” *Chrysalis Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1991): 29-31.

embraced a more androgynous style and mode of identification, a position which drew on more radical 1970s conceptions of gender-variant identity.”²⁴ Boswell’s work, then, was the beginning of a broader understanding of transgender as a “third way,” or alternative to the binary sex/gender system. However, her definition was based on a notion of *individual* androgynous behavior that merely foreshadowed the more collective—group identification—use of the term that was to follow.

Along with other critics, Valentine credits Leslie Feinberg’s 1992 pamphlet *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* with providing the architecture for an understanding of transgender that “explicitly politicized transgender identification beyond individual radical acts,” such as those Boswell proposed, and “called for a social movement organized around its terms.”²⁵ He goes on to say that, “this collective sense is that which most activists and social service providers adopted in the early 1990s.”²⁶ This concept of a transgender collectivity drew upon notions of a gender “spectrum” or “continuum,” which fueled the ever-increasing number of identities and behaviors lumped under its categorical umbrella.

²⁴ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 32. Also, in his article “Identity and Politics in a ‘Postmodern’ Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes,” Steven Seidman identifies a critical difference between “gay liberationist” politics of the early 1970s and what he calls an “ethnic/identity” model that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s. Seidman claims the gay liberationist moment “is more than a movement to liberate eros; it is a gender revolution. The struggle against the hetero/homo dichotomy is intertwined with the struggle against a sex-role system that views masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive categories of gender identity.” Steven Seidman, “Identity and Politics in a ‘Postmodern’ Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes,” in *Fear of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 113-114. Seidman’s historicization validates Valentine’s claim that Boswell draws upon an earlier (1970s) “androgynous” form of self-identification.

²⁵ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 33.

²⁶ Ibid.

In his book-length analysis, *Imagining Transgender*, Valentine persuasively argues that “the very flexibility of transgender, its strength as a tool of political organizing, thus makes it possible to use without specifying who is being invoked in particular instances.”²⁷ It is this very “flexibility,” and terminological imprecision, that constitutes the term’s “capacity to stand in for an unspecified group of people,” creating the category’s “seductive” power as a political organizing frame. As a category, then, transgender has the ability both to “[describe] individual identity and simultaneously [stand in] as a general term for gendered transgressions of many kinds [which] makes it almost infinitely elastic.”²⁸ In addition, as Valentine notes, “these slippages embody a central tension of the collective mode of ‘transgender.’”²⁹ In this way, “transgender” seems to function in a dual manner and its internal duality leads Valentine to highlight this “central tension” characterizing “transgender” in its collective usage as an identity-based term. Simply put, “transgender” operates in a categorical *and* an a-categorical manner either simultaneously or alternately, depending upon the context.

The descriptors—“infinite elasticity,” “slippage,” and “standing in for”—all concern the collective mode of transgender that results in umbrella logic as a way of thinking about and organizing spaces, and identities, by imagining *all* sex and gender variance grouped within a single structure or term.³⁰ This collective mode of transgender is linked to the shaping power of trans-specific political strategies that, as Valentine notes, mean that renaming done under the umbrella of transgender is often done *to*

²⁷ Ibid., 39.

²⁸ Ibid., 39.

²⁹ Ibid., 39.

³⁰ In his book *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg defines transgender “as a term to include *everyone* who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender.” Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, x.

individuals by activists, social services providers, researchers or other institutionally ensconced authorities. Thus, the phenomenon of renaming and placing people under the categorical umbrella leads to a central query of Valentine's analysis: What to make of individuals who do not identify as transgender and yet get categorized as such?

Valentine analyzes the repositioning of identity types under the transgender umbrella to argue that, "transgender has arisen out of a realignment—contested as it may be—of the kinds of individuals who see themselves or are seen as being part of the collectivity and who were previously accounted for by other terms including 'homosexuality', 'transexuality', and 'transvestism.'"³¹ He goes on to say that while an "'umbrella' term that includes all people who are in some ways gender-variant—seems self evident, the question remains: what counts as gender-variant and who is included in 'transgender'?" The answer to this question is not clear and is sometimes contradictory."³² Reflexive questioning of this sort requires discernments, for example, as to whether a butch dyke or a feminine gay man identifies as transgender even if s/he is included by others under its' categorical rubric.

Transgender in its collective usage—and the fleeting gesture to its limit ("almost infinitely elastic")—points to yet another "central tension" between the aggregative capacity of transgender and its function as a proliferative matrix. That is, in addition to an ability to realign identities and then consolidate them, "transgender" has an internally driven proliferative function that makes it a powerful political and social force. While Valentine's tension derives from the categorical use of transgender as a specific identity

³¹ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 32.

³² *Ibid.*, 37.

term in relation to its elastic expansive capacity to realign identities (like “butch” or “gay”), it also has an a-categorically generative capacity.

In addition to Valentine’s noted “central tension,” I contend that a less obvious, but equally important, disjuncture exists between the category operating as a top-down model that stretches to encompass more and more nonstandard identities (or bodies) and an internal proliferation that disseminates outward. This movement of proliferation is central to my argument in this dissertation because it establishes the ground for a transgender sublime to emerge. The transgender sublime is based on a mind’s cognitive incapacity to comprehend fully all the proliferating forms of embodiment, sex/gender identities and expressions. Magnitude and proportionality thus condition an affective overwhelmed response that follows. Feeling overwhelmed is the related sensory dimension of the experience of the sublime—shutting down being a form of psychical protection against the fear/terror of subjective boundary collapse at the edge of “limitlessness.”

While transgender *is* elastic in the category-gathering sense, pulling in identities from locations elsewhere—such as butch dykes who were previously categorized within “gay” or “lesbian” lexicons—it is also, by Valentine’s own admission, “*almost* infinitely elastic,” implying not quite all-encompassing. To clarify, this is not Valentine’s definition of “transgender,” but rather, his ethnographically grounded *observation* of how the category gets constructed and then put to use. The image of the umbrella—literally a human-made synthetic object that protects users from being assailed by the elements—rain, hail, sleet, snow or wind—is particularly revealing because plastic, while expansive and elastic, is not infinitely expandable. So, Valentine’s reference to the umbrella that is

described as “*almost* infinitely elastic” implies a limit as to how far it will stretch in order to accommodate the numerous realignments of identities and bodies. It really cannot be *infinitely* expandable because there would be nothing left of “gay” or “queer” identities and cultures if everything were so easily realigned under the category transgender.

While non-trans-specific identities and bodies are frequently included under the umbrella, as I have suggested, not all the terms are coming from outside only to be re-categorized within this new schematic. The very seams of transgender also strain and burst open from within, unleashing an excess of signification that produces novel variants of embodiment and gender identity. This a-categorical excess, or proliferation, that holds much transformative promise can, at the same time, create unintended political and cultural complications. For example, in *Transgender Rights*, the first book-length treatment of trans-specific political issues in the US, the editors note the “tension” filled relationship between the terms; nevertheless, they include a list of their own.

The term transgender offers political possibilities as well as risks. Any claim to describe or define a people or a set of practices poses the danger of misrepresenting them. The danger is not trivial; distorted representations can lead to misguided advocacy [which] at times, masks the differences among gender nonconforming people and risks implying a common identity that outweighs differences along racial and class lines. Nonetheless, there is also considerable value in a term that can draw together people who believe that individuals should have a right to determine and express their gender without fear, stigmatization, marginalization, or punishment.³³

In this case, “transgender” turns out to be a double-edged political sword.

I would argue that Valentine’s “central tension” – so pertinent to the question “What counts as transgender?” – depends on the conceptual frame chosen. In his case, it is a matter of realignment and re-naming of previously existing identity terms (e.g.,

³³ Paisley Currah, Richard M Juang, and Shannon Minter, *Transgender Rights* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xv.

“stone butch” or “flaming fag”). Yet Valentine’s description, while exactly right, is still partial and does not go far enough toward examining the internally contradictory aspects of transgender. In the end, his is an observation of some shuffling and shifting: the movement of realignment. Valentine’s image is of a transgender tree-like umbrella with the handle serving as a grounding trunk for the all-encompassing branched canopy overhead: terms hop on (or are pushed) from other habitats only to settle onto a new branch. While “realignment” can be abrupt, radical and disruptive of existing taxonomies, the picture generated by such movement fails to describe fully the generative quality of transgender, which conjures images of underground hidden growths that shoot up and off—tracing nearly unintelligible trajectories outward.

Following theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “arborescent”³⁴ schemas map phenomena onto tree-like logical structures, such as the transgender umbrella. These diagrams—and associated imaginaries—ultimately fail to capture the fact that it is not complexity alone, but rather another form of difference that promotes proliferation and conditions the transgender sublime. Trans-specific identities, bodies and even linguistic variations consistently exceed the branching patterns of the umbrella and instead sprout up from seemingly nowhere, flying off in wild and unexpected directions. This rootless, unpredictable and circuitous variability is what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “rhizomatic,” arguing that the term

should not be confused with the lineages of the arborescent type, which are merely localizable linkages between points and positions. Unlike the tree, the rhizome [...] operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots... [and] is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable [...]. In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 16.

and pre-established paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without [...] an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states. What is at question in the rhizome is a relation to sexuality [...] that is totally different from the arborescent relation.³⁵

Deleuze and Guattari also note that rhizomes encompass “all manner of ‘becomings.’”³⁶

The rhizomatic quality of transgender can likewise be said to encompass “all manner of becomings” since—in terms of the transgender sublime—being overwhelmed and even transformed by it does not follow simply from calculating the possible combinations of potential bodies and genders in the world. Valentine’s observation about elasticity relates to the arborescent side of “transgender,” whereas its generative or proliferative qualities correspond to the rhizomatic. And rhizomes, in particular, suggest transgender functions as a proliferative matrix that does not solely operate by realigning pre-existing bodies and identities under the transgender umbrella. While realignment does occur, “transgender” also disseminates a plethora of mutations that are gestated from within. This rhizomatic dimension signals the qualitative, and not simply quantitative, nature of gendered embodiment and subjectivity—something that points toward the radical and transformative potential of an encounter with transgender sublimity.

Along the Continuum...

To better understand umbrella logic—and see how the associated diagram even came to exist—it may be helpful to back up and explore the way “transgender” has been framed in terms of a “continuum” or “spectrum.” The notion of a continuum, instead of a binary, has been active in various sexual and gender-specific discourses longer than it has

³⁵ Ibid., 7-21.

³⁶ Ibid., 21.

grounded the umbrella logic that organizes “transgender.” One influential historical example is poet and feminist Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in which she posited a range of woman-to-woman relationships by invoking a “lesbian continuum” that extended far beyond sexual relations between women.³⁷

According to the editors of a special transgender issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly*: “[a]lthough Rich’s crucial intervention has faded into the distance [it] remind[s] us of the importance of its theoretical operations, such as denaturalizing heterosexuality and viewing the lesbian continuum as ‘a strategic mechanism for generating politically viable identities and alliances’” (Introduction, 20).³⁸ They go on to note that “Rich’s thought should not be seen as occupying only one end of several related binaries: essentialist not constructionist, second wave rather than next wave, feminist in opposition to queer” (20). Rather, they suggest that “Rich’s critical frameworks can be transposed to imagine a ‘transgender continuum on which so-called male-born men and female-born women can find themselves building political connections with those whose gender is more obviously outside society’s narrow ‘frame’ of the normal’” (20).

³⁷ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660. In Rich’s words: “I have chosen the words lesbian existence and lesbian continuum because the word lesbianism has a clinical and limiting ring. [...] I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.”

³⁸ Susan Stryker et al., “Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2008): 11-308. Quotes taken from introductory remarks summarizing an article in this volume: Cheryl L. Cole and Shannon L. C. Cate, “Compulsory Gender and Transgender Existence: Adrienne Rich’s Queer Possibility,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2008): 279-287.

Historian Joanne Meyerowitz provides the most detailed historical account of the discursive shift to non-binary “continuum” thinking which, she claims, evolved from late eighteenth century attempts to measure sex differences. She explains that “[b]y the early twentieth century, though, scientists increasingly noted the ways in which women and men overlapped” (HSC, 23). Charles Darwin supported this idea when he wrote: “in many, probably in all cases, the secondary-sex characters of each sex lie dormant or latent in the opposite sex, ready to be evolved under peculiar circumstances” (HSC, 22-23).³⁹

Meyerowitz also discusses Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger’s “theory of bisexuality” from his 1903 book *Sex and Character*, wherein he “envisioned sex as a continuous spectrum ‘in which the different degrees [of sexual embodiment] grade into each other without breaks in the series’” (HSC, 23-24).⁴⁰ Also noted are the influential nineteenth-century European sexologists Magnus Hirschfeld and Richard von Krafft-Ebing who ascribed to the belief in a continuum of genders and sexual states. For example, Hirschfeld promoted a theory of “sexual intermediaries” and then “portrayed intermediaries—among whom he included hermaphrodites, androgynes, homosexuals, and transvestites—as a ‘third sex’, anomalous exceptions to the male-female rule” (26).

Other significant milestones of “continuum” thinking included, in the 1940s, Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy and Clyde Martin, who: “focused on the wide variation in human sexual behavior” (29). They argued that “[i]t is a fundamental taxonomy that

³⁹ Quoted in Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 29.

⁴⁰ “Bisexuality” in this sense is not defined as being attracted to “both” genders; rather, it suggests that within one individual is the potential for a dual physiological condition, or, alternately, from individual to individual (regardless of their gender) that humans run a spectrum from male to female morphology.

nature rarely deals with discrete categories ... The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects” (29).⁴¹ Finally, more recent social scientists that have exhibited continuum thinking are Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna, who “accepted and built upon the mid-twentieth-century research that focused on the construction of gender [which they distinguished from biological sex]” (HSC, 262). In fact, Meyerowitz claims, Kessler and McKenna “asserted the primacy of gender in defining the very categories of male and female, and in a modified form they returned, without seeming to know it, to an early twentieth-century model of biological sex as a continuum” (263).⁴²

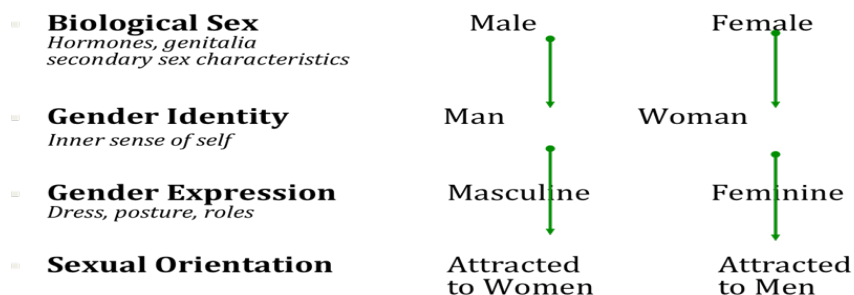
The continuum principle is also seen in the educational programs of trans-health trainer Samuel Lurie, whose workshops are designed to sensitize healthcare providers. In his public presentations Lurie begins with the “Binary Gender Model” [Figure 2] that highlights different facets of the sex/gender system.⁴³

⁴¹ As Meyerowitz points out, the Kinsey Scale, failed to “adopt the biological correlate that blurred the boundaries of male and female and posed all humans and biologically indeterminate. They maintained the male-female categories and located their scales of individual variation primarily in the areas of temperament, personality, and behavior.” *How Sex Changed*, 29. Thus, the Kinsey Scale did not provide any binary-breaking leverage for transgender theory and activism because it was too grounded in fixed male and female gender identities with corresponding heterosexual and homosexual sex practices.

⁴² The study referenced here is Suzanne J Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: an Ethnomethodological Approach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁴³ Samuel Lurie, “Four Steps to Providing Health Care for Transgender People,” Self-published training handout, 2004. Inclusion of Lurie’s materials in this chapter is not intended to call into question his considerable training expertise. A distinction should be made between the use of these models in training contexts—where specific pedagogical imperatives necessitate such techniques and models—and my analysis of these slides to explain an ethnographically documented phenomenon. My use of these models is to demonstrate their effect on training participants and their heuristic truth-value is not germane to this discussion.

Binary Gender Model



Adapted from model by Samuel Lurie (2002)

Figure 2

Dominant cultural logic posits that these dimensions of identity, embodiment and orientation are supposed to flow causally into one another in heteronormative fashion.

When using this slide, Lurie follows feminist, queer and transgender critics of the sex/gender system and teaches his trainees that such models clearly fail to account for the range and variation of diversity in the world. Instead, he and other educators propose that the deconstruction of a binary sex/gender system entails uncoupling gender from sex.⁴⁴

In order to disrupt this binary sex/gender system, transgender educational program interventions use the notion of a “gender spectrum,” whereby gender, according to this new schema, is no longer binary but instead exists along a continuum.

Continuum logic is exemplified by another of Lurie’s slides, the “Continuum Gender Model” [Figure 3], that indicates a non-binary range of bodies, genders and sexualities that are all possible in social worlds.

⁴⁴ In this case, “gender” is understood to be the roles and expectations that become grounded by, for example, “male” physiology that gets equated with the social identity of “man” and an associated compulsory “masculine” gender expression.

Continuum Gender Model

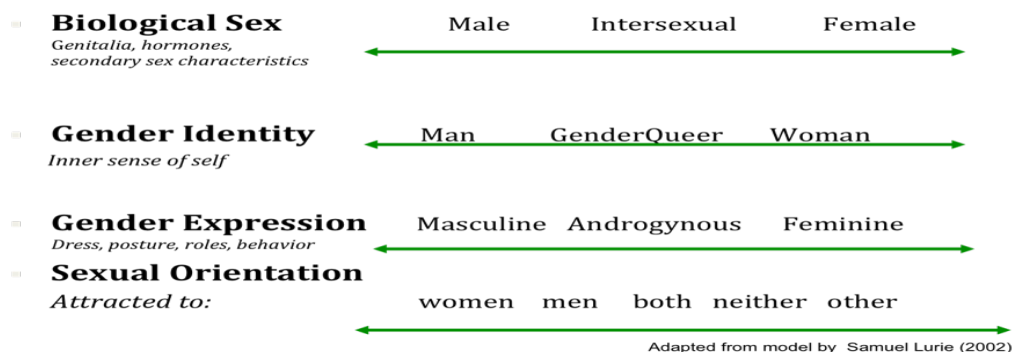


Figure 3

According to trans studies critic Jordy Jones, “in place of a black-and-white binarism, a sort of ‘rainbow flag’ of gender is sometimes proposed.”⁴⁵ While the continuum is often lauded as an advance in gender thinking and considered a more “naturalistic” view of gender biodiversity, Jones remains skeptical as he questions:

How useful is this idea of a (linear) spectrum for understanding multiple and diverse genders? It certainly provides for more positions, and more livable ones, than does a binary structure. A spectral analysis, however, locks a multiplicity of positions into absolute relation to one another as well as to the extremes, which, while they may be arbitrary, nevertheless remain opposites. In the absence of theories of gender that allow for the potentially *infinite proliferation* of specificities, eccentric subjectivities are forced into preformed genres, and important differences are abolished in favor of a provisional intelligibility. (449, italics added)

Lurie’s training, on some level, follows Jones’s critique of the continuum concept and demonstrates that it is not enough to simply reveal a spectrum of genders and bodies.

Thus, Lurie introduces his “‘Revolutionary’ Gender Model” [Figure 4] to address the

⁴⁵ Jordy Jones, “Gender Without Genitals: Hedwig’s Six Inches,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 449-468.

limitation of the continuum which “locks” in intermediate gender locations between a fixed set of distal (M/F) points.

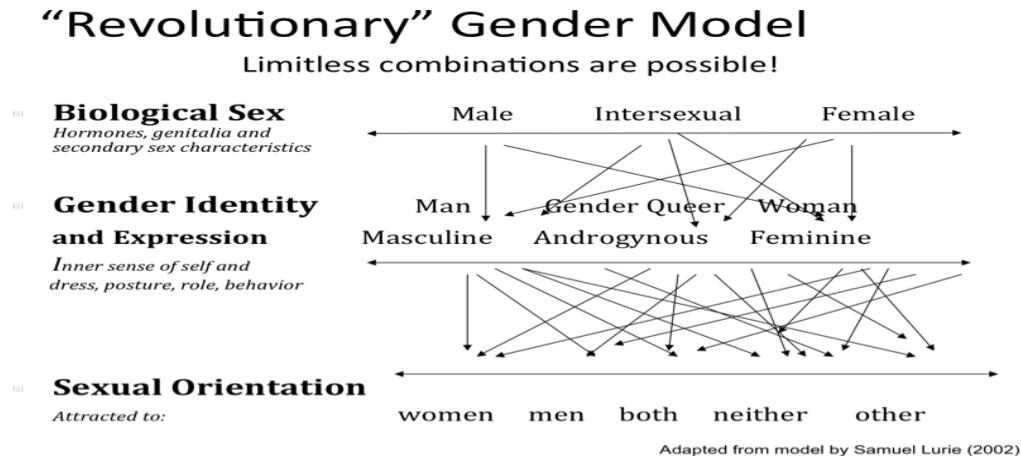


Figure 4

The “Revolutionary” diagram relies upon a historical separation of sex from gender, and also from sexual orientation, which, in this model, correspond to the axes of “biological sex,” “gender identity and expression,” and “sexual orientation.”⁴⁶ This separating is what gender critic Judith Halberstam calls the “untangling once and for all [of] the knots that appeared to bind gender to sex and sexuality in some mysterious and organic way” (48).⁴⁷ But Lurie’s model also moves beyond the disarticulation of these axes of identity and behavior to suggest their many possible combinations. In this way, Lurie builds upon the continuum principle by adding to it the complexity of potential

⁴⁶ Meyerowitz historicizes the sex and gender distinction that she claims happened some time around the mid-twentieth-century. She offers the example of Daniel G. Brown’s work as a researcher who, in 1960, “pointed to ‘three different, independently varying components in the psychosexual development of an individual’: ‘(1) the constitutional composition as male or female [sex]... (2) the process whereby a child learns how to be masculine or feminine [gender role and expression] ... and (3) the process whereby a child ... acquires a sex-object choice [sexual orientation],” Quoted in Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 127.

⁴⁷ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1998).

interrelationships between each continuum-based axis. Thus, the “Revolutionary” graphic suggests the “infinite proliferation of specificities” that Jones favors by providing a visual map of the nearly endless connections between different identities, embodiments and sexual orientations. However, the fixed points that Jones critiques still remain, and as an educational heuristic, Lurie’s objective seems to be exactly what Jones identifies as the limited goal of “provisional intelligibility.”

While increased intelligibility is the desired outcome of almost all training programs, sometimes the opposite can occur. For example, during his workshop at the “Third Annual Philadelphia Trans-health Conference,” Lurie showed his slides of mapped gender diversity.⁴⁸ When he introduced the “Revolutionary” model he paused, scanned the crowd, and said out loud: “I see many of your eyes glazing over.” This simple observation verbally acknowledged the profound overload effect that his model had on the audience. Notably, the training participants’ response in that moment contradicted the intended purpose of such workshops whereby increased intelligibility is the desired outcome. Lurie’s attempt, at least in this workshop in Philadelphia, failed at establishing even “provisional intelligibility” precisely because it distilled the “infinite proliferation of specificities” into a simple schematic. In fact, Jones’s own imaginary articulates what I argue about the dual aspect of the category transgender: it contains a nearly “infinite proliferative” effect at the same time that it realigns, aggregates and consolidates identities under a single umbrella, or, in this case, a tree-like diagram.

I have witnessed a similar cognitively overwhelmed response when using Lurie’s slides in my own health education workshops. However, instead of seeking “provisional

⁴⁸ *Third Annual Philadelphia Trans-health Conference*, Philadelphia, PA (March 2004).

intelligibility,” I use the “Revolutionary” model diagram in order to intentionally precipitate a sublime crisis of comprehension, anxiety or fear. Of course, such overwhelming and potentially transformative moments can fail if defenses against a sublime experience overtake a viewer. Yet it is a risk worth taking if the intention is to move beyond static models that include the continuum, whereby every gender/body has a position and the end points are fixed. The goal is to initiate a qualitatively different training experience—engaging visceral and not just cognitive learning—which tree-like charts and reductive categorical definitions alone cannot provide.

Intense visceral reaction on the part of training participants is common to encounters with sublimity. And feeling overwhelmed is a sensory dimension of the experience of the sublime, with shutting down the result of psychical protection against the terror of boundary collapse at the edge of limitlessness. In training contexts, this becomes a teachable moment, as I ask: “Is anyone confused?” Usually, at least one timid hand will go up and the person will admit to being overwhelmed at the sight of the visual diagram and their contemplation of the multiple, proliferative and seemingly infinite possibilities. After that, other participants will voice their own experience of confusion. I then say: “Great, it is confusing, and confusion is inherent in this process [...] your response is exactly what should be expected when beginning to provide trans-specific services.” This reassurance often results in visible relief registered on participants’ faces because they realize that their lack of comprehension and discomfort with ambiguity is not wrong.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The authors of an evaluation study of the effectiveness of “Transgender 101-style” trainings claim: “Recent scholarship in the field of cultural competence education discussed the ineffectiveness of using a formulaic approach [to training...] and examined

The continuum and the complexity of the related “Revolutionary” model is less convincing as a straightforward heuristic precisely because it tends to confuse more than clarify issues for training participants in the process of attempting to eradicate ambiguity. Ironically, this often happens in workshops where increased intelligibility is the stated goal. So, while such training models can open workshop participants’ minds to multiple possibilities, in general, these sessions fall short of providing a transformative experience. Instead of increased intelligibility, my intention for this exercise is to facilitate a trainees’ encounter with the transgender sublime, as contrived as it may be through the use of a disorienting diagram. My objective is to initiate a viscerally and cognitively disruptive experience and then teach participants how to deal with their confusion, or fear, and still function in this uncomfortable zone. This can happen through encountering, even in virtual visual format, the proliferative limitlessness of bodies and genders. However, the point is not to teach trainees that “infinite” genders and bodies are a scientific fact; instead, I encourage them to become intimate with sublimity by not trying to eradicate it while performing their work.

By suggesting to trainees they embrace a sublime experience of the seemingly limitless possible bodies, genders, and sexualities, and then asking them to confront the

the tension between providers’ desire for certainty and the critical importance of reflection, uncertainty, and a focus on patients’ self-definitions [...]. Building skills to cope with ambiguity serves a larger and more varied set of patients than the checklist [providing a set definitions] or stereotype-based approach to clinical encounters. Centralizing ambiguity provides a foundation for developing effective, useful training curricula and programs. However, because providers and staff have a great desire for certainty [...], such a process requires sound planning on the part of [...] trainers, as well as a depth of commitment [from those being trained]” (8). From Christoph Hannsmann, Darius Morrison, and Ellery Russian, “Talking, Gawking, or Getting It Done: Provider Trainings to Increase Cultural and Clinical Competence for Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Patients and Clients,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of the NSRC* 5, no. 1 (March 2008): 5-23.

potential fear of being faced with the categorically unknown, a different way to relate, not simply based on defining and categorizing people, can begin to emerge. Moments like these, in relatively mundane settings, reveal how aesthetics—in this case, visceral and somatically embodied reactions to the disruption of familiar categorical sex/gender forms—connect with the pragmatic concerns of competency programs. Encounters of this sort lead to a discussion of practice; specifically, how do providers offer services for people who defy conventional definitions and forms? How does one relate in a competent manner while allowing for the radical ambiguity of the unknown? Or, how does one negotiate a potential encounter with the transgender sublime in a non-defensive manner? This, then, is a question of ethics—of relational being or becoming and of newly discovered ways to engage with an “other.”

Transgender is (to) Queer

Thinking about transgender umbrellas raises another crucial question: Why is transgender not tantamount to queer if queer is understood as an umbrella category that functions differently than identity terms such as lesbian or gay? Trans-identified historian and gender theorist Susan Stryker has argued in “The Transgender Issue” of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* that “I am not as concerned with how either referent of *Q* [quarterly or queer] relates to *L* and *G* as I am with the relation of *queer* to another letter entirely—*T*, itself a signifier that slides between ‘transsexual’ and ‘transgender’”(149).⁵⁰

To explain her position further, Stryker elaborates:

⁵⁰ Susan Stryker, “The Transgender Issue: An Introduction,” *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 4 (1998): 145-158.

I use *transgender* not to refer to one particular identity or way of being embodied but rather as an umbrella term for a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual's anatomy at birth, a nonconsensually assigned gender category, psychical identification with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions. (149)

For Stryker, “*transgender* can [...] be read as a heterodox interpretation of *queer*” and, thus, is a related form of anti-heteronormative disruption (149). This makes the collective set of dissonant transgender *effects* inherently *queer*. Both denote something beyond orthodox sexual and gender practices that enact the de-centering of normative gender, embodiment, and sexual acts.⁵¹ And so, paraphrasing David Halperin who invokes a Foucauldian understanding of queer, Stryker defines transgender as “a category without a stable referent that acquires its specific meaning from the logic of its oppositions to a norm grounded in particular concrete situations” (*GLQ*, 151). According to Stryker, transgender *is* queer because of how each term enabled her, a trans-identified queer woman, to “align [herself] with antiheteronormative identities and sociopolitical formations” (151).

As noted, queer, like transgender, is often used as an elastic and syntactically driven umbrella formulation. This umbrella quality has been vividly demonstrated by a groundbreaking 1992 issue of the *Village Voice* entitled “The Queer Issue: Identity

⁵¹ “Queer” is often used as an analytic frame to critically examine social formations, non-normative sexual or gender expressions, and relationships that counter or transgress those considered “normal” and conventional. See Michael Warner, *Fear Of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Gayatri Gopinath, “Homoconomics: Queer Sexualities in a Transnational Frame,” in *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*, ed. Rosemary George (Boulder: Westwood Press, 1998); Chandan R. Reddy, “Homes, Houses, Non-Identity: Paris is Burning,” in *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity* (Boulder: Westwood Press, 1998), 335-379; Janet Jakobsen, “Queer Is? Queer Does?” *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 511-536.

Politics and the New Gay.”⁵² Prominently displayed in street corner news boxes, the first thing a passersby would notice was an image emblazoned on the front cover: a full-body photograph of the bare-chested Asian American butch bodybuilder—Kitty Tsui—wearing only leather pants and Labrys necklace. Superimposed over her image-body was a plethora of presumably queer terms:

dyke/gay/queen/lesbian/
femme/fairy/butch/gay
lesbian/queer/dyke/bi
homo/butch/gay/queen
queer/bi/lesbian/femme
butch/dyke/fairy/homo

Although each term repeats at least two or three times, this congregation of words, taken as a whole, represents an elastic encompassing of identity types that mirrors Valentine’s observation of how transgender functions. While some terms like “gay” or “homo” reference sexual orientation, others such as “queen,” “fairy” and “butch” have additional gender-variant overtones. Comparing the *Village Voice*’s collection of identity terms to a list under the heading of “gender outlaws” from Leslie Feinberg’s pamphlet *Transgender Liberation*, published in the same year (1992), there is also significant terminological overlap. Feinberg’s outlaws include: “transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and drag kings, cross-dressers, bull-daggers, stone butches, androgynes, diesel dykes [and] berdache—a European colonialist term” (206).⁵³ Not only does each umbrella-like constellation contain similar terms, in this case terminological re-contouring is central to the syntactic imaginaries of both “queer” and “transgender” in their collective usage.

⁵² “The Queer Issue: Identity Politics and the New Gay,” *The Village Voice* (New York, June 30, 1992). Cover photograph of Kitty Tsui by Jill Posener.

⁵³ Leslie Feinberg, “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Such linguistic realigning is crucial to the re-naming activity Valentine associates with “transgender,” and here it seems to be equally applicable to “queer.”

Centrality of syntax is further emphasized in the special pull-out section of this *Voice* issue that included the cover quote: “‘OUT OF THE CLOSETS, INTO THE STREETS’ Went the Rallying Cry That Kicked Off Gay and Lesbian Liberation Some 25 Years Ago. A Different Sort of Syntax Fires Us Today” (25).⁵⁴ A “different [queer] syntax” could, at least on the surface, just as easily be the result of “transgender effects” if we apply Stryker’s anti-heteronormative trans-queer formulation from the *GLQ* “Transgender Issue.” If so, then does anything set apart the transgender umbrella and associated umbrella logic from this syntactic, elastic and collective version of queer?

Perhaps one difference concerns the anti-heteronormative aspect of queer that Stryker connects to “transgender effects” in her introduction of *GLQ*. According to historians like Stryker, as political organizing under the umbrellas of “queer” and “transgender” have evolved simultaneously (early 1990s) in the U.S., they have included some overlap of identity types under each collective category. However, following Valentine, “transgender” as a repository of realignment means that it often includes types of individuals queer politics never anticipated, the most obvious being heterosexual male cross-dressers. In fact, if we apply Prince’s specific usage of “transgender”—to distinguish otherwise ordinary heterosexual men from gender-variant gays and lesbians, or anyone else not sexually normative—then it is hard to reconcile the inclusion of heterosexuals, albeit sometimes gender-variant in guise, under the explicitly anti-heteronormative logic of queer.

⁵⁴ “The Queer Issue: Identity Politics and the New Gay.” Special section edited by Richard Goldstein and Alisa Solomon.

Another more concrete difference is one of political agenda: queer activists and theorists have historically focused on the rejection and destabilization of heteronormative institutions, such as marriage. While trans-specific political efforts have concentrated on upturning gendered social norms and institutions, trans-activists also concentrate on social exclusions that queer politics rarely, if ever, address. These include: identity documentation (e.g., sex designation on birth certificates and driver's licenses); lack of social services (even within existing gay/lesbian programs); gendered exclusions from public accommodation because services are organized according to binary gender categories (e.g., men's and women's public bathrooms or sex segregated homeless shelters); denial of healthcare based on gender variant identity/expression and trans-sexed embodiment; insurance exclusion of trans-specific health services (e.g., hormones and gender-related surgeries); and blatantly improper use of chosen names and pronouns in institutional settings.⁵⁵

Transgender categorically displays its dual impulse in another way, then, through trans-specific political work that is both anti-normative and, at the same time, grounded in efforts to expand access to regulative social institutions without entirely dismantling them. The primary reason for the latter is the ongoing daily struggle simply to survive—what Judith Butler has, in reference to trans-identified people, called the right to a “livable life”⁵⁶ This is not to say that queer and transgender politics do not overlap; they

⁵⁵ For a more comprehensive elaboration of these political issues see Paisley Currah and Shannon Minter, *Transgender Equality: A Handbook for Activists and Policymakers* (New York: Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2000).

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality,” *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2001): 621-636. In this article Butler recoups some of her previous trans-insensitive work by focusing, in an affirmative manner, on questions of ethics related to trans-identity and embodiment. She

definitely do. However, “transgender” in the U.S. embodies a contradictory tension both categorically and politically, and the internally conflicted aspect of the category transgender is something “queer” exhibits less because, unlike transgender, it stands in direct opposition to gay and lesbian identity politics and normative social institutions.⁵⁷ Unlike “queer,” then, the category transgender and its associated politics are *both* normative and anti-normative at the same time. This is something of a unique condition.

The differences between “transgender” and “queer” could suggest the need for a disarticulation of one from the other. Yet such distinctions are complicated by yet another tension, this time involving the relationship between embodiment and identity. While it might seem logical to disentangle “queer” from “transgender,” for some individuals it is not quite so simple.

Again, quoting Stryker from her introduction to *GLQ*:

takes as a frame issues of power (ala Foucault’s elaborations on a “politics of truth”) and the issue of intelligibility: what counts as an intelligible subject, under what circumstances, and in terms of the many ways that intelligibility can be denied based on one’s status as a non-normatively sexed or gendered being. She begins with questions, such as: “What counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? Whose world is legitimated as real? [...] Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me? [...] What happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place in the given regime of truth?” (621).

⁵⁷ Queer politics of the sort I describe here are quite different from the current (2008-09) political drive toward same-sex marriage being promoted by assimilation-minded LGB advocates. Within contemporary queer (as opposed to LGB) organizing there are examples, such as “Queers for Economic Justice” which is a New York City-based organization with a mission to “promot[e] economic justice in a context of sexual and gender liberation.” As a queer organization that takes a social justice approach to political work, they connect issues of racial and economic inequity to LGBT concerns in order to acknowledge that “poor queers have always been a part of both the gay rights and economic justice movements, [although they] continue to be [...] largely invisible in both movements.” “Queers For Economic Justice,” *LGBT Organizing New York*, n.d., <http://q4ej.org/>. Social justice queer activism focuses less on single-issue (e.g., marriage) and identity-based (LGB) political work and more on equity-based challenges to institutional and social exclusion.

The root of my conviction that *transgender*, *transsexual*, and *queer* need not be mutually antagonistic terms is shamelessly autobiographical, a result of my lived experience during the early 1990s when these words were undergoing rapid evolutions in meaning. (GLQ, 149)

Here she pinpoints the early 1990s as the cultural moment in the U.S. when categories of queer, transgender, and transsexual “were undergoing rapid evolutions in meaning” (p).⁵⁸

This was especially true on the west coast, where Stryker was located. Thus, there seemed to be no mutual antagonism between any of these terms, especially if *embodied* in one person—Stryker—who inhabited a particular geographic location—The Bay Area. At the same time, in other social spaces and geographical locations, individuals experienced the relationship between these categories differently. Elsewhere, queer and/or trans-specific identities were not so readily accessible because the language had not fully evolved enough to enable the kind of non-contradictory self-identification Stryker describes.

The emergent aspect of the historical moment of the early 1990s, with regional differences and uneven discourses, can be exemplified by comparing two graduate student conferences that took place in the Midwest only one year apart. The first was “Flaunting It: The First National Graduate Student Conference on Lesbian and Gay Studies” in 1991.⁵⁹ Identified as a “gay and lesbian studies conference,” the title alone marks it by gay identity politics instead of the distinctively anti-identitarian impulse of

⁵⁸ Meyerowitz also identifies the early 1990s as the moment when a transition occurred from an “older era” of suffering individuals who sought out private medical doctors or university-based gender programs toward the “rise of the contemporary transgender movement.” *How Sex Changed*, 256. The movement’s emergence marked a shift away from viewing “transgender” as an individual pathology toward that of a collective identity with an associated level of group activism.

⁵⁹ “Flaunting It: The First National Graduate Student Conference on Lesbian and Gay Studies,” University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (April 1991).

queer. At the same time, the titles of many conference papers listed in the program included the word “queer” and/or advocated moving beyond gay and lesbian identity politics toward an anti-identitarian mode of non-normative categorical disruption. Despite the conference title, then, the discourse of “queer” was already seeping through the cracks of culture making, even at a conference linguistically framed by gay and lesbian identity politics.

While “Flaunting It” did not fully reflect the move from same-sex politics (the identity-based “it” of the title) to queer theory and activism, the following year’s conference made the shift more explicit: “Making it Perfectly Queer: Second National Graduate Student Conference on Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Studies.”⁶⁰ Discussions at this event centered on an emergent queer political discourse with a residual interest in identity politics that still lingered in the air—indicated by the subtitle: “Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Studies.” Conference papers also represented a mixture of the two modes of critical inquiry and political attitudes.

Relevant to my analysis was a recurring question at “Perfectly Queer,” which suggested that the non-contradictory relationship between queer and trans-specific issues/identities had not become operational in every social space. The question was: “If a dyke and a fag have sex together is it queer or heterosexual sex?” As a query initiated within the context of a historical moment when the focus on gay and lesbian identity politics was giving way to the disruptiveness of “queer,” such an utterance seemed simply scandalous. The question itself, though, provides a clue as to the difference

⁶⁰ “Making it Perfectly Queer: Second National Graduate Student Conference on Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Studies,” University of Illinois, Urbana—Champaign (April 2-4, 1992).

embodiment makes when seen through a queer versus transgender lens. As worded, it offers only a choice between “queer” *or* “heterosexual” outcomes and presumes fairly normative male and female bodies as the locus of the sex act.

This either/or choice indicates how easily queer slips into a gender binary and the same-sex (homo) logic that is often used as shorthand for a gay-centric identity politics. Such binary thinking excludes trans-specific bodies and sexualities that span a vast sexual range and even include “heterosexual.” As a “queer” formulation, this question also assumes that the gender identity of each participant is stable, if somewhat gender-variant. Most importantly, though, is that a choice of *either* “queer” *or* “heterosexual” simply prevents any detailed discussion of non-binary and trans-specific embodiments, identities and sexual practices.

Behind this question there was never the hint of more challenging trans-specific considerations, such as: What if the “dyke” was actually a man or what if the “fag” was actually a woman? What if one person identified as a trans man or a transfag? Or what if one partner was once assigned male at birth and might still have “male” sex organs, but now identifies as a woman and/or lesbian? What difference, for the purpose of sexual categorization, would these questions of embodiment and identity actually make? At “Perfectly Queer,” these concerns were wholly absent. In fact, it seemed that there was no collective way of imagining how the sexuality of the couple, or of each sex partner (individually), might be classified *beyond* existing categories including “heterosexual” and “queer.” Through the frame of “transgender,” sexual questions must be framed differently from the outset because, due to the multiple potentials of each coupling, the

sexual dynamic will change depending upon the specific combination of embodiment, identity and desire in play.

At the time (early 90s) and perhaps even today, “queer” does not entirely address issues of changing embodiment and its effect on sexuality. In particular, re-embodiment makes the already shifting sands of queer sexuality even more unstable, unclassifiable and unimaginable. Embodiment, then, is really at the pivot point of a crucial distinction related to (re)categorizations of identity and sexuality marking a distinct historical movement from queer to transgender.⁶¹

Embodiment at the Pivot Point

The difference between queer and transgender I have been exploring can be better understood through examination of key writings in transgender studies that demonstrate the transition from the frame of queer to transgender. An important text in this regard is by Leslie Feinberg, who, as previously noted, is credited with producing a

⁶¹ The distinctions between gay/queer and gender non-conforming individuals and politics began to emerge long before the 1990s. For example, Meyerowitz documents the period in the late 1960s when groups such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) formed in New York City right after “gay and transgendered people rioted against police harassment at the Stonewall Inn.” However, she also notes that “[i]n the factional battles that followed, various subgroups soon split apart. The shift from umbrella coalitions under gay liberation to separate organizations reflected a process of self-sorting on the sexual margins.” For example, “[i]n New York in 1969, Sylvia Rivera, a seventeen-year-old street queen from the Bronx, founded Street Transvestites for Gay Power, later named STAR, or Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries, and in 1970 Lee Brewster started Queens, later known as Queens Liberation Front. [...] The queens felt alienated from the gay activists, who found them embarrassing.” This earlier historical disarticulation of gay/queer and queen/trans identifications and politics supports my claim that “queer,” which collapses too easily into gay and lesbian identity politics and associated sex/gender rubrics, does not suffice in terms of providing a frame for trans-specific and other gender non-conforming issues. It also exemplifies how the “politics of respectability” plays into the formation of political factions. *How Sex Changed*, 235.

“foundational text of contemporary transgender theory and activism.”⁶² In hir⁶³ widely influential manifesto-like essay (originally a stand-alone pamphlet), Feinberg articulates the collective model of transgender that has become central to the history of trans-specific political organizing in the U.S. The title alone, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, literally announces the arrival of a trans-specific politics in the midst of the early 1990s queer moment.⁶⁴ This seeming coincidence of history prompts asking why, if Feinberg was writing at the same time that the *Village Voice* was promoting “queer” political chic, did zie choose “transgender” and not “queer” to identify the “movement whose time has come”?

When theorists and activists cite Feinberg, it is usually to reference the “collective” sense of transgender that zie posits as both trans-historical and pan-cultural in scope. Underlying this sense of collectivity is a vision of a vast range of gender and sex variance. This is the continuum concept, as discussed previously, that conjures up images of a gender spectrum and a range of physical embodiments. As Feinberg asserts:

⁶² Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Stephen, Stephen and Stryker, Susan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-17.

⁶³ While Feinberg has used both male and female pronouns to describe herself—at times, requiring that in trans-male spaces male pronouns be used exclusively—I am using hybrid pronouns in this chapter such as “s/he” (pronounced “shu-hee”), “hir” (pronounced “here”) and “zie” (pronounced “zee”), etc. For a more complete articulation of “gender neutral” pronouns and their pronunciations (along with subject, object, possessive, reflexive, as well as Spivakian equivalents), see Eli Green and Eric N. Peterson, “LGBTTSQI Terminology,” n.d., www.trans-academics.org/lgbttsqi/terminology.pdf. This educational resource was created by Eli Green and Eric N. Peterson for the LGBT Resource Center at UC Riverside (copyright 2003-2006). In this document, “Spivakian pronouns” are defined by Green and Peterson as “[n]ew terms proposed to serve as gender-neutral, third-person, singular, personal pronouns in English. These neologisms are used by some people who feel that there are problems with gender-specific pronouns because they imply sex and/or gender” (n.p.).

⁶⁴ Feinberg, “Transgender Liberation.”

“everything in nature is a continuum” (*Warriors*, introduction x). And this “natural” continuum approach facilitates the grouping together of sex and gender variance that often includes gender-variant queers—like butch dykes and nellie fags—under the transgender umbrella. (Feinberg, *Transgender Reader*, 206). Feinberg’s theory provides a perfect example of Valentine’s “realignment” argument and demonstrates how the category transgender creates a broader umbrella than queer, the latter being unable to encompass as many identities, especially gender variant or trans-sexed heterosexual ones.

However, few critics have paused to consider the arc of Feinberg’s argument, instead choosing to reference its core definition of “transgender” in order to support comparisons of a trans-historical and cross-cultural set of gender-variant behaviors.⁶⁵ These behaviors might be classified in terms of Stryker’s “transgender effects” or what Feinberg in *Transgender Liberation* calls “transgendered expression[s].” Through widespread academic and activist citation, then, Feinberg’s articulation of a cross-cultural continuum of comparable gender variant behaviors becomes the basis upon which zie gets credited with originating the collective sense of the category transgender. At the same time, there is much more to this essay than the postulation of a simple “transgender” collectivity.

A closer look reveals a three-part structure, although parts two and three make up only the final two pages of the pamphlet. Notably, near the end (page before last) of *Transgender Liberation*, Feinberg includes a short section on Christine Jorgensen, who,

⁶⁵ For an exception to Feinberg’s style of theorizing, see Evan B. Towle and Lynne M. Morgan, “Romancing the Transgender Native,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 666-684. In their article, Towle and Morgan provide a cogent critique of the uncritical trans-historical and cross-cultural collapsing of all sex and gender variance into a “third” gender category.

unarguably, is the most historically iconic transsexual-identified female in the world. While this section seems intended to enable hir to comment on the pervasive prejudice and discrimination faced by trans-sexed and gender nonconforming individuals, discussion of Jorgensen also forces Feinberg to mention *re-embodiment* by noting that “[t]he development of anesthesia and the commercial synthesis of hormones are relatively recent discoveries of this century. These breakthroughs opened the possibility for individuals to change their sex to conform with their gender” (218-219). So, in the process of explaining the deplorable treatment of Christine Jorgensen by the mainstream media (as “the first reported sex-change”) in order to exemplify the group-wide discrimination, Feinberg brings forward the notion of re-embodiment through use of the specific word “transsexual” and not the more general and all-encompassing term “transgender.”

This act of precise naming seems curiously to contradict Feinberg’s assertion at the beginning of the essay that: “[t]his pamphlet is an attempt to trace the historic rise of an oppression that, as yet, has no commonly agreed upon name” (*TG Reader*, 205). On the final page of the essay, however, zie definitively names an oppressed grouping through reference to “the transgendered population” (220). By placing Jorgensen at a pivotal point in hir essay, right before s/he names “the transgendered population,” Feinberg appears to use Jorgensen—by association, issues of re-embodiment—as the basis of a shift away from trans-historical and cross-cultural sets of *behaviors* (that “have no name”) and toward an *identity*.⁶⁶ This may be one reason “queer,” figured as an anti-

⁶⁶ Viviane Namaste comments upon what she calls the Anglo-centric focus on identity politics in her book *Sex Change, Social Change*. She claims: “Identity is the focal point of almost all current TS/TG theory and activism in the English-speaking world. [...]”

normative and an anti-identitarian (somewhat) disembodied state, cannot do the same work as “transgender,” which, through aggregation of a set of behaviors forms them into a collective identity. In this manner, Feinberg is able to conclude with “transgender” not only constituting a continuum of individual gendered *effects*, but by also becoming an *embodied* identity. Ultimately this individually embodied identity then gets mirrored in “transgender effects” that are solidified—given a group identity—through the naming of an entire social class: “the transgender population.”⁶⁷

everyone seems to be talking about gender identities, about gender non-identities, about being an FTM, about not being a woman, about deconstructing the sex/gender binary. [...] for instance, [...] a conference for TS/TG people [...] goes on to name this “us”: two-spirited, transsexual, transgender, intersexed, FTM, MTF, boyz, grrrls, women, men, tranny, gender-fluid, gender-fucking, androgynous folk, cross-dressers, drag kings, drag queens, gender queers, gender blenders, butches, femmes, sofas [sic], activists, supporters, allies, tranny boys/girls/dykes/bis/fags, questioning, trans bears, and curious folk. Whew!” She goes on to critique this hyper-focus on identity through pointing out how “an uncritical engagement with identity actually pre-empts any kind of institutional analysis.” Viviane K Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions and Imperialism* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2005), 18, 19. However, not *all* political or cultural work in English-speaking contexts is focused exclusively on identity, although it does seem to be a common preoccupation across trans-specific contexts. U.S. community-based work that centers on an institutional critique includes trans and gender nonconforming organizations such as the Sylvia Rivera Law Project in New York City. In addition to their legal services they have published many resources on institutional barriers. See, for example, *It's a War in Here: A Report on the Treatment of Transgender and Intersex People in New York State Men's Prisons* (Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2007). Other publications by SRLP include those on immigration rights, access to homeless services, legal name changes, workplace rights, and healthcare rights. See “Sylvia Rivera Law Project,” n.d., <http://srlp.org/>.

⁶⁷ Feinberg’s particular use of “class” is purposeful and related to his heavy involvement in socialist Worker’s World Party activism. “Workers World,” n.d., <http://www.workers.org/>. This use of the “population” concept might be interesting to consider in light of Foucault’s claim that it was the “discovery of population” that was the pivot on which the transition from rule based on police (external authority) to neoliberal rules of government (and the self-governing subject) took place. Foucault’s thinking about “population” changed across the course of his work, starting with *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, however, his work on “governmentality” is probably the most thorough treatment he gave the subject. See Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: With Two Lectures by and an Interview With Michel Foucault*, ed.

If conceptual grounding of “transgender” through trans-sexed embodiment seems idiosyncratic to Feinberg’s essay, it is not.⁶⁸ Evidence of “transgender” categorically pivoting on physically embodied gender variance is found elsewhere, such as on the cover of New York City’s Gender Identity Project pamphlet dated from 1997. It reads: “Wherever you are on the transgender spectrum—...Drag, CrossDresser, CrossGender, BiGender, TV, Transexual, FTM, MTF, NewWoman, NewMan...—you are not alone!”⁶⁹ Accompanying the “you are not alone” text is an ordered progression of terms that range from “drag” to “New Woman” and “New Man.” Notably, the font for everything up to “TV” (standing for “transvestite”) is printed in white and everything after that starting with the politicized spelling of “transexual”⁷⁰ is in black.

This font shift visually marks a line between “TV” and “transexual,” a distinction hinging on the difference between cross-dressing (change of clothing) and embodiment (change of physical morphology). Thus, a seemingly benign design strategy creates an implicit *hierarchy of realness* as the spectrum of terms moves from the least embodied to the most permanently embodied of identities. The same trajectory from vestment to physical embodiment fuels ongoing debates within trans-specific social networks about

Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104.

⁶⁸ U.S.-based trans-specific politics has had a history of centering its cultural analysis on embodiment. In fact, embodiment, denoted by the term “transsexual,” continues to come up as central to transgender’s categorical functioning, usage and meaning. A book that drew controversy for its title that displayed this slippage between “transsexual” denoting embodiment and “transgender” as a social movement is Patrick Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ See Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender* for a reprint of the Gender Identity Project [1997] pamphlet cover (10).

⁷⁰ Spelling with one “s” denotes community reclamation from medical taxonomies that use “transsexual” spelled with a double “s.”

who is *really* trans; such contentious discussions often result in horizontal hostilities exchanged between differing trans-identified and gender nonconforming individuals.

The similar terminological shift centering on embodiment in Feinberg's essay indicates a movement away from queer *effects* that have a hard time consolidating into an *identity* due to their anti-categorical and destabilizing quality. Quite simply, "queer" cannot fully account for radical re-embodiment and related identity changes because such changes rely upon a re-stabilization of physicality and associated identity. Furthermore, the arc of Feinberg's argument mimics the identity versus non-identity contradiction at the heart of the category "transgender," something that also mirrors a related tension between "queer" and "transgender." Ultimately, by the conclusion of *Transgender Liberation*, "transgender"—in the collective identity/class sense—moves beyond queer categorical destabilization and toward an identity-based re-configuration that is both de/re-stabilizing.⁷¹

Taxonomy Trouble

The title of this chapter, "The Profusion of Things," references one of Foucault's major works, *The Order of Things*, which was titled in the original French: *Words and Things*. What I have been exploring in this chapter is the politics behind how the profusion of *words* (identity terms) and *things* (trans-sexed embodiments and non-

⁷¹ I derive this de/re-stabilization concept from Pauline Park, "The Radically Constructive Turn: An Academic Activist's Reflections on Race and Culture in the Theorizing of Transgender," in (presented at the Transpositions: A Conference Toward Transgender Studies, Cornell University, 1998). Another example is Rosalyne Blumenstein, *The Construction, De-Construction, and Re-construction of Gender Identity Mergers and the Power of Language: A Delicate Meta-Narrative* (New York: In Affiliation with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Service Center, Gender Identity Project, November 2000).

normative gender identities and expressions) are *ordered* under the umbrella of “transgender.” Taxonomic practice⁷², in particular, is an effective containment strategy derived from scientific contexts where there is often a need to classify a multiplicity of seemingly chaotic phenomena into hierarchically ordered structures. While initially intended to apply to the classification of biological organisms, in a wider sense, both words and things can also be classified according to a systematic ordering principle such as the “transgender umbrella.” Yet “transgender” (and its associated terms) has produced not one but *multiple* classification and taxonomic systems—medical (scientific), non-medical (community/folk) and mixtures of the two. Following Foucault’s argument in *The Order of Things*, the category has generated a variety of sometimes competing ordering schematics that participate in “knowledge production” and “truth value” claims.⁷³

⁷² For discussions on the subject of taxonomic practice, see Ralph Bulmer, “Why Is the Cassowary Not a Bird? A Problem of Zoological Taxonomy Among the Karam of the New Guinea Highlands,” *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 1 (March 1967): 5-25. Bulmer’s article engages with, and contradicts, discussions centering on whether there are universal cognitive categories—a theory made famous by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay in *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). See also Alice Domurat Dreger, “Doubtful Sex: The Fate of the Hermaphrodite in Victorian Medicine,” *Victorian Studies* 38, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 335-370. In this article, Dreger looks at the taxonomic formations of “hermaphrodisism” in the late Nineteenth Century and points out that during the Victorian period, most hermaphrodites were re-classified as “pseudo” hermaphrodites, thus enabling the medical profession to argue that each hermaphrodite had one “true sex” that needed only the intervention of medical authorities to decide. Through this taxonomic/discursive move, the “problem” of hermaphrodisism became much smaller because most could be classified as “really” male or female, needing only a doctor’s judgment to make the sex clear. Finally, see Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid, and other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁷³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

The categorical proliferation linked to taxonomic classification practices that conditions the transgender sublime can create too much, or excess, signification to the extent that whatever effective political or cultural work that is done can become undone in the end. For example, Davidson, quoted earlier, mentions one trans-identified activist who is fearful of the “shift” from defining trans-identity as embodied toward one that is “between the ears” (66). This activist states that “she thought the term *transgender* was brilliant when she first heard it, calling it a ‘concept that finally brings us together instead of separating us’ and stating that she believed the term *transgender* had made a growing political and social movement possible” (66). But Davidson claims that this same activist goes on to express her fear that the “definition has exploded” by

shift[ing] away from specific notions of [physical] transition to mark a trans identity [and] toward an explosion of self-identifications underneath the umbrella [that] was slowing the process of social change “tremendously” because “nontrans society barely understands transsexuals, much less a girl in a tie with a crew cut who now feels male yet is not willing to manifest it other than [with] a tie and crew cut.”⁷⁴

While this may be a minority opinion within a broader political movement, and an example of the problematic hierarchies of respectability and realness previously mentioned, what is expressed here is also the fear of “transgender” becoming (or already being) too *large*.

These negative, affect-driven reactions to proportionality and magnitude are the reason sublimity is a good frame to define the phenomenon I identify as the transgender sublime. There is a sense that the category is proliferating to a degree that it is out of control, in this case beyond the presumably culturally assimilable condition of physical

⁷⁴ Davidson, “Seeking Refuge Under the Umbrella: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Organizing Within the Category Transgender,” 66.

re-embodiment. Thus, there is an anxiety that underlies the use of many trans-specific classification schematics, whether the ordering takes the form of newly generated identity categories, or lists of definitions, diagrams, lexicons and full-blown taxonomic systems. After all, if there is not an underlying fear or anxiety precipitated by the overwhelming magnitude of “transgender,” then why are there so many extreme reactions to categorical expansion via the proliferative naming of new identity types and embodiments?

My question could be countered by the fact that there is an intrinsic pleasure in naming and identifying with different specific identity types. There is also power in aligning disparate individuals under a singularly named political flag: “transgender.” More pragmatically, naming allows individuals, as well as organizations, to accrue resources that might otherwise be placed elsewhere—that is, under a different rubric of identity and thus allocated toward members of a group that is not one’s own. At the same time, I also believe that the ever-increasing proliferation of trans-sexed embodiments, gender identifications and identity terms poses some perceived *threat* to personal identification, political progress, or even to medical treatment and social service provision. This threat, which often manifests viscerally in defenses designed to manage the effect (and affect) of the transgender sublime, is what drives the nearly obsessive activity surrounding trans-specific taxonomic practice. In fact, taxonomy operates in a variety of contexts—political, medical and community-based—much like fetishism does on the level of the individual. It is designed to contain the otherwise vast and overwhelming magnitude of a phenomenon that threatens to overtake and subsume a subject by breaking it down (and ordering it) into parts. Like fetishism there too might be

an overinvestment in a particular part, such as someone's preferred term of self-identification.

Still, many queer and trans-identified theorists promote naming, classification and taxonomy as a "good thing." This is probably because of the way that misclassification and misunderstanding have shrouded non-normative embodiments, identities and desires, thus creating positions of social marginalization that are quite painful to occupy. It is no wonder, then, that gender theorist Judith Halberstam suggests a maligned and/or ignored subject such as "female masculinity" would benefit from further elucidation and classification. Her claim is that "female masculinity is actually a multiplicity of masculinities, indeed a *proliferation* of masculinities, and the more we identify the various forms of female masculinity the more they multiply" (46, italics added).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Not only does Halberstam propose the idea of a "[female] masculine continuum" in her work (yet another example of continuum thinking), this notion of a "multiplicity of masculinities" and subsequent "proliferation" as a result of classification activity is exactly of the sort that I have observed happening with the category transgender. Furthermore, many of Halberstam's variants of "female masculinity" referenced in her book are often included, in other contexts, under the transgender umbrella. However, this is not unusual for queer/trans terminology to overlap. Halberstam has been criticized for including trans-identified men in her book on female masculinities, mainly by community-based scholars who take issue with her perceived misclassification of men under the rubric of "female." Community members and scholars also critiqued Halberstam's earlier work, namely, an article titled "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity," in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan and Robyn Wiegman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 210-228. In this piece she made the bold claim that "There are no transsexuals. We are all transsexuals." She has since recanted her position (in *Female Masculinity*, 153), after much backlash from trans-identified individuals who were community members and/or scholars that pointed out such dismissal of the specificity of transsexual identity and embodiment appears transphobic. What these disagreements with framing female masculinity, trans-male-identification, and embodiment signal is ongoing "border wars." Halberstam took part in an important dialogue around these issues centering on Brandon Tenna (aka Teena Brandon), a female-birth-assigned masculine-identified individual living in Lincoln, Nebraska, who was murdered after it was found out he was not assigned male at birth. In *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Halberstam engaged with trans-identified scholar C.

Halberstam goes on to acknowledge that she has

no illusions that this book [*Female Masculinity*] will definitely catalogue the entirety of female masculinities, but it does offer models and taxonomies and classifications for future endorsement or rejection. I am well aware of the damaging history of taxonomies within the history of sexuality, but I think that the main problem with taxonomizing was first that it was left to sexologists, and second that we have not continued to produce ever more accurate or colorful or elaborate or imaginative or flamboyant taxonomies.” (46-47) ⁷⁶

To me, the promise of a better taxonomic system leads to the limitation of “provisional intelligibility” that Jordy Jones associates with certain transgender schematics such as the continuum model, or even the umbrella. This hope for increased intelligibility underlies what Halberstam calls the “ever more accurate or colorful or elaborate” taxonomies. And a desire for more “flamboyant” taxonomies carries with it a libratory promise that masks the fact that any classificatory system is designed to fail, especially in the face of the transgender sublime, which is particularly adept at defeating systematization of any kind. Furthermore, to stop at the point of wishing for or creating better taxonomies circumvents discussion of the trouble that such systematization can cause on the level of individual identification, as well as for service provision or political and cultural organizing.

Jacob Hale over what has become coined the “Butch/FTM border wars.” See Judith Halberstam and C. Jacob Hale, “Butch/FTM Border Wars: A Note on Collaboration,” *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1998): 283-285; Judith Halberstam, “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Borderlands,” *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1998): 287-310; C. Jacob Hale, “Consuming the Living, Dis(Re)membering the Dead in the Butch/FTM Borderlands,” *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1998): 311-348.

⁷⁶ Halberstam here references Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of a “nonce” taxonomy defined in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* as the “making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23.

So I end by arriving, full circle, back to another example of a transgender umbrella in hopes of making my point clear. This version is a take-off on the umbrella graphic presented at the beginning of this chapter. It is from another San Francisco report, this time the 1995 “Transgender Protocol: Treatment Services Guidelines for Substance Abuse Treatment Providers [Figure 5].”⁷⁷

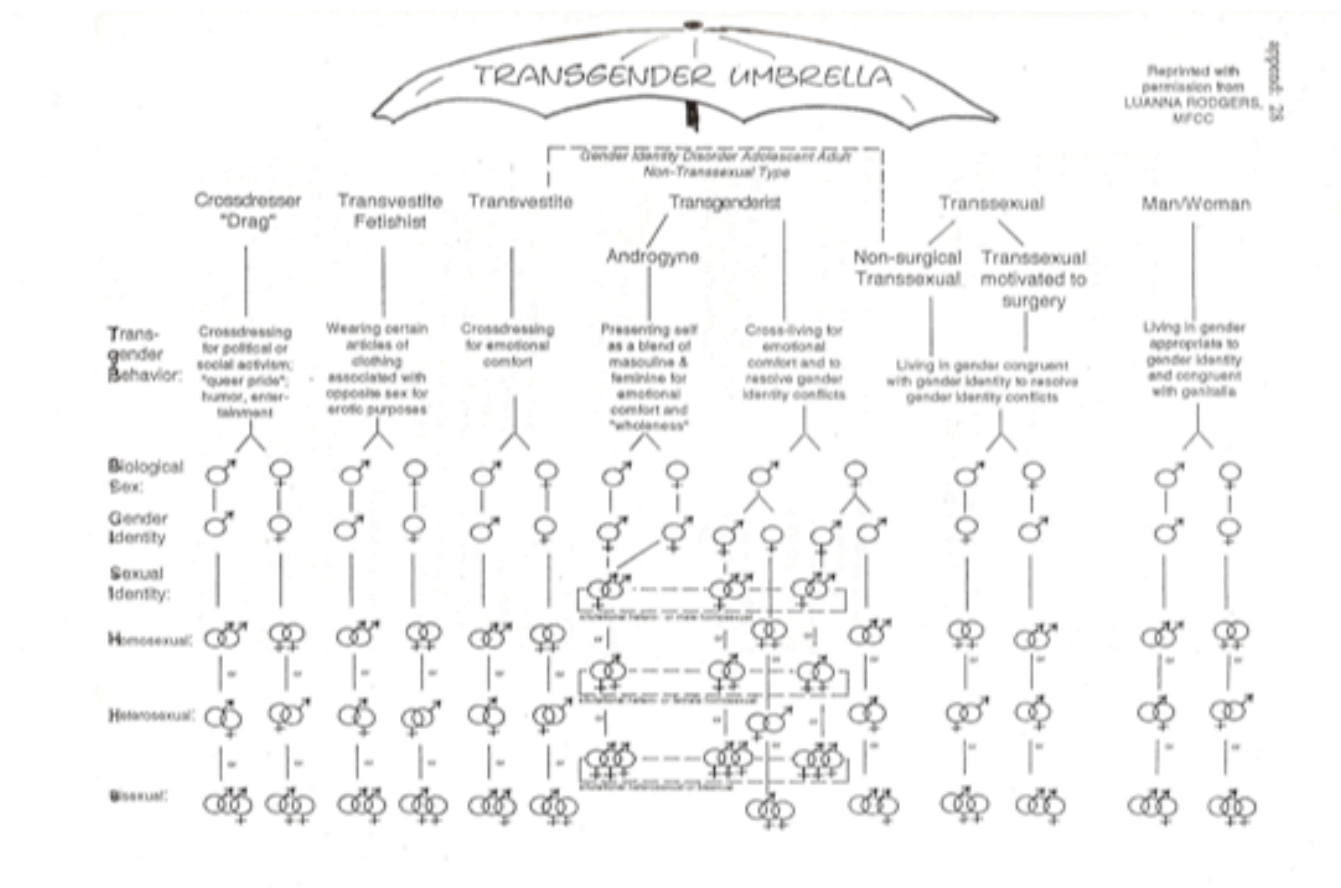


Figure 5

⁷⁷ *Transgender Protocol: Treatment Service Guidelines for Substance Abuse Treatment Providers* (Transgender Protocol Team of the San Francisco Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Substance Abuse Task Force, May 9, 1995). The umbrella diagram from this document is by Luanna Rodgers, MFCC (Appendix 28).

This “Transgender Protocol” document begins with a list of relevant definitions, probably included in order to establish a “provisional intelligibility” that will guide readers through interpretation of information that comes later in the report. Among a catalogue of terms is: “transgender,” “transsexual,” “crossdresser,” “drag,” “androgyny,” “female and male impersonator,” “transgenderist,” “gender bender,” “gender confirmation surgery” and “sexual orientation” (2-4). This list of definitions, while intelligible, seems both limited and antiquated. At the same time, the umbrella graphic that is placed at the end of the document, and included for the purpose of elucidative guidance, appears downright confusing. By placing the appendix section of the report where clarifying reference documents are generally located, the proliferative chaos and dizzying confusion of this umbrella model is only further highlighted.

Using the same terminology (an ordered range of identity terms) as the earlier 1994 umbrella, this one appears intended to take the original model an additional step, in this case, mapping and calculating multiple possible variations of sexuality that seem to literally rain down from under the rubric of transgender. If the umbrella, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is designed to protect at-risk individuals from the harsh rain of discrimination, then this umbrella is particularly ineffective as Mars/Venus symbols and associated descriptors appear to pour from beneath the dwarfed umbrellas’ leaky cover.

This graphic suggests that instead of enhancing a reader’s comprehension, just like the “Revolutionary” gender model it visually elicits apprehension and disorientation—that is, it increases anxiety and/or confusion. Either end of the umbrella maps a fairly straightforward set of binaries—male or female sex/gender and hetero/homo/bi sexualities—which simply get flipped from one side to the other (i.e.,

“M” becomes “F” and “hetero” becomes “homo,” or vice versa). However, right down the center of this continuum is a proliferative and also ambivalent (either/or) section of chaotic signification: the astrological signs for Mars and Venus—classic M/F gendered symbols—and associated sexuality descriptors. This part of the diagram is particularly hard to decipher. Instead of creating increased intelligibility, it results in an overwhelming visual diagram that is more likely to produce extreme cognitive disorientation.

For example, underneath one set of Mars/Venus symbols is the descriptor: “situational hetero- or male homosexual.”⁷⁸ Exactly what does this mean? And how clarifying of a trans-specific sexuality is this? One can infer that the “or” of this taxonomic subspecies indicates a shift of perceived embodiment, which leads to a particular line of questioning: If the body/identity of one person in a sexual relationship with another is perceived as “female,” based on genitals, and the other is male-birth-assigned, male-bodied, and heterosexual-identified then is the couple “situational(ly) hetero”—meaning, by all outward appearance, a woman and a man in a heterosexual relationship? *Or*, if one person is male-identified, regardless of having retained a “female” genital structure, and is attracted to a male-bodied and male-identified individual, then is this considered a “homosexual” orientation? It is hard to tell what the intended answer to these questions might be, but their inherent indeterminacy is reminiscent of the limitation of the question asked earlier in this chapter: *Is this queer or heterosexual sex?* The answer very well could be neither. And so, the proliferative and

⁷⁸ The other two descriptors accompanying different configurations of Mars/Venus symbols are: “situational hetero- or female homosexual,” and “situational heterosexual or bisexual.”

disorienting visual effect of this diagram—far from clarifying trans-specific sexuality—is symptomatic of the unclassifiable and uncontainable excess of sex/gender and sexuality that conditions a transgender sublime.

I envision the transgender sublime as a tsunami size wave that threatens to overtake and potentially obliterate anything standing in its way. One can seek higher ground in an attempt to calculate the catastrophe and avoid the risk of total annihilation, or one can attempt to ride it out—with survival virtually guaranteeing an experience of subjective transformation. What I am suggesting in this chapter is that perhaps a “revolutionary” and ever-more complex diagram, or a particularly “flamboyant” taxonomic system, while capable of expanding minds, cannot fully enable the transformative promise of a transgender sublime. These expanded schematics are, in the end, simply more sophisticated containment strategies that provide a modest “provisional intelligibility” that can only incrementally expand one’s imagination. The bigger risk—and thus greater payoff—is a close encounter with transgender sublimity that promises to trans-form an individual’s imagination beyond the contours of presently imaginable worlds.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ I do not want to make this statement without qualifying it, for fear of being misunderstood as ignorant of the very real violence that attends the social incoherence of gender indeterminate and trans-sex-bodied people. By taking the sort of risk I suggest there is a potential danger, especially if taken in the wrong context, whereby reactive violence becomes a distinct possibility—of course such peril also depends on the sex/gender status of the person risking such an encounter.

CHAPTER TWO

The Transgender Demographic Imaginary in U.S. Public Health

Ethnographic material for this chapter was gathered during fieldwork for a project focusing on the relationship between trans-specific social networks and the world of U.S. public health. I specifically looked at the way bodies of experts (medical and HIV/AIDS service providers) and people with trans-sexed bodies related through the interplay of expertise. I expected to find a strict regulation of medical transition technologies by a group of pedigreed experts and the widespread erasure of trans-identified and gender nonconforming people in public health systems. However, my findings were significantly more interesting because they contradicted the complete “erasure” argument often articulated by advocates for trans-specific services, by people attempting to access healthcare systems, and through emergent academic work on the topic.

Viviane Namaste’s *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* is an example of the groundbreaking trans-specific scholarship.¹

¹ Viviane K Namaste, *Invisible lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Based on Namaste’s examination Canadian healthcare practices she asserts trans-identified “individuals are excluded from the institutional world through specific administrative policies, procedures and practices. Demonstrating the thesis of this book that transsexuals are erased in the everyday social world, the concept of erasure here designates the exclusion of TS/TG people from the institutional site of health care” (159). Her argument about a comprehensive erasure is compelling, especially considering the operation of binary gender practices in social spaces like healthcare and prison systems. However, Namaste’s research, although groundbreaking, is specific to a time when trans-health was in its controversial infancy; thus her thesis has limited explanatory value regarding current healthcare systems wherein inclusion is increasingly promoted through use of the category “transgender.”

Namaste's study considers the categorical, as well as material and physical, exclusion of trans-identified people from the Canadian healthcare services. While healthcare in the U.S. and Canada fundamentally differ, Namaste's research is supported by U.S. studies, such as sociologist Anne Bolin's *In Search of Eve*, that documented similar systemic erasures through her observations of middle class male-to-female transsexuals.² For Namaste, Bolin and others, barriers to accessing medical care are predicated on practices of exclusion that accomplish "the erasure of transsexuals from the everyday social world."³ I documented similar obstacles through my research that ranged from binary gender boxes on intake forms, to lack of clinical study on the long-term effects of exogenous hormone use, to a receptionist's difficulty using pronouns when greeting gender-indeterminate people walking through a medical provider's door.

Exclusion in healthcare settings should not be minimized; however, in the late 1990s something else was also happening in cities like San Francisco, New York, Philadelphia and Boston. There, efforts were underway to include the "T," often by adding trans-specific programs to existing gay, lesbian and bisexual medical services at public health clinics. So while the exclusion of trans-identified people continued to happen in medical contexts, born of binary-structured institutional practices, paradoxically, my investigation found a *proliferation* of bodies, genders and categories in U.S. healthcare systems driven by the generative capacity of the category transgender. While historically, services have been scarce, in the past ten years, especially in urban centers, a flurry of inclusion activity has revolved around categorical inclusion in needs

² Anne Bolin, *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1988).

³ Namaste, *Invisible lives*, 159.

assessment studies, development of trans-specific HIV prevention and care services, and model public health programs that serve the “T” in L-G-B-T.⁴ Proliferation has occurred in several areas: the ever-expanding mutations of linguistic and bodily modifications in trans-specific social worlds; the increase of programs designed to serve trans-identified people (or others who get caught in the “transgender” net); and through multiplying media images and discourses. This chapter will focus on case examples of the way that transgender categorical proliferation operates across needs assessment studies in U.S. public health research. It will end with a discussion of a tactical response to the problem of the transgender sublime by a trans-specific public health program.

The argument about erasure of trans bodies and identities overshadows how inclusion of a category referencing trans-identified and gender non-conforming people in healthcare settings can itself produce erasure. This happens because “transgender,” operating categorically, produces its subjects as a stable category of personhood. An example of this is in public health clinics providing trans-specific care, where medical professionals recognize the existence of non-traditional genders and include “male-to-female” (MTF) and “female-to-male” (FTM) under “gender” in the demographic section on intake forms. However, this expanded choice set constitutes another binary with FTM or MTF mirroring M or F. And other less intelligible identity configurations like

⁴ LGBT is the most common appearing acronym standing for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.” Similar to the additive and proliferative category of transgender, this collective acronym is often lengthened in a seemingly endless gesture of inclusion. For example, “LGBTTIQQ” stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two-spirit, Intersex, Queer and Questioning.” The premise behind adding letters is more full and comprehensive inclusivity via naming.

“genderqueer,”⁵ a term derived from community contexts, still confound healthcare professionals and are absent from institutional databases that have expanded only to include MTF and FTM. There is a seeming contradiction, then, between the community-driven proliferation of bodies and identities and this newly stable, and thus institutionally assimilated, classification of personhood anchored by “transgender”—a category that often stands in for “transsexual” (meaning gendered body modifications) implied by “MTF” or “FTM.” As such, MTF or FTM, included alongside “male” and “female” as demographic choices, do not entirely displace the traditional binary gender structure of public health practices.⁶ Inclusion, so it seems, comes on terms that are institutionally intelligible. At the same time, inclusion of trans-specific categories, even if only two additional gender vectors are represented, is evidence of effective political advocacy that facilitates access to services (and creation of programs) that otherwise would not have been possible only a decade ago.

Namaste’s erasure thesis depends on an assumption that categorical inclusion is the antidote to exclusion. However, this is not always the case. Many trans and/or gender

⁵ “Genderqueer” is a term that became popular in the early 2000s. It is most commonly used as a third, non-binary, categorical indicator. It denotes someone who identifies as neither male nor female, or is between genders, or is some combination thereof. According to Eli Green: “This identity is usually related to or in reaction to the social construction of gender, gender stereotypes, and the binary gender system.” Quoted from Eli Green and Eric N. Peterson, “LGBTTSQI Terminology,” n.d., www.trans-academics.org/lgbttsqiterminology.pdf.

⁶ “FTM” and “MTF” or simply “gender” (with a fill-in-the-blank space next to it) are currently in common use on clinic intake forms. However, earlier demographic collection tools used other categorical schematics. For example, a 1995 intake form from the Tom Waddell Health Center in San Francisco, the first public health clinic in the U.S. to provide trans-specific services, simply included “transsexual” along with “male” and “female.” This by now outdated intake form asked registrants to check “only one” box, thus excluding those who marked “transsexual” from identifying as a male or female gender. (Intake form on file.)

variant bodies and genders—a proliferation that is *enabled* by “transgender” and its semi-recognition—are simultaneously reordered through, and thereby ordered out of, the category that is ironically meant to make sense of them.⁷ The problem is that in institutional healthcare settings, the “T” in LGBT requires order, protocols and a clear position within medical systems dependent upon such ordering. But the sublime excessiveness of *trans*—seemingly infinite multiplicative variability—eludes institutionalized orderliness and often troubles healthcare providers on a visceral level. This disorderliness relates to “transgender” when it functions as a proliferative matrix, at the times when it does not delimit the boundaries of me/us and not-me/us—the normative way that consolidated categories like “male” and “female” sex/gender classifications work. The category transgender has a dual capacity, then, which means that sometimes it performs generatively (a-categorically), whereas at other times it refers to a specific type of individual, thus acting as a fixed category of personhood. And it is the a-categorically proliferative effect of “transgender” that is central to the problem of transgender sublimity in U.S. public health contexts.

The root of the trouble for trans-allied professionals is their inability to classify. This limitation is occasioned by the excessiveness of identity and embodiment of people entering healthcare programs who defy categorical coherence. A provider’s attempt to classify, however, does not simply aim to place people in boxes. Instead, because classification plays an integral role in the routine function of medical systems, impacting diagnosis and treatment protocols, adherence to “best practice” standards of care, billing

⁷ A related irony is that the category transgender, unlike transsexual, was historically used to defy medicalization—Virginia Prince’s coining of the term denoted someone living full time, cross gender, without the use of hormones and surgery—and has since become appropriated by the U.S. medical establishment past ten years.

of procedures, and even legal liability issues, it would be impossible for a healthcare professionals to function within medical systems without classifying individuals. Most pertinent to the subject of this chapter, then, is the friction between the imperative to classify within public health systems and the categorical excess that defies classification and conditions a transgender sublime. For this reason, the way classification operates in general is integral to the issue of transgender categorical proliferation.

Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star assert in *Sorting Things Out* that “to classify is human,” and they claim that the act of classifying pervades almost every aspect of our lives. A seemingly mundane example is the way we arrange our work spaces using “folk classification” methods to sort piles of papers that need to be read, reminders on post-it notes and to-do lists, and “urgent” emails versus “e-junk” that is often hard to eliminate from our computer systems using electronic filters. In a more systematized way, classification also organizes macro-structured social life—from traffic pattern flows on city streets, to modes of transporting goods to retail stores, to methods for diagnosing and treating disease, to codes by which we build our homes, to determining international geographical boundary divisions. While classification is ubiquitous, Bowker and Star claim that “however imbricated in our lives, [standards and classifications] are ordinarily invisible” (2).⁸ It is only when classification systems break down, or become contested, that they become visible (3). As I argued in chapter one, “transgender” is characterized by proliferative variability. It thus exposes its categorical status through repeated breakdowns and by failing to act systematically, that is, failing to

⁸ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Boston: MIT Press, 1999), 2-3.

operate in a standard (consistent) manner across contexts.⁹ It also contains internal contradictions that often lead to categorical contestation when issues of inclusion arise.

At the heart of how “transgender” functions are “imaginaries,” which operate as categorical schemas informing acts of classification in healthcare systems. That “transgender” has an imaginary quality is not meant to imply it is inauthentic or naively fantastical; rather, in some sense all versions of “transgender” are imaginary, as are all categories in general. This, however, makes their political and material effect no less real. I take up this idea of an imaginary following Arjun Appadurai’s concept of “imagination as a social practice,” something to be discussed in more depth in the following section.¹⁰ The idea of “the imaginary” is important, signaled by inclusion in this chapter’s title, because it is the rupture of various transgender imaginaries that condition the sublime. I promote the idea that “transgender” can be understood in terms of “the imagination as social practice,” thus opening up possibilities for agentic action that can influence the shape of social worlds. As I will argue, reshaping activity happens in trans-health

⁹ There is a distinction to be made between “classification” and “standardization,” although they often function hand-in-hand. In her dissertation thesis Rebecca Culyba explains that “Classification is a ubiquitous and elusive social process of labeling, defining, establishing names and criteria, creating boxes in which things can be contained in order to distinguish them from other things, count and deploy them in knowledge systems. [...] Further,] classifications themselves are also the product of social processes: containers that go on to be counted and targeted by organizations and their activity. By contrast, standardization is the social process by which classifications are integrated into the social and/or organizational goals and objectives. Standards turn classifications from boxes into guideposts for action. Thus, classification is distinct from sorting, prioritizing, or standardizing because things must be classified first in order to be compared with other things or be integrated into existing systems of order and hierarchy. Not all things are classified and not all classified things are deployed in standardized activity.” Rebecca Culyba, “Classification and the Social Construction of Disease in Medical Systems: A Historical Comparison of Syphilis and HIV/Aids in the United States” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2008), 14-15.

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

programs that address clients “outside the (binary gender) box,” thus mobilizing new imaginaries designed to shape individual behavior, but also to enable the re-contouring of social worlds.

Caution! “New identity terms are constantly emerging...”

I’m not supposed to be here [...] forbidden by my employer, one of the major public health divisions of the U.S. government. I’m the girl who knew too much. So today I’m going by the name Doris Dayta, after the movie *The Man Who Knew Too Much* starring Doris Day.¹¹

Thus went the introduction of the fictitious yet true to life Doris Dayta at the first summer institute on the “Future of Transgender/Transsexual Health Research,” convened at the University of Pittsburgh in the summer of 2008. This meeting began with the introductions by university faculty who organized the gathering, plus a group of observers (students enrolled in their new LGBT Health Studies Certificate Program), followed by the invited outsider “experts.” I sat next to my long-time friend and collaborator Doris, who was invited to present epidemiological data on trans-health. The obvious humor of her introduction, yet serious undertone of the assumed identity, was not lost on the room as it exemplified the frequently divided position of members in this emergent movement. We were the usual suspects: a group of researchers, healthcare providers and advocates who have collaborated on research studies, advocacy campaigns and other health-related projects over the course of many years.

¹¹ *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) is a suspense film directed by Alfred Hitchcock that stars James Stewart and Doris Day. In the film it is actually Stewart’s character that “knew too much” as he carries what ends up being a lethal secret. The character who is played by Doris Day is his wife. Hitchcock, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, DVD (Universal Studios, 2006).

On this occasion, members of the group, half of whom were trans-identified, were tasked with brainstorming a research agenda that would advance the growing trans-health movement in the U.S. As invited “experts” we, in particular, understood that an imaginary, yet in many ways all too real, Doris Dayta embodied the uneasy relationship between a growing grass-roots health movement and official government bodies as institutionalized regulatory forces.¹² The fact that she was *the girl who knew too much* vividly highlighted the politically charged aspect of the topic. And as someone with a foot in both the government and activist worlds, this tension was particularly acute for Doris.

I arrived in Pittsburgh the night before, coming directly from the “14th Annual Street Outreach Worker’s Conference” in Austin, Texas. Entering the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh feeling travel-weary, I fantasized that the holy priests of higher education might meet me as the elevator door opened to the forty-second floor conference room. Instead, faculty researchers from the Center for Research on Sexual Orientation and Health warmly greeted me. I was scheduled to present a talk on “Conceptualizing *Trans* in Research Studies.” My co-presenters were a trans-identified medical doctor speaking on trans-specific evidence based medicine, and Doris, the trans-

¹² The insider/outsider politics of the institute, as well as of the larger social movement, was demonstrated by a controversy that erupted during the planning process for the meeting. It was over a non-trans-identified public health official invited to participate from the *U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. When community-based researchers found out that this individual was attending they complained about not being able to speak candidly, and potentially criticize the government, if this person were in the room. This situation threatened to subvert the institute’s goal, and resulted in the government official being gracefully disinvited; such tensions, however, are not always so easily resolved.

identified public health worker who would cover epidemiological data on trans-health risk factors.

As the meeting commenced, the doctor spoke first. He drew a humorous analogy between the scientific evidence available in the nascent field of “transgender medicine” to a Ford Pinto. Illustrating his point he showed side-by-side pictures of two cars and said “While we’d all like to be in this sports car, if all you have is a Pinto it can get still get you from point A to B. The Pinto’s what we’re driving right now folks!” A Pinto’s worth of medical evidence, he suggested, served enough of a utilitarian purpose to advocate for coverage of trans-specific services in public and private health sectors. Doris followed with her overview of research statistics on the incidence of HIV infection, substance abuse, violence and numerous other risk factors adversely impacting the health of trans-identified individuals. While not an explicitly politicized presentation, she ended with a controversial “theory of transgender risk reduction” that proposed providing hormones as a way to reduce negative health outcomes amongst physically transitioning individuals. The idea is to give people who normally avoid medical contexts, for fear of being stigmatized, hormones as incentive so they will access care more frequently.¹³

I rounded out the morning session with a talk exploring the hidden imaginaries behind public health practices, focusing on the sex and gender questions of research surveys. As a critical piece, it concluded with no real solution to the problem of

¹³ Providing hormones is a harm reduction strategy—similar to giving injection drug users (IDU) clean needles to reduce their risk of infection. In this case, by accessing hormones from medical providers, and not within the street economy (e.g., from friends, drug dealers, etc.), the belief is that people will act more safely by using clean needles and receiving routine monitoring of blood levels and liver functioning. In the end, they will become increasingly self-monitoring of their own risks. The simple logic is: People who are enabled to change their bodies (if they so desire) are more likely to take care of their bodies as a result.

documenting a vast range of body/identity variation contained under what is often called the “transgender umbrella.” However, I raised questions about categorical complications that all the researchers in the room regularly struggled with; afterward, I was approached by people interested in my “deconstructive approach.” As I took my seat next to Doris she told me: “I like that thing you said about the transgender imaginary. What is it?” Later, glancing at her notes, I saw she had translated my concept into “the binary imaginary.” Sitting there, I wondered if the imagined aspect of the gender binary was more understandable to her as trans-identified person than the idea that transgender, categorically speaking, also had an imaginary dimension.

My use of “imaginary” at the Pittsburgh meeting and in this chapter engages with theories that concern what has been called the “social imaginary,” which is a way to explain how imagination, not simply reason, figures into the construction and operation of institutions, cultural representations and social practices. Arguments about social imaginaries in the past two decades have become a key component in conversations about collective belonging and action—common ways of thinking, sets of expectations and social practices that give a sense of shared group life.¹⁴ While social imaginaries operate on the level of culture and nation building, colonization, globalization and a number of other ideologically driven large-scale social forces, they also function locally in terms of the lived practices in which people engage one another and develop a sense of

¹⁴ Key texts on the subject of the social imaginary are Appadurai, *Modernity At Large*; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006); Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004). Also, on the subject of an anthropological multi-sited imaginary, see George E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

self-understanding in the context of collective life. In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai provides an outline of “the imaginary” that draws upon Benedict Anderson’s work on “imagined communities.” Appadurai, like Anderson, asserts that the advent of print capitalism unleashed a new power in the world, mass literacy, and that medium enabled group ethnic and national identifications.¹⁵ However, Appadurai extends Anderson’s project by adding “the idea of mechanically produced images (Frankfurt School)” and “the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations” (31). He summarizes the various aspects of the imaginary as follows:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary—[are] terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as social practice*. [...] The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (31)

I interpret Appadurai’s employment of “agency” here in terms of the seemingly contradictory phrase “ruling through freedom” attributed to Foucault’s analysis of modern state governmentality. Sociologist Mitchell Dean follows Foucault’s conceptualization of “technologies of agency” in which “technologies of government . . . seek to enhance or deploy our agency” (167).¹⁶ According to Dean, the mobilization of agency can happen through “health promotion campaigns” aimed at “targeted populations”—those groupings of individuals that, according to some classificatory scheme,

¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 28.

¹⁶ Mitchell M Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2009).

manifest high risk, or are composed of individuals deemed at risk. Victims of crime, smokers, abused children, gay men, intravenous drug users, the unemployed [...] all subject to these technologies of agency, the object being to transform their status, to make them active citizens capable, as individuals and communities, of managing their own risk. (168)

For Dean, this ultimately leads to typified individuals, who purportedly represent an at-risk group, willfully participating (“contractually”) through various “technologies of citizenship” in a range “of normalizing, therapeutic and training measures designed to empower them, enhance their self-esteem, optimize their skills . . . and so on.”¹⁷

However, there is also a second sense of “agency” in Appadurai’s passage that suggests the possibility of revising the imaginaries we live by, or the ones that we contest, as part of the process of changing the material world. In his other writing on “grassroots globalization,” Appadurai supports this dual reading of imagination and agency, saying: “On the one hand, it is in and through the imagination that modern citizens are disciplined and controlled—by states, markets, and other powerful interests. But it is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge.”¹⁸

While on the surface “transgender” implies categorical cohesion, it also has a co-optive side in that sometimes individuals who do not understand themselves as part of the category are still included. For this reason, assertions about a “transgender imaginary” must be qualified. According to Valentine in *Imagining Transgender*, “transgender” operates according to an imaginary that traverses activism, social services and medical

¹⁷ Ibid., 168.

¹⁸ Arjan Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (January 2000): 16.

programs.¹⁹ In this case, it operates like Anderson's imagined community—connecting disparate individuals across differences and distances. But Valentine also argues that this is an “imagining of one group, where other putative members might *not* imagine themselves belonging to such a community,” such as “fem queen”²⁰ youth of color from house/ball networks,²¹ or where members of communities drawn under the “transgender umbrella” forcefully voice their opposition to being included, like some gay identified men in drag (103). Valentine notes that other critics have connected this phenomenon to “identity politics” whereby “the notion of ‘identity’ in contemporary politics does much

¹⁹ David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007).

²⁰ A “fem queen” (alternately spelled “femme queen”) is a male-bodied person who may also have a male gender identity, but who is feminine in presentation (at least sometimes). They may also identify as “gay” either in terms of being attracted to other male-bodied individuals and/or through maintaining an affiliation with gay social networks. Fem queen identity often troubles the line between “transgender” (gender variant expression and gender identity) and “homosexual” (sexuality). This term is both race and class-inflected since many fem-queen-identified individuals are either African-American or Latina/o and are also, quite often, from lower socio-economic circumstances. Many fem queens do not identify as “transgender,” although quite often transgender activists and social service providers include the term “fem queen” under the transgender umbrella regardless of how such individuals self-identify. This type of co-optive “inclusion” is the point Valentine makes in his book.

²¹ The house and ball social networks of New York City were documented in Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning* (1990), the first media representation to popularize and spread awareness of the scene in mainstream social imaginaries. Houses are “family” kinship-type structures comprised of African-American or Latino/a mostly gay-identified individuals. A House is not meant literally to imply groups living together within one structure, although sometimes members do cohabitate. Houses usually have a “Father” and “Mother” and the members are referred to as “children.” Some houses have original names (often named after a Father/Mother of the house) such as Ebony, Xtravaganza (Latin) or Maasai. More recently, they have been named after famous fashion designers (e.g., Dior, Chanel or Manolo Blahnik). Balls are events held for spectators and House members who compete for trophies, prize money and peer recognition. Examples of competition categories in which contestants “walk” include: Vogueing, Runway, Realness, Body and Face. See Christopher Murrill, “HIV Prevalence and Risk Behaviors Among Persons Active in the New York City House and Ball Community,” *New York Department of Health and mental Hygiene*, 2005, <http://nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/dires/epi-resupdates-riskhouseball.pdf>.

the same that an imagined national community does: it irons out differences and elides power relationships” (103). Valentine provides a strong critique of uncritical uses of the category transgender as he claims:

a “transgender community,” while a powerful category, [...] also works against other less powerful understandings of gender and sexuality and fixes into place particular meanings to the exclusion of others. That is, if we understand “community” as a series of practices, then the notion of a “transgender community” is produced through certain kinds of work which incorporate members who are not necessarily engaged in doing the same kind of work. In turn, this incorporation obscures the racial and class structures which characterize the transgender community. (104)

The imaginary to which Valentine refers here has specifically to do with institutional—HIV and social service—contexts of the type that I critique in this chapter. However, I contend that there is not just one but *multiple* transgender imaginaries at work in U.S. public health contexts. And these imaginaries are active in the uneven and variable uses of “transgender” across a range of research study methods, as well as operating through tactical programmatic responses to trans-health needs. What these imaginaries enable versus what they elide, in terms of social practice, demonstrates that “transgender” can simultaneously obscure as much as it reveals.

At the same time that “transgender” is engaged with various imaginaries, sometimes there is an inability to imagine aspects of it, and this is particularly true of people new to trans-specific social worlds. The unimaginable aspect of “transgender” can be demonstrated by turning back to the Pittsburgh meeting. At an opportune moment, as attendees were plodding through the second day of formulating our research agenda, a non-trans student observer interrupted to ask: “Can you [the invitees] explain all the differences you keep talking about between various trans people? Can you define *all* the types?” His question was met with knowing smiles on the faces of the more initiated

participants. Because no one was quick to answer, I broke the silence by saying: “Well, we’d be here far into next week if we did that right now.” To this all the “experts” nodded in tacit agreement that we would not define the very thing we gathered there to discuss because it would take too much time. By not defining “the types,” we created a consensus that there was really no consensus on the exact meaning of the very category upon which we were building an advocacy-driven research agenda. I also suspected that group acquiescence was because on some level everyone knew defining “*all the [transgender] types*” was an impossible task.

I want to acknowledge that categorization, by definition, can never encompass “all the types.” This is because categories are built upon exclusions, especially at their margins, as they collapse disparate specificities into a consolidated generality. Categorical exclusions relate to theoretical arguments about how identity-formation is predicated upon a fundamental “violence” that establishes the boundary between “me” and “not-me.” That is, who I am is as much about who I am not. Such boundary distinctions are true for any “type” of thing, an insight derived from structural linguistics of the sort that Saussure articulated. For example, among those things classified as “tree” it is often hard to distinguish between a “tree” a “hedge” or a “bush” except by making nuanced linguistic distinctions. The problem of categorization, then, is at the center of issues concerning language and signification that apply beyond “transgender.”

However, the special effects that “transgender” produces stem from its recent arrival as an emergent category, as well as from the way it rearticulates existing categories (e.g., transsexual, transvestite and drag, etc.). It also intercedes in a domain, gender, seen to exist outside of signification via M/F gender categories that remain

unmarked.²² All these conditions combine to make “transgender,” categorically speaking, very visible. And this visibility is further highlighted by the invisibility of more consolidated categories, such as unmarked “male” and “female,” which means transgender often generates incoherence or precipitates disruption within healthcare and other systems.

During the Pittsburgh meeting, what I found most remarkable was the way that everyone seemed to agree with my critique of the category transgender—insufficient to encompass all the sex and gender variation lumped under its canopy—and at the same time repeatedly invoked it as a shorthand reference for the individuals on whose behalf our work was engaged. That an entire group of researchers deferred defining the very category that operationally drove our research agenda demonstrated how powerful the imaginary of transgender had become as it forwarded our discussion regardless of the fact that definitional precision remained ever elusive. As I argued in chapter one, if we concentrated more conscious attention on the fact that empirically grounded definitions of transgender become a dead end, especially for community formation and mobilization of resources, then other ways to work with this linguistic impasse might emerge. For example, the problem of global categorical definition does not preclude creation of a mobile response to public health needs through use of shifting categories based on local vernaculars.

The most revealing moment of the Pittsburgh meeting came when Doris Dayta discussed the challenges of data collection on trans-health issues. While explaining that the shopping list of identities is a research barrier, she showed a PowerPoint slide

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

described as containing only *some* of the many trans-specific and gender-variant identity terms. Similar educational tools are used by trans-health educators to didactically demonstrate the wide range of identities lumped under the “transgender umbrella.” The assortment of terms varies among presenters, which emphasizes that variability is a primary characteristic of the a-categorical aspect of transgender. Under the heading of “Who We Are,” Doris included her favorites:

Ag / Androgyne / Basement Transvestite / Bigendered / Bigenderist / Boi / Boss grrrl / Boychick / Butch / Changeling / Clotheshorse / Creatively Gendered / Crossdresser / Dom / Drag King / Drag Monarch / Drag Queen / Fairy / Female Crossdresser / Femme / Femme Queen / Flaming / Former transsexual / Fribble / FTM, F2M, Female-to-Male / Gender Bender, gender-bending / Gender Blender, gender-blending / Gender Breaker / Gender Dysphoric / Gender Euphoric / Gender-fluid / Gender Free / Gender Fuck, Gender Fucker / Gender Illusionist / Gender Outlaw / Gender Queer / Gender Refusenik / Gender Transgressor / Gender Trash / Gender Variant / Grrl / Gynander / Gyanadroid / Gynandromorph / Hermaphrodite / Heesh / Hem / He-she / Heterogendered Heterovestite / Humangendered / Intersex, Intersexed / Invert / Man of transsexual experience / Maricón / Mariposa / Metagendered / MTF, M2F, Male-to-Female / Multigendered / Nelly / Neutrois / No-Ho/No-Op / Nongendered / Non-op / Pangender, Pangendered / Polygendered / Post-op/ Pre-op / Queen / Queerer / Recast / Shapeshifter / S/he / Shim / Stealth FTM / Stealth MTF / Stone Butch / T* / *T / *TG / Third Sex / Tomboy / Tranny / Trannyboy / Trannyfag / Trannydyke / Trannygirl / Trans / Transfag / Transcendent / Transgender / Transgenderist / Transman / Transsexual / Transsexual Man / Transsexual Woman / Transvestite / Transwoman / Travesti / Tryke / Two-spirit / Woman of transsexual experience (Slide #4)²³

Printed at the bottom of this completely crammed slide was the caveat: “This is *not* exhaustive! New identity terms are constantly emerging. No offense is implied or intended if your self-identification terms are not listed above.”

Not only does this slide invoke the conditions for the transgender sublime to emerge—a dizzying (and often terminologically incoherent) proliferation of identities—it also raises questions about what counts as data. From a qualitative standpoint, this *is* rich

²³ Doris Dayta, “A Survey of U.S. Transgender Epidemiology,” in (presented at the Transgender/Transsexual Health Research Institute, University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, 2008).

data for an ethnographer; however, from a quantitative perspective, such as Doris's epidemiological concerns, all these terms constitute chaos requiring order and systematization.²⁴ And while the target audience for this slide is anyone interested in barriers to trans-specific data collection, the final pre-emptive warning indicates a specific address to trans-identified individuals or anyone else potentially offended if their identity of choice were left out. For people familiar with trans-specific social worlds, this disclaimer seems obvious and important to include because of the personal importance precise definitions of identity have for individuals. Less obvious is that what is often lost in the community-derived and identity-driven impulse to list every gender-variant expression and every trans-specific identity type is the cultural specificity of each term. This assertion, which will be more fully articulated later in the chapter, foreshadows the manner by which "transgender" can obscure as much as it clarifies within public health worlds. While the category transgender and related enumerated list of identity types might well serve community-building efforts, in public health contexts, where highly structured operations predominate, "transgender" often emerges as equally frequently as disruptive noise within the system.

A few things stand out about my conversations with Doris over the years. Foremost is her claim that the shopping list approach, based on the proliferative tendency of "transgender" ("new identities are constantly emerging"), complicates quantitative data analysis drawn from otherwise well structured research studies. Public health is a

²⁴ For an clarifying discussion on what constitutes "evidence" (and data) in different contexts and how it gets used, as well as how knowledge production is sometimes regarded as "one-dimensional" and "fail[s] to respond to the contingencies of everyday practice in health and social care settings," see Carl May, "Mobilizing Modern Facts: Health Technology Assessment and the Politics of Evidence," *Sociology of Health and Illness* 28, no. 5 (2006): 513-532.

largely data-driven and evidence-based enterprise, and “population health,” focusing on identifiable and distinguishable characteristics of groupings of individuals, drives epidemiological data gathering methods. In terms of epidemiology, as the science behind public health, Doris contends that “the fewer the categories, the easier the analysis and the clearer the [research] results.”²⁵ The methodological problem, then, especially from an epidemiological perspective, is related to the transgender sublime (infinite proliferation). Specifically, when the shopping list model can so quickly get out of a user’s control. Doris told me this happened when she tried to include a similar list on the cover of newly completed trans-specific needs assessment study. In the end, she and her collaborators “kept finding more and more terms” such that “they would not all fit on the cover of the report.” This lack of manageability led her team to abort the entire idea.²⁶

²⁵ In an email exchange with Doris she discussed a way to figure out how to classify people who were not transitioning and/or living within a clearly bounded gender vector (i.e., FTM and MTF), without having to resort to a shopping list of identity choices. So, she devised two new “gender vectors” that had a point of origin in “sex” but no point of destination. She asked for my opinion: “What did you think of my new additional gender vectors? Since we are born with assigned anatomical sexes, we cannot escape the binary of birth sex male or female). The traditional gender vectors work for transsexual people and some transgender people, but clearly not for the Gender Queers and others who do not like the gender binary. So MTnF and FTnM—Male-to-not-Female and Female-to-not-Male—cover those folks. This is along the lines of various FTM support groups who define their membership as ‘those who were assigned female at birth but do not currently identify as female.’ I mean, we need something else for the hardcore epidemiology types who think in narrow categories, and with regard to gender, ‘not male’ and ‘not female’ seem to me an easy means to describe those who are not grounded in the binary. We’ve got to meet those scientists halfway—at least initially—so we can get data that will lead to more sophisticated modeling later.” Doris Dayta, June 27, 2007.

²⁶ A report that includes over 50 terms on the cover is Anna H. McCrery, “Culturally Appropriate Approaches to Trans Youth Health Risk Assessment: Translating Experiential Narrative into Empirical Research” (Johns Hopkins University, Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2007). A main point of McCrery’s thesis concerns the numerous identifications found particularly among trans-identified and gender-variant youth, and also notes the fluidity of movement across identity trajectories that young people display.

The Pittsburgh institute crystallized themes from over a decade of my activism and ethnographic fieldwork combined, but the most germane was our two-ton elephant in the meeting room—the a-categorical quality of transgender that defies easy definition. While “transgender” is frequently employed for quick identification of research subjects, or as terminological shorthand in educational programs, just as often it results in methodological difficulty due to its proliferative instability. This is because, as explained, the category not only pulls in and realigns existing identities but it also simultaneously generates new ones. Thus, while able to perform powerful political and personal identity-formation work, the transgender can often precipitate the significant disruption of public health research and programming agendas.

Administering and Assessing Trans-identities

During ethnographic fieldwork, the variety of identity and body formations of my research participants animated the proliferative aspect of the category transgender. I also witnessed this same phenomenon in research projects on trans-specific healthcare, whereby the proliferative aspect of “transgender” was manifest in methodological variation. What I discovered was an explosion of uneven deployments of categories and classification schemas across studies through an examination of sex and gender questions from needs assessment survey demographic sections. Examining needs assessment studies is a good way to gauge the impact of the category transgender in public health settings because such studies serve as an interface between communities (on the ground social action) and governmental administrative bodies.

Needs assessment study is a first step toward determining “population” (group-wide collective) health risks and setting government public health priorities. While research of this sort can appear value-neutral, conducted using presumably objective scientific methods such as surveys, it is really a highly politicized process from beginning to end. Sociologist Susan A. McDaniel outlines the trajectory of establishing a “need,” saying that, “The political status of a need must first be established [e.g., using a need assessment study], then struggles over interpretation of that need ensues, followed by struggles over resources for meeting the need” (9).²⁷ The first politicized move in the process of needs assessment is identifying an “at-risk” population. However, populations, being large-scale groupings, must be based on some underlying unit of logic. For McDaniel, “the project of demography” creates classification systems that do the work of “defining and consolidating boundaries for bodies, for gender, for categories that become reified and determining through both disciplinary canon and applied practice” (5).²⁸ She

²⁷ Susan A McDaniel, “The Demographic Category as Leaky Gender Boundary: Implications for Women’s Reproductive Health,” *Women’s Health and Urban Life* 2, no. 1 (May 2003): 4-21.

²⁸ Juan Carlos Jorge, a professor of anatomy and neurobiology, articulates the issue of classification and its underlying imaginary in a slightly different way following Durkheim’s and Mauss’s seminal 1903 work on statistics. He states: “Systems of classification, beyond providing order, provide comfort as they name and encode the real and the natural around us to give universal character to individual phenomenon [sic]. At the outskirts of these systems we find the un-real, the un-natural, or simply, the freakish and the monstrous: the things that cannot be named. But if named, they should be systematically encoded; therefore, sabotaging the social strategy of reinforcing the idea of a rare event in order to avoid its proper management. [S]ystems of classification require the assumption that each criterion for classification is real, natural, and universal” (31). While Jorge provides this commentary to explain the “mystery” shrouding a lack of data on “incidence” of intersex births, this observation could easily be applied to my discussion of the naming and then classification of trans-specific and gender nonconforming individuals. Juan Carlos Jorge, “Statistical Management of Ambiguity: Bodies that Defy the Algorithm of Sex Classification,” *DataCritica: International Journal of Critical Statistics* 1, no. 1 (2007): 19-37.

goes on to explain: “The category in demographic discourse, then becomes the reality, or at least a significant reality on the ‘radar screen’ of the population project” (7). In this way, “transgender” becomes the categorical lynchpin for a demographic imaginary that constitutes “the transgender population,” and thus establishes a legitimate target for health risk surveillance and needs assessment study.

These micro-operations of public health research are part of a larger orchestration of administrative techniques that Michel Foucault has named “bio-power.” For Foucault, this is “a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (137).²⁹ Bio-power describes how the modern state, since the eighteenth century onward, became an integral actor in the regulation and production of humans as resources through efficient life-maximizing technologies. Mitchell Dean summarizes Foucault’s bio-politics by explaining how the notion of a “population” is framed through what he calls “apparatuses of security.”³⁰ According to Dean,

these apparatuses of security include the use of standing armies, police forces, diplomatic corps, intelligence services and spies...[but] also includes health, education and social welfare systems...[centralizing] this concern for the population and its optimization (in terms of wealth, health, happiness, prosperity, efficiency, and the forms of knowledge and technical means appropriate to it. (20)

Trans legal scholar Dean Spade alternately calls this the “caretaker/surveillance state,” explaining that there is a “two-part dynamic of collecting standardized data about a

²⁹ The first appearance of “bio-power” in Foucault’s published work is in volume one of *The History of Sexuality*. There he writes about two poles related to this power. The first is centered on the “body as machine,” which leads to an “anatomo-politics of the human body,” and the other is “focused on the species body,” leading to “a biopolitics of the population” (139, *italics original*). Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

³⁰ Dean, *Governmentality*.

population and then engaging in population-level interventions.”³¹ Interventions include providing public education, care for the aging, occupational safety standards and healthcare which are all functions of the “caretaker state” (742). He elaborates by saying “caretaking activities are focused on ensuring the health and well-being of the population through creation of national standardized programs” (e.g., social security) and this necessitates a “data-gathering element” aimed at the demographics of “population-level interventions” (742-743). In this way, Spade claims “caretaking and surveillance are married” (743).

Because public health is one apparatus of state regulation it is no accident that the language of “surveillance” and the philosophy of “caretaking” are central to public health discourse. This connection is clearly exemplified in the phraseology “HIV surveillance and prevention [caretaking]” used throughout federal agencies like the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Spade goes on to explain that classification, which is central to population-level interventions, also has a reality-constituting effect that is accomplished through data gathering and other state administered bio-political procedures:

categories used in the classification of data gathered by the state do not merely collect information about pre-existing types of things, but rather shape the world into those categories [and furthermore, while] classification systems create reality, grouping and sorting things such that certain distinctions become essential while others are ignored [...] Every classification system could involve other, different criteria for sorting than the ones it does, and in some cases, the determination of what criteria are used have ethical implications because they significantly impact the social and political realities of individuals and groups. (745-746)

Bowker and Star call this mutually constitutive relationship between classifying things and the things that are classified “convergence”; however, they clarify that “although

³¹ Dean Spade, “Documenting Gender,” *Hastings Law Journal* 59, no. 1 (2008): 742.

convergence may appear . . . to create a inescapable cycle of feedback and verification, the very multiplicity of people, things and processes involved mean that they are never locked in for all time.”³² So, for example, while this mutually constitutive effect might explain how binary gender categories reinforce the “reality” of male and female sexes, the situation for “transgender” is somewhat different. The general arbitrariness of classification—Spade’s claim that things *could* be sorted otherwise—and the “multiplicity of people, things and processes” mean that at present “transgender,” as a proliferative category, operates differently than a consolidated one like “gender” in the field of bio-power.³³ Although all categories are socially constructed, “transgender” shows its seams more readily by failing to function like a naturalized classification category. Proliferation and the inability to contain itself make this “failure” more visible among otherwise invisible and insidiously pervasive operations of categorization.³⁴

³² Need *Sorting Things Out*, 49.

³³ Judith Butler claims in *Gender Trouble* that “gender” is a performance—following Austin’s definition of a reiterative speech act—which must be repeated continually, on a daily basis, in order that its naturalized status to be maintained. However, she warns repetition is always accompanied by “failure,” even of categories as seemingly “natural” as gender; thus, all gender is in the end socially constructed. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. While I subscribe to Butler’s theory of gender performativity, I believe that transgender, at the present historical moment, has a peculiar status in that it fails (that is, exposes its categorical status) far more often than more consolidated categories like “male” or “female.” It is this extreme categorical instability of “transgender” that facilitates powerful transversal grouping for political purposes, and also creates effective (and affective—sublime) disruption within various systems.

³⁴ The visible “failure” of transgender is what queer studies seized upon, as exemplified by the work of Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Butler references drag performances in order to reveal the artificiality of cultural norms and to explain the instability of the apparently “natural” category of gender. Trans-studies theorists have critiqued Butler, and queer studies in general, for exploiting trans-specific examples in the service of an argument that largely ignores the harsh social conditions of trans-identified and gender non-conforming people’s lives. See for example Namaste, *Invisible lives*; Jay Prosser, *Second Skins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Quite simply, the categorical consolidation of “transgender” is at present an incomplete project, and its internal classificatory contradictions and “multiplicity” foreground its unsystematic status. The visibility of “transgender,” precipitated by categorical instability, follows Bowker’s and Star’s claim that when classification systems falter, or when contestations arise, their operational processes and underlying politics become most obvious. These unstable and proliferative aspects of “transgender” can be seen clearly when unpacking the demographic sections of trans-specific needs assessment studies that include a contradictory array of categories. A cursory glance reveals that all of these studies are different, yet this is not unusual since emergent issues and identities often correlate to unevenness in research methods. However, more to the point is that “transgender” produces differences from within by being generative and proliferative as much as it is a stable identity term; this a-categorical variability and visibility symptomatically plays out across a range of needs assessment instrument survey designs.

However, instead of presenting statistics from studies for their own sake, the way data is commonly used in public health contexts, I will look at how statistics themselves become legible through analysis of research using demographic methods that contain concealed imaginaries. One such imaginary is the shopping list of identities, what I call the community-based approach, whereby a blizzard of self-identifications drives categorical choices. This a-categorically proliferative aspect of “transgender” leads to data analysis problems—what Doris Dayta calls a “data dragon”—that incite ongoing debates about how best to categorize and count trans and/or gender non-conforming people in quantitative research. Discussion of this topic arises among researchers and

community advocates on trans-specific HIV prevention list-serves, at community conferences, during governmental meetings and elsewhere. Taken together, these different research methods, and attendant imaginaries, make visible the shifting sands of classification work and demonstrate the elastic, generative, proliferative and transfiguring power of the a-categorical aspect of transgender.

Needs Assessment Studies: Transgender Excess and Categorical Recontouring

Public health surveys conducted beginning in the early 1990s, and even one as recent as 2002, included “transgender” as a demographic selection under “sexual orientation.”³⁵ The conflation of “sexual orientation” with “gender identity” (often coded “transgender”) resulted in the claim that transgender participation in these studies was “statistically insignificant” due to so few people checking the transgender box. On the surface, this interpretation suggests researchers failed to realize that the reason was not small numbers alone, but probably because trans-identified respondents had to *choose* between their sexual orientation and their gender identity when checking “only one” box.

³⁵ During a fieldwork outing at the 130th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association I documented several posters of studies that included “transgender” as a choice under “sexual orientation” (Philadelphia Convention Center, February 2002). One was a health needs assessment from Minnesota that included “transgender” under “sexual identity” along with “gay, lesbian and bisexual”: *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adults in Minnesota, City of Minneapolis*, Health and Family Support Division, Department of Public Health (2002). This transgender-inclusive definition of sexual orientation is interesting because it mirrors the 1975 State of Minnesota’s historic non-discrimination law which was the first to provide trans-specific protections under the category “affectional preference,” as amended to mean: “having or projecting a self-image not associated with one’s biological maleness or biological femaleness.” Paisley Currah and Shannon Minter, *Transgender Equality: A Handbook for Activists and Policymakers* (New York: Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2000), 19.

If historicized, this seemingly common sense separation of “sexual orientation” from “gender identity” is understood as far from a “natural” distinction. Thus, my readings of the imaginaries behind late twentieth-century demographics in trans-specific needs assessment studies must be placed in a broader context, one in which the delineations between “sex,” “gender” and “sexual orientation” were at one time not so clear. Distinguishing between “sexual orientation” and “gender,” in specific, is the hinge upon which the current distinction between “homosexual” (sexual orientation) and “transgender” (gender identity) hangs.

In *Imagining Transgender*, Valentine traces the historical separation of “sexuality” from “gender,” and of “homosexuality” from “transgender,” claiming that these only became distinct categories in the United States in the early 1970s. Categorical disentanglement, according to Valentine, rested upon earlier work by European sexologists who used taxonomic discrimination “to enable them to distinguish between . . . people who visibly transgressed conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity . . . and those who, despite being content to be social men or women in concordance with their birth ascription, were erotically drawn to people of the same general embodiment (‘sexuality’).” Valentine explains that his “roundabout” phrasing in this passage indicates that sexologists, such as Magnus Hirschfeld and Havelock Ellis who struggled with this issue, did not yet have the language available to them in order to make such a distinction because it was just “emerging from their work.”³⁶

Historian Joanne Meyerowitz, in *How Sex Changed*, explains that mid-twentieth-century psychiatric and medical practitioners—who had to account for transsexuality

³⁶ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 57.

(embodiment) as distinct from desire (orientation toward eroticized others)—distinguished even more precisely between sex, gender and sexuality.³⁷ However, Valentine maintains that it was not until the 1960s, primarily through the work of sex researcher Robert Stoller, that “the separation of gender and sexuality at an epistemological level was [...] fully elaborated within the medical field.” He goes on to say that “[t]he work of Stoller, Green, and others thus enabled the difference between gender and sexuality (and thus transsexuality and homosexuality) to be elaborated and institutionalized in medical terms.” Valentine contends that the early sexologists, and later (1960s) sex researchers, were not invested in separating biology (sex) from social roles (gender identity) and from sexuality in order to advance a revolutionary agenda; rather, many medical and psychiatric professionals sought to reassert heteronormativity through understanding transsexual re-embodiment as righting the wrong of homosexuality—meaning, presumably the pre-op transsexual (homosexual) would become heterosexual after transition. One of Valentine’s major claims is that “the ‘gender’ that underpins ‘transgender’ and marks it as distinct from the ‘sexuality’ of mainstream gay and lesbian politics is one rooted in a sexological rather than feminist tradition.”³⁸

³⁷ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 127.

³⁸ Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 57-59. Valentine, Meyerowitz and other theorists such as Stryker in *Transgender History*, (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008) are careful to attribute this critical distinction between biological sex and social gender not just to medical discourses but to political impulses too, citing, in particular, feminism. For second-wave feminists, political change—since at least Beauvoir 1989 [1952] onward—relied upon unhooking women’s “biology” from their social destiny as historically determined second-class citizens. According to Valentine, “the distinction between gender and sexuality has roots in the feminism of the 1970s as well” (58). He also credits Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” as one of the most radical and influential feminist

It is clear that “transgender” has maintained an outsider status within sex/gender systems. As symbolic anthropologist Mary Douglas claims: “When something is firmly classed as anomalous the outline of the set in which it is not a member is clarified” and “[i]n general these reflections [on anomalies] confirm our confidence in the main classifications.”³⁹ Often regarded an “outlier”⁴⁰ in the field of public health, the appearance of “transgender” has certainly enabled consolidations around the “main classifications” of sex, gender and sexuality. However, it has also forced new clarifications of the meaning of these categories as well. By providing this history, I demonstrate that the seemingly natural separations between sex, gender and sexuality that undergird the transgender demographic imaginaries of studies in this chapter are by no means “natural” and a-historical. In fact, these distinctions are the result of a long process of cultural and ideological negotiation around taxonomic schemas, classification procedures and categorization practices. In presenting these studies, I intend to situate sex, gender and sexuality and their demographic imaginaries within the context of trans-specific cultural production. This contextualizing analysis of “transgender” is important,

articulations of the separation between sexuality and gender arising from the sex war debates of the 1980s.

³⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 38.

⁴⁰ An “outlier” in statistical terms is an observation that is numerically distant from the rest of the data—something that exists too far from the center (mean/norm) of a data set. Outliers can be symptomatic of different things: faulty data (“errors”), methodological instabilities, or areas where a certain theory may be invalid. “Transgender” phenomena have often existed as “outliers” in public health study data sets and have often been thrown out because researchers claimed they “skewed” the findings. One of my research participants told me she was upset about her public health program’s continual insistence that “transgender” was an outlier within more normative systems of data collection and that her intention to focus on trans-health research was not supported for this reason. In her frustration she said that as a “queer woman” she wanted to wear a t-shirt to school that simply read “OUTLIER” across her chest. K.T.V., “Interview with the Author,” June 2004.

because its emergence in larger social realm of research has moved beyond it being a categorical—and social—aberration. As such, “transgender” has begun to place a reverse pressure on existing sex, gender and sexuality categories to redefine themselves once again.

Study 1 - “The Transgender Health Action Coalition Survey”

This 1996 survey by Philadelphia’s Trans-health Action Coalition (THAC) actually separates “gender identity,” “sex assigned at birth” and “current physical sex” using three different questions [Fig. 6].⁴¹ It also originated the use of the gender-identity shopping list. However, being a historically early survey in the timeline of trans-specific needs assessments that run from the mid-1990s to present, it displays a rather modest selection of gender identity choices compared to Dayta’s list. However, what we see here is documentation of the emergence of the process whereby “transgender” accumulates and enumerates more types under an all-encompassing umbrella via a shopping list schematic.

So while sex, like gender, can be deconstructed—because both are socially constructed even as they carry different cultural weight related to biology—it is important to consider the usefulness of separating “sex” from “gender” in research that pertains to trans-specific health issues.⁴² The methodological distinction between “sex assigned at

⁴¹ T. Benjamin Singer, M. Cochran, and R. Adamec, *Final Report by the Trans-Health Action Coalition (THAC) to the Philadelphia Foundation Legacy Fund* (Philadelphia, 1997). There is also a separate question on this THAC survey asking for “sexual orientation.”

⁴² Sex, like gender, has been argued to be a social “construct,” for example, by noted gender theorist Judith Butler in her book *Bodies that Matter*. For Butler, sex is not “a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but [...] a cultural

birth” and “current gender identity” in the THAC study was named the “two-step method” by Doris Dayta, during the late 1990s (while she was a community-based researcher before taking her position within the national public health system). The reason for this separation in trans-specific research, like in transgender political activism, is purposeful. That is, Doris argues that in quantitative research a data-detected discordance between “sex assigned at birth” and “current gender identity” signals the *possibility* of someone being trans-identified. Although discordance is no guarantee of a transgender identity, within the context of health disparities research, such a distinction could place otherwise invisible people (trans-identified and/or gender non-conforming) on the public health surveillance radar. On the other hand, without a data-detected discordance, in a world operating according to a normative binary sex/gender imaginary, trans-identified and other gender non-conforming people seem simply not to exist.

Detecting sex/gender discordance is regarded by researchers, like Doris, as a necessity when operating within an administrative surveillance system built upon nearly inviolable binary gender structures. The imaginary that separates sex-at-birth from

norm which governs the materialization of bodies.” For Butler, sex “is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms.” *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2-3. Thomas Laqueur historicizes the changing ways that science has determined our understanding of bodily “sex” since the ancient Greeks in Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Other noted theorists on the subject of sex and gender construction include: Alice Domurat Dreger, “Doubtful Sex: The Fate of the Hermaphrodite in Victorian Medicine,” *Victorian Studies* 38, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 335-370; Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Sharon E. Preves, *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Julia Epstein, *Altered Conditions: Disease, Medicine, and Storytelling* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

current-gender-identity attempts to make people visible who, within large-scale systems, are often rendered invisible. Appadurai's second sense of agency that promotes "dissent . . . and designs for collective life to emerge," whereby "dissent" relates to the rejection of binary gender systems and "collective life," quite appropriately, implies the aggregative existence of life under the transgender umbrella. Depending upon who one asks, categorical visibility is either a necessary political move—countering institutional erasures that Namaste documents and Dayta laments—or visibility runs the risk of subjection to "disciplinary" controls. The latter seen as a function of Appadurai's other formulation of agency, that which serves state-driven bio-political necessity. This dual consideration of agency, then, highlights how visibility within the context of U.S. public health is a double-edged sword; it is necessary in order to accrue much-needed state supported resources, but at the same time it often renders individuals vulnerable to bio-political administration and social control.

Study 2 - "The Washington (DC) Transgender Needs Assessment Survey"

This 1999 "Washington (DC) Transgender Needs Assessment Survey" (WTNAS) also used the two-step method that separates physical sex from gender identity, borrowed directly from the THAC survey [Fig. 7].⁴³ However, WTNAS refined this method by including a comprehensive set of choices regarding the anatomical characteristics of research participants [Fig. 8]. The goal is detailed enumeration of physical sex characteristics (especially modified ones—e.g., secondary sex characteristic changes due

⁴³ Jessica M. Xavier et al., "A Needs Assessment of Transgendered People of Color Living in Washington, DC," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 8, no. 2 (April 2005): 31-47.

to hormones or surgeries) not included in binary male/female schematics. The survey's Principal Investigator named this section the "anatomy inventory," invoking notions of eighteenth-century taxonomic practices.⁴⁴ The intention behind this list, as with most taxonomic systems, is to be exhaustive; thus, it includes nearly every trans-specific non-modified and modified physical combination conceivable—including hormonally and surgically enhanced body-part configurations. While the two-step method allows for a detection of sex/gender discordance, it does little to document the actual physical status of an individual surveyed. As such, the anatomy inventory moves beyond discordance toward specifying morphological variations that naturalized categories such as "male" or "female" cannot capture, especially for people with trans-sexed or otherwise non-normative bodies.

But why would including an anatomical status question be important to include in a needs assessment study? Because otherwise trans-figured bodies can end up coded as data "errors" in quantitative research imaginaries.⁴⁵ The "managerial calculus"⁴⁶ behind

⁴⁴ Of course taxonomies are still in use today, especially in biomedical research. Juan Carlos Jorge confirms as much saying that: "Professional statisticians, and scientists whose work heavily depends on statistics, make sense of the world by quantifying phenomena or by creating categories to classify all phenomenon [sic]. Statisticians aim at generating taxonomies that include categories that are mutually exclusive and that encompass the full spectrum of alternatives. In so doing, the use of nomenclatures as classifications systems has the consequence of equating the typical, the most frequent, with the normal. One of the simplest and most pervasive forms of binary classification is that of 'sex,' since it poses two distinct acceptable anatomical phenotypes of male and female that are mutually exclusive and preclude other typologies. Therefore, this classification system is consistent with the statistical worldview." Jorge, "Statistical Management of Ambiguity: Bodies that Defy the Algorithm of Sex Classification," 19-20.

⁴⁵ A good example of a different classification schematic created by the *U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* for identifying victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) uses "Other (Hermaphrodite, Transsexual)." This is the CDC's attempt at providing an alternative to the binary categorization system that completely erases trans-identified

this sort of coding “error” is found in a 1999 version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) manual. SPSS is a computer program used for statistical analysis in the social sciences. It provides a means to manage, organize and interpret a mountain of data compiled from needs assessment studies. The manual guides researchers on appropriate applications of quantitative data analysis techniques. A revealing quote from the SPSS manual reads:

Sometimes simply describing crosstabulations and their percentages may be all you need for a report or paper. At other times, sophisticated analyses are needed to understand relationships between categorical variables. Or, you may want to use tables as a data-screening tool for cross-variable edit checks to uncover errors. A 2 X 2 table of *gender (male, female)* against *hysterectomy (yes, no)*, for example, might uncover males coded as *yes* hysterectomy (or vice versa).⁴⁷

This directive bluntly illustrates the manner by which the literal erasure of trans-sexed bodies in research studies can occur. In this case, a binary sex/gender imaginary underlies an error detection system that eliminates all men with a uterus as coding “errors.” This same imaginary, and administrative technique, likely renders all other trans-specific body configurations equally incoherent and implausible. In fact, using quantitative software to

people and sex “indeterminate” bodies. However, this third (“other”) strategy, as a catchall solution, functions like a categorical garbage can to “place” variance that is, in this case, defined mainly by physical anomaly. The CDC offers no good rationale for doing so other than they appear unable to imagine any other way to record such bodies and identities as targets of IPV. Included in the section “Uniform definitions” for the “sex” of the victim choices are: “Code: M, Description: Male; Code: F, Description: Female; Code: O, Description Other (Hermaphrodite, Transsexual); Code: U, Description: Unknown or undetermined” (26). Quoted from: *Intimate Partner Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and Recommended Data Elements* (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.), www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/ipv_surveillance/Intimate%20Partner%20violence.pdf.

⁴⁶ McDaniel argues: “A managerial calculus is created by which demography and its application in population policies, foreclose other ways to define,” from *Journal of Women’s Health* (2003): 8.

⁴⁷ From “Using Crosstabs to Obtain Crosstabulations and Measures of Association,” in *SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Base 10.0 Applications Guide* (Chicago: SPSS Inc., 1999): 63.

code only binary gender categories actually eliminates the *excessiveness* of trans-specific bodies; thus the proliferation that conditions transgender sublimity is effectively contained. On the other hand, the WTNAS anatomical inventory that includes trans-specific bodily references provides an alternative imaginary designed to turn a two-dimensional coding system into a multi-dimensional document of bio-morphological variation. As such, the WTNAS method provides researchers with a very different picture—albeit equally abstract—than does the SPSS demographic imaginary.⁴⁸

I am not suggesting the anatomy inventory solves the problem of categorical proliferation and the associated issue of transgender sublimity in public health. What I am saying is that, pragmatically speaking, scientific methodology could be used to devise more precise questions for data gathering in studies. This is especially true if researchers keep in mind the specific need for the information. For example, if the government is truly interested in tracking uterine cancer rates, then it might do better to count all people with a uterus instead of only people who are socially categorized as “female,” who may or may not have a uterus.⁴⁹ Moving from documenting a presumably identifiable sex

⁴⁸ Quantitative researchers in the Behavioral Science Training Program at the National Development Research Institute in New York City have reviewed this chapter and commented that SPSS can be modified to include additional variables, even, perhaps, trans-specific ones. However, by providing this example my aim is to demonstrate how pervasive is the binary sex/gender imaginary that would include such a scenario in a training manual. The taken-for-granted tone of the instruction—a man with a uterus is a “coding error”—is a perfect example of how social imaginaries become naturalized as social facts in the everyday world. Educational training of researchers attending statistics classes in university-based public health programs further reinforces this reality-constructing/confirming effect. There, students are routinely given the example of “gender (male or female)” as the only truly dichotomous variable and told that no other characteristic of persons they study will have only two options. This assumption usually goes unchallenged by both teachers and students.

⁴⁹ In “Documenting Gender” Spade offers the same suggestion that the government “track[...] uterine cancer rates [...] in people with uteruses [rather] than in people who

(“female”)⁵⁰ or a social category (“woman”) to an anatomically descriptive one (“person with uterus”) is possible if a different demographic imaginary such as the WTNAS anatomy inventory were employed.

In the end, WTNAS offers one example of the way that changing an underlying imaginary through the use of an alternate classification schema has the potential to influence the reshaping of social worlds. In specific, if men with a uterus were to be included in governmental research then the binary-driven gender imaginary might become an outmoded method for data collection. This new methodological approach has the potential to disrupt the reality-constituting “convergence” effect identified by Bowker

are socially classified as ‘female.’” His larger argument in this article is that gender classification on identity documents (e.g., passports, drivers licenses, etc.) is unnecessary and often erroneous, particularly in the context of the variable and often contradictory bureaucratic rules about sex/gender classification across different geographical regions, jurisdictions and levels of government. The proliferation and variability of sex/gender classification as it impacts policies and definitions concerning when a trans-identified person can change sex/gender markers on identification parallels my analysis of how trans-specific data operates unevenly and inconsistently in public health contexts. However, while Spade recommends removal of sex/gender categories from the criteria on identity documents, he admits: “An area that would be likely to retain the use of gender data to some degree is public health.” Spade, “Documenting Gender,” 814.

⁵⁰ Previously quoted professor of Anatomy and Neurobiology Juan Carlos Jorge states that: “Taken together, it is appropriate to revise our current classification system as the management of intersex [i.e., people born with mixed sex characteristics, renamed, although not without controversy, “disorders of sexual development”] cases does not guarantee that an assigned sex category under a binary system that is based a priori on sexual anatomy will match gender identity later in life. More importantly, there is now sufficient data showing the insufficiencies of one of the most heavily used categories in statistical classification: sex. It is an attainable goal for the medical and legal fields to redefine this category for the coding into the birth certificate cases that do not follow the binary system. What is true about sex then? That: (i) our current classification system of sex is ambiguous, (ii) our current classification system of sex is faulty, and (iii) our current classification system of sex must be critically revised with an open mind. [...] until then, what seems obvious about sex, the innocent classification of the infant’s sex organs and the dichotomy of the pink and the blue, will continue to be engrained in our brains even as we gaze through the magazine covers waiting in line to pay for our secret cravings at night.” Jorge, “Statistical Management of Ambiguity: Bodies that Defy the Algorithm of Sex Classification,” 35.

and Star, since there would no longer be a binary gender classification schema in place to “confirm” the supposed reality of only two sexes in the world outside of public health research. As is, the Anatomy Inventory still relies upon classificatory procedures that use existing anatomical terms (not trans-specific ones such as “cock-pit” instead of “vagina”); still, it provides example of a viable alternate imaginary.

Study 3 - “Transgender Needs Assessment,” New York Department of Public Health

In addition to asking “How did medical professionals assign your sex at birth?” this 1999 New York Department of Public Health funded survey includes questions both THAC and WTNAS did not [Fig. 9].⁵¹ Additional questions include: “What gender role did your guardians raise you?” and “What word best describes your gender role today?” and “What is your legal sex today?” These added sex/gender dimensions speak to the importance of collecting data criteria that fall squarely in the realm of social construct and yet allow for documentation of change-over-time, thereby acknowledging the inherent “gender fluidity” in trans-specific social worlds. This imaginary is markedly different than the static two-sex schematics most often used, especially models in which “sex assigned at birth” cannot change over time and is determined by a doctor’s cursory glance at a baby’s genitals and a corroborating mark on a birth record. The impact of marking a baby as such goes far beyond initial birth assignation and supplies the child with a lifetime gender script, based, of course, on the infant’s cultural background and related gender norms.

⁵¹ C. Kelly McGowan, *Final Report of the Transgender Needs Assessment* (HIV Prevention Planning Unit, New York City Department of Public Health, 1999).

What I have described as the process of assigning a baby's gender script is exemplary of Bowker's and Star's concept of "convergence." That is, the reality of the classificatory mark—decided upon using a normatively visual manner of interpreting genitals—appears on the birth record that reinforces the scripting of the child's gender performance across a lifetime. According to Dean, if through exercising the "technology of agency" the script is performed seamlessly, then a child will likely be socially rewarded for such compliance. It is only when the script is challenged by others or refused by the individual, or when it "fails" entirely (as in cases of sex/gender transition or babies born with culturally "ambiguous" genitals), that the arbitrary process of classification and the driving social imaginary behind categorical gender schemas become visible.

In another section of this same New York City survey the THAC strategy of providing many different gender identity choices [Fig. 10] is approximately duplicated. Although this NYC study provides a more comprehensive set of choices than the THAC version, it is still based on a random catalogue of identity terms derivative of the "transgender umbrella" model. An interesting note in the Executive Summary of this NYC study's findings reads:

39 (of 111) participants were assigned male at birth by medical professionals and reported a male primary gender role at the time of the study. They were included in this study under the "*transgender umbrella*" because they participated in gender variant activities such as wearing feminine clothing for performance or personal expression.[Participants in this group, while indicating their primary gender role was male, also self-selected the gender identity categories of drag queen (47%), transgender/transexual (34%), cross-dresser (32%), transvestite (29%), and bi-gendered (5%) (8, italics added).

Study 4 – Unnamed New York City Project: MTF Needs Assessment (draft)

I include the previous 1999 NYC DPH study and compare it to this draft of an anonymous 2005 NYC study [Fig. 11] because they contradict each other.⁵²

Contradiction and contestation, of course, indicate a categorical breakdown that exposes an underlying imaginary. In particular, this survey uses “eligibility questions” that disqualify people from participation if they have a “sex assigned at birth” and “current gender identity” that are both identified as “male.” This would exclude the 39 of 111 participants from the 1999 study who would have responded “yes” to the second question. Quite possibly this survey was designed specifically to exclude the 39 respondents because they did not fit the researcher’s imaginary of what transgender “really” is (i.e., individuals physically transitioning versus those who cross dress or occasionally dress in drag).⁵³

Having consulted on a draft of this survey and offered input that pointed out how their method created built-in exclusions, I know that the researchers did not intend to eliminate individuals from this study who exist outside of the transgender imaginary that seeks discordance between birth-sex and current gender identity. At the same time, that an earlier survey design unintentionally resulted in exclusions simply reinforces the insidious way social imaginaries function—that people who should be included were not even imaginable—and how categories and classification systems operate most powerfully when they render others people invisible.

⁵² Survey draft of anonymous New York City *Transgender Survey Project* (2005).

⁵³ The Principal Investigator of this study has since assured me that “this problem [of exclusion] has been corrected” through use of different criteria to establish eligibility.

From a purely scientific standpoint, the data derived from these studies, due to their inconsistent classificatory approaches, are incomparable because these questions are not sufficiently standardized. And while comparability of data is a legitimate epidemiological concern, this chapter is not arguing for the standardization of survey questions, categories or data because unintended categorical inconsistencies indicate something more complex and relevant to my argument. That is, methodological variability resonates with the category-defying aspect of trans-identities and bodies and is also where the specter of the transgender sublime begins to emerge. By comparing these two studies' contradictory logic, we see how individuals (those included and excluded) get caught in the crosshairs of what Mary Douglas calls "the system at war with itself."⁵⁴

Taken together, the contradictory imaginaries underlying the category transgender embodied in each survey, as much as we would like the data to clarify something, actually obscures as much as it reveals about survey participants. Moreover, the second survey ends up excluding people for whom "sex assigned at birth" and "current gender identity" *match*. My ethnographic and activist work confirms that many of these potentially disqualified individuals are gender non-conforming racial minorities who occupy the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder. As Valentine argues, sometimes "incorporation obscures [. . .] racial and class structures which characterize the transgender community."

In this case, related "disqualifications" (exclusions) are based upon the separation of sexual orientation from gender (identity/variance) discussed at the beginning of this section: a separation common to U.S. activist and social service transgender imaginaries.

⁵⁴ See "The System at War with Itself" in Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

As such, the failure to include some racial (and class) minority gender-variant individuals in research imaginaries indicates limited usefulness of the two-step method designed to detect discordance between “birth-sex assignation” and “current gender identity.” So while the separation of sex, gender (variance) and sexuality—and the associated search for non-congruence—might make visible *some* trans-sexed and gender non-conforming people, for others, such imaginaries elide their difference by relying upon research methods that eliminate alternate ways categories are “sorted” and combined outside of trans-specific social worlds.

This exclusionary outcome demonstrates how powerful the category transgender has become as it functions to disqualify people from studies who experience violence, discrimination and other forms of social marginalization similar to self-consciously trans-identified study participants. It results from methodological choices developed deep within the matrix of the a-categorical category transgender and should compel researchers to self-reflexively consider unintended research effects. However, reflexivity in research necessitates consideration of hidden categorical imaginaries and requires the practice of a critical demographic style that this chapter aims to advance.

As I voice this caution, I also remain acutely aware of the critically useful work of the category transgender and suggest that researchers and activists continue pushing for inclusion in research studies, for the purpose of registering in the social imaginary, as well as to forward efforts to gain government funding, develop programming and provide effective service delivery. This dilemma, just as for the related visibility issue already mentioned, remains unresolved territory that must be carefully traversed.

Study 5 – Young Men who have Sex with Men (Youth of Color)

To cap my discussion of demographic imaginaries, I include questions from a recent study conducted by George Washington University's YES Center of "young men who have sex with men (youth of color) [Fig. 12]."⁵⁵ This survey instrument includes an expanded array of identity choices in the demographic section, derived from the "umbrella model" but with a twist: this time it is used in a survey of "young men who have sex with men" (YMSM). This means non-trans-identified people and more broadly defined gender variant individuals were included. The underlying imaginary seems to imply that "transgender" or "transsexual" (included as choices) come from within the male-born population, which leads to an interesting connection. That is, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention still include male-born, feminine gendered individuals (a broad spectrum that includes gay and trans-identified people) under the category men who have sex with men (MSM). This institutional ordering of "transgender" through the pre-existing category of MSM suggests that one avenue "transgender" has used to enter governmental public health systems is through the MSM back door.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ "Young Men who have Sex with Men," YES Center, George Washington University.

⁵⁶ One urgent trans-specific activist issue I came across in my research was the push for separating out "transgender" (trans-identified women) from current classification under MSM. This topic dominated a government meeting that I attended with other trans-identified public health advocates and non-trans allied providers: "Expert Consultation: HIV-related Behavioral Survey Among Transgender Persons," *U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Atlanta, Georgia (18-19 September 2006). Collection of trans-specific data outside of the MSM category does happen within the national public health system although in uneven and un-systematized ways. This includes through programs administered by the CDC and also through the Ryan White Care Act Data Reporting (CADR) system that started recording "transgender" data in the late 1990s. The latter's use of "transgender" as a catchall category that operates like "other" on race-based questionnaires thus yielding little useful data. The amorphous quality of this data collection method, and the fact some people do not use "transgender" for self-

At the same time, the participants of house/ball social networks also promoted the inclusion of trans-specific language in a largely MSM study by offering input into research design (these same people—along with others—are who the survey is designed to document). So here we see governmental administrative operations and community-based knowledge production collude to produce a particular categorical imaginary.

Like the previous trans-specific studies, this one also separates “sex at birth” from “(current) gender identity,” a distinction never made in survey instruments untouched by the trans-derived methodology I have been discussing in this chapter. Furthermore, this MSM survey contains mixed vernaculars, that is, “femme queen”—a category exclusive to gay or queer communities of color—is placed alongside other terms most often, though not always, associated with a largely white U.S. trans political movement. While not a trans-specific survey, then, the format of this study is greatly influenced by transgender “umbrella” logic due to the fact it offers so many choices of “current gender identity,” including “transgender” and “transsexual.” Categorical imaginaries in research paradigms come full circle here with a survey format that *includes* those who self-identify as “femme queens” among the umbrella-like shopping list; in this case, however, it is not within a trans-specific study context.

Femme queens often (though not always) identify as male-assigned and currently male-identified individuals, and they also sometimes alternate between self-identifying as “gay” and/or “transgender.” However, transgender in this sense is used as an alternative *sexuality* and not gender identity descriptor. Thus, the separation between “sexuality” and “gender identity” that Valentine identifies as central to a U.S. activist and social service

identification, is what prompted Doris Dayta to suggest the two-step method (“sex assigned at birth” and “current gender identity”) as an alternate data-gathering technique.

transgender imaginary is subverted in this case because, here, “transgender” indicates a distinctive nuance of *sexuality* for some participants.⁵⁷ The separation of sexuality and gender identity is thus reversed in this study because the focus on “men who have sex with men” subsumes gender identity and/or trans-specific identity under a sexuality-based umbrella.

Most important to note is that individuals who otherwise would have to be folded back into the research findings of the 1999 NYC DPH study, or who would have been determined to be “ineligible,” like those in the 2005 NYC study, are being explicitly *included* here through use of the category “femme queen.” The reason for “femme queen” appearing among the shopping list of choices indicates its terminological currency among queer communities of color and that this study reflects the input into

⁵⁷ On one fieldwork outing I overheard two fem queens (alternate spelling “femme queen”) call themselves “men with breasts.” This is not, however, a consistent form of self-description and there is much variation among individuals. These same individuals sometimes have a situational and shifting self-identification; for example, in conversation with one informant she described herself as being “just one of the women in her neighborhood” where her home was located, whereas when she was downtown (the LGBT part of the city nicknamed the “Fruit Loop”) she claimed “amidst all this faggotry” her identity was “gay” and that her being “a regular woman” receded into the background. Valentine makes this same observation in chapter three of his book, *Imagining Transgender*, when discussing how some of his research participants who work for social service programs “shift between seeing themselves and their clients as ‘transgender’ and ‘gay.’” While Valentine admits that it would not necessarily be a “bad” thing if some of these individuals come to singularly identify as transgender—especially since it is such a powerful category for political and social action—he cautions that from a public health standpoint, it has always been important to “reach people where they are at” (a core harm reduction principle), and to use categories and identities that outreach participants choose for themselves. He notes: “in order to reach people you wish to help, you need to understand and use the categories by which [those being helped] understand themselves.” Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 134.

research design by youth of color who were program participants from the Washington, DC “house and ball” scene.⁵⁸

The shopping list approach also demonstrates the a-categorically proliferative power of “transgender” to respond to current socio-political demands by spilling over into a study that is not trans-specific. Through inclusion of this study, I am not simply endorsing umbrella logic. Rather, I use it to make the observation that research participants could simply have been asked if they were “straight,” “gay,” “bi,” or “questioning,” but by adding a “gender identity” question with a shopping list of choices, the proliferative power of “transgender” prevails. Most interesting is that in this survey “transgender” actually places pressure on “gay” (or men who have sex with men—MSM) to re-group into an aggregative formation that then carries within it mixed trans and non-trans vernaculars. This representational expansion ultimately demonstrates my argument about the ever-expanding power of “transgender” categorical transfiguration.

A Policy Conundrum: The “Bubble Question”

Analysis of survey designs in this chapter leads to speculation about the political implications of different imaginaries. An urgent policy issue arose around the summer of

⁵⁸ In email conversation with Dr. Manya Magnus of George Washington University she described their program and explained who helped create the survey with program participant input. This approach to public health research fits the methodological model of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). For a good discussion on the application of CBPR to trans-specific public health interventions see: Willy Wilkinson, “Public Health Gains of the Transgender Community in San Francisco: Grassroots Organizing and Community-Based Research,” in *Transgender rights*, ed. Paisley Currah, Richard M Juang, and Shannon Minter (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 192-214; Kristen Clements-Nolle and Ari Bachrach, “Community Based Participatory Research with a Hidden Population: The Transgender Community Health Project,” ed. Meredith Minkler and Nina Wallerstein, *Community Based Participatory Research for Health*. (2003): 332-343.

2007 that was colloquially referred to as the “bubble question.”⁵⁹ Simply put, there was great concern among public health workers about how to complete government-mandated forms that were newly inclusive of “transgender”—filling in the “bubbles” (or checking boxes) next to demographic data gathered on clients of public health programs. For example, when a trans-identified or gender non-conforming client comes to an agency for HIV counseling and testing, some trans-identified testers (who may or may not be out to their clients or to staff at their agency) have complained about use of new government data collection tools requiring clients to disclose their “sex assigned at birth” and whether they are “male,” “female” or “transgender (MTF or FTM).” Testers complained they were put in a difficult ethical position given that their primary duty is to ensure the comfort of a client. Asking “sex assigned at birth” or “transgender” might force an otherwise stealth (closeted) client to disclose their gender status, and the result of such “outing” could potentially alienate clients from the services an agency offers, leaving them open to discrimination from different program staff or others seeking services. Most of these testers and case managers claimed that their primary responsibility was to create a client-centered supportive atmosphere and “the bubble question [can just] be damned.”

On the other hand, Doris Dayta believes “stealth equals death” and passionately argues for trans-identified clients to self-disclose, otherwise they will not be counted. Remaining stealth, according to Doris, creates invisibility within the U.S. public health surveillance system that has, as previously discussed, lumped trans-identified women into

⁵⁹ The “bubble question” colloquially refers to a U.S. government data-gathering tool with the acronym PEMS, which includes “assigned sex at birth (male or female)” and “current gender (male, female, or transgender/MTF, transgender/FTM).” *CDC PEMS Data Variables and Values*, Version 12 (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), 74, <http://www.champnetwork.org/media/PEMS-Variables-V-2.0.pdf>.

the category “men who have sex with men” (MSM). Alternately, trans-identified men are rendered non-existent by the same categorization practice since MSM is really code for people-born-with-penises having sex with people-born-with-penises. And still other individuals who do not fit into either MTF or FTM gender vectors are also excluded from consideration. This crude, genitally based classification schema is used regardless of whether the person with a penis has a masculine or feminine gender identity and/or expression.

Doris contends that the two-step method is critical to shifting funding priorities so government money gets channeled to people most impacted by HIV infection—male-born and feminine-gendered people of color. To do so effectively, she argues, the “bubble form” needs to continue including “sex assigned at birth” *and* “transgender” so that “discordance” can be detected, signaling the possibility someone is trans-identified.⁶⁰ She believes that even those who do not identify as transgender, either because they are living stealth or use another term of identification, need to be counted as trans-identified for political reasons.⁶¹ Thus, disclosure is the key toward advancing the civil rights of and gaining funded services for otherwise marginalized individuals.

⁶⁰ In an email conversation with Doris she further explained her rationale: “As usual, consider the application of data being collected. One purpose does not fit all. The difficulty with lay transpeople (not you) is their tendency to take data out of context and then individualize it to their life’s context/body/sex/gender—without understanding its purpose. Hence, the ‘marketing’ we need to do in public health to be able to really get trans health care – we need to contextualize the argument so that reporting birth sex other than current gender identity will not threaten one’s health care but help providers deliver it and the epi[demiological] goddesses (moi) count it better. Make sense?” (Email communication April 2008; on file with author.)

⁶¹ A parallel to strategic uses of gender data is that of race classification on the census. Discussion revolves around “mixed race” people checking a politically “useful” box in order to direct resources toward socially marginalized groups. For a discussion of the multi-racial category on the U.S. census see: Christine B. Hickman, “The Devil and the

While I understand and sympathize with both sides of this issue, for me an important question remains: How to account for the unruly and sublimely vast range of bodies and identities in the context of systems—in this case public health—that rely on a specific ordering of identification and embodiment as the very epistemological basis for their practice and functioning? This conundrum has been my constant concern as a trans-identified man, as a consumer of public health services, as an activist, as the director of a trans-specific public health program, and as a researcher of public health practices. My multiple roles mean that my position vis-à-vis research is more complex than crossing disciplines; I’ve also been simultaneously crossing back and forth into theory and into practice.

HIV testers forced to use “bubble forms” that threaten the “safe-zones” created for their clients, and Doris and the Doctor who use data as an activist tool to legitimate an otherwise invisible healthcare crisis, are all positioned in relative ethical positions within a system that continues to place them on different sides of this tension. As a result, ethical demands will pull between a trans-identified person’s right of self-determination and the political necessity to register them on the government radar screen (sometimes using a troublesome category that may produce erasure). The alternative is to risk remaining unintelligible within governmental and broader social imaginaries. This ethical dilemma relates to the critical and political impasse created by the “bubble question.”

At the present historical juncture, *trans* is a loose, undefined, regional, local and contingent (as is every identity) category that is also caught up in a particular moment of consolidation, and there is a productive tension created by this dual impulse to be

One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census,” *Michigan Law Review* 95, no. 5 (March 1997): 1161-1265.

proliferative *and* consolidative or de/re-stabilizing.⁶² Furthermore, various thinkers and political trends are vying for what the stabilized content of “transgender” might look like, which is complicated by an awareness of the categorical contingency and internal contradictions described in this chapter. Being both unstable (proliferative) categorically and contested, allows us, as Bowker and Star claim, to see the classificatory aspects of “transgender” in operation. However, the fact remains that any categorical system devised will ultimately be defied by the sublimely proliferative and a-categorical aspect of transgender, which leaves me wondering: What *is* a multiply and contradictorily situated activist-academic to do?

Alternate Imaginaries: The “Mathematical Sublime” and The “Gender Galaxy”

The problem of transgender sublimity shadows any discussions about the “bubble question,” categorization, excess proliferation, and the ethics of disclosure. In fact, the proliferative excess of bodies and identities discussed in this and the previous chapters conditions the sublime in public health contexts. The trouble that proliferation and categorical excess causes for healthcare providers, as well as for public health researchers, often registers on a visceral level in an affect-driven overload response to proliferation and excess. And aesthetic and ethical concerns, particularly those related to sublimity, are intimately linked with the fear of losing oneself in the immensity of the overwhelming object, or idea, that one encounters. This situation can “move” a

⁶² Pauline Park offers a compelling analysis of the de-reconstruction aspect of trans-identity in “The Radically Constructive Turn: An Academic Activist’s Reflections on Race and Culture in the Theorizing of Transgender,” a paper presented at *Transpositions: A Conference Toward Transgender Studies*, Cornell University, March 29th, 1998 (unpublished paper on file).

healthcare provider in a very visceral sense; medical providers can be troubled in a deeply affective way from their inability to mentally master and comfortably contemplate, via categorization, *all* the trans-generative bodies and identities possible. As such, a provider's moved condition can take many forms, including moving toward or away from and/or feeling overwhelmed as a sensory dimension of the experience of the sublime—shutting down being a form of psychical protection against the terror of boundary collapse, and loss of self, at the edge of “transcendent”—sublime—limitlessness.

An instance this overwhelmed condition arose during one public health clinic visit when I interviewed a medical assistant who, referring to all the different “types” seeking trans-specific care, confessed: “For the most part I am learning a lot and really enjoy this work, some days I’m like *Please, just for today...enough, okay?*” Other providers reacted more negatively by outright refusing to serve transitioning individuals. So a continuum of visceral responses to classification and category failure on the part of professionals working in healthcare contexts was common from what I observed. It derives from the genuine *confusion* of providers, who frequently asked for clarification of trans-specific language use or of the wide-ranging, customized self-identifications; their questions were presumably in order to classify precisely, categorize, understand and better serve their patients. With the ever-increasing proliferation of trans body types, gender expressions, discourses and experiential worlds, it is no wonder the medical assistant reacted as she did. Her overload response to the amount of variation (bodies and identities) walking through the clinic door manifests as palpable distress in the moment, creating a temporary barrier to providing her best care.

So while not discounting erasure within social systems or transphobia in public health settings, all predicated on institutionally embedded exclusionary mechanisms, I also encountered a cognitive limit on the part of healthcare professionals when faced with the excessiveness of trans bodies and identities. Provider responses to such limitlessness echoes Dick Hebdige's claim of sublimity whereby "reason [is] forced to confront its incapacity to deal rationally with the infinite." The aspects of "transgender" that are generative, proliferative, and excessive are also imagined to be infinite.

As such, Kant's "mathematical sublime" is useful as a frame for discussing the generative force of "transgender" in terms of number, infinitude and the whole:

Examples of the mathematical sublime of nature [are] not so much a larger numerical concept, as a large unit for the measure of the imagination (for shortening the numerical series). A tree [the height of] which we estimate with reference to the height of a man, at all events gives us a standard for a mountain; and if this were a mile high, it would serve as unit for the number expressive of the earth's diameter, so that the latter might be made intuitable. The earth's diameter [would supply a unit] for the immeasurable number of Milky Way systems called nebulae, themselves, lets us expect no bounds here. Now the sublime in the aesthetical judging of an immeasurable whole like this lies, not so much in the greatness of number [of units], as in the fact that in our progress we arrive at yet greater units." (95)

In the mathematical sublime moment, the experience of sublimity arises when the imagination attempts to offer an intuitive whole for an idea so grand that it defeats the imagination's effort. If "transgender" is compared to Kant's Milky Way metaphor—and is not simply a collection of modified bodies or "units" of terms on a list of identities—then it can be imagined as an "immeasurable whole" arrived at through ever "greater units" moving toward unbounded space. Yet this "immeasurable" totality is nearly impossible to fathom and the imagination, in sublime response, is "pained" by its failure

to do so.⁶³ I want to be clear that I am not claiming transgender *is* “infinite”—certainly although there are very many trans-specific identities they are finite in number—rather, it is the *sense* of infinitude stimulated by categorical proliferation that conditions the transgender sublime.

The Kantian “mathematical sublime” enables a reimagining of “transgender” beyond its conceptualization as a two-dimensional continuum, or as a collection of “units,” both models that were critiqued in chapter one. An alternate imaginary, comparable to Kant’s Milky Way metaphor, is trans-legal theorist Dylan Vade’s “gender galaxy.” Vade claims that “[g]ender is much bigger than a line [or continuum]. It is at least a three-dimensional space, but not a Cartesian one, not a space created by three lines. There are no lines, no ordering. There is just space—an infinite space, a space that allows motion” (8).⁶⁴ He also contends that “the gender galaxy already exists [and there] are infinite genders, and they are not linearly related” (9).

⁶³ In *The Abyss of Representation*, George Hartley considers imaginative defeat from a related angle: “[t]he problem for the imagination is that there are some objects in nature that exceed our capacity for sensible comprehension; while the imagination can apprehend the multiple sensible attributes of the object, the object’s vastness confounds our ability to comprehend it—that is, to join all of these apprehended moments into a unified image. We are still concerned with a purely aesthetic experience—we have concept in mind when we experience the sublime—yet the feeling we experience is not pleasure but now pain. The imagination is pained by its failure.” George Hartley, *The Abyss of Representation: Marxism and the Postmodern Sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 34.

⁶⁴ Dylan Vade, “Expanding Gender and Expanding the Law: Toward a Social and Legal Conceptualization of Gender that is more Inclusive of Transgender People,” *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* 11, no. 253 (n.d.): 2005.. A related educational document posted on the Sylvia Rivera Law Project Web site, authored by Jody Marksamer and Dylan Vade, says: “And, a little note on spectrums and lines. There are women and there are men. These are two options among a million. Female and male are not two endpoints on a line. There is no line, no spectrum. If there were a line, where would a sissy ftm fall compared to a butch dyke? Where would a butch mtf fall? Where would a fierce femme fall? Gender is much bigger than a line. We cannot order people on a scale of

By attending to this non-linear, spatial imaginary, I am *not* saying that Vade “gets it right,” especially in terms of “infinite genders.” However, I am suggesting that the idea of infinite movements in relatively unbounded space is a provocative imaginary that affords more possibilities than consolidated categories and socially normative imaginaries. Given this, an answer to the question asked in the last section “What’s an academic-activist to do?” could be: to politically interrogate the unintended effects of transgender imaginaries and to promote ethically engaged ones, knowing that imaginaries, as social practices, have tangible, material and worldly effects. While this is a broad claim, in the next section I will provide a concrete example of what I mean through critical analysis of a response to the transgender sublime in a public health program’s outreach tactics.

TIP Tactics: A Politics of Mobility

I conclude with ethnographic material from my time as director of Philadelphia’s Trans-health Information Project (TIP), a joint collaboration of the Prevention Point needle exchange and the Gay and Lesbian Latino AIDS Education Initiative (GALAEI), with funding by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. TIP is a peer-driven harm reduction program designed to decrease health risks among individuals defined as “transgender” (or “trans”) and anyone else included under the “umbrella.” Yet, as I will show, simple notions of umbrella-like inclusion were eschewed at TIP in favor of a

masculinity/femininity. Gender is (at least!) a 3 dimensional space that allows motion. One way to picture gender is as a gender galaxy—a space with an infinite number of gender points that can move and that are not hierarchically ordered.” Found at: <http://srlp.org/node/123> (viewed 24 June 2009).

tactical, local and mobile outreach approach to the proliferation of identities and bodies that often exceed the aggregative logic of the transgender umbrella.

As the program's founding director, I was charged with overseeing and helping develop a model program from the ground up. This meant we had no pre-designed outreach materials (e.g., condom packs, safer sex brochures, proper injection technique manuals, etc.). So one of the program's first challenges arose in a staff meeting as we gathered around the conference table, staring at the condom packs borrowed from GALAEI's Midnight Cowboy Project—an outreach initiative for men who have sex with men (MSM). In front of us were “male” and “female” outreach packets coded blue or pink with hyperbolically gendered pictures (i.e., a muscular guy in a cowboy hat) on the label. Inside were condoms for MSM and heterosexual women or dental dams and gloves for lesbians. We knew this would not work!

The obvious challenge for TIP was how to imagine the vast (sublime) range of identities and bodies engaged by our outreach activity, identify risky sexual and injecting practices, and then create targeted, effective harm reduction messages. As a result, the “TIP Menu” emerged when Rick, one of the outreach workers, came to our second staff meeting bearing six color-coded, individually named safer sex packets and placed them on the table. Because our funding was limited, necessity became the mother of invention: ideally we should have put all the barrier methods (e.g., condoms, dental dams, latex gloves, etc.) in each packet; however, budgetary constraints meant limited usage. So, after the group brainstormed using “local” knowledge of identities, bodies and sex practices, Rick came up with a custom set of outreach materials. Calling it the “Menu,”

suggesting we could order up whatever was needed on a particular outreach excursion and customize the combination of packs. He explained:

Because the sexual health needs of our population vary on an individual basis, I have devised 6 different color-coded packs we can make and choose from, depending on where we are doing outreach and who we are doing outreach to.

We all know it's more complex than that, but it's a start.

We can pack in advance, so we'll have an idea of what we may need. For example, if doing outreach on 13th Street [a popular sex work stroll], I might need 20 Flygirls, 20 Divas, 5 Daddies, and 5 Stallions. If doing outreach at an event like Transpyre [a local trans-specific club night], I might need 10 Divas, 20 BoiScouts, 10 Daddies, 5 Stallions and 5 Sisters (Rick, 2002, italics added).

So, for example, under the “mtF Menu” is the “Diva” pack with a purple colored label and on it written: “For ladies who turn it.” Meaning, to turn a trick: sex work. Included were packing instructions for condoms and other barriers as well as label coding. Another example, under the “ftM Menu,” was the “BoiScout” imprinted with the descriptor: “Be prepared (for anything!).” This pack, of course, included the entire range of safer sex barriers.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ The complete TIP Menu packing instructions are:

mtF Menu

#01. The Fly Girl: *An outreach classic*. Face out with a hot pink mtF resource guide, backed up by a lime green TIP card. Follow up with 2 regular condoms, 1 flavored condom, and 1 lube;

#02. The Diva: *For ladies who turn it*. Face out with a purple mtF resource guide, backed up by a yellow TIP card. Follow up with 1 ‘female’ condom, 2 regular condoms, 1 flavored condom, 1 lube;

#03. The Sister: *She's got everything she needs*. Face out with a baby pink mtF resource guide backed up by a green TIP card. Follow up with 1 dental dam, 1 glove, 1 condom and 1 lube;

ftM Menu

#04. The Daddy: *He knows what's best*. Face out with a hunter green ftM resource guide, backed by a lime green TIP card. Follow up with 1 dental dam, 1 glove and 1 lube;

#05. The Stallion: For guys who want to take ‘em for a ride. Face out with a red ftM resource guide, backed up by a lime green TIP card. Follow up with 1 ‘female’ condom, 2 regular condoms, 1 flavored condom and 1 lube;

In the context of public health practices that routinely function on binary models, such as the SPSS imaginary, this *recoding* tactic was really quite brilliant. Starting with knowledge that spatial locations in the urban landscape are inhabited by people with different bodies and identities engaged in specific-local sex practices, The Menu incorporates a range of reasons people are having sex and appeals to them with targeted vernaculars: such as “Divas” doing sex work in the 13th Street corridor. The Menu also adapts and re-contextualizes codes from other, sometimes overlapping subcultures; for example the “Daddy” is colored hunter green, a signal used by practitioners of sadomasochism (S/M) to “flag” for a specific Daddy/boy dynamic in relationships.

Furthermore, the different latex barriers anticipate a variety of types that exceeds two genders, two sexes, and two genital configurations engaging in sexual practices. Instead of a choice of only two, the TIP Menu offers six combinatorial possibilities, and outreach contacts are encouraged to take as many as necessary. Each packet represents a careful recoding tactic that articulates specific bodies, identities and sexual practices—combinations often found in trans-specific social worlds but which would otherwise be largely incoherent if located elsewhere.

In his discussion of globalization and social imaginaries, Appadurai claims that “[globalization is] marked by a new role for the imagination in social life” and that, despite the way Western imaginaries act as the center of this worldwide process, “regions also imagine their own worlds” (13).⁶⁶ A similar global versus local relationship can be applied to the TIP program outreach work whereby TIP’s “regional” imaginary confronts

06. The BoiScout: *Be prepared (for anything!)*. Face out with a blue ftM resource guide, backed up by a yellow TIP card. Follow up with 1 dental dam, 1 glove, 1 regular condom, 1 flavored condom and 1 lube.

⁶⁶ Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination.”

the problem of the transgender sublime that remains simply disruptive within a global public health system that imagines itself as the center of the bio-political (categorical) universe. In a program like TIP, the excess of identities, bodies and sex practices undergo a process of re-coding—overwriting of preexisting systematized gender and sexuality codes. Drawing from peer expertise within a public health program run by people whose lives touch upon sublimity daily, recoding tactics respond to the sublime situation of “reason forced to confront its incapacity to deal rationally with the infinite.”

Yet institutions still function in normative ways using categorization and standardization procedures. For this reason, the TIP Menu relies upon classification practices while attempting to break the binary code that frames bodies, identities and desires in public health settings. As Rick says: “We all know it’s more complex than [this], but it’s a start.” These recoded outreach packs are an attempt within limit-based systems to work with and not against the transgender sublime, thus not attempting to eliminate it. In fact, the existence of the packs is actually symptomatic of the proliferative excess that often accompanies sublimity. TIP packs operate according to the “shimmering” mobile politics discussed in the last chapter: they are always in movement.

This mobility was clearly demonstrated for me a year after having resigned directorship, when I approached the TIP table at a health fair. Scanning the materials, I did not recognize the TIP packets anymore, and the staffing outreach worker explained that they obtained a grant to work with a “younger” clientele so the packs had to be reconfigured—new names, colors and brochures inside.⁶⁷ I was witnessing the politicized

⁶⁷ The newer TIP Menu consisted of: The Bangy Girl: *the future*; The Shorty is a 10: *for ladies who turn it*; The Sister: *she has everything she needs*; and The Soldier Boy: *always prepared and ready*.”

act of recoding in action. However, this was not a radical or revolutionary overturning of categorical operations within the U.S. public health system; instead, Rick and other TIP-staff members were mobilizing categorical functions, in line with the way language and signification generally works, and responding from within the system in full recognition of the categorical imperatives that drive public health work.

The TIP Menu resembles Michel de Certeau's articulation of a "tactic" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, wherein he articulates how "consumers" within capitalist systems of exchange manage to reuse aspects of the system in subversive ways toward their own ends.⁶⁸ It is not a stretch to link de Certeau's discussion of consumer culture to public health contexts in which individuals who utilize services are often identified as "consumers" and health promotion messages are "marketed" in an attempt to influence behaviors and establish "buy in." There is a definite capitalist systemic logic to public health practices that mirror the processes of consumer capitalism from which de Certeau derives his analysis.

Crucial to my discussion of TIP is de Certeau's distinction between "strategy" and "tactic." Strategies are aligned with the dominant order, are locatable (e.g., offices, headquarters) and manifest in social products (e.g., laws, rituals, commercial goods, literature, art, discourses). A strategy is relatively inflexible because it is embedded in a "proper" (*propre*) . . . spatial or institutional localization" (xix). The goal of a strategy is to perpetuate itself thus it is relatively uniform and stable, and therefore is engaged in the work of systematizing and imposing order. De Certeau claims that "every 'strategic' rationalization" is "the typical attitude of modern science, politics and military strategy"

⁶⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

(36). This “strategic attitude” is also perpetuated within the U.S. public health system through multiple techniques that include epidemiological classification practices, all designed to maximize and impose order according to what Foucault calls a “bio-political” imperative. That is, “a power bent on generating forces [lives], making them grow, and ordering them” (*HS*, 136). While this description may sound ominous and offend some well-intentioned public health workers who want to improve the conditions of trans people’s lives, this is far from a conspiratorial scenario. Rather, it is a relatively routine way for systems to operate. And yet public health systems are not impervious to the action of “tactics,” which are practiced by people who work to make a difference within strategy-oriented systems.

For de Certeau, “The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (37). Furthermore, a tactic is opposed to a strategy because its actions are fragmentary, incapable of grasping and controlling the whole, yet lacking a fixed “location” tactics are able to form swiftly according to current necessity. Necessity thus spurs a tactic into action. The outcome of a tactic is in its effect; that is, alert to its status as “weak” it does not attempt to take over a strategy or centralize itself in the form of a structure or a permanent order. Instead, according to de Certeau, a tactic:

takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ [...but is] without any base where it could stockpile its winnings [...] This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, [...] but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that [...] open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. (37)

In this way, a tactic is mobile and responds to conditions that are not of its own making. De Certeau contends that “tactical trajectories ... according to their own criteria, select fragments taken from vast ensembles of production in order to compose new stories with them” (35). The TIP Menu does precisely this: takes “fragments” of a “vast ensemble” (public health practices and gender systems) and, through recombining and recoding the elements, “compose[s] new stories with them.” The result, a multicolored story of “Divas,” “Girlfriends,” “Daddies” and “BioScouts,” is far more interesting than the blue and pink tale of Adam and Eve.

It may be a stretch to claim that the TIP program always operates according to tactics because it is so fully embedded within a public health system that sits firmly in the land of strategic maneuvers. Still, the TIP Menu is something that emerged according to a situation of “necessity” and took advantage of the moment of possibility within a system by creating a bit of a “surprise” from within. It serves as an example of how to negotiate *within* systems without becoming wholly overtaken by them. This means I am not suggesting radical anti-system politics or even outright revolution here, but instead providing a critical account of tactics used within institutional spaces that are taken from ethnographic moments encountered during my fieldwork.

I had an opportunity to engage Rick on his rationale behind the TIP Menu when I sent him a paper to review in which I had written about the TIP program. He responded with a justification that could have been lifted directly from de Certeau:

I read your paper and it got me thinking... and the next thing you know I'm scribbling on a napkin in a diner at 2AM with a busted GALAEI pen. I realize now, looking back with distance, that when I designed those packs, that necessarily both tactics and evolution (as opposed to strategy or revolution) framed my solution.

My perspective was tactical [...] because I believed the need was both immediate and concrete (much like healthcare is). The tactics required concrete action that resulted in immediate advantage. [...] Whatever needs to be done, is done, and is done now, with whatever resources are immediately available. Furthermore, any tactical solution in and of itself is negotiable, because it is subject to immediate needs, as they arise, evolve, or are expressed with finer distinction. In this way, the solution becomes *evolutionary*, not necessarily a linear-trajectory sense, but [in that] it provides a point (though not a frame) of reference to which future solutions can be related to with further complexity [...] at which point the “original” solution becomes “recycled” or “extinct,” in favor of What Works Now. My quote, “We all know it’s more complex than that, but it’s a start,” recognized this and reflected my perspective that the “solution” was only an evolutionary step, a necessary one, but subject to further modifications and possibilities.⁶⁹

The “tactical” rationale behind Rick’s politics that he calls “What Works Now” sounds quite like de Certeau’s concept of “making do.” That is, using what is available in the moment to enact a necessary effect. As de Certeau so poetically states: “Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of ‘making do’” (29). What I am proposing, born of the practical necessity to respond to the problem of the transgender sublime in U.S. public health, is that working from within the system is just as important as revolution from outside. Yet working from within is tricky business. In charting the temporary “victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong,’” de Certeau asserts that “clever tricks” become a viable tactical maneuver (xix). This art of “pulling tricks” necessitates “a sense of the opportunities afforded by a particular occasion” (37), which Rick, being a deft trickster, accomplished through the TIP Menu that temporarily disrupted rigid gender classification schemas upon which the U.S. public health system is built.

⁶⁹ According to his self-report, Rick had not read Certeau or any other critic before explaining his rationale. In a note appended to his “justification” was a final disclaimer that simply said: “I am not an expert on this and have not read any theory to back it up so I am not sure it makes sense, but maybe I should change my major (smile)?” (Email communication with Rick, 2004; email on file with Author).

As I have acknowledged throughout this chapter, “transgender” enables the aggregation of a politicized grouping of sex and gender variant individuals; at the same time, it can sometimes produce critical erasures. This puts an activist-academic such as myself in a difficult position. It means that I and we (my own imaginary envisions collaboration with others) are working to consolidate new identity formations because they are places for resources to accrue, such as funding for public health programs. At the same time we must remain resistant to the reification of bio-political power such consolidations reproduce. Nevertheless it is difficult to work within systems and always attempt to evade the totalizing power of state consolidation and territorialization that happen through seemingly benign acts of categorization and classification. This predicament necessitates that ethically and politically we always keep moving—it means we must *be* the *trans* in transgender.

CHAPTER THREE

“Sublime Mutations”: Reading Images of Trans-male Embodiment

Emblazoned on the cover of the lesbian sex magazine *On Our Backs* is the simple, yet shocking, banner: “Transsexual Nudes.” It corresponds to a groundbreaking article inside titled “How Shall I Address You? Pronouns, Pussies and Pricks—Talking to Female-to-Male Transsexuals.”¹ Included in this feature are several photographs of unclothed transsexual men and women; and next to each photo is a caption written in the voice of the person pictured. Along with this article is a short sidebar by Susan Stryker, “Looking at You Looking at Me,” wherein she provocatively interrogates the viewer’s motive for looking at these images.

Ask yourself—why do you look when we transsexuals make spectacles of ourselves? Is it the curiosity of the freak show, the same voyeuristic desire mixed with dread and titillation that makes you scan the asphalt for gobs of red as you drive slowly past the accident scene?²

Stryker’s words are accompanied by a picture of her nude, non-operative body, as she stands in a full-frontal pose, hand on hip, staring intently back into the camera. The mixture of horror, fascination and even titillation referenced in this quote suggests an element of sublimity in the exchange set up by this particular combination of image, viewer and text.

This chapter is concerned with the dynamics of embodied aesthetic perception, in particular with non-standard trans-sexed male bodies as objects of visual perception and

¹ Cherry Smith, “How Shall I Address You? Pronouns, Pussies and Pricks--Talking to Female-to-Male Transsexuals,” *On Our Backs*, February 1995.

² *Ibid.*, 21.

contemplation. My analysis draws upon the modern usage of the aesthetic as the ability to form judgments based on sense perception and not through rationality alone. I focus on representational strategies that relate to non-normative trans-sexed bodies as they can be read through the categories of the beautiful and the sublime. Visual encounters with trans-sexed embodiment occasion for a viewer the recognition of what Dick Hebdige claims, regarding sublimity, is the “limitation of language and [the] capacity to think and judge.”³ As such, I draw upon the trope of sublimity in this chapter to illustrate this representational limit as it pertains to images of trans-sexed embodiment because, in approaching this limit, there exists a potential for subjective transformation.

At the outset I admit that my analysis raises a question about the subject-object relationship that has troubled theories of sublimity for centuries: specifically, where is the sublime located? Is it in the viewer’s mind’s reaction to an overwhelming object of contemplation or is there a quality of the object itself that conditions a sublime response? Philosopher Timothy Gould provocatively argues that this subject-object relationship oscillates; he states:

[T]here is a kind of uncertainty or oscillation about the location of (the experience of) the sublime. [...] Our experience of the sublime has two poles, one of them pointing toward natural objects (or events) and one of them pointing toward a heightened activity within the mind of the judging subject. I am suggesting that it is a significant feature of the sublime, and of the judgment or experience of sublimity, that we are not always able to locate its characteristic heightening of our feelings. [...] At any given moment, however, our experience of the sublime may very well be in transition from one pole of experience to the other.⁴

³ Dick Hebdige, “The Impossible Object: Towards a Sociology of the Sublime,” *New Formations* 1 (1987): 51.

⁴ Timothy Gould, “Intensity and Its Audiences: Notes Towards A Feminist Perspective on the Kantian Sublime,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 48, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 79-80.

I emphasize Gould's theory to suggest that an experience of sublimity resides in the movement "from one pole of experience to the other." As such, I agree with Gould's conceptualization of the oscillating relationship between a perceiving subject and an object that conditions sublimity. This movement is particularly important to my analysis because, as I will argue at the end of this chapter, a subject-object relationship that oscillates requires a reading practice tailored to objects that invite perceptual movement.

To develop my theory, I explore the aesthetic strategies and conditions of representation surrounding gendered body parts, in particular images of trans-sexed genitals and trans-male⁵ pregnant bodies. My analysis centers on the discursive contexts of these images that range from the mainstream press, LGBT news magazines, Internet blogs and art photography. I begin by reading varied responses to images of, and the first-person narrative by, Thomas Beatie, a trans-sexed man who became pregnant and went public with his news. As a figure, Beatie traverses a line between the beautiful and the sublime—moving between the rhetoric of an ordinary human and an extraordinarily embodied man.

I contend the conditions of representation attending Beatie's narrative and image demonstrates what media critic Joshua Gamson calls the "*paradoxes of visibility* that talk shows dramatize with such fury: democratization through exploitation, truths wrapped in

⁵ I use this term interchangeably with female-to-male (FTM) transsexual to indicate a person assigned female at birth and raised as female, who has (or wants to) used medical technology for bodily modification. A trans-specific online dictionary defines the related term "trans man" as "an identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male transsexuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as females." See "Trans-Academics.org," n.d., <http://trans-academics.org/>.

lies, normalization through the freak show.”⁶ What we see in the figure of Beatie is the democratic urge to self-represent that exists in tension with the spectacle-driven (and freakifying) side of media representation. This paradoxical situation of positive and negative media visibility, I argue, conditions a transgender sublime.

In the second half of the chapter, I juxtapose readings of the representational politics surrounding Beatie in the mainstream press with the autobiographical narratives and self-portraits by trans-identified photographer Loren Cameron. Cameron’s portraits demonstrate a use of the aesthetic of “the beautiful” that is simultaneously a humanizing strategy and a community-based practice. I argue that despite his attempt to create beautiful, bounded, and unitary images that are easy to socially assimilate, that there is still an element of sublimity conditioned by his photographs. To address this shadow sublime, I conclude with a nude self-portrait by Cameron to propose a reading practice that entails using interpretive mobility to navigate the oscillating sublimity of visibly trans-sexed imagery.

My overall concern is with the manner by which normative schemas of intelligibility both produce and erase the visibility of trans-male embodiment in mainstream and counter-mainstream contexts. Furthermore, specific representational styles, such as the strategically beautiful or the autobiographically real, condition viscerally embodied reactions to trans-sexed visual display. By analyzing some of these common reactions such as fascination, fear, and disgust—relative to the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime—I address the affective politics that attend representations of trans-male embodiment.

⁶ Joshua Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999).

My discussion of embodiment in this chapter is positioned within the larger field of contradictions that attend all bodily representation. As feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz defines it, such embodied tenuousness is integral to the body in general. She states:

By *body* I understand a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and organization only through their physical and social inscription as surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality. The body is, so to speak, organically/biologically/naturally “incomplete”; it is indeterminate, amorphous, a series of uncoordinated potentialities which require social triggering, ordering, and long term “administration.”⁷

I follow Grosz’s assertion that the representation of bodies as coherent wholes must inevitably contend with embodied incompleteness, something that many images and linguistic constructions of normative bodies seek to overcome. Thus, the body as an object of representation appears at once certain, and yet, the indefinable quality of its inevitably incomplete materiality remains a source of unease. This is true, according to Grosz, for *any* body in terms of its inherent incompleteness that further requires “social triggering, ordering and long term administration.” As such, her theory situates bodies within the context of bio-politics, as discussed in Chapter Two, that following Foucault, concern a “power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer,

⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies-Cities,” in *Sexuality & Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 243. Elsewhere in her work Grosz exhibits transphobic logic that contradicts her excellent discussion of “the body.” For example, in *Volatile Bodies* she claims: “Men, contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live, as women. At best the transsexual can live out his fantasy of femininity – a fantasy that in itself is usually disappointed with the rather crude transformations effected by surgical and chemical intervention.” Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 207.

optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”⁸

While I agree with Grosz about bodily integrity in general, the case for non-normative bodies is both similar to and different from what I might call the ordinary organic incompleteness of normatively embodied personhood. According to theorists Susan Stryker and Nikki Sullivan, this particularity of non-normative embodiment is due to its “improper corporeality.” They further claim that

(im)proper corporealities [...] enable certain modes of bodily being, and denigrate or forecloses others. [This lead to] a new understanding of bodily *integration* [wholeness], one predicated not on the organic *integrity* of the human organism, but rather on the body’s suitability for integration, its ability *to be integrated* as a biopolitical resource into a larger sociotechnical field, or into an apparatus such as the State.⁹

In this passage, Stryker and Sullivan do not proscriptively argue that bodies *should* be integrated into the State apparatus; rather, similar to Grosz, they point out that “the ability of the body to be integrated—is thus, paradoxically, dependant on its enfleshment as always already torn, rent, incomplete and unwhole.”¹⁰ However, they go beyond Grosz’s claim by offering a “critical interrogation” of the “ways in which such legitimizing fictions as ‘integrity’ simultaneously enable certain modes or forms of bodily being, whilst denigrating or foreclosing others.”¹¹ Thus, the ability to register as a legitimate body vis-à-vis the State relies upon a form of embodiment able to perform normative—

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 137.

⁹ Nikki Sullivan and Stryker, Susan, “King’s Member, Queens Body: Transsexual Surgery, Self-Demand Amputation, and the Somatechnics of Sovereign Power,” in *Somatechnics*, ed. Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray (Farmingham: Ashgate, 2009), 50-51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

gendered, raced, classed, sexed—personhood. The fact is that some bodies are more readily integrated into the whole of the State, or more easily recognized as whole by the State. The emphasis here is on the integrative ability of *some* bodies, particularly those able to register as legitimate, and not on a general state of bodily incompleteness. As such, my contention is that non-normative bodies, unlike normative ones, encounter *more* integrative difficulty in relation to the social and the State despite the fact of all bodies being incomplete.

As is, my analysis of the representations of trans-male bodies augments studies of other non-standard bodies—e.g., dis/abled or intersexed—and further elaborates on the abstract potentiated body of which Grosz speaks. By situating trans-specific bodies both in relation to a range of biodiversity, as well as in proximity to “the [abstract] body,” trans bodies are normalized. However, in this case normalization does not mean trans-sexed bodies are normative (statistically frequent) occurrences, or even that they are centrally positioned within the social imaginary as “normal.” Rather, it means that like all bodies, they require an *analytics of representation*: this requirement alone makes trans-sexed bodies like all forms of embodiment that necessitate interpretation.

My methodology in this chapter reverses the academic trend that posits trans-specific embodiment as the limit-case example of the social construction of gender.¹²

¹² Critiques of this tendency from a trans studies perspective include Jay Prosser’s chapter “Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex,” in *Second Skins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 21-60; “‘Tragic Misreadings’: Queer Theory’s Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity,” in Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9-23. For a critique of this same impulse from within queer theory see Judith Butler’s “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 57-74.

Instead, I aim to contextualize the “incompleteness” that attends all bodies such that trans-male bodies are understood as one variation among many, but, at the same time, to argue that there is *specificity* to the conditions of their representation. That is, there is a particular analytic necessary for reading trans-sex embodiment that calls for a mobile reading practice. As such, I articulate an emergent reading strategy that requires holding seemingly incongruous registers of meaning in mind as equally plausible—such as the image of a man with a visibly pregnant abdomen.

When gender nonconforming bodies go on public display, what can be seen or not seen of “ambiguously” sexed trans male bodies, as I have said, perpetually shifts. At the end of this chapter, then, I propose a theory of reading visibly trans-sexed embodiment based on philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s concept of “shimmering” in order to address the oscillation of image and body. Such wavering or shimmering interpretive movement is an effect of self-representation in a constitutive relationship with social erasure and the limits of representation. This representational situation—predicated upon hyper-visibility *and* erasure—creates the condition for a transformative engagement with a transgender sublime: a disorienting encounter with visibly trans-sexed embodiment that unsettles familiar ways of seeing enough to enable a “new kind of subjectivity.”¹³

¹³ Adam Phillips, “Introduction,” in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), ix.

“The Pregnant Man”: Excess Embodiment and Unspeakable Bodies

When Thomas Beatie announced he was pregnant in the *Advocate*, a major U.S. national gay magazine, the startling news created an instantaneous media feeding frenzy.¹⁴ Accompanying his article “Labor of Love,” a first person account of the reasons for carrying the child (his wife was physically incapable), was an image of a man with a prominent “baby bump” standing shirtless in classic pregnancy pose: left hand, bearing a wedding ring, cradling a distended belly, with eyes gazing serenely downward. The not so classic aspects of this image included a handsomely bearded jaw line, a male-contoured chest with visible reconstruction scars, and a muscular physique. While Beatie claimed to be the first¹⁵ of his kind there have been others, some of whom became pregnant before physically transitioning from female to male, and the rest after years on testosterone resulted in extensive masculinization had ceased taking hormones to become fertile again. The unusual phenomenon of this pregnant man was not about historical precedent; rather, it was due to the extensive cultural visibility of his gravid body.

Early reports of transgender men becoming pregnant (some like Beatie after years on testosterone) began around the mid-1990s. At the time this news, which caused quite a stir, traveled among trans-specific online discussion groups and informal social networks.

¹⁴ Thomas Beatie, “Labor of Love,” *Advocate Online*, March 26, 2008, http://www.advocate.com/Society/Commentary/Labor_of_Love/.

¹⁵ It is unclear whether Beatie was aware of his pregnant trans-male predecessors. If so, his claim to be “the first” is based on his state-sanctioned gender status—legally male in Oregon—that made it possible for him to marry his wife. He made this point clear in the *Advocate*, explaining “(u)nlike those same-sex marriages, domestic partnerships, or civil unions, Nancy [his wife] and I are afforded the more than 1,100 federal rights of marriage.” This is a contingent and fragile claim to legitimacy given he might have trouble maintaining marital status if he moved out of the state of Oregon. In this article, Beatie also clarified that “sterilization is not a requirement for sex reassignment, so I decided to have chest reconstruction and testosterone therapy but kept my reproductive rights.”

Beatie, on the other hand, turned to the gay press in hopes of preempting impending media distortions by telling his story in his own words. His article in the *Advocate*, like much print media of the twenty first century that also has an online presence, assured viral dissemination leading to nearly instantaneous mainstream attention.¹⁶

Beatie's story and pictures, which appeared in *People Magazine* as well as countless local newspapers and other printed periodicals, circulated around the world; it also found its way onto a vast array of online sites: gossip blogs, new mom discussion boards, gay and lesbian news lists, and various YouTube videos. "I was shocked that it [the story] looped around the world in 24 hours," Beatie told Barbara Walters, "I mean it was on Chinese Web sites and, you know, Web sites in Romania, Russia and Brazil."¹⁷ Many media sources simply repackaged the *Advocate* content, often quoting verbatim but including little new information other than added sensationalistic language. Still other reports took the angle of questioning the veracity of the story altogether; for example, a Melbourne gay and lesbian online news site contacted one of Beatie's neighbors, who said: "Quite frankly, I think it's a hoax...I saw him a few days ago and he didn't look like that [...]. He was walking down the street with his wife, Nancy, and I don't recall seeing

¹⁶ This story seems to be the female-to-male transsexual equivalent of the Christine Jorgensen phenomenon of the 1950s, which erupted when the *Daily News* of New York City ran a front-page story of her "sex change." At the time, the news coverage made Jorgensen as tabloid noteworthy as Beatie.

¹⁷ Alan B. Goldberg and Katie N. Thomson, "Barbara Walters Exclusive: Pregnant Man Expecting Second Child," *ABC News "Health" Online*, November 13, 2008, <http://abcnews.go.com/?id=6244878&page=1>.

a belly. If that [*Advocate* photo] was a month ago, he would have been much bigger just a few days ago.”¹⁸

However, magazine, newspaper articles and Web sites were only the beginning. Beatie also appeared, often with his wife Nancy, on various television news and talk shows including NBC’s *Good Morning America*, ABC’s *20/20*, the BBC, and ultimately *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. While Beatie was first to identify himself in the *Advocate* as “a pregnant man,” after the *Oprah* episode aired he became better known as “Oprah’s pregnant man.” In fact, evolving media constructions transformed Beatie from “a” pregnant man—implying one among possible others—to “the” pregnant man, thus creating an exceptional character through manipulation of his original self-descriptive language. So what started as one man’s attempt to define himself through the media before the circus ensued, ended, unsurprisingly, by trapping him in what Gamson calls the “paradoxes of visibility” that attempt “normalization through the freak show.” Gamson goes on to argue that “there is in fact no choice here between manipulative spectacle and democratic forum, only the puzzle of a situation in which one cannot exist without the other, and the challenge of seeing clearly what this means for a society at war with its own sexual diversity.”¹⁹

¹⁸ “Pregnant Man a Hoax: Neighbour,” *MCV - Melbourne Community Voice for Gay and Lesbian Readers*, March 27, 2008, <http://mcv.gaynewsnetwork.com.au/news/pregnant-man-a-hoax-neighbour-002881.html>.

¹⁹ Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back*, 19. For a different take on the “paradoxes” of trans-specific visibility see James Green, “Look! No, Don’t! The Visibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Stephen Whittle and Stryker, Susan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 499-508. Green argues that the irony of gender transition for transsexual men is that the more successful they are at appearing as their “subjectively experienced gender” the “less interesting they tend to become to the public, and the less illustrative their lives are of the diversity of gender experience” (503).

The evidence of a “society being at war with its own sexual diversity” manifests in the varied responses to media coverage that included general condemnations of Beattie as a self-promoter, or hate mongers labeling him a “freak” and suggesting he be “shot on sight.” There were also parents concerned for the “safety” of his child and, interestingly, a few non-trans women who connected with him, not due to a shared gender identity, but because they were in the same trimester (“I know what you’re going through and hope you have a healthy baby”²⁰). A community-driven response featured trans-identified individuals expressing fear that coverage would result in all trans people being labeled “sick” or inauthentic—as if mainstream respectability had already been achieved. One notable reaction came from reporter Annalee Newitz whose article appeared in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*.²¹ She wrote:

Beattie [sic] is the first pregnant man most people will ever meet. He’s the guy in *People* magazine right now looking preggers and hunky, and the guy who was on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* last week. And it makes sense that he’s the first wonder of tranny obstetric medical science to hit the spotlight. He’s a nice, small-town Oregon boy, married for five years to a nice, small-town lady, and his full beard and muscles make it quite obvious he’s a dude. In other words: he’s not a freak from a freaky city like San Francisco. He is, as they say in the mainstream media, relatable.

²⁰ Surprisingly, there were many of posts about identification, including by a blog poster “Daisy Duck” who said: “I’m pregnant at the moment and Thomas and I seem to be roughly the same stage, so I am identifying a lot (despite being a heterosexual female).” Quoted in Hannah Tennant-Moore, “Trans Community Worries About ‘Pregnant Man’ Bad Press,” May 5, 2008, <http://www.babble.com/cs/blogs/strollerderby/archive/2008/05/05/trans-community-worries-about-pregnant-man-bad-press.aspx>.

²¹ Annalee Newitz, “San Francisco Bay Guardian,” *SF Bay Guardian Online*, n.d., <http://www.sfbg.com>. Newitz self-describes as a “tranny chaser” (i.e., someone not trans-identified attracted to someone who is trans-identified). She is likely being ironic in using this pejorative term since she clearly aligns herself as a trans-positive ally. A related term, “admirer,” is often used as a less stigmatizing variant to label someone who is not trans-identified but is attracted to people who are trans-identified or gender nonconforming. Admirer usually applies to people who prefer male-to-female objects of attraction. Finally, another more recent terminological variation is “trans(s)ensual.”

Newitz contrasted the “relatable” quality of Beatie with the example of another trans man, Matt Rice, who became pregnant almost a decade earlier. In the opening sentences of her article she clarifies that “Beatie is actually not the first man to get pregnant. Almost a decade ago [late 1990s], a San Francisco transgender man named Matt Rice got pregnant and had a cute son.” At that time, Rice, who is not heterosexual, was in a queer relationship with another in-transition (beginning hormone treatment) trans male individual. Given Beatie’s heterosexual marriage, small-town existence and rather normative appearance (pregnant belly aside) Newitz might be right to say that Rice’s situation, from a mainstream perspective, could be considered comparatively “freaky.”

Beatie walked a fine line between presenting his situation as extraordinary—calling his experience “surreal”—and very ordinary. In the *Advocate*, for example, he attempted to solicit reader identification through an appeal to universal humanism: “wanting to have a biological child is neither a male or female desire, but a human desire.” These initial attempts to normalize his embodiment through self-representation and universal identification seemed to anticipate a backlash given the “paradoxical” situation of visibility in which he found himself. As such, he made it clear that he was the baby’s father and his wife was the mother, going so far as to distance himself from the very physical condition that could invalidate his male gender identity: “I see myself as my own surrogate.”²²

This attempt to re-frame the meaning of his own embodiment—a clever move—ultimately failed to preempt vicious verbal attacks posted to message boards and blogs containing thousands of messages, including many by detractors who crassly accused

²² Beatie, “Labor of Love.”

“this bitch” of being “no real dude, just a girl who cut her tits off and then went and got pregnant. Men DON’T HAVE BABIES!”²³ This type of sentiment constitutes one side of Gamson’s “society at war with its own sexual diversity” and signals a negative defensive affect often associated with encountering the sublime. Other vitriolic commentators, such as Bobby O who registered his disgust and repulsion, claim that “[s]ociety’s not ready for this.” Bobby O goes on to say:

THERE is no polite way of saying this...the sight of the alleged “pregnant man” is enough to turn anyone’s stomach. It is simply repulsive to see a person with a beard and a man’s flat chest sporting a swollen pregnant belly. It is wrong in the most visceral way. Whether or not it’s a hoax, Beatie, aka Tracy Lagondino, is a global freak show and if there really is a baby girl involved, God help her.²⁴

According to theorist Sianne Ngai, disgust can be “boiled down to its kernel of repulsion.”²⁵ As one of the limit forms of “weak affect” Ngai considers in her “afterward on disgust,” she calls it the “ugly feeling par excellence.” She notes that disgust is “the single exception to representational arts’ otherwise unlimited power to beautify things which are ugly or displeasing in real life.”²⁶

Indeed, Kant argues of that

[t]here is only one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction, and consequently artificial beauty, viz. that which excites *disgust*. For in this singular sensation, which rests on mere imagination, the object is represented as it were obtruding for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might. And the [...] representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and thus it is impossible that it can be regarded as beautiful.²⁷

²³ Quoted in Ibid.

²⁴ Posted by “Bobby O” on March 30, 2008 in response to “Pregnant Man a Hoax: Neighbour.”

²⁵ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 335.

²⁶ Ibid., 334.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1951), 155.

Following Kant, Ngai goes on to contend that “[t]he disgusting seems to say, ‘You want me,’ imposing itself on the subject as something to be mingled with and perhaps even enjoyed.” In fact the “split between desire and disgust” destroys Kant’s necessary “disinterestedness” (and distance) upon which enjoyment of an aesthetic object depends. As such, Ngai concludes that disgust is “the ugliest of ‘ugly feelings’,”²⁸ yet it is one that, paradoxically, unlike the other affective states, does not break down the subject-object distinction. Instead disgust intensifies the split to the point of an absolute break between subject and object: disgust simply “strengthens and polices the boundary.”²⁹

This collapse of the subject-object distinction, a boundary critical to navigating a sublime encounter, can elicit a strongly negative defense reaction that creates an abject otherness out of the supposedly disgusting object. Disgust, as an other-producing form of affect, assures us that the self-same boundary of our identity remains securely intact. For example, Bobby O’s disgust and repulsion toward Beatie, symptomatic of sublimity, is supported by Ngai’s commentary that “there is a sense in which the disgusting is ‘the true Kantian sublime’—more sublime than the sublime itself.”³⁰ I contend that encounters with non-normative embodiment like a pregnant man, then, threaten some normatively embodied perceivers so deeply because the viewer’s body and sense of self—or any comprehensible combination of sex, gender and pregnant body—are not reflected back. In the case of Bobby O, it is the sight as well as the *idea* of a pregnant (trans) man that provokes a reactionary disgust-driven disidentification.

²⁸ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 335.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 334.

In this way, the boundary between self and other is rendered solid through the negative defensive affect of disgust. And the sight and the idea of a pregnant (trans) man seems to necessitate a strong disidentification that simultaneously de-genders and dehumanizes Beatie as a freak. Expressing the affective response of disgust reinforces the difference between the self (Bobby O) and the other (Beatie). And this affect-driven dynamic functions to clearly defend the boundary separating the “me” from the “not me.” While disgust is an extreme means of disidentification, this dynamic is generally how identity formation occurs through establishing an inviolable self and other boundary.

Instead of being disgusted, however, in her *Chronicle* article Newitz reveals the other side of the war on sexual diversity as she criticizes Beatie for being too normal.³¹ Newitz focuses her political critique on Beatie’s gender-normative appearance and then dismisses his demeanor as predictably palatable for mainstream audiences. From her freak-positive perspective, his inarticulate affect simply seems suspiciously stereotypical.

He’s playing his poster boy role perfectly. On *Oprah*, you could tell he was a friendly shy person [...] visibly nervous, obviously proud as hell of his wife and soon-to-be-born daughter, he didn’t try to make a political statement or lecture anybody about gender binaries being stupid. He had a hard time explaining why he had become a man, too. Often when Oprah asked pointed questions he would shrug and say, “It’s hard to explain.” *Exactly like a dude to be sort of inarticulate about his own dudeness*. So another part of his appeal to the mainstream media is that he fits gender stereotypes (italics added).³²

³¹ Newitz used the accusation of normality as the basis of her political critique. However, transgender advocacy strategists, not surprisingly, mobilized discourses of the normal in an attempt to defuse the possible retrograde political repercussions of this story. For example, Mara Keisling, the director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, was quoted in *The New York Times* online, saying: “This is just a neat human-interest story about a particular couple using the reproductive capabilities they have [...] there’s really nothing remarkable [about the Beatie pregnancy].” Quoted in Guy Trebay, “He’s Pregnant. You’re Speechless,” *New York Times Online*, June 22, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/fashion/22pregnant.html?_r=2.

³² Newitz, “San Francisco Bay Guardian.”

Heteronormative rhetoric is certainly evident in Beatie's self-expression and demeanor. However, his inability to articulate the meaning of his gender identity and embodiment, what Newitz identifies as symptomatic of his "dudeness," is not necessarily what it seems on the surface. From another perspective, Beatie's inarticulate affect could be indicative of the inability to describe the indescribable through the use of existing language and categories. Socially speaking, he is simply rendered speechless.³³ My reading of Beatie is substantiated by the fact that he called his experience of pregnancy "surreal," suggesting his situation was an unrepresentable (even to himself) condition of embodiment. This observation leads to a central claim of my chapter: that sublime inexplicability extends beyond one pregnant man's body and points towards the ineffable, something manifest in the condition of "being without words."

While the pregnant man may be without language adequate to describe his indescribable condition, it is not only Beatie who finds difficulty putting the unfathomable into words. His speechlessness was mirrored in an article from the *New York Times* aptly titled: "He's Pregnant, You're Speechless."³⁴ This article offers an index of a moment in time, a snapshot of contemporary institutional media and mass cultural discourses. The "you're" of the headline interpellates readers who find Beatie's pregnant body shocking beyond words. By drawing upon discourses of the spectacular,

³³ For an insightful philosophical account of the connection between the sublime and inexpressibility, see Gould, "Intensity and Its Audiences." Gould draws upon Eve Sedgwick's work on Charlotte Bronte and Emily Dickinson wherein she argues that just as the sublime needs a sort of "preparation," it also needs an "aftermath," an avenue for expression. Gould "follow[s] Sedgwick in thinking that the very intensity of the sublime contains in it the wish to communicate that experience to others" (75). However, the overwhelming intensity of the sublime may be unspeakable and/or unrepresentable during and as an after-effect of an experience.

³⁴ Trebay, "He's Pregnant. You're Speechless."

the *Times* reporter, Guy Trebay, claims that images of Beatie “were hard to look away from.” Trebay goes on to say that Beatie’s trans-sexed pregnant display was “[p]artly a carnival sideshow and partly a glimpse of shifting sexual tectonics” that makes “poignantly clear [...] there is no good language yet to discuss his situation, [lacking] words like an all-purpose pronoun to describe an idea as complex as a pregnant man.”

On the other hand, the *Advocated* verified that there *is* a pronoun for *this* pregnant man: he. So the *Times* coverage, by claiming that language is lacking, reveals the insidious manner by which mainstream media constructs non-normatively embodied subjects as unrepresentable in contrast to the assumed, yet unseen, “normal” reading public. This move to define the normal through a focus on exceptional characters finds its corollary in nineteenth-century circus sideshows. Critic Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s influential work in disability studies—a field centered on critiques of the way “normal” bodies are constructed against non-normative embodiment—notes that “[f]reak discourse did not vanish with the shows, but proliferated into a variety of contemporary discourses that still allude to its premises.”³⁵ As such, the representational politics that attend Beatie’s image in the mainstream media could be read as contemporary “freak” discourse that alludes to this earlier time.

Thomson elaborates on the productive function of the freak show by claiming it

³⁵ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Introduction: From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 13. The field of disability studies informs trans studies since it focuses on relationships of power and privilege related to the discursive construction of non-normative embodiment as the fictional “other” to an constructed norm. It provides an analytic framework through which to think about bodies of all kinds, rather than focusing on non-normative bodies and their disability, disease or supposedly inherent otherness. A brilliant poetic-political memoir that brings together trans-identity and issues of disability is Eli Clare, *Exile & Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2009).

made more than freaks: it fashioned as well the self-governed, the iterable subject of democracy—the American cultural self. [...] A freak show's cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text against which the viewer's indistinguishable body fades into a seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will, suitable to the uniform abstract citizenry democracy institutes.³⁶

Thompson calls this process “enfreakment,” the making of non-standard embodiment into a “freaky” condition that then establishes the ground for a “privileged state of disembodiment” that “normate” spectators of the show inhabited.³⁷ The *Times*, like other mainstream media, similarly ensured the disembodied normality of their readership by focusing on the abnormal embodiment of the story's subject. And the unspeakability of trans-male pregnant embodiment was shored up by the journalistic claim that language does not exist “to describe an idea as complex as a pregnant man.”³⁸ In doing so, the *Times* effectively constructed a uniformly embodied and gendered “abstract citizenry” on the back, or belly, of the unspeakable and unspoken body of a/the pregnant man. This abstract reader, an imaginary identification with all too real social consequences, allows anyone taking it up to remain un-marked. By establishing a “normate” subject position—against the hyper-visible “freak” body—readers of the times are thus able to remain unaware of a normative gaze that exempts them from similarly harsh media scrutiny.

³⁶ Thomson, *Freakery*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁸ While Beatie uses male pronouns, hybrid versions are also used in trans-specific and gender nonconforming social worlds. Some people use the neologism “hir” (which blends “her/his” or “her/him”), others replace “she/he” with “zie” (or “sie”), and still others use the barely pronounceable “s/he” (shuh-hee). This is a subterranean language that has yet to surface fully in mainstream publications. In fact, while *The Associated Press Stylebook* has changed its policy as a result of community advocacy and started redirecting those searching entries on “sex changes” and “transsexuals” to the more inclusive term “transgender,” it probably will not include hybrid pronouns anytime soon.

Although Beatie's identity and embodiment were discursively positioned as unspeakable in the mainstream media, this framing does not fully account for his own speechlessness. I would argue, contrary to Newitz's dismissive observation, that his inarticulate self-presentation could easily be read as symptomatic of the inability to comprehend his own sublime condition. This leads, somewhat ingeniously, to Beatie naming himself as his own surrogate, a self-distancing strategy that enables him to conceptually contain the vast incomprehensibility of being a pregnant man.

Beatie's situation, I suggest, evinces an individual falling into the paradoxical trap of (in)visibility at the edge of (self)representation, while attempting, perhaps in vain, to control the meaning of his own embodiment. He does so by mobilizing a media-driven "normalization through the freak show," even as the meaning and articulation of his embodiment remains ever elusive. As such, he figures himself and is figured by the alternating rhetoric of an ordinary human and an extraordinarily embodied man. In the end, Beatie simply remains a highly visible, yet unspeakable (but obsessively spoken about), subject.

Contrary to Newitz, I argue that Beatie's "dudeness" is not only heteronormative recapitulation through the affect of stereotypical masculinity. It is also an attempt to mitigate the social contradictions that transect and dissect gender non-conforming bodies in mainstream spaces. Thus, this is not simply the story of a pregnant man's inability to articulate his own "dudeness"; it is also exemplary of excess without language, or what George Hartley identifies as "the failure of representation to define its outer limits."³⁹ In this way, speechlessness extends beyond one pregnant man's body and points toward the

³⁹ George Hartley, *The Abyss of Representation: Marxism and the Postmodern Sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 34.

ineffable, as that which exceeds representation. The representational situation of Beatie, as “the pregnant man,” thus manifests in the condition of being without words.

Representational failure is inherent in the situation Beatie finds himself, submerged in the paradoxes of (in)visibility with no way to communicate—using a publicly available language—the truly excessive and unspeakable aspects of his identity and embodiment. This points toward the failure of language to create a connection across the seemingly unbridgeable chasm that separates the normal from the abnormal, the universal from the particular, and the public from the private. However, I want to emphasize that the issue of speechlessness regarding Beatie’s embodiment hinges upon the *image* itself. That is, the image of a pregnant man seems to render so many people speechless, but in actuality it precipitates an excess of speech about the meaning of his embodiment. As such, I argue that “the pregnant man” occasions an incitement to discourse about how the sight of a pregnant man renders viewers speechless. Such speechlessness is symptomatic of a cognitive overload response to a representational limit that signals a transgender sublime. And speech, in this case, means the discursive activity that pertains to images of trans-male pregnancy, and, at the same time, the lack of information exchanged across different discursive boundaries that attend this image. Simply put, much is being said but very little is communicated in this discursive flurry.

In terms of the sublime, “magnitude” in classic theories of sublimity refers to the proportion and size of natural objects. However, Beatie is not literally so vast as a mountain, and yet in the social imaginary the *idea* of a pregnant man looms quite large. In his introduction to *Enquiry*, editor Adam Phillips claims that Burke, in his obsession with the size and the extent of things, confronted similar problems with ideas and

magnitude. For example, Burke observes that “an excess of implication could be paralyzing”⁴⁰ and that “classification is immediately threatened by abundance.”⁴¹ Thus, the overwhelming proportion of an idea and the associated lack of classificatory language are intimately entwined with imagination and excess. This suggests the idea of a pregnant man is too excessive to imagine and thus to categorically contain. Or, quoting Hebdige again, the pregnant man as the “absolute Other” of mainstream signification provides the occasion for “reason [...] to confront its incapacity to deal rationally with the infinite.”⁴² What my analysis of the representational conditions of trans-male pregnancy reveals is that this is really the story of excess without language—not simply a lack of words, as the *Times* suggests—and the failure of representation to define its outer limits with regard to visibly trans-sexed otherness.

Loren Cameron’s Strategy of “The Beautiful”

The paradoxes and representational limits that surround images of Beatie in the mainstream media are common to the representation of trans-sexed bodies and identities in general. And photography is a medium of cultural production where the sight of embodied trans-male difference is negotiated, thus photographs provide fertile ground for an exploration of the politics of (un)representability. To further pursue this line of inquiry, I turn to artistic photographic images by Loren Cameron. I look, in particular, at his self-portraits that play out similar complications to those I have been discussing relative to mainstream representations of Beatie. However, Cameron’s images, often

⁴⁰ Phillips, “Introduction,” xviii.

⁴¹ Ibid., xx.

⁴² Hebdige, “The Impossible Object,” 51.

accompanied by his autobiographical text, circulate in small-press print networks, trans-specific community venues and one-person art shows instead of the mainstream media.

Cameron's photographic studies of himself and other transsexual men are described by writer-biographer Diane Middlebrook as "[a]n irreplaceably valued documentation of a cultural moment."⁴³ As an artist who began his career recording his transition from female to male, Cameron has created a simultaneously personal, political and historical document. He did so at a time in the United States, the early 1990s, when increased access to medical technology and the availability of photographic technology combined to make these photographs possible. Cameron's documentary impulse to produce images substantiates Susan Sontag's claim in *On Photography* about photography's "democratizing" effect. Following Sontag, Cameron's use of the photographic apparatus and his will to represent transitioning "carried out the promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: to democratize all experiences by translating them into images."⁴⁴

The biography on Cameron's Web site describes his own "democratizing" impulse to make imagery more explicitly.

What was initially a crude documentation of my own personal journey quickly evolved into an impassioned mission. Impulsively, I began photographing other transsexuals that I knew, feeling compelled to make images of their emotional and physical triumphs. I was fueled by my need to be validated and wanted, in turn to validate them. I wanted the world to see us, I mean, really see us.⁴⁵

⁴³ This comment is quoted from the back cover of *Body Alchemy*.

⁴⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 7.

⁴⁵ Loren Cameron, "Online Alchemy: Biography," n.d., <http://lorencameron.com/home.html>.

By wanting to be validated, and to validate others, Cameron seized the technology and exploited the democratizing effect of the photographic medium to say: *These bodies—often rendered monstrous, pathological or freaky—are beautiful*. In fact, Cameron often employs “the beautiful” as an aesthetic strategy to resist cultural erasure and invisibility. His self-portraits, in particular the nudes, demonstrate a purposeful use of aesthetic conventions pertaining to “the beautiful,” a category of perception that Hebdige identifies as foundational to “the birth of formal aesthetics in the Enlightenment when the categories of the Sublime and the Beautiful were first used to differentiate the varieties of aesthetic experience.”⁴⁶ However, unlike the boundlessness of the sublime, the beautiful is characterized by limitation that, according to Hebdige, is in a “work of art, [...] like an organism—a unity surrounding a manifold of perception: a totality which is more than the sum of its parts.”⁴⁷ This totalizing perceptive manifold renders the potentially sublime object familiar. In this way, the “strange” body is turned into a familiar (beautiful) image that can facilitate the assimilation of radically embodied difference that otherwise exceeds the frame of culturally available meaning and interpretative analysis.

The image from *Body Alchemy*, Cameron’s seminal collection of photographs, best exemplifying “the beautiful” is from a triptych titled “God’s Will” [Fig. 13].⁴⁸ It is typical of Cameron’s portraiture and also emblematic, taken from the anthology’s cover and reproduced everywhere. In this image, Cameron presents a unified portrait of physical beauty: his body is held in a classic bodybuilding physique pose, framed by an empty, black, negative space. The stark relief creates an impression of a living Greek

⁴⁶ Hebdige, “The Impossible Object,” 47-48.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁸ Loren Cameron, *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1996), 27.

statue. While aestheticians often suggest beauty is feminine, best exemplified by the soft and rounded quality of the “female form,”⁴⁹ Cameron’s body is unmistakably masculine, as hard sculptural lines define his physical form. If one looks past the subject’s physical contours to the overall aesthetic composition, however, one finds an image not only regarded as conventionally attractive, but one which supports notions of “unity” and “totality” central to nineteenth-century European aesthetics. In this case, the beautiful enables the images to be apprehended in total, like a framed painting whereby the frame simultaneously draws attention to and then contains the subject within.

Cameron inscribes his assertion of control by revealing the shutter release bulb in his left hand while injecting body-modifying testosterone with a syringe held in his right hand. It is provocatively self-representational image that simultaneously connects the material and aesthetic manipulation of his body. In this way, Cameron mobilizes one aspect of the “paradoxes of visibility,” the side that presumably puts him in charge of his own image and self-presentation.⁵⁰ This visual strategy recasts the sense of sacrality and power typically associated with the concept of God as an expression of self-actualization and self-determination, rather than as subjection to an inscrutable external force. While Cameron could be seen as merely a product of medical and/or media intervention—or even invention—this self-portrait suggests he is an agent responsible for his own embodiment and image. Yet this type of agency is not simply about being in control of

⁴⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ Cameron substantiates this as his intent, explaining, “People have asked me why I don’t conceal the bulb in the photographs. [...] I don’t really mind that the bulb is visible. Its presence serves as a metaphor: I am creating my own image alone, an act that reflects the transsexual experience as well.” *Body Alchemy*, 11.

oneself; rather, it hinges upon Cameron's act of self-fashioning as a manipulation of form: this is a politicized aesthetic act.

The God referred to by "thy *will* be done" is none other than the trans-sexed photographer himself. In this sense, "God's Will" does not invoke sublimity—the ineffable quality of God—since the God of this image is not a transcendental figure, but rather, a fully embodied human. This upturning of religious transcendence is substantiated by the formal structure of the series. Specifically, the triptych form arises in early Christian art as a standard popular format for altar paintings from the Middle Ages onward. This further emphasizes Cameron's purposeful subversion of religious codes. At the same time, Cameron's self-portrait also draws upon the representational semiotics of body-building magazines through use of chiaroscuro lighting, an effect that starkly contrasts light and dark to cast deep shadows and create a highly defined, sculptural surface effect.⁵¹ This technique, in addition to the classic physique pose, enhances the visual appearance of his musculature. However, even as it plays on conventions of the beautiful, the image additionally evokes a complicated excess of signification: caught in a polarized field of light and dark, Cameron's form is intersected by, yet resists, a simple aesthetic dichotomy because it does not correspond to a gender identity or embodiment that is reducible to familiar social binaries.

So despite some resistance, or delay, in being read as a normative body-beautiful, the representational result is an idealized masculinity showing a person attempting to be read on his own terms: the syringe and shutter release signifying Cameron's power to fix (normalize and stabilize) his image and self. In other images from this triptych series he

⁵¹ It is interesting to note that film noir uses similar lighting techniques commonly regarded by film theorists to represent both beauty and danger.

holds a barbell in one hand and a scalpel in the other. All of these codes—bodybuilding, hormones and surgery—reference specific technologies of transformation and self-determination that foreground the constructed aspect of the body pictured and the prosthetic possibility inherent in visual re-presentation. In this regard, trans studies critic Jordy Jones goes as far as to claim, “[p]hotography here is actually a kind of bodybuilding, which is both a kind of and part of transition. Cameron is doing the same thing through different media: he makes himself a man with the hormones and surgery and exercise and documentation.”⁵²

As noted, many images in *Body Alchemy* are accompanied by autobiographical quotes and explanatory text. While mainstream autobiographical representations of trans-male individuals like Beatie are often flattened into stereotypes and emptied of subjective content, or are caught in the unspeakable paradoxes of representation, Cameron’s images are frequently accompanied by articulate self-reflective commentary. While photographic captions and explanatory text often appear to be subordinate to a photographic image, in Cameron’s work this voice is integral to a representational strategy that didactically guides the viewer’s gaze. Along these lines, visual critic William Mitchell states that

if an image follows the conventions of photography and seems internally coherent, if the visual evidence that it presents supports the caption, and if we can confirm that this visual evidence is consistent with other things that we accept as knowledge within the framework of the relevant discourse, then we feel justified in the attitude that seeing is believing.⁵³

In the case of Cameron’s work, the “visual evidence” does not so much “support” the caption because the caption enacts a reversal. That is, the text inverts the primacy of the

⁵² Jordy Jones, “Flex, Rex and Mister: Loren Cameron’s Transhomosex Texts,” in *The Art of Queering in Art*, ed. Henry Rogers (Birmingham: Article Press, 2007), 12.

⁵³ William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 50.

visual by critically commenting on the operation of a normatively structured and structuring gaze. In Cameron's work, then, "seeing" is not simply "believing."

While photosensitive emulsion-on-paper is widely accepted as having an unmediated and direct relationship to the referent, this is challenged by Cameron's photographs, which utilize a critical voice-over strategy. The photographic voice makes visible the usually seamless representational conventions that are integral to photographic portraiture and aesthetic realism. It unmaskes epistemological truth-making practices and, at the same time, draws attention to the representational excess attending trans-sexed and gender non-conforming bodies. In this way, viewers are directed to read the pictured body differently; by subverting a normatively structured gaze, the autobiographical voice demands that the textual subjectivity of the person pictured partially guide the reading. This voice-over technique not only draws attention to the act of looking, it prompts a viewer to become self-conscious about their *particular* way of looking. As trans studies critic Jay Prosser claims in relation to Cameron's work: "[w]e can only look at the transsexual, then, if we look at how we look."⁵⁴

But many of Cameron's images and text are not presented as triumphant moments of embodiment and subjective experience. As such, he often explores the underside of Gamson's "paradoxes of visibility." An example of this negative side of visibility is "Carney" [Fig. 14], another self-portrait from *Body Alchemy* that is accompanied by autobiographical text.⁵⁵ Through the textual voice, Cameron reveals his *ambivalence* about being in front of the camera by including a narrative of self-doubt and shame.

⁵⁴ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 230.

⁵⁵ Carney from "Self-portraits" series from Cameron, *Body Alchemy*, 14.

Every time I tell someone I am transsexual, I have a turbulent series of emotions. At first, I am afraid that whomever I'm telling will have a negative response, that they will somehow be repelled and become hostile or in some way reject me. [...] But then, if I've been given a positive reception, I begin to spill it all with myopic enthusiasm, answering every question, which always encourages another. People are naturally curious, and some have a real need to know. By revealing myself, I have consensually invited their voyeurism; they can't help but watch as I make a spectacle of myself [...] In the end, when I have spilled my guts or exhausted their interest, I begin to retreat a little. A grayness falls over me, and I realize that I feel unsafe. I feel naked. Self-doubt starts to poke holes in my ego, and I begin to think I have exploited myself. I am ashamed of my exhibitionism. I promise myself not to tell anyone ever again.⁵⁶

The voice in this passage is self-reflexive and addresses the conditions of visibility that constitute the normative gaze of the seer and the on-display status of the seen. The gaze here is unidirectional: Cameron is on display but is not the one doing the looking. There is also an element of excess and exhaustion inherent in his condition of being seen such that it goes too far and he “spills his guts”—a purging—while subsequently “exhaust[ing] the viewers’ interest.” This exhausted situation is echoed in to a tortured tone of ambivalence that characterizes Cameron’s work. This is in part because he has no way to be seen strictly on his own terms—existing as he does within a mainstream social context where, like Beatie, his embodiment and identity are rendered culturally unintelligible.

I think it is too simplistic to say that Cameron’s work is about a subject in complete control of his self-representation and creates beautiful images in order to make his difference desirable. In this way, the conditions of representation that attend images and narratives of “the pregnant man” in the mainstream media relate to Cameron’s imagery. That is, Cameron’s use of “the beautiful” cannot resist the unidirectional gaze and representational excess that attends his trans-sexed embodiment. Furthermore, as I noted in the introduction to this chapter, according to Grosz all bodies are ultimately not

⁵⁶ Ibid., 15.

whole or complete. Yet, as Stryker and Sullivan point out, trans-sexed physicality renders some bodies more vulnerable to visual policing and social marginalization or non-integration. In this way, Cameron's image and text together suggest that his ambivalence is socially located, in addition to being subjectively embodied and experienced.

As such, relative to the mainstream media, and in response to a normatively structured gaze, trans-sexed embodiment, subjectivity and authority are always already undercut. This social condition of representation leads to both internal (psychic) and external (social or spatial) ambivalence: quite literally, two valences—affirmative and negative, or visible and invisible—are in operation at the same time. In the end, such a doubled and conflicted predicament allows the trans-sexed subject a very circumscribed discursive space. Instead of reducing social stigma by providing a beautiful image for easy consumption then, Cameron's photographs enact the doubled condition of a nonstandard body sighted within the paradoxical circumstance of social (in)visibility.

In *Vision and Difference*, Griselda Pollack writes about this relationship between gender and social space through her analysis of nineteenth century women painters. She argues that the aesthetic distinctiveness of their work from that of male artists was not a matter of biologically based sexual difference, but rather, was created by a rigidly class stratified and gendered social structure. She observes that women artists were confined to working in "spaces of femininity," thus they depicted subjects in drawing rooms and private gardens, whereas men painted figures in bars and brothels. For Pollack, such differences in particular ways of seeing and representing were in fact "the product of a lived sense of social locatedness, mobility and visibility, in the relations of seeing and

being seen.”⁵⁷ She goes on to note that gendered social spaces, because they are shaped “within the sexual politics of looking,” demarcate a “particular social organization of the gaze,” that “secure[s] a particular social ordering of sexual difference. Femininity is both the condition and the effect.”⁵⁸

To the extent that gender and a “particular social organization of the gaze” are mutually constitutive, Pollack’s argument about subjectivity, artistic production, and space can be applied to another Cameron self-portrait, “Distortions” [Fig. 15].⁵⁹ In this image, Cameron is literally framed or boxed in, like a criminal or a caged animal, by transphobic discourses. Cameron appears with a hand held to one side of his head and wears a look of pained consternation. He is ringed by contradictory statements such as “Sorry, but I don’t like men,” followed by “You’re not a man – you’ll never shoot sperm.” The textual frame suggests that social erasure is, in Pollock’s terms, both the “condition and the effect” of his existence.

As an image literally circumscribed by transphobic discourses, the frame of this photograph functions contrary to the bounded unity associated with “the beautiful.” That is, whereas “the beautiful” typically makes difference easier to assimilate, this series of framing accusations narrates subjectivity under erasure. It exemplifies the undercutting of any viable discursive or social position that Cameron might occupy. So instead of

⁵⁷ G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 66. Pollack discusses “the conventions of geometric perspective which had normally governed the representation of space in European painting since the fifteenth century,” saying, “this mathematically calculated system of projection had aided painters in the representation of a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface by organizing objects in relation to each other to produce a notional and singular position from which the scene is intelligible. It establishes the viewer as both absent from and indeed independent of the scene while being its mastering eye/I” (64).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Image #3 from Distortions triptych in Cameron, *Body Alchemy*, 31.

enabling the integration of difference, this combination of image and text performs the opposite: disintegration and dislocation. The non-locatable aspect of Cameron's body-identity-image is highlighted by the final poignant phrase "You don't belong here."⁶⁰ Presumably "here" is where a normative-bodied person belongs if they inhabit the right anatomical form and normative identity category. However, "here" is not a stable location in either a discursive or embodied sense for Cameron.

As I have argued, these images engage the aesthetics of the beautiful and are intended to create a humanizing effect of representation. Alternately, they work against the beautiful by foregrounding the frame, thus drawing attention their conditions of production and reception. Still other times, the images gesture beyond the frame through the inclusion of social commentary such as the text that encloses "Distortions." Taken together, this range of representational styles reveals Cameron's photographs to be as mediated, constructed and codified as any other. However, they do offer a glimpse of social stigma from a subjective and spatial, that is, an embodied perspective.

To represent subjectively embodied stigma, Cameron uses aesthetic strategies—schemas of intelligibility—that establish a located subjectivity. This embodied-subjective locatedness relates to what philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls a "body-space." He states,

Bodies are not 'full' of filled space (space is always full): they are *open* space, that is to say in one sense, space that is properly *spacious* rather than spatial, or that which one could perhaps call *place*. Bodies are places of existence, and there is no existence without place, without *there*, without a 'here', a 'here it is' [voici] for the *this* [ceci].⁶¹

Subjectivity in this case is situated less in a body conceived as an object and more as a body-as-space that lends itself to a sense of both location and dislocation: here *and* there

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 16.

are temporarily together in one body-space. In this way, Cameron's work does not naïvely present celebratory images that promise embodiment plus visibility equals intelligibility; rather, he restages the visual and narrative ambivalence constitutive of a person trapped not simply in the wrong body (here), but in the wrong cultural context (there). The claim that Cameron does not "belong here" further emphasizes the (not)-at-home quality of his embodied subjectivity as a spatially constituted nexus where self-representation and mainstream discourses oscillate and sometimes collide.

Through his series of photographs, Cameron's body of work *performs* the condition of discursive unspeakability and visual unrepresentability that exists in tension with the desire to self-represent. It does so by engaging multiple sides of the "paradoxes of visibility." However, this attempt on the part of Cameron, who inhabits (and bares) a largely unintelligible body, is fraught with complexity. This is because embodied difference as trans-sexed marks him such that sublimity is his perpetual shadow. Despite his attempted command of the technologies of image, embodiment and gaze, something remains intractably beyond his aesthetic control. In Cameron's work, physical ambiguity and the imperative to signify coherently intersect at the sight of a visually trans-sexed body. Thus, while Cameron attempts to utilize the aesthetic strategies of an idealized beauty and a humanizing autobiographical narrative to ward off sublimity, the collision between non-normative embodiment and the necessity to appear coherently embodied establish the condition for a transgender sublime to emerge. I turn to a final nude self-portrait by Cameron in order to substantiate my claim.

In this photograph, “Mister,” Cameron is seen presenting another paradigmatic bodybuilding pose: a full-frontal double bicep stance [Fig. 16].⁶² He stares slightly upward and away from the camera, presenting a determined visage in profile. Tattooed flame-like stripes on his forearms, chest and thighs make him appear like an unfamiliar, exotic animal.⁶³ With his arms raised one can see the faint trace of surgery scars at the base of his pectorals. Despite the fact that Cameron mobilizes aesthetic codes of “the beautiful,” and sometimes uses a didactic autobiographical voice-over subversively, in this image the trans-sexed body with its unclothed and transfigured flesh is a precondition for sublimity.

Notably, we see Cameron’s genitals and they are not, if viewed through a normatively structured gaze, what is anticipated; something appears to be missing—his penis. While there are plenty of potentially interesting body codes to interpret, the eye that is trained by a normatively structured gaze is drawn to where visual expectation is *not* fulfilled. In this way, visual pleasure is thwarted and the aesthetic effect of the beautiful fails to fulfill its promise to present a unified, coherent, image. Quite simply, this is not the picture of the human form that most viewers expect to see.

While many scholars have commented on this photograph, the elements just described—tattoos, muscles, facial expression, scars and pose—although noted by critics,

⁶² Loren Cameron, “Untitled Self Portrait,” *On Our Backs*, February 1995, 18. Critics Stephen Whittle and Jay Prosser cite this photograph in their work as having a 1993 publication/copyright date, however, I have not been able to locate a 1993 version of this image.

⁶³ “Manx” is one of Cameron’s early fantasy monikers and refers to a breed of cat that originated before the 1700s on the Isle of Man. Most relevant to the “Where is it?” response to Cameron’s body-genitals is the fact that this cat has a naturally occurring mutation of the spine that results in only a “stub” of a tail; in some cases, a Manx can even be tailless.

seem insignificant as everyone eventually zeroes in on the genitals. There is an intense fascination with this aspect of Cameron's nude self-portraits such that even theorists who are trans-identified focus much of their critical attention on the meaning of this region of his body. This is the location of embodiment seemingly most incongruous with the masculinity portrayed; it also remains the place in the image most resistant to a consensus of interpretation. This supposed lacunae in the image appears as a jarring disjuncture and occasion for reactions such as fascination, confusion, disgust, fear or even horror.

This fixation on Cameron's full-frontal nudes, especially with what is or is not there genitally, is an effect of the system of representation that is as symptomatic of sublimity. As such, interpretations of this photograph vary widely and, through these competing ways of looking, a representational *crisis* ensues around where Cameron's genitals are or are not located and what exactly they signify. For example, trans-theorist Bobby Noble, writing of a Cameron nude self-portrait in *Body Alchemy*, uses the descriptive frames of "incoherence" and "incongruity" to describe his genital region in the photograph. He claims that Cameron's "body signifies masculinity: chiseled face, developed musculature, absence of breasts, hair across his belly and upper thighs, and pubic area. But where one might expect to see a penis, one sees only pubic hair and shadow. This is incongruity writ large."⁶⁴ Alternately, non-trans critic Melanie Taylor sees "visual dissonance" in a similar image from "God's Will" wherein Cameron wields

⁶⁴ From "Conclusion: Archive of Post-Queer, Incoherent Bodies," in Jean Bobby Noble, *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2006), 129.

a scalpel, thus “invok[ing] ‘castration’ models.”⁶⁵ Taylor ends up categorizing this place on his body “female genitalia.”⁶⁶

Another bold interpretation is proposed by trans-identified theorist Stephen Whittle, who describes the double-bicep flex photo [Fig. 4] as that in which “Cameron becomes the human fucking penis.”⁶⁷ Whittle elaborates:

We see in him the female signifier of ‘lack’, yet in his case the meaning of ‘lack’ is meaningless: he chooses not to wear a phallus because that would not be him, he is without ‘lack’. He has a gender through himself and because of himself.[...] Cameron does not ‘gender blend’, instead he escapes gender because it can no longer be imposed by the observer as the boundaries keep moving.⁶⁸

Whittle’s assertion in this passage builds upon Marcia Ian’s analysis whereby she suggests that the body itself is drag, a fact starkly demonstrated through the physical excess of bodybuilding, which results in “the tightest fitting bodysuit imaginable, a suit made of veins and translucent skin that looks like the inside worn on the outside.”⁶⁹ This body, she provocatively argues, is intended “to look as much like a giant erection as possible [...] a human fucking penis.”⁷⁰ Ian goes further by linking bodybuilding to sublimity, saying that “[b]odybuilding is about the body’s self-loathing, its horror at its own repulsive beauty, and is therefore sublime.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ Melanie Taylor, “Changing the Subject: Transgender Consciousness and the 1920s,” 2000, 187.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 191.

⁶⁷ Stephen Whittle, “Gender fucking or fucking gender? Current cultural contributions to theories of gender blending,” in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, ed. Richard Ekins and Dave King (London: Routledge, 2007), 214.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Marcia Ian, “How Do You Wear Your Body: Bodybuilding and the Sublimity of Drag,” in *Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects*, ed. Monica Dorenkamp and Richard Henke (New York: Routledge, 1994), 83.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁷¹ Ibid., 72.

Ian locates this notion of sublimity in the body or in one's relationship to embodiment, but I also include the social *situation* that creates the conditions for a sublime encounter. As such, my reading of Cameron's photograph from "Distortions" provides an example of the social conditions of intelligibility that affect the spatial and discursive placement and displacement of a trans-sexed subject. This is relevant to my earlier discussion of Gould's theory that the subject-object relationship "oscillates" in sublime encounters. Sublimity, then, is not simply in the mind of the perceiver; rather, it alternates between a trans-sexed body, social space, and discursive situation that together condition an affective response to a transgender sublime.

While Taylor simply sutures Cameron's genitals to an original sex (female), Whittle alternately renders sex irrelevant by arguing that Cameron "escapes gender" altogether. Instead, he asserts that the only meaning that matters derives from the body-space itself. For Whittle, Cameron possesses a power to self-authorize to the extent that the genital region does not make the man, but rather, the man makes the genitals. However, I suggest that both of these readings of sex, gender and genitals demonstrate how theorists use rationality as a shield against an encroaching sublime and the problems of interpretation that inevitably follow.

What is most interesting to me about Whittle's proposition is the claim that the "boundaries keep moving." While it is unclear what boundaries he refers to—sex, gender, genitals, subject, object, frame—given this is a still photograph and not, say, a film, the static quality of the image appears secure. And yet the boundaries do keep moving between the varied and multiple interpretations that elicit, gather and accrue contradictory and competing meanings. One critic who performs an appropriately mobile interpretation

is Jordy Jones, who tries out various plausible readings by alternately questioning if this is an image of “castration,” “tucking,”⁷² “medical anomaly,” “hermaphrodite,” “woman,” “female bodybuilder,” etc. Jones even considers “ambiguity” regarding Cameron’s own self-description as “a hybrid male or whatever.”⁷³ Jones also quotes Cameron saying, in contradiction to Whittle (who claims Cameron is man who chooses to do without), “I feel that I do have a penis, it’s just a hybrid version and not very big.”⁷⁴ Ultimately Jones rules all of these interpretive possibilities and asks simply: “[w]here is it, this nomadic phallus?”⁷⁵

My own interpretation of this image engages all the varied responses to it. That is, what I am most concerned with is the fascination that critics have in locating the “nomadic phallus” (if any) and the crisis of representation that ensues—given all these different, and sometimes competing, readings. The interpretive uncertainty surrounding this photograph, and Cameron’s genitals, parallels the oscillations of trans-sexed bodies caught up in Gamson’s paradoxes of visibility in mainstream contexts. Only this time, unlike the outright hostile, fearful and disgusted viewers of “the pregnant man,” these critics are fascinated and fixated on the supposed lacuna in the image.

This visual absence (of penis) signals that sublimity is on the interpretive horizon. Even though none of Cameron’s sympathetic readers seem fearful or overwhelmed by his physicality, they do all display an unusual fascination, and perhaps even take pleasure (a component of sublimity), in reading his genitals. Jones observes that across the body of

⁷² Tucking is using a “gaff” (a specially designed piece of cloth) to pull the penis up as close to the body as possible in order to smooth down the genital area and make it appear to disappear.

⁷³ Jones, “Flex, Rex and Mister: Loren Cameron's Transhomosex Texts,” 29.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 16.

his work Cameron “shifts between an apparently normative masculinity and a potentially ruptured one.”⁷⁶ And these images of Cameron’s “ruptured” masculinity attract much of the critical attention regarding locating, categorizing and interpretively fixing imagistic excess. This ruptured image is also symptomatic of sublimity, precisely because the sublime bursts open any fixed (interpretively reductive) frame of representation.

In the context of such interpretive hyperactivity surrounding Cameron’s nude image, Jones, after performing a prismatic mobile critique of his own, simply concludes that

[p]erhaps, in the end, it is less important to constrain subjectivity and desire within provisional name-ability and more important to acknowledge the radically un-nameable nature of specific subjects and their associated desires[... s]omething always goes beyond. And something always intersects.[...] the points at which we can and do connect [...] may be exactly those points that can lead us past the psychic violence of our truncated identifications and identities.⁷⁷

I include Jones’ extended quotation not because I think he finally resolves the interpretive conundrum, but because his is an approach that does not foreclose upon the mobile readings of Cameron’s body-image-text. I have been tracing interpretive movement across Cameron’s use of the beautiful until it reaches its sublime limit because mobility interests me most. Interpretive mobility helps to understand the oscillating and elusive quality of Cameron’s, as well as Beatie’s, images of embodiment. That is, if images of a nude Cameron are to cohere then they requires a mobile reading practice that takes into account *all* the signifiers: pose, hair pattern, syringe, muscles, surgery scars and even genital region. If all the elements add up, then there is coherence. However, “dissonance”

⁷⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 20. The notion of “truncated identifications” in this quote corresponds to standard identity categories. Jones is suggesting there may be other ways to connect that do not involve taking on standard categories of identification.

and “incoherence,” as some of readers suggest, show that the elements do not add up all the time for everyone. Because these codes oscillate, a mobile reading practice is necessary, since a reader must be cognitively nimble enough to circle around the photograph, reading each element without concluding it is unreadable or, alternately, that the meaning is fixed. Mobility thus anticipates and necessitates a new practice of reading trans-sexed identity and corporeality.

In positing my reading practice, I build upon Gould’s argument by noting that an oscillation between attraction and repulsion is, from an individual level of perception and a larger political standpoint, an unproductive—even paralyzing—state.⁷⁸ And in order to circumvent such paralysis, I suggest employing a perceptive dexterity that enables shifting between registers of the real and not real or between male and female, etc. This reading technique circumvents a simple desire/disgust alternation and promotes, instead, a practice whereby mind and emotional affect can together perceive bodies and identities as complex or as both/and. This mobile reading practice thus enables the nimble navigation of otherwise treacherous and ever-shifting terrain of trans-specific genders, modes of embodiment and social worlds.

A mobile reading practice necessitates fostering new ways of looking, ways that mutate with the unfamiliar and oscillating physicality of the subjects viewed. This is something I will turn to in my conclusion where I consider Gaston Bachelard’s concept of “shimmering”⁷⁹—a philosophical theory based on encounters with oscillating objects. My aim is to account for the ontology of trans-sexed embodiment and related images

⁷⁸ If not complete paralysis, certainly this is a stuck state of being trapped in an alternation circuit with no possibility of integration—just perpetual movement between “pole[s] of the experience.”

⁷⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

without foreclosing upon their multivalent, always shifting and often contradictory, interpretive possibilities. I suggest that such a reading strategy is useful in navigating the inevitable sublimity that arises as trans-sexed bodies reach their representational limit. A disorienting encounter with a visibly trans-sexed body, instead of resulting in a defensive shutting down like Bobby O's disgust-driven disidentification, can potentially be a transformative experience: in beholding an unfamiliar other, I suggest, new forms of perception and interpretive ability begin to emerge. I now turn to an image of trans-specific (genital) erectile tissue to demonstrate a "shimmering" reading practice.

Reading "Shimmering" Bodies

The sublime arises from a breakdown of aesthetic form—too big/too small, too near/too far, too real/unreal—which then relates to the aesthetic variations I have been concerned with throughout this chapter. As stated in my introduction, Gould's theory of subject-object oscillation and sublimity raises the issue of form and boundaries. As stated, Gould's theory addresses a long-standing philosophical debate about whether the sublime experience is located entirely in the viewer, a Kantian notion, or whether it is also a property of the displayed object. In addressing this aesthetic problematic, I draw upon Bachelard's spatial approach to the subject-object relationship in order to examine the presumably fixed boundary that separates subjective and objective realms.

In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard makes a distinction between "resonance" and "reverberation," or what he calls the "resonance-reverberation doublet,"⁸⁰ in his phenomenological analysis of the poetic image. For him, "resonances are dispersed on

⁸⁰ Ibid., xxiii.

the different planes of our life in the world,"⁸¹ and they are linked to "the outpourings of the mind"⁸² toward broad contexts. As such, they "invite us to give greater depth to our own experience."⁸³ By contrast, "reverberations bring about a change of being"⁸⁴ that is effected through a transformation of consciousness and of the deepest aspects of our selves. The end result of resonance and reverberation is that taken together, they produce identification with the image and are the means by which a subversion of the subject-object duality occurs. That is, phenomenologically speaking, a poetic image "shimmers" in that it is both a "becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being [and so] expression creates being."⁸⁵ As Bachelard puts it: "At the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions."⁸⁶

Bachelard's reformulation of the subject-object duality, as the resonance-reverberation doublet, implies that the representational world and embodiment are mutually constitutive through a circuitously spatial network of relations. In fact, trans Studies critic Susan Stryker follows this same logic as she provocatively states: "Our bodies are motions set in space: what trace of their generative locations do these mobile architectures make as they extend into the world?"⁸⁷ As a generative or reproductive medium, photography creates such an image-body trace in the world. Through an analysis of one final photograph, then, I use "shimmering" as the basis for a reading

⁸¹ Ibid., xxii.

⁸² Ibid., xxiii.

⁸³ Ibid., xxii.

⁸⁴ Ibid., xii.

⁸⁵ Ibid., xxiii.

⁸⁶ Ibid., xix.

⁸⁷ Susan Stryker, "Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism.," *Parallax* 14, no. 1 (January 2008): 45.

practice that can account for the oscillating representational and material ontology of trans-sexed embodiment.

I draw upon Bachelard's concept to describe a reading practice that, depending upon from where and how one looks, when one looks, and at what one looks, different representational effects and interpretations are possible. "Shimmering" thus conjures images of oscillating movement in the motion of light on water: depending upon the time of day and the atmospheric conditions, the effect of light cast upon water changes.⁸⁸ Sometimes the motion of light on water makes vision perfectly clear, sparkingly clear, and at other times the view nearly blinds. Water as a substance is also paradoxically insubstantial (hard to grasp), having fluid boundaries that take the shape of whatever container—interpretive schema—it is held within.

This wavering concept of shimmering can potentially aid in navigating the interpretive oscillations and ambiguity that accompany so many images of trans-sexed embodiment. And according to Elizabeth Grosz, who speaks from a normative subject position, ambiguity is exactly the problem: "in popular, nonmedical discourses, there seems to be something intolerable, not about sexual profusion [...] but about sexual

⁸⁸ Eliza Steinbock writes in her in-progress dissertation, "'Shimmering': Towards a Trans-Erotic Film Aesthetic," about Lili Elbe, and the first documented male-to-female sex change surgery. Steinbock reads Elbe's memoir *Man into Woman: A True and Authentic Record of a Sex Change* to argue that "at issue is whether the movement of shimmering would undermine [Elbe's] subjectivity [and argues that] Elbe is able to establish a continuity of self precisely through incorporating discontinuity into her image" (31). Steinbock also explains that Elbe took her name directly from the river "Elbe," which she crossed to her various surgeries, and claims that "[Elbe's] identification with the river's shimmers provides the coherency of the flow, even as it suggests multiplication of selves in the various points of light that make up Elbe." Eliza Steinbock, "'Shimmering': Towards a Trans-Erotic Film Aesthetic," n.d., 32.

indeterminacy: the subject who has clear-cut male and female parts seems more acceptable than the subject whose genitalia is neither male nor female.”⁸⁹

As such, I turn to an image “Transcock 1” [Fig. 17], taken from Del LaGrace Volcano’s photographic anthology *Sublime Mutations*, for a visual of trans-specific genital “indeterminacy.”⁹⁰ While I do not intend to fix the interpretation of this image, I will also not claim that it is entirely unreadable—beyond representation. Instead, I present this image in order to illustrate a mobile reading practice that does not thwart sublimity; neither does it deny the representational excess of trans-sexed bodies and their related image-traces. As promised, I propose a way of reading trans-sexed images that draws upon Bachelard’s theorization of “shimmering” as a mobile interpretive practice. The varied interpretations of Cameron’s genitals outlined in the previous section are evidence of a representational crisis, but they also indicate a body-boundary or body-image that is always in perpetual motion. And trans-sexed bodies are, by definition, in motion—the prefix *trans* literally means to move across boundaries. However, this is not exactly a “nomadic” movement as Jones suggests. Instead, it is a shimmering type of perception that follows from the interpretation of trans-specific images.

Perhaps the main thing to notice about “Transcock” is not the genital itself, but rather, the ruler that attracts the eye precisely because it provides a metric (standardized measure and classification system) that makes the meaning of the tissue possible, or so it seems. The tape measure next to the genital tissue reads both “feet” and “inch”; however,

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 84.

⁹⁰ Del Lagrace Volcano, “TransGenital Landscapes, London 1996-1998,” in *Sublime Mutations* (Berlin: Janssen Verlag, 2000), 151. In critical writing about this image it is also simply known as “Transcock,” which is how I will refer to it in this chapter.

casual consideration would quickly rule out “feet” because the idea of a two-foot penis is both surreal and unreal. Outside of some fetishistic pornographic videos, where it is hard to tell if a two-foot penis is undetached flesh or enhanced latex prosthetic, the possibility that “Transcock” is two feet long seems implausible. “Inch,” on the other hand, presents another interpretive problem because the idea of a two-inch penis seems incredible.

Of course a few people might just “get” the reference—either being familiar with Volcano’s work or, alternately, are intimate with this particular formation of trans-male genital geography. But even if viewers are clued-in what is to ensure that it is a transcock they see?⁹¹ As such, I argue that the ruler tells us more than the presented flesh about what a productive (not foreclosed) reading of this image could be. The fact that both “feet” and “inch” are interpretive possibilities suggests a wavering movement between

⁹¹ There is much debate and contestation about bodies and the naming of body parts inside and outside of trans-specific social networks. Jordy Jones elaborates on the linguistics of genital structures: “pre or non-operative transmale genitals [named] dicklet [...] for the testosterone-enhanced clitoris/micropenis. Cockpit, toolbox and front hole are all used [...] for referring to the vagina...” See Jones, “Flex, Rex and Mister: Loren Cameron’s Transhomosex Texts.” Also, philosopher C. Jacob Hale has described ‘FTM-specific erogenous tissue’ [which can] refer to a range of genitalia, from pre or non-operative through metaoidioplasic and phalloplastic re/constructions.” C. Jacob Hale, “Consuming the Living, Dis(Re)membering the Dead in the Butch/FTM Borderlands,” *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1998): 16-17. Trans studies political theorist Paisley Currah addresses trans-specific physical variability, saying: “[s]ome bodies are modified through hormones, various types of gender reassignment surgeries, or both, to produce bodies commensurate with gender identities. In those cases, the perceived incongruence comes only from knowing the history of that individual’s body. Other bodies, however, have unexpected configurations [...] for example, breasts with penises for some, male chests with vaginas for others—that produce dissonance. [...] The more easily read and specific physical terrains of bodies, such as the presence or absence of facial hair, baldness, or patterns of musculature, can add a third layer of potential contradiction,” Paisley Currah, “Expecting Bodies: The Pregnant Man and Transgender Exclusion from the Employment Non-Discrimination Act,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 331. From “Expecting Bodies: The Pregnant Man and Transgender Exclusion from the Employment Non-Discrimination Act,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36:3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 330-336.

representational registers and schematics: between the trans-specific two-inch real and the hyperbolically unreal proportions of phallic excess. As such, the ontological status of the image-body in this photograph is, in fact, shimmering; and shimmering oscillations of image and text call for a reading practice based on interpretive mobility.

Prosser has written extensively about this photograph. He first reads it in his book *Second Skins* as an image emblematic of the “transsexual real.”⁹² Therein he makes an argument for the “transsexual real” as a substantiation of the materiality of the transsexual body, as a fleshly anchor and counterpoint to the disembodiment of queer theory. Prosser claims that because queer theory, following Butler’s analysis in *Gender Trouble*, hinges upon gender performativity and the transubstantiation of flesh, it elides the materiality of bodies. As such, the “real” material contours of transsexual bodies, for Prosser, offer the most logical fleshly rejoinder to the blank spot of embodiment at the center of queer theory.

One year later Prosser returned to his prior claim in an essay titled “A Palinode on Photography and the Transsexual Real.” Prosser called this piece “one long footnote” to his original text.⁹³ In this later essay, he deftly critiques his earlier argument and bluntly admits: “I was wrong.” He then offers a corrective reading for his previously naïve investment in a referential equivalent of “the [materially embodied] real.” That is, his original argument that the photograph had a transparent relationship to the “transcock,” which he called a “penis.” Prosser’s re-reading of Transcock in “Palinode” posits that it is

⁹² Prosser, *Second Skins*.

⁹³ Jay Prosser, “A Palinode on Photography and the Transsexual Real,” *a/b: Autobiography Studies* 14, no. 1 (n.d.): 51-70. Prosser has revisited, for a third time, his reading of the photograph “Transcock” and the issue of photographic referentiality in his chapter “My Second Skin” in Jay Prosser, *Light in Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 163-182.

now representative of the “failure of transsexuality to be real.”⁹⁴ He also mentions scars, genital surgery and other trans-specific re-embodiment techniques as evidence of “failure” precisely because of their constructed status. He punctuates his point with reference to a nude photograph of Loren Cameron, saying that the “unspeakability of transsexuality [is] this failure of Cameron’s body to be genetically male-ly real.”⁹⁵ He then goes on to say that “[i]t is precisely our [transsexuals] failure to achieve the real that makes us desire it [...] our distance from the real that allows us to prize it, recognize it.”⁹⁶ Sound very much like Grosz, Prosser connects his claim about transsexual failure to the “inevitable failure” of all embodied subjects to cohere.

However, to avoid sounding dismissively transphobic, Prosser states that he is following the lead of Roland Barthes who writes: “constituting the self as a complete subject [...] is a fantasy [yet] this in no way prevents it from existing.”⁹⁷ Prosser then embellishes Barthe’s point, saying: “[i]n spite of the fact that transsexuality is impossible this in no way prevents it from existing.”⁹⁸ At this point in the essay, all the theoretical bases seem to be covered. Yet lurking beneath this argument is another covert binary: the real of the body/materiality versus the not real or failure of representation/the subject. My contention is that Prosser’s re-reading in “Palindrome” is an *over*correction for his prior essentialism that is now transposed into a disavowal of materiality. As a critique, Prosser’s new formulation simply leads nowhere; by averting a collapse into uncritical essentialism, his analytic conclusion dead-ends in a hypercritical cul-de-sac.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Prosser's revised analytic gambit in "Palinode" does not enable the kind of reading of trans-sexed embodiment I have been developing: a reading that allows for *movement* in/of images, bodies and interpretive methods. If there is any ontological substance to trans-sexed embodiment it is located in between the real/not real binary. As such, turning back to "Transcock" again, I argue that neither "inch" nor "feet" is a right or wrong interpretation. Instead, trans-sexed bodies and their images oscillate and shimmer between the registers of the real (material) and the surreal (fantasy, failure and the limits of representation). Furthermore, a multiplicity of forms of embodiment is suggested by the number two, as the antidote to the phallic singularity and reductionism of the number one in the photograph. Thus, not only can trans-sexed bodies take on multitudinous representational forms; many interpretations are also possible.

What I have been leading to is the postulation that trans-sexed bodies shimmer in the in-between: one/two, inch/feet, real/phantasmatic, beautiful/sublime. As such, I contend that "Transcock" is neither an image of the real nor the real's failure. It instead suggests the specificity of trans-sexed embodiment that, presenting shifting ambiguities, forces questions such as: Which should I read, inch or feet? Is it one or two? What *is* it? "Transcock" stands denotatively defiant of interpretive fixity next to the metric (ruler) that catches the image in its own shimmering oscillations.

And while the number two suggests multiplicity, the most intriguing aspect of this image is a bit of barely discernible text, a branding mark on the ruler that reads: "TRU ZERO." Zero is perhaps the most trans-like of all numbers since it signifies nothing (0) but is not simply a no-thing. In fact, this no-thing holds a crucial place in a complex abstract system of signification that, without it (0), the system would not work at all. Zero

is the insubstantial and yet very real placeholder of systematicity: it is the no-thing, or the unrepresentable (other), upon which the entire system depends.

The meaning of “Transcock,” and other images of trans-sexed embodiment, I conclude, is in the *sublime mutation*—in the ineffable sublimity that exceeds representational fixity and in the oscillating or shimmering movement that ensues.⁹⁹ Mutating movement across boundaries of subject and object or of male and female remains always in recursive motion. That is, shimmering enables movement to occur in place. This spatial movement is characteristic of an oscillating ontology of gender, rather than the more commonly thought of temporal movement of a standard transition narrative. That is, a familiar gender trajectory moves a subject linearly from point A to point B, or unambiguously from male to female or female to male. By contrast, a shimmering-in-place is the either/or/both/and simultaneity of trans-sexed embodiment in all possible variations and forms. This does not mean *all* bodies can or will take multiple other forms, it just means all other forms are *possible*. And it is also in-between and in movement that the viewer can have a sublime encounter without being too far or too close to experience a subjective transformation. In this shimmering place, one can perceive the glimmer of a “new kind of subjectivity”—one that *sees* multiplicity.

⁹⁹ Photographer Del LaGrace Volcano explains his own notion of motion in the preface to *Sublime Mutations*, saying: “[b]odies as sites of mutation, loss and longing have been my overriding and obsessional concerns for the past ten years. Sublime Mutations are the transformations that are produced by age, accident, illness, or design. The motto is: Mutate and survive or stagnate and perish. I’ve possessed and been possessed by a multitude of names, bodies and identities in my forty odd years. Change, mutation and migration are as natural to me as staying the same might be to you [...] Mutations come in many forms [...] I believe in crossing the line, not just once, but as many times as it takes to weave a web we can all walk on” (5). While this is a different conceptualization of mobility than I propose via “shimmering,” it does suggest a related movement that is ongoing and perpetual.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wrong Bodies and Right Selves: Narrative Structure and Trans-sublimity

I first encountered *My Right Self*, a photography exhibit with accompanying autobiographical narratives (written by the subjects of the images), during a fieldwork outing at the 7th Annual Philadelphia Trans-health Conference.¹ According to the project's Web site it is "stories and photographs of and by transsexuals, transgendered, genderqueer, gender-variant, queer, trans-persons, [and] persons... [e]xploring issues of identity, perception and the body."² The centerpiece of the exhibit is a set of glossy, large-format, and technically well-executed photos by Arthur Robinson Williams. The images are understated in their ordinariness and include people in casual postures sitting in living rooms, kitchens and other domestic spaces, or posing in the backyard, as well as in other outdoor settings such as public parks. There are also pictures, more typical of transition-related photojournalism, featuring partially clothed subjects and their hormonally or surgically transformed flesh.

While I surveyed the scene, Williams, a tall slim-suited white man meandered about and engaged conference-goers who approached his exhibit. At the time of this exhibition, he was a newly enrolled medical student at the University of Pennsylvania and simultaneously pursuing a degree in bioethics at Penn's Center for Bioethics. *My Right Self* was his bioethical master's project.

¹ The exhibit premiered at The Seventh Annual Philadelphia Trans-health Conference sponsored by the Mazzone Center, Philadelphia Convention Center (May 29-31, 2008).

² See online materials by Arthur Robinson Williams, "My Right Self," n.d., <http://www.myrightself.org/>.

Documentary photography of trans-sexed and gender-variant individuals paired with explanatory narratives, written in the subjects' own words, is not a new genre. Photographs combined with autobiographical stories is an aesthetic strategy that has been used since the early 1990s, exemplified in the work of Loren Cameron's *Body Alchemy* examined in a previous chapter. However, Cameron often put his unclothed body on display along with personal confessions about the conflicted condition of his non-normatively embodied subjectivity. *My Right Self's* bioethicist-artist, by contrast, remained a fully clothed presence throughout the course of his project—walking a fine line between a medical-ethical authority, and, alternately, an artist-documentarian able to solicit narratives and images from the project's participants. That we never hear the bioethicist-artist's own gender justification narrative, or see his visually vulnerable flesh, sets his work apart from similarly structured projects such as Cameron's.

Instead of the artist's voice included among others, *My Right Self* presents five photo-vignettes of trans-sexed bodied and/or gender non-conforming individuals a two non-trans partners. All the subjects' appear to be white and of a range of ages, of gender identifications and of states of sexed embodiment. Single as well as partnered individuals are documented. An example is "Dane and Erin," a couple that includes a female-to-male individual who explains that he altered his body "to feel safe," and so that he could "move [in the world] and connect with people [...] because the world is not ready for a man without a flat chest or a man without a deep voice and an angled jaw" (n.p.). Dane makes clear, contrary to the ubiquitous "wrong body" narrative, that he has "always known [his] body to be enough—and it still is." His reason for transitioning seems not to be motivated from a psychic-somatic dissonance, like many classic stories of transsexual

transition, but rather for want of communicating his internal sense of gender to a world of others who cannot otherwise read him as a man. A parallel narrative by his partner Erin, who identifies as “a woman, a dyke, and a feminist,” describes how she met Dane at a women’s music festival and then wistfully recounts the point at which their relationship was no longer a “lesbian relationship.” She also explains, without any seeming contradiction between lesbian and male, that “Dana [former name of Dane] always felt male to me.”

These stories are but two examples of the seven vignettes included in *My Right Self* that appear to be riddled with contradiction. Viewers unfamiliar with transition-inflected shifts in intimate relationship dynamics might well be confused or even overwhelmed by what they cannot comprehend of this combination of image and text. But Dane and Erin’s intertwined narratives, while they wrestle with contradiction, can also be read as nuanced and complex rather than internally conflicted or confusing. This particular combination of image and narrative I reference is of someone who appears unambiguously male—except in photos that show his prominent surgery scars—and a partner who identifies as a dyke. (The relationship type conjured by the word “dyke” suggests a woman who prefers to be in a relationship with another woman, not a man.) What Dane and Erin show us is that sexuality, like gender, is more complex and mutable than standard sexual categories allow. The seeming contradiction of this coupling between Erin and Dane may generate confusion for a viewer not versed in relationship dynamics that exceed existing sexual categories. Such sexual categories—whether homosexual or heterosexual—obscure how people like Dane and Erin make sense of their relationship in a manner specific only to themselves.

I will return to reading the richly layered stories included in this project at the end of the chapter. For now, I note that the images and accompanying narratives of *My Right Self* represent a shift in medico-psychiatric discursive practice whereby “the story” of gender/embodiment is solicited from trans-identified and gender non-conforming individuals, not all of whom use the wrong body trope. Discourses of wrong embodiment, until recently, have been *the* main avenue to accessing hormones and medically regulated sex/gender transition procedures. The medico-psychiatric paradigm to which I refer is based on a trope of wrong embodiment that is produced through a binary- structured (male or female) reductive set of discursive and institutional practices. It produces socially sanctioned heteronormative sex and gender categories and associated narrative uniformity; that is, subjects who seek access to medical care all tell the same story of wrongly sex-gendered embodiment. By comparison, *My Right Self* presents individuals who articulate widely varying explanations of their identity, embodiment, sexual orientation, and gender transition trajectory—not all resulting in hormonal and/or surgical alteration. Together, *My Right Self* stories and images signify a shift in the ethical framing of sex/gender transition that counters the medical narrative of wrong embodiment, a model that has dominated cultural discourses up until the early 1990s.

In this chapter, I will trace a history of the wrong body narrative that circulates in the psychological and medical literature. Then I will show that this conventional trope is found most often in transsexual autobiographies that draw upon the classic Bildungsroman structure. I will then return to the autobiographical vignettes and photographs of *My Right Self* to discuss the range of differences among the project participants and to juxtapose their polyvocal stories with a univocally limited medical

model. *My Right Self* uses some aesthetic and narrative choices that create a space of possibility for trans-sublimity to emerge; at the same time, the reductive definitions included in the medical education component threaten to thwart the polyvocality of the personal stories. Taken together, these stories hold the potential to enable a polyvocality that is necessary to produce new forms of subjectivity and alternate social worlds.

My Right Self provides a useful comparison case for texts that use the wrong body narrative trope. This is because instead of presenting an entirely non-medical model this project straddles two worlds: it is not solely of the older medical model that hinges upon a pathologizing diagnoses of “gender identity disorder”³ or “gender dysphoria”⁴ (medico-psychiatric discourses centered on wrong embodiment), and neither is it entirely a community-based project representing a plurality of voices. The transition from a “wrong body” to a “right self” in this text indicates the waning influence of the consolidated medical model that authorizes—literally writes into being and makes mandatory—a trapped-in-the-wrong-body discourse. As such, *My Right Self* suggests a move away—but not complete break—from solidified and fixed models of gender variance and trans-sexed embodiment.

My Right Self documents what trans-activist and author Dallas Denny identifies as a paradigm change. But as I will argue, elements of this bioethical medical education initiative threaten to thwart Denny’s paradigm shift through the use of narrative practices associated with the older medical model, one that utilizes taxonomic and definitional

³ “Gender Identity Disorder” (GID) is a diagnostic classification that has been in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders* (DSM) in one version or another since the third edition was published in 1980.

⁴ “Gender dysphoria” is a term closely related to GID and is used in psychiatric discourse to refer to feelings of dissatisfaction or discomfort with one’s assigned gender, and often further denotes feelings of being “confused” by or “trapped” in the wrong embodiment.

reductionism to contain excessively sexed and gendered multiplicity. It is clear that the persons included in this project do not all fit a limited number of categories, and yet this project includes a list of identity terms that are common to medico-psychiatric discourse. I contend that this residual medical education component is constitutive of the problem of narrative foreclosure, while, at the same time the “right self” ethic and aesthetic opens up to multiple and proliferating figurations of gender identity and embodiment. By not relying solely upon the narrative of wrong embodiment, the collage of elements that compose *My Right Self* demonstrate that there are a multitude of embodiments and genders to behold and concomitant stories to be told.

Wrong Bodies

In *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault identified various discursive practices, including medicine, science and even literature that belong to—and are produced by—a particular culture’s “episteme.” An episteme is the dominant discourse or network of discourses whose regulatory power governs what is possible to imagine, think or articulate within a given culture at a particular place and time.⁵ It operates based upon what Kant called the “conditions of possibility” that govern what is thinkable and sayable within a specific cultural context. Foucault acknowledged in subsequent work that different epistemes could co-exist as part of different power-knowledge systems, and that they even have the ability to interact. This interactive dynamic makes the concept of an episteme less totalizing and deterministic than first postulated. According to Foucault, an epistemic “apparatus” is as follows:

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

I would define the *episteme* retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits the separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won't say scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The *episteme* is the 'apparatus' which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as scientific.⁶

Beginning with the science of sexology, the wrong body trope started upon its travels from the early nineteen hundreds through the twentieth- and into the early twenty-first century. Sociologist Jeffrey Weeks explains that "[t]he last decades of the nineteenth century saw a spectacular new preoccupation with the scientific study of sexuality, giving rise to this new subdiscipline, 'sexology' [...]. The task of the early sexologist was no less than the discovery, description and analysis of 'the [sexual] laws of nature'" (64).⁷ According to Week's, what made sexology unique from previous writing on sexuality and desire was the "effort to put all this on to a new, 'scientific' footing: to isolate, and individualize, the specific characteristics of sexuality, to detail its normal paths and morbid variations, to emphasize its power and to speculate on its effects" (65-66).

One of the primary scientific methods adopted by sexologists was taxonomy, both the act of classification and also the creation of hierarchical relationships between the delineated categories. Because sexology was focused on sexual identity and behavior, sexologists applied their categorical sorting techniques to the varieties of sexual and gender variant individuals who presented to them in their practices.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 197.

⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

It was Havelock Ellis, a British sexologist, who authored the first medical text written in English on the subject of sexological taxonomic categorization concerning variances of sexual desire, gender identity and gender expression. Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* provides a detailed account of what, by the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, is commonly called "homosexuality."⁸ Theories of same-sex desire and gender variance were in fact tightly linked in most sexological literature. As historian Gert Hekma explains: "homosexuality [theorized] as a third sex gained ground in the second half of the nineteenth century" and "the emerging received opinion had come to hold that 'homosexuals' indeed belonged to a third sex of feminine men and masculine women" with such a view leading "to transform this idea into a biological theory" delineated by "modes of behavior" resulting in certain taxonomic characters such as "sodomies" and "mollies" (213).⁹

However, across the range of sexological literature the theories of sexual desire, gender variance (sometimes referred to as "psychic hermaphrodisism"¹⁰) and embodied

⁸ Ellis's definition was the "sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality toward persons of the same sex." Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Random House, 1936), 1.

⁹ Gert Hekma and Gilbert Herdt, "A Female Soul in a Male Body': Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology," in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 213-240. Hekma credits Karl-Heinrich Ulrichs, a pioneer of sexual reform in the mid-1800s, with the description of same-sex desire as a "female soul in a male body" (aka "Uranians").

¹⁰ In *The History of Sexuality (Volume I)*, Michel Foucault lists "psychic hermaphrodisism" among the nineteenth-century discourses on the "subspecies of homosexuality." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 101. While "homosexuality" was eventually wrested from the apparatus of medical meaning making the same cannot be said for the psychic hermaphrodite who remained the sole property of the medical imaginary. Sexologist Christian Hamburger and collaborators wrote in an article in 1953 that

[t]here remains, then, the category of men in whom the desire [to cross dress] is so dominant as to justify the designation "genuine transvestism" or "psychic

difference (of secondary sex characteristic variation) were constantly being linked and de-linked. Sexologists undertook the practice of case study to aid in their practice of taxonomic classification because cases allowed for comparison and contrast between various individuals. It was as if the ultimate truth of sex(uality), and the proper categorization of “deviance,” would eventually work itself out through this seemingly endless process of comparison and differentiation.

In addition to accounts of what might clearly be classified as same-sex desire, albeit sometimes framed in terms of gender variance, Ellis’s case studies include an autobiographical narrative of a female-birth-assigned and cross-gendered author who claimed: “I regarded the conformation of my body as a mysterious accident” (235) that represents a “hiatus [...] between my bodily structure and my feelings” (240). Ellis’s subject simply explained this condition of wrong embodiment by asserting that there were “men’s minds in women’s bodies” (241).¹¹

Magnus Hirschfeld, who founded the Institute for Sexology in Berlin in 1919, described similar subjects in his 1910 book *Transvestites*, one of whom pronounces: “I am physically a man, mentally a woman” (83).¹² Yet another individual articulates a distinction between the body and the psyche saying: “Physically, I am thoroughly a developed man [, ...y]et ever since my childhood I have always felt deeply feminine”

hermaphroditism” (391).

Quoted in Christian Hamburger, Georg K. Stürup, and E. Dahl-Iversen, “Transvestism: Hormonal, Psychiatric, and Surgical Treatment,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 152, no. 5 (May 30, 1953): 391-6. Notably, this comparison of terms goes nowhere as neither is defined or used again in this article. Instead, the authors suggest “eonism,” a word coined by Havelock Ellis, as the equivalent term for “transvestite.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestites: The Erotic Desire to Cross Dress*, Tr. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, [1928] 1991).

(61). This same person longs for a different bodily configuration, graphically claiming: “If I see a mother suckling her child I sigh, ‘If only I had such breasts and could give milk!’” (63-64). These are but a few emblematic accounts of wrong embodiment that made their way into the medical literature through the avenue of patient autobiography translated into a sexological case study.

Advancing several decades to the mid-twentieth century we find reference to a desire to “correct nature’s *anatomical* ‘error’” (emphasis added) in the pioneering work of Harry Benjamin.¹³ As mentioned in Chapter One, Benjamin was a sexologist, endocrinologist and physician who, after leaving Germany for the United States, made a name for himself treating individuals who sought access to somatic sex changing technologies. He was also known for his writings on transsexualism that in the 1950s and 1960s lay the foundation for subsequent medical theory and practice on the subject. In fact, the reach of Benjamin’s influence is still felt today within professional psychiatric and medical circles and beyond.¹⁴

According to Meyerowitz, the European and American models of trans-sex embodiment differed in that European doctors tended to favor a theory of “bisexuality,”

¹³ Harry Benjamin, “Transvestism and Transsexualism,” *International Journal of Sexology* 7 (1953): 12-14.

¹⁴ Benjamin’s influence was so profound that the first and most influential worldwide professional organization devoted to the advancement of trans-specific treatment was named after him. In 1979 the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA) was formed. This organization has been fraught with controversy over the years, particularly concerning their guidelines for transition that seemed unnecessarily restrictive. Recently it has switched to a less stigmatizing name: The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). In 2007, WPATH elected Stephen Whittle, a trans-activist and legal scholar, as the first non-medical professional to serve as the organization’s president.

positing a physically embodied dual-sexed (male/female) condition.¹⁵ Benjamin seems to have followed in his European predecessor's footsteps by proposing a somatically oriented model of trans-identity, even if this view placed him out of step—and out of favor—with his American medical counterparts.¹⁶

Benjamin does not use the word “bisexual” as his European counterparts did to refer to a bi-sexed physical condition. Instead, he describes “various *kinds of sex*” that are “overlapping” and include: “chromosomal, genetic, anatomical, legal, gonadal, germinal, endocrine (hormonal), psychological” (2).¹⁷ He also refers to sexual intermediaries, or “hermaphroditic deformities,” in order to make a bold claim: “we are all ‘intersexes’” (5). Thus, Benjamin not only links trans-specific psychic and embodied selfhood to an physically sexed condition, the way European doctors ascribed fundamental bisexuality to all humans, but by saying “we are all intersexes” he normalized what would otherwise have been considered deviance through his claim that everyone (to some degree)

¹⁵ Meyerowitz documents that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European doctors proposed a theory of “bisexuality” to explain what is today commonly referred to as transsexuality. This theory was not about sexual orientation, being attracted to two different (“opposite”) sexes, rather, it was the notion that transsexual people carried a mixture of male and female sexual characteristics. However, it was never clear to proponents of this theory exactly where this mixture of sex was located in the human body. Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ American psychiatrists and medical doctors during Benjamin's time largely favored the concept of a psychological disorder to explain the etiology of what was considered a mental disease or delusion. For example, Charles Socarides, a New York based doctor of psychiatry, wrote in 1969 that “[i]n this author's opinion, [...] surgical intervention constitutes a sanctioning of the transsexual's pathological view of reality and cannot resolve the underlying conflict.” Charles W. Socarides, “The Desire for Sexual Transformation: A Psychiatric Evaluation of Transsexualism,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 125, no. 10 (1969): 125.

¹⁷ Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian, 1966, out of print). Quoted in http://www.symposion.com/ijt/benjamin/chap_01.htm (copy of book on file; website defunct).

embodies a sex/gender mixture. While there are places in his work where Benjamin rhetorically constructs a fairly stable and normative version of “sex”¹⁸ against which “deviant” versions are compared, still other times he admits to the instability and polyvalency of human sex, sexuality and gender expression. Thus, Benjamin’s theories are riddled with inconsistencies concerning definitions and delineations of sex, gender, normalcy and deviance. His work symptomatically displays the instability of categories and concepts with which he and his contemporaries struggled.

For this reason, it would be an oversimplification to say that the medical model, beginning with the early stirrings of sexological discourses into mid-twentieth century theories of sex and gender, was simply internally contradictory. This is because medical texts concerning the distinctions between sexual and gender types— taxonomies of “deviance”—were unstable and always shifting. At the same time, Benjamin and his contemporaries were products of their time—as such, gendered instability and excess were something to be contained and/or eradicated through scientific schematization whenever possible.

¹⁸ In his introduction to *The Transsexual Phenomenon* titled “The Symphony of Sexes,” a summary passage near the end seems to undercut Benjamin’s radical comment about everyone being “intersex” (a sex/gender mixture) by presenting a very gender normative and unambiguous picture of the “normal” male and female:

The normal male [...] has his masculine build and voice, an ample supply of androgen, satisfactory potency, a sperm count that assures fertility, feels himself to be a man, is sexually attracted to women, and would be horrified to wear female clothes or ‘change his sex’. He is often husband and father, works in a job or profession in accord with his sex and gender that is never questioned legally or socially.

The genetically normal female presents the opposite picture. She feels, looks, acts, and functions as a woman, wants to be nothing else, usually marries and has children. She dresses and makes up to be attractive to men and her sex and gender are never doubted either by society or the law.

Such more or less perfect *symphony of the sexes* is the rule (6, emphasis in original).

A good example of categorical excess and Benjamin's attempt to contain it is this charted continuum inspired by the Kinsey Scale. He labels his diagram the "Sexual Orientation Scale (S.O.S)" and it appears as follows:

<i>Group 1</i>			<i>Group 2</i>	<i>Group 3</i>	
<i>Type I</i>	<i>Type II</i>	<i>Type III</i>	<i>Type IV</i>	<i>Type V</i>	<i>Type VI</i>
TRANVESTITE	TRANVESTITE	TRANVESTITE	TRANSSEXUAL	TRUE TRANSSEXUAL	TRUE TRANSSEXUAL
				<i>Moderate</i>	
<i>Pseudo</i>	<i>Fetishistic</i>	<i>True</i>	<i>Nonsurgical</i>	<i>Intensiy</i>	<i>High Intensity</i> ¹⁹

Here Benjamin categorizes different types of transvestites and transsexuals into groups. The first group includes three types of transvestites. Included in the second group (a middle ground?) is the singular "non-surgical transsexual" who would likely appear indistinguishable from a transvestite since neither has undergone bodily modification. In the third group are two types of transsexuals that to differing degrees ("moderate" and "high") are both qualified as "true." Perhaps each is "truer" than the non-surgical transsexual because they request body modification in order to embody the "truth" of their psychic sex. This emphasis on "true" suggests that the wrong body can only be made right after surgery is completed for the transsexuals on this charted continuum. Everyone else, it is implied, remains falsely or wrongly embodied to some degree.

It is hard to ignore the name of Benjamin's scale, the "Sexual Orientation Scale," because it does not measure sexual orientation: there is no sexual orientation category included for each charted type. In addition, Benjamin unnecessarily includes the acronym for his scale in parentheses: "(S.O.S.)." In nautical terms, S.O.S. is the internationally recognized call for help from people in distress; the people in distress according to Benjamin's scale, it appears, are the typified individuals included under each column.

¹⁹ Ibid. 9.

Presumably, those who would rush to their rescue are the endocrinologists, like Benjamin, and the equally enlightened cadre of European “sex change” doctors.

The distinct criteria of this diagram present it as a precise diagnostic tool and further the illusion that sex, gender and sexuality are clearly demarcated phenomena. Yet any assistance this diagram offers to medical providers attempting a differential diagnosis in order to distinguish a “true” transsexual from a transvestite is scant, since as a diagnostic schematic it is rather confusing and offers little clarifying assistance. It is simply not clear exactly what type of taxonomic sorting this scale can accomplish. In fact, Benjamin expressed his own reservations about the efficacy of the S.O.S. schematic and stated his doubts about the diagram as it applies to “nature” and the charted types, saying:

If these attempts to define and classify the transvestite and the transsexual appear vague and unsatisfactory, it is because a sharp and scientific separation between the two syndromes is not possible. We have as of yet no objective diagnostic methods at our disposal to differentiate between the two. [...] Furthermore, nature does not abide by rigid systems. The vicissitudes of life and love cause ebbs and flows in the emotions so that fixed boundaries cannot be drawn. [...] Referring to [the S.O.S.] will then enable the reader to get a somewhat clearer picture of the particular individual and his or her problem. It should be noted [...] however, that most patients would fall between two types and may even have this or that symptom of still another type. (8-9)

Through this explanatory commentary upon his own diagnostic tool in this passage, Benjamin casts doubt upon its fixed precision. He states: “nature does not abide by rigid systems,” which suggests that he regards categories, and the identities/embodiments associated with them, as contingent rather than fixed or universal. The S.O.S. diagram and its associated qualifying commentary thus exhibit the very instability that attends sexuality, sexual identity and gender expression across the medical literature.

The S.O.S. scale, like the Transgender Umbrella analyzed in Chapter One and the Revolutionary Gender Model of Chapter Two, work fail to perform their intended explanatory function. Instead, they serve best as containment devices for the proliferation of identities and embodiments, and this is true even as Benjamin admits certain “types” of individuals have fuzzy boundaries. Despite the illusion of clearly mapping different types of transvestites and transsexuals, the S.O.S. schematic ultimately fails to provide a map-to-territory correspondence. Such models that, as I have argued in previous chapters, are intended to clarify and map the excesses of (trans) sexed identity and embodiment falter because they are premised on an arborescent structure—a tree-like diagram that can be understood as any reductive charting of sexed and gendered excess. These attempts to contain proliferative excess simply cannot contend with the ever-elusive, unpredictable and rhizomatic quality of transgender sublimity.

Elsewhere, Benjamin references the trope of wrong embodiment more explicitly with his claim that “[m]any psychologists [...] ascribe to early childhood conditioning an environment unfavorable for a normal healthy development the plight of such patients, who feel that their minds and souls are ‘trapped’ in the wrong bodies” (5). However, it is clear that he does not fully ascribe to a psychologically reductionist view of transsexual embodiment because he observes that other individuals with equally unhappy childhoods turn out “perfectly normal [adults]” (5). So, while not rejecting the wrong body trope altogether, Benjamin does see it as less psychologically derived and more the result of “a constitutional factor.” (5). For this reason he was inclined to “correct” the embodied “anatomical [constitutional] error” using hormones and surgeries rather than prescribing the “talking cure” commonly used in cases of homosexuality.

I have been outlining the cases from sexological and medical literature that represent wrong embodiment as literally wrong with the doctor's role being to relieve an individual's suffering by making the body right. However, there is another way wrong bodies are figured in this literature that presents transition as resulting in a "productive" body able to support capitalist social structures. In this case, the doctor's intervention is also to enable productive citizenship. Capitalism requires that bodies be productive and reproductive in various ways: as laborers, as ideal citizens, as heterosexual, and as sexual and gender norm abiding, thus intelligible, humans. Along these lines, cultural theorist Dan Irving argues that the medically bounded transsexual model that makes wrong bodies right relies upon the rehabilitative prospect of sexual re-embodiment. He specifically points out how the medical model of wrong embodiment requires that transsexed bodies must avoid being socially disruptive.

In support of his claim, Irving references the treatment philosophy of Dr. David O. Cauldwell who states that "there is a possibility that these [transsexual]²⁰ individuals will in time settle down and become significantly well adjusted to avoid causing serious social concern."²¹ We can read this rehabilitative imperative in medical discourses that

²⁰ Dr. Harry Benjamin takes credit for the term "transsexual" in his book *The Transsexual Phenomenon* when referring to the case of Christine Jorgensen: "I was asked to write an article on the subject for the now no longer existing *International Journal of Sexology*. In this article, which appeared in August 1953, I chose the term *transsexualism* for this almost unknown syndrome" (4, http://www.symposin.com/ijt/benjamin/chap_02.htm). However, historian Susan Stryker claims that "[t]he term was used in the title of a 1949 article by D.O. Cauldwell, 'Psychopathia Transexualis,' but it was popularized by Dr. Harry Benjamin in the 1950s and became widely known as a result of the spectacular publicity given to the 1952 surgical 'sex change' of Christine Jorgensen [...]." Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 18.

²¹ Quoted in D. O. Cauldwell, "Psychopathia Transexualis," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 5, no. 2 (April 2001).

emphasize how wrong embodiment results in social disruption through non-integration of individuals into capitalist socio-economic structures. For doctors like Cauldwell, the goal of physical transition was to integrate socially “deviant” gender-variant bodies so that they disappear into the normative gender and economic ideologies of their time. For this reason, and not simply to alleviate individual suffering alone, doctors approved sexual reassignment procedures. The medical motive to make right bodies out of wrong ones, it seems, also served the capitalist imperative of social control via the production of viable citizens. I quote Irving at length in order to make his point clear.

A reading of the medical literature reveals the dominant belief that transsexuality, framed as a mental disorder, renders the body unproductive. According to this literature, the sex/gender “preoccupations” of transsexual individuals undermined their productivity and created states of dependency. Thus, given their broad social commitment to healing, most doctors would not condone a decision to live as a transsexual [i.e., as a cross-gender-identified person who has not medically transitioned]. They maintained that if untreated, this disorder would likely have a devastating impact on the transsexual individual. Medical commentaries [...] interpreted problems faced by gender-variant individuals—including depression, substance abuse, and self-mutilation—not as evidence of the personal implications of unrealized desires to embody one’s sex/gender but, rather, as evidence of the social and economic threats that such individuals posed to a broader public [and to] economic productivity [...]. Within a heteronormative capitalist society organized around binary sex/gender and exploitative labor relations, transsexuality did not work (47-48).²²

We can take literally Irving’s observation in this passage that the mid-twentieth century medical authorities’ believed “transsexuality did not work.” Due to widespread discrimination against sexual and gender nonconforming people, most trans-identified and gender-variant individuals could not get jobs in the legal sector and often did not work. Still others found work in “illicit” or street economies—such as male-to-female

www.wpath.org/journal/www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/IJT/97-03/numbers/symposion/cauldwell_2.htm.

²² Dan Irving, “Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive,” *Radical History Review*, no. 100 (Winter 2008 2008): 38-59.

individuals who performed sex work. This fact serves to further Irving's argument that "wrong" (i.e., not transitioned) bodies within mid-century heteronormative capitalist social structures were considered improperly gendered, unproductive and, thus, socially disruptive. This is clear if we consider that many working "girls" who sell sex are only marketable if they do not have surgery.²³ As such, the labor of non-medically transitioned or "wrong" bodies is relegated to the shadow world of non-state-sanctioned capitalist exchange networks.²⁴

So far I have provided evidence of the wrong body trope within medical and psychiatric literature. However, a similar discursive construction is found with equal frequency in the writings of trans-identified individuals, particularly within the genre of the transsexual memoir and autobiography. Canonical examples are included in a 2005 collection edited by writer Jonathan Ames. His anthology titled *Sexual Metamorphoses* includes influential medical treatises such as sections excerpted from Havelock Ellis's *Psychopathis Transsexualis* and Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. It also contains the earliest published memoir by Lili Elbe, the first male-to-female individual to

²³ This form of non-surgical embodiment is colloquially referred to as "chicks with dicks." While some sex workers use this term, especially for marketing, many activists consider it a pejorative descriptor. Dallas Denny elaborates on sex work: "for instance, some transgendered and transsexual women turn to sex work because they are unable to get or keep jobs due to discrimination and because there is a steady demand for transgendered sex workers. When one is faced with homelessness, denied even the most menial of jobs, sex work can sometimes provide an alternative way to pay the rent." Dallas Denny, Ubaldo Leli, and Jack Drescher, "Changing Models of Transsexualism," *Transgender Subjectivities: A Clinician's Guide* 8, no. 1 (October 2004): 31. In providing this contextualizing reference, I do not mean to discredit the pro-sex position that sex work can be a viable choice.

²⁴ By including Irving's critique I suggest a way that transsexuality *can* work; however it would require different narrative forms—both different personal narratives (like *My Right Self*) and different discursive relations to Capital (or different kinds of productivity).

undergo sexual reassignment in the 1920s, as well as the mid-twentieth century autobiography of the most widely recognizable transsexual woman, Christine Jorgensen.

In his introduction, Ames offers his own memoir-like confession about how he came to publish such a volume. He recounts that as a young man he met an attractive “older” woman in a bar. When she pulled him to her “bosom” and said “Where have you been my whole life, baby?” he was instantly smitten. Even though Ames was already in a relationship, he engaged in a flirty correspondence with his paramour that eventually faded. Years later, he moved to New York City to research a novel and spent ample time there in a “bar for pre-op transsexual prostitutes” located in Times Square. After publication of his novel, he reports receiving requests from publishers for book-jacket endorsements for works that included transsexual content. It was such a request to endorse a memoir authored by his buxom former crush that led him to realize the object of his youthful desire had been a transsexual woman. This moment of personal realization motivated Ames to begin reading and researching the genre of transsexual autobiography.

Ames’s extensive research led him to an understanding of the generic properties of transsexual memoirs, summarized as follows:

I found the memoirs of transsexuals to be parallel in structure to the classic literary model—the bildungsroman, the coming-of-age novel. The basic outline of the transsexual memoir is as follows: A boy or girl very early in life feels terribly uncomfortable in his or her gender role, and there is a sense that some terrible mistake has occurred, that he or she was meant to be the other sex. Attempts are made—by parents or society—to reform them, and they learn to repress their instincts [...]. Eventually—like the protagonist of the bildungsroman—they leave their home, their small world, and venture out, usually to a big city. There they begin to privately or publically masquerade as the other sex, until eventually the masquerade goes beyond costume and posture and becomes permanent—especially in the latter part of the twentieth century with the advent of synthetic hormones and plastic sex-change surgeries. (xii)

The language of this passage sounds dated even though the anthology was published in 2005. However, this description is fitting for a genre that was solidified within the context of a mid-twentieth-century sexual and gender norms. An example of the genre's mid-century binary gendered constructs can be found in the quirky graphic on the book's cover. It is a 1950s-style illustrated caricature of a white male face drawn in black and white with a conventionally attractive blond female face drawn in color. Both halves are spliced together to create a unified dual-gendered head.²⁵ The coloring of only the "female" half suggests that through transition, in this case male-to-female, a fully embodied existence—in living color—is achievable.²⁶ Although Lili Elbe's included memoir is dated well before the 1950s, and others in the volume were written after mid-century, it was within a 1950s Western cultural context that the genre became solidified. During this historical moment the heteronormative gender norms, exemplified by the book's cover, became culturally entrenched; by extension, these same binary sex/gender constructs became integral to the transsexual memoir's generic structure.

The centrality of mid-century gender norms to transsexual autobiography is elsewhere illustrated in media representations of the world's most famous transsexual woman, Christine Jorgensen. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz quotes the original headline

²⁵ Ames's book cover graphic also conjures up the image of the "Half-and-Half." These individuals referred to as such were sometimes, but not always, figures associated with circuses or carnivals. However, they were not like the "bearded women"—also carnival regulars—who embodied another style of presentation: full facial hair and a hairy body. Rather, the "Half-and-Half" appeared with the right side of their body dressed as male (including facial hair, muscles and other "masculine" sexual signifiers) and the left side dressed as female (with a breast and other "feminine" signifiers of sex). A prominently known "half woman and half man" performer named Josephine-Joseph appeared in the Tod Browning cult classic film *Freaks* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1932).

²⁶ While it is no longer the case, male-to-female autobiographies, particularly those written by white middle-class individuals, were more common until about the 1980s.

referring to Jorgensen's surgery in Denmark: "On December 1st, 1952, the *New York Daily News* announced the 'sex change' surgery of Christine Jorgensen. The front-page headline read: 'Ex-GI Becomes Blond Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth.'" ²⁷ It is no coincidence that the image from this mid-century newspaper headline nearly duplicates the picture gracing the cover of Ames's collection: a stereotypically masculine white male who could conceivably be that "ex-GI turned blond beauty."

The split-gendered and two-colored graphic of *Sexual Metamorphoses* also illustrates the idea that wrong embodiment is a component of transsexual autobiography. In fact, Ames confirms this interrelation of re-embodiment and narrative structure through his observation of the transsexual coming-of-age story that he argues follows a specific arc: "first act: gender-dysphoric childhood" is followed by a "second act: move to big city and the transformation" and finally culminates in "the aftermath of the sex change" (xii). He elaborates on this identifiable structure, saying

[i]n most of the books I've read, whether it be female-to-male or male-to-female transsexuals, the writers will not proclaim that great happiness has been found or that all their problems are solved, but they all do seem to express this feeling that *they've done all they can*—penises removed, breasts implanted; penises constructed, breasts removed; [...] great physical and psychological suffering—and they have come, finally, to a place of self-acceptance and peace. (xii)

Described here is the classic narrative structure of a transsexual bildungsroman.

According to Ames's, the autobiographer's suffering reaches a point of resolution with the secure arrival at "a place of self-acceptance and peace." The travels and travails of the transsexual subject's coming-of-age tale are alleviated as the protagonist returns home to a body that feels more right than wrong.

²⁷ Quoted in Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 1.

A well-known example from the genre of transsexual autobiography, included in *Sexual Metamorphosis*, is Jan Morris's *Conundrum* written in 1974. It begins with these lines: "I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl. I remember the moment well, and it is the earliest memory of my life" (15).²⁸ Morris thus describes the quintessential transsexual moment of recognition—that there is something discordant about the relationship between her gender identity and her corporeal embodiment. At the time, she is sitting "as in a cave" under her mother's piano and beneath that "high dark vault" the chords her mother played were "very noisy," providing an aptly dramatic aural accompaniment for her early-life gendered epiphany (15). Morris's metaphor of confinement in an isolated world of abject difference is ironically echoed in a subsequent chapter where she describes inhabiting her natal body as "my entombment within the male physique" (73).

Following the Buildingsroman structure, as well as drawing upon the language of fairy tales and exotic depictions of otherness, Morris chronicles her travels to the far off city of Casablanca in Morocco, North Africa. There she "knew of a magician" (her doctor) and in an atmosphere shrouded with mystery she would undergo her sexual reassignment surgery. Morris describes the scene using characteristic orientalizing prose.

For example, the first time she was led through the clinic she observes that

[t]he atmosphere thickened as we proceeded. The rooms became more heavily curtained, more velvety [...] and there was a hint of heavy perfume. Presently I saw advancing upon me through the dim alcoves of this retreat, which distinctly suggested [...] the allure of a harem, a figure no less recognizably odalesque. It was Madame B--- [the doctor's wife]."²⁹

²⁸ Jan Morris, *Conundrum: From James to Jan - An Extraordinary Personal Narrative of Transsexualism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 155.

²⁹ Morris traveled to Morocco for her surgery because doctors in Britain refused to allow her to have surgery until she divorced her wife, something she refused to do. Her

Morris identifies her doctor, “Dr. B,” as the “sultan” and the nurses “[a]s they seemed to loiter by, orientally” are referred to by phrases such as “a Mistress of the Knives.” She describes the room maid who would enter “singing a quavering Arab melody as she went about her tasks [...]” and noted that the little Arabic she remembered gave this woman “a touch of mystery” (159). The wonder and mystery surrounding the clinic was mirrored in the as yet uncommon surgical procedure Morris was about to undergo. And after the surgical transformation was complete, she describes her travel home: “like a princess emancipated from her degrading disguise, or something new out of Africa” (162). The idea of a fairy tale ending is interesting here given the role of fantasy in creating a possible but yet-to-be-material reality. Fantasy makes the seemingly impossible both thinkable and thus one step closer to becoming true. Thus, Morris’s story reads like a fairy tale since the unthinkable is made manifest in the fantastical locale of Casablanca.³⁰

Equally intriguing is the image of coming “out of Africa.” This is a direct reference to a 1937 memoir written by Isak Dineson, which is the nom de plume for Danish author Baroness Karen von Blixen-Finecke. A notable structural element of *Out of Africa* is the manner by which contrasts are explored throughout the book.³¹ There are many opposites to be mined: town and country, dry season and rainy season, Muslim and Christian, and perhaps most important is the juxtaposition of African and European.

romantic style of writing about “exotic lands” in *Conundrum* was likely influenced by her career as a journalist and travel writer. In fact when Morris was still living as James she “had won acclaim as the journalist who had joined and reported on the first British expedition to ascend Mt. Everest.” Quoted in Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 277.

³⁰ Another interesting feature apropos of fairy tales is that they are often about wrong embodiment, such as the prince stuck in a frog’s body. Fairy tales also conclude with the wrong body made right: when the frog turns back into a prince and Cinderella loses her maid’s rags to become the princess because the slipper fits her foot.

³¹ Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

Underlying these themes is Blixen's theory that posits the "Unity" of contrasts. She best describes this theory in another book, *Shadows on the Grass*, written thirty years after her leaving Africa.

Two homogenous units will never be capable of forming a whole [...]. Man and woman become one [...]. A hook and an eye are a Unity, a fastening, but with two hooks you can do nothing. A right-hand glove with its contrast the left-hand glove makes a whole, a pair of gloves; but two right-hand gloves you throw away. (384)

In terms of gender norms, Blixen's theory suggests that the only combination of gender and embodiment to form a whole via unification is a heteronormatively configured binary of sex/gender spliced together. Recalling the cover of Ames's memoir collection, we can see such unification in the dual-gendered male/female face. Both Blixen's theory and Ames's image seem to substantiate that a transition from one "homogenous [gender] unit" to the other will complete Morris's journey: by traveling from one unambiguous, if wrongly embodied, gender to an other the self is unified and made whole. Such gender normative unification parallels the narrative movement of Morris to and from an exotic foreign land that results in the achievement of a newly embodied home. By joining the two separate halves of her life via the journey to and from Casablanca, the travel and travail arc of her story nears completion. Her return home simply seals the gendered, and narrative, foreclosure of a classic transsexual autobiography that reifies gender as binary.

Close to the end of her story, the tone shifts a bit as Morris describes what could be read as a process of gendered becoming: "For I no longer feel myself isolated and unreal. Not only can I imagine more vividly how other people feel: released at last from those old bridles and blinkers, I am beginning to know how I feel myself" (172). This is the "place of self-acceptance and peace" that Ames claims signifies the resolution of the

journey experienced in the “aftermath of the sex change” process. Having been released from her “disguise,” via her surgically re-contoured sex, Morris is liberated from her isolated world of one under the piano, as well as from her suffocating “entombment within the male” flesh. Her travels and travails are now over; thus she is free to begin exploring what it might feel like to be a more embodied self—presumably because she can *feel* her self now that her wrong body has been made right. With the two halves of a fragmented body and self made into a unified whole, Morris has fully and finally arrived home.

A more recent autobiography, such as James Green’s *Becoming a Visible Man* published in the early 2000s, provides another instance of ill-fitting embodiment figured as a core aspect of trans-specific identity. Green opens with a description of a course he teaches on trans-identity and relates conversations with students that show how he provides comprehensive explanations about sex, gender, sexuality and embodiment. Green too includes pieces of personal story that use elements of wrong body logic. For example, he describes growing up in a family that did not entirely discourage his gender variant expression since they allowed him to wear “play clothes” that were “jeans and a T-shirt.”³² When wearing these clothes he was often “mistaken for a boy” which made perfect sense since it was exactly how he felt inside (15). Green then theorizes childhood gender variance, saying:

[i]t is easy to read a transgender childhood as a lesbian childhood (or gay one, as the case may be), but there is an important difference. [...] Transpeople, in my experience, consistently report, to varying degrees, a sense of separation from their bodies that gay and lesbian people who are not transgendered do not seem to experience or report. (12-13)

³² Jamison Green, *Becoming a Visible Man* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 12.

Implicit in this distinction is that gays and lesbians are unlike trans people because only the latter inhabit bodies misaligned with an internal sense of gender.³³ While it is not untrue to say that *some* trans-identified people experience their bodies as “wrong,” it is inaccurate to ascribe a mind-body separation to everyone and then use it as a line of demarcation between lesbian/gay and trans people. At the same time, for Green and many others, this discursive construction of bodily and psychic dissonance is likely an accurate description of embodied personhood.³⁴

Later Green tells another story of gender transition, explaining that his transition allowed him to take up a leadership role in the first-ever female-to-male support organization: FTM International. And Irving remarks on this passage, again noting that a “productive” body allows Green to more fully participate in the public sphere.

What is particularly interesting vis-à-vis his [Green’s] autobiography, however, is the way that authenticity regarding his (trans)sex/gender identity and the realization of this identity through medical transition leads to his ability to occupy a leadership role within FTM organizing. He [Green] links the right to sex/gender self-determination directly to the capacity of transsexuals to be effective within broader public spheres. (“Legitimizing,” 53)

³³ Green does admit in this same section that many gay and lesbian individuals do struggle with gender variance (13). Because individuals have used and do use the trope of a “wrong body” strategically to access medical care it is not useful to dismiss these descriptions as mere “false consciousness.” For example, Janice Raymond, in her book *The Transsexual Empire*, posited false consciousness on the part of trans-identified individuals to argue that male-to-female individuals are in collusion with a “patriarchal medical establishment.” She claims that male-to-female individuals have formed a conspiracy to render “real” women’s bodies and lives obsolete. See *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Teachers College Press, 1994).

³⁴ Psychotherapist Arlene Istar Lev has argued that this particular “transsexual narrative as it is outlined is not inaccurate—it is simply not inclusive” (215). While Lev’s notion of complete inclusivity is problematic—complicated by my concept of transgender sublimity—I include this statement to demonstrate that healthcare professionals too are beginning to take issue with totalizing and foreclosed narratives of wrong embodiment. Arlene Istar Lev, *Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working With Gender-Variant People and Their Families* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Using Green's narrative as an example, Irving continues with his critique of productive embodiment and capitalist relations by drawing a parallel between medical discourse and transsexual autobiography: "[s]imilar to medial experts' concerns regarding the prospects of transsexuals living economically productive lives, Green is also anxious that personal security with one's male embodiment [...] does not correlate directly with productive achievements" (54). Green claims his anxiety rests on the fact that trans-identified men still have to deal with a history of female socialization, thus lack of masculine skill-set, and the reality that if found out to be trans at work he could lose his job. Green's anxiety seems quite appropriate for a white, middle-class and able-bodied transsexual man, since he certainly does have a lot to lose, as do others who occupy similar bodily and social positions.

In looking at the narrative of wrong embodiment across autobiographical and medical literatures, I do not want to be misunderstood as attempting to present an exhaustive history of sex, sexuality and gender variance. My motive in providing these examples is to substantiate the pervasive use of the wrong body trope across a range of texts. My introduction to the wrong body discourse is to set the stage for a discussion of models that do not entirely dismiss the usefulness of the trope for certain individuals, yet open up narrative possibilities pertaining to expanded (and exploded) notions of sex, gender and embodiment. These open narrative structures exist in excess of the older medical model. This is so even as the medical model, as demonstrated by Benjamin's schematic, contains its own excessive instability and struggles to foreclose upon radical difference using of reductive taxonomies and narrative tropes.

Paradigm Shifts and Emergent Polyvocality

In her 2004 article, “Changing Models of Transsexualism,” Dallas Denny articulates a shifting model of gender and embodiment that pertains to the wrong body trope.³⁵ According to Denny, “[t]he initial [medical] model held that transsexuals were ‘trapped in the wrong body,’ experiencing a psychic pain that could be alleviated only by body transformation” (26). While not all medico-psychiatric practitioners agreed on the appropriate response to this “condition,” those who advocated for medical intervention came to the conclusion that this was a state of psychic distress only alleviated through administration of hormones and surgeries. Denny observes that from the doctor’s perspective “[t]he treatment was palliative. The individual would not be cured, but merely rendered able to participate in life’s rich banquet” (21). Again, we see Irving’s rehabilitative model that supports capitalist imperatives to create citizens able to be consumers of “life’s rich banquet” and to be productive within that same economy.

The medical model that emerged in the mid-twentieth century was not without merit despite how it buttressed a problematic capitalist ideology. It offered a rationale for the development of treatment programs that provided trans-specific healthcare for the first time in the United States. Denny explains the benefits of this paradigm shift by explaining that “[t]he transsexual model provided a theoretical framework for sex reassignment in an earlier era. It protected transsexuals, who now had a medical problem rather than a moral problem, and it gave professionals a logical reason for treating and studying gender-variant persons: they were doing their duty as healers” (28). The medically authorized “transsexual model” not only softened harshly moralizing social

³⁵ Dallas Denny, Leli, and Drescher, “Changing Models of Transsexualism.”

discourses, but it also altered medical practices and helped to concretize previously unavailable healthcare resources. According to Denny, the “transsexual model”

brought professionals together to form a community. It made previously unavailable sex reassignment technologies available to transsexuals. The model stimulated much research and the publication of dozens of books and hundreds of articles in professional journals. Without it, there would have been no gender clinics, and the thousands of transsexuals who attended the clinics in the 1960s and 1970s would have been forced to choose between going without treatment or seeking out problematic and often dangerous black market hormones and surgeries. (28)

Within this shifted context individuals who sought medical intervention were able to utilize the culturally and medically sanctioned dualism of a mind-body split, exemplified by the wrong body trope, to access previously unavailable medical interventions. As previously noted, some of the individuals mobilizing this narrative did so strategically and others felt it represented a fundamental truth of their wrongly embodied selves.

While this earlier “medically-based transsexual model” has been useful, it was severely limited in terms of who could access care.³⁶ It also cast a long shadow upon other gender variant individuals, including many who did not want to alter their bodies but still wished to live a cross-gendered life. As I noted in chapter one, when discussing the Holly Boswell’s groundbreaking 1991 article “The Transgender Alternative,” a broader (umbrella) imaginary began to emerge in the 1970s that fully took hold by the

³⁶ Denny identifies that the first gender program was established at John’s Hopkins University in 1966 (27). Like the other university-based programs their research agenda resulted in care not being widely accessible. Instead, doctors acted as medical gatekeepers by imposing a set of rigid entrance criteria. Acceptance was predicated on applicants conforming to heterosexist assumptions, including that a transitioning individual should get divorced if they were currently married in an effort to ensure they would be heterosexual after transition. Also scrutinized was whether applicants fit era-specific stereotypes of masculine and feminine gender presentation and behavior. These narrow prescriptions rendered medical services inaccessible to gender-variant individuals who did not meet clinically constraining binary-gendered and heteronormative criteria.

early 1990s. This expanded vision placed pressure on the reductive medical model and the centrality of the wrong body trope. Denny calls this “the transgender model” and claims that it was part of a Kuhnian-like “paradigm change” (35) that shifted “the locus of pathology; if there is pathology, it might more properly be attributed to the society rather than the gender-variant individual” (31). The transgender political imaginary that attended this shift in discursive practice asserted that individuals were trapped as much in the wrong cultural context as in the wrong body.

The impetus for Denny’s “transgender model” derives from community-building efforts that used a more inclusive imaginary of gender variance. As such, the transgender model appears less pathologizing of non-normative sex, gender and sexuality configurations by regarding “gender variance [...] not as mental disorders, but rather as natural forms of human variability” (30). It suggests a flexible, non-prescriptive path that promotes a multitude of gender trajectories, including the possibility of a cross-gender identity that forgoes hormones and/or surgeries. This same model also generates more narrative structures: no longer is “the story” born entirely of medical necessity, instead many different stories can potentially be told.

In terms of the generic medical model narrative of wrong embodiment, Sandy Stone writes in her germinal essay “The Empire Strikes Back” that

[i]t took a surprisingly long time—several years—for the researchers to realize that the reason the candidates’ behavioral profiles matched Benjamin’s so well was that the candidates, too, had read Benjamin’s book, which was passed from hand to hand within the transsexual community, and they were only too happy to provide the behavior [and story] that led to acceptance for surgery.³⁷

³⁷ Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” *Camera Obscura*, no. 29 (May 1992): 291.

Stone's often-cited explanation accounts for why, in particular, transsexual individuals appeared to fit the medical model narrative of their time—from the mid-1950s to early 1990s—so well. This revelation leads her to argue that in clinical contexts, transsexual individuals have suppressed the complexities of their lived histories and individual gender stories in order to conform to a uniform, standardized and reductive medical model of sex and gender. As Denny notes, by conforming to diagnostic criteria, transsexuals could at least gain access to medical technologies. However, Stone's contention is that medically managed narrative necessity means that the stories produced scarcely resemble the complex ways in which sex and gender are actually lived. Under such circumstances, she observes, the "[e]mergent polyvocalities of lived experience, never represented in the [medical and psychiatric] discourse but present at least in potential, disappear" (293).

"The *Empire*" is an injunction toward what Stone terms "posttranssexual" visibility.³⁸ Her call highlights the central role of narrative—personal and medical—in shaping the lives of transsexuals and, more broadly, of all gender variant individuals. Stone provocatively addresses a fundamental problem in medical and autobiographical discourses that are products of the medical imperative to make gender variance disappear

³⁸ Susan Stryker offers her interpretation of what Stone means by the term "posttranssexual," saying: "As I read the passage, she [Stone] applied the term *posttranssexual* to transsexuals (however they physically configured their embodiment) who, counter to their programming, elected not to disappear into the woodwork [live as non-trans men and women] but rather to speak the personal history of their bodily inscription in a politically productive way. This would represent a decisive break with what transsexuality had meant up until that point and hence would be posttranssexual." She goes on to explain that her reading counters gender-bending interpretations of this passage that suggested Stone meant individuals should live as hybrids such as "psychosocial men with female genitals" and vice versa. Susan Stryker, "The Transgender Issue: An Introduction," *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 4 (1998): 152.

through use of normalizing narrative structures and associated medical procedures. She claims that through the creation of a “plausible history” (296)—a story predicated on passing as non-trans—the transsexual is programmed to disappear. The narrative foreclosure of the plausible history, she argues, results in the “foreclosed [...] possibility of authentic relationships” (298).³⁹

As Stone puts it, medical management means “learning to lie about one’s past” and then disappearing into normative social structures. But there is a cost, because what one gains in terms of “acceptability in society [means that one loses] the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience [...]”. Instead, authentic experience is replaced by a particular kind of story, one that supports the old constructed positions,” which for Stone is “profoundly disempowering” (295). This lamentable fact leads to her famous plea at the end of her essay that “I could not ask a transsexual for anything more than to forego passing, to be consciously ‘read,’ to read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written” (299, emphasis original). While this notion of an “authentic lived experience” in this passage is problematic, Stone’s important intervention into this debate is her proposition that the polyvalency of multiple

³⁹ In her autobiography, trans-identified author Kate Bornstein relates her own frustration with the plausible history, saying: “I was told by several counselors and a number of trans-gendered peers that I would need to invent a past for myself as a little girl, that I’d have to make up incidents of my girl childhood; that I’d have to say things like ‘When I was a little girl’ I never was a little girl; I’d lied all my life trying to be the boy, the man that I’d known myself *not* to be. Here I was, taking a giant step toward personal integrity by entering therapy with the truth and self-acknowledgment that I was a transsexual, and I was told, ‘Don’t *tell* anyone you’re a transsexual.’” Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 62.

stories and subjectivities is elided via medically mediated practices of narrative containment.

Stone's manifesto was produced at a time well in advance of the current explosion of trans-specific identities and embodiments proliferating from within and existing in excess of the transgender umbrella matrix. She was riding the crest of an early wave of representation, social practice and material possibility building in intensity at the time of her writing. Her work anticipated the challenge to a medical paradigm that produced the narrative containment of "emergent polyvocalities of lived experience." Denny notes a similar challenge in reference to the "transgender model" when she claims that the "contemporary self-definitions may be bewildering [to a] therapist [who] may be unwilling to authorize medical procedures for a client who does not fit the 'all-or-none' model of transsexualism" (35). For Stone, this disorienting "bewilderment" is the basis for "political action begun by reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body" that leads to "[t]he disruptions of the old patterns of desire that the multiple dissonances of the transsexual body imply [and that can] produce not an irreducible alterity but a myriad of alterities, whose unanticipated juxtapositions [...] *exceed the frame of any possible representation*" (298-299, emphasis added).

From the standpoint of a Foucauldian epistemic formation, it is impossible to exist outside of culture-bound relations of power and discourse. This means that when an individual asserts they live "outside of gender," this phrase must be understood to mean that they exist in tension with the law by which normative binary male/female gender is produced. Person may actively resist the law and are certainly not wholly defined by it, yet they are not living beyond normative gender ideologies either. For example, Butler

posits the possibility of resistance to social norms that occurs from a position within existing relations of power when she states that “[t]o be *implicated* in the relations of power, indeed, enabled by the relations of power that [one] opposes is not, as a consequence, to be reducible to their existing forms” (123, emphasis original).⁴⁰

A similar argument regarding socially determined power relations applies to writing. We see a tight narratological linkage between the medical discourses and autobiographical stories of sex and gender embodiment because they share similar narrative structures generated from within the same cultural episteme. However, just as disobedient subjects are irreducible to hegemonic forms of subjectivity, the medical and autobiographical discourses are not exact duplications of social power relations. Butler explains non-duplicitous discursive instability and excess in much the same manner that Stone suggests that some narratives “exceed the frame of any possible representation.”

However, Butler posits an actor, a “disobedient” subject whose actions “produce [...] a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law” (122). The result is that “[i]nterpellation [...] loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, *signifying in excess* of any intended referent (122, emphasis added).⁴¹ Simply put, individual utterances stated in relation to a social norm—particularly an institutionally entrenched one like the discourse of wrong embodiment—can exceed the representational limit of that norm. As Butler contends, it is through the reiteration of gendered social norms, occurring in destabilizing ways, that

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴¹ Ibid.

resistant forms of subjectivity emerge and pose a challenge to the official discourses of legitimate personhood.

An example might help to concretize Butler's theorization of undisciplined subjectivity and discursive excess. Trans-identified theorist and historian Susan Stryker explains her relationship to medically mediated discourses, as well as to the specific category of transsexual as that of a "disobedient subject" who "strategically" uses the category of transsexual to access body-modifying technologies. As such, she allows herself to be strategically "interpellated" via the medico-legal and psychiatric "apparatus." She writes:

In 1990 [...] I was at that time neither a lesbian nor a gay man nor a transsexual in any standard senses of those words, in that my embodiment was unambiguously male and my desire was for women. [...] but these things did not prevent me from disappearing into the default categories of "straight society" and "heterosexual man" as long as my body remained untransfigured. Surgical and hormonal alterations did not seem viable at that point [...]. Such things were available only to "transsexuals," who, as I then understood the matter, were compelled by their doctors to try to pass [as non-trans gendered], to claim a coherently gendered life course they had never experienced [Stone's "plausible history"], and to lie about their desires if they happened to be attracted to members of the gender into which they wanted to transition. I found the inauthenticity require by those demands [Butler's "interpellation" via the law of gender norms] repugnant (150).

Becoming "a transsexual" implied nothing more than the willingness to engage with the [medico-legal and psychiatric] apparatus for generating and sustaining the desired reality effects of my gender identifications through the manipulation of bodily surface [...]. Naming myself *transsexual* was therefore only a provisional and instrumentally useful move. It rankled, but I insisted upon it, for being interpellated under the sign of that particular name was for me [...] the access key to the regulated technologies I sought. "I name myself a transsexual because I have to," I told myself, "but the word will mean something different when I get through using it. I will be a new kind of transsexual" (151-152).⁴²

⁴² Stryker, "The Transgender Issue: An Introduction."

As already noted, the process of re-embodiment Stryker describes here—one often predicated upon a wrong body trope—results in narrative foreclosure. However, Stryker produces another sort of story than those found in *Sexual Metamorphoses* as she applies the antidote to narrative foreclosure via autobiography written as a re-inscription. She answers Stone’s call to read her self aloud “and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to *write* [herself] into the discourses by which [she] has been written.” The result is her becoming a “new kind of transsexual,” but not in the sense that she disappears or, alternately, lives in a state of gender-intermediate limbo. Stryker instead becomes irreducible to the sign of “transsexual” through her re-inscription of the term in a radically specific manner. By writing her *self* into the discourses by which she has been written, an avenue is opened toward increased polyvocal and polyvalent excess.⁴³ For disobedient sexual and gender non-conforming subjects, mobilizing discourses in such a manner creates horizons of possibility for who they can become.

In Stryker’s case, it is not just re-embodiment but also narrative re-inscription, poised in relation to a classical wrong body narrative that signifies in *excess* of norm enforcing medical discourses. Through the deployment of discursive strategies that are “disobedient” of medico-legal interpellation it becomes possible to write into being a “new transsexual” identity and in the process re-inscribe not a wrong body but a right

⁴³ As Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, the potential for insurrection exists within any discursive framework. He refers to this indirectly as “the tactical polyvalence of discourses,” by which he means, at least in part, that discourses can be deployed in a number of ways by different speakers, and changing contexts can result in “shifts and reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives.” These “[...]discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it [...]. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable processes whereby discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 100-101.

self; she also produces a write self which is the key to a politics of re-inscription. Thus, Stryker arrives at this moment of wrongness made right through writing as re-inscription of normative and normalizing medical discourses. In this instance, by attending to her irreducible and radical specificity, writing makes right what was previously figured as wrong: a body and identity no longer in need of a medical fix.

As radical re-inscription, Stryker's story, along with others, establishes the conditions for a transgender sublime to emerge. Instead of the conceptual incoherence that leads to an affectively overwhelmed disorientation response, sublimity enabled by polyvocal excess breaks apart existing (medical and gendered) frames of representation and then reconfigures their narrative structures. Through this re-inscriptive counter-discourse,⁴⁴ we see a politics of transgender sublimity beginning to emerge from the productive potential of proliferative excess. Stryker accomplishes this by writing against the grain of totalizing medical discourses that exert explanatory control over bodies, in particular non-normative and gender-variant ones. For Stone, Stryker, and others, narrative re-inscription is at the heart of the problem—and the promise—for trans-identified and gender-variant people. In this case, autobiography in the mode of re-inscription is a political act that demonstrates how not only bodies, but also narratives, *do* matter.

⁴⁴ Foucault claims that discourse not only “transmits and produces power; it [not only] reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (*History* 101). Elsewhere he describes this phenomenon of discourse as the *insurrection* of subjugated knowledges, which is “an insurrection against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with the institutionalization and workings of any scientific discourse” that claims to solidify “disqualified” or “nonlegitimated” knowledges into a unitary “true body of knowledge.” Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003), 7, 9.

Right Selves and Polyvocal Excess

I now turn to the model of a “right self” through an examination of the project *My Right Self* and its stories that diverge from the wrong body model through their use of radically specific articulations of identity and embodiment. These stories provide a concrete example of Stone’s “polyvocal excess” and they also help us to imagine a space of representation that surpasses the reductive medical model frame. I will critically attend to the narratives by the project’s participants who articulate identities and embodiments that often “exceed the frame of representation.” However, the frame in this case is not the frame of *all* possible representation; rather, it is the frame of this bioethics project.

The space of *My Right Self* includes autobiographical narratives written by seven individuals. Many of the featured participants are trans-identified, although some others perform complex negotiations to define the terms of their self-identification. Two of the individuals are not trans-identified and define themselves in mutable ways, especially in relationship to a partner going through the process of somatic change. Pertinent to my analysis is that no two individuals within the project describe either an identity or gender transition trajectory (including the partner’s parallel journey) in the same manner. Instead, the frame of *My Right Self* enables polyvocality since it does not require subjects to conform to a reductive wrong body model in order to participate. This is because the artist-ethicist is not in the position of a medical doctor who must negotiate his or her gender biases and medical liability issues in order to authorize care. Thus, *My Right Self* establishes a context wherein, following Stone, individuals no longer need to lie about themselves. The result is a space where an “irreducible [...] myriad of alterities, whose

unanticipated juxtapositions [...] exceed the frame of any possible representation” find conducive conditions for their articulation.

From a narrative standpoint, so many differences between individual stories in the context of a single frame demonstrate a degree of polyvocality that is hard to encapsulate. Unlike Ames’s concise account of the transsexual bildungsroman, it is impossible to provide a one-paragraph summation of any narrative structure that could encompass all of the “right self” stories. Aside from the use of an autobiographical first-person pronoun, there is no common feature that can be traced across each articulation of embodiment and selfhood. These stories are simply irreducible to generic conventionality. This lack of generic uniformity in a project that contains a medical education component can be compared to the Bildungsroman as a genre centered upon education: a protagonist’s journey that ultimately leads to psychological and moral awareness and eventual growth.

The lack of generic uniformity is because, unlike the transsexual bildungsroman, *My Right Self* is *not* centered on the subject’s (of the stories and images) self-education or their eventual integration into society via acceptance of social norms. Rather, the project is aimed at the education of its viewers, especially healthcare professionals. For this reason, its inherent polyvocal excess is itself an educational component that defies the formation of standard generic convention. In fact, unconventionality and the upturning of social norms is part of *My Right Self*’s educational message: there is no *one* way to be a right self; instead there are many ways, perhaps as many ways as there are individuals willing to participate in the project. Defying conventional gender norms, as well as generic narrative structures, is part of the process of articulating and inhabiting a right self. While *My Right Self* does not eliminate personal testimony of self and embodiment

that is found in more traditional autobiographical accounts, it does foster *differences* that are not reducible to categorical, narrative, and generic uniformity. These differences are between varying accounts of identity and embodiment, as well as uses of tropes and narrative structures. In this way, *My Right Self* displays the making of an anti-buildungsroman collage of texts. This interesting anti-generic property of the project, driven by its inherent polyvocality, can be linked to the proliferative and a-categorical aspect of the transgender umbrella/matrix, something that also produces discursive excess as discussed in Chapter One.

While *My Right Self* diverges from the recognizable properties of generic conventionality, two of the participants do draw upon the wrong body narrative. For example, Ashley says:

All those years [as a youth], when no one else was watching, I'd wear women's clothes and makeup. They felt "right" to me in a way that men's clothing did not. [...] I would feel an intense desire for it all to be real. [...] I am scheduled for gender reassignment surgery this Spring. When that is done I will finally be me. [...] I will finally look like I've always felt: like a woman. [...] regardless of what body I was born with, I always have been one [a woman].

Ashley's explanation of her childhood gender dissonance—her body (and clothing) did not match her sense of self, and her position that surgery will finally make her "real"—fits a classic wrong body narrative. Yet there is an internal instability to her logic that is often found in medical model influenced stories as well, since Ashley also claims she has "always been" a woman despite her physical morphology. This linguistic contradiction is not a failure of Ashley's reasoning capacity as much as it is symptomatic of the same instabilities concerning the etiology of sex/gender transition faced by autobiographers such as Morris, as well as by doctors like Benjamin and the European sexologists.

Another subject, Allie, speaks about feeling like her “body was the exact opposite of who [she knew herself to be] inside.” Her classic trapped-in-the-wrong-body sentiment mirrors Morris’s story since Allie also refers to having been locked up “in a prison of masculinity.” Like Morris, Allie too pinpoints medical intervention as the moment of change by claiming: “The first major change came when I started estrogen and anti-androgens. For the first time in my life I felt *right*.” Allie goes on to claim that despite her “chromosomes” containing a “Y” or “boy” structure, in her “mind” she is a “woman. [...] And finally, after 20 long years, my body is changing to match my mind.”

Granted, it is the case that some transsexual narratives reinforce a medical model that restricts the possibilities of trans-sexed embodiment and gender-variant expression via gender normative narrative foreclosure. However, not *all* transition stories do so and some even purposefully disturb the medically determined discursive restrictions by means of politicized acts of narrative re-inscription. Stryker supports disruption by saying that “[c]ontrary to what much of the existing scholarly literature on transgender phenomena suggests, many transsexuals—like many homosexuals—have formed a personal sense of self not only *through* particular scientific discourses of sexuality [and gender], but in *opposition* to them.”⁴⁵ Taken as a whole, the narratives included within the framework of *My Right Self* perform represent an oppositional polyvocality.

Just as the stories of *My Right Self* display their disobedient relationship to gender norms and scientific discourses on gender variance, they also demonstrate a multiplicity of oppositional voices. This lack of univocal coherence from story to story subverts the

⁴⁵ Susan Stryker, “Portrait of a Transfag Drag Hag as a Young Man: The Activist Career of Louis G. Sullivan,” in *Reclaiming Genders*, ed. Kate More and Stephen Whittle (New York: Continuum, 2000), 63.

imaginary that attends a medically authorized wrong body model that demands stories be interchangeable and internally non-contradictory. As well, variability *within* the stories is also evident. For example, Jake, a gay-identified female-to-male individual, talks about how his comfort with his body changes depending upon the acceptance of his partner.

Many times I feel like my sense of dysphoria is directly related to how well I'm being accepted by people I'm sexually attracted to. If I'm really into a guy and he's totally accepting of my body, I feel less pressure even though I'm really self-conscious about the parts [e.g., genitals and breasts/chest] I don't identify with.

As someone who has not had any surgery, Jake also vacillates about his own body image.

I don't feel I need a penis, I just want what I have to not look female. In regards to genitalia, sometimes I think I would be happier with nothing rather than what I have now.

But sometimes I feel happy with what I have. [...] I like to walk around the house with my shirt off [...]. When I look at myself in the mirror I'm always amazed at how masculine my chest is even with breasts. My muscles are more defined now and I've developed a lot of body hair. Sometimes I want to show off my chest, but I think it would make people uncomfortable. But if I'm honest I think it's amazing. I've always been attracted to the idea of hybrids. I like how certain aspects of my body marry images of masculinity and femininity together in a very striking way.

Jake's story moves from self-consciousness to self-amazement and sounds very different from the unambiguously single-toned narrative of wrong embodiment. He circumvents conforming to the standard medical model through revealing his deep self-doubt and uncertainty, something that would have surely disqualified him from access to trans-specific medical care in an earlier era. Instead, Jake articulates a right self in *opposition* to medically determined gender norms and what we get is a sense of the "[e]mergent polyvocalities [...]" present at least in potential" within a text that makes it hard to figure exactly what a right body and self might look (and feel) like. Such a body-self seems not only to differ from person to person within the project, but it also appears divided within

itself, as is the case for Jake. Furthermore, this body-self shifts in relationship, for example, when Jake relates to himself (in the mirror) versus Jake relating to another (sexual partner).

To an extent, the variability and proliferative excess represented by the stories of *My Right Self* rely upon the socio-cultural shift in medical paradigms described earlier by Denny. This change occurred as the result of the closing of the university based gender clinics and the subsequent privatization of trans-specific medical care. Stryker calls this the “decentralization of transgender health-care,” and claims that: “a significant shift [happened] in the organization of transgender health care services in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s” (68).⁴⁶ She explains that, “more transsexuals who presented atypical histories [instead of *the* “plausible history”] or desires [such as being homosexual-identified after transition] were able to get what they wanted for themselves through the personal relationships they established with sympathetic individual psychotherapists” (71).

This consumer-driven model enabled a variety of choices for individuals who could afford access to private care. It also opened new routes of access and allowed a broader range of possible transition trajectories. Anthropologist Anne Bolin elaborates:

Just as clinics were partially responsible for the dichotomization of gender-variant identities through promoting sex-reassignment surgery, their widespread closing in the 1980s facilitated a sociocultural mutation in the social construction of trans[...] identities. [...] The result was] more client centered [care]. Client-centered gender clinics may contribute to greater flexibility in the expression of gender identities (463).⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid. (68, 71)

⁴⁷ Anne Bolin, “Transcending and Transgendering: Male-to-Female Transsexuals, Dichotomy, and Diversity,” *Current Concepts in Transgender Identity* (1998): 63-96. “Client-centered” is a term used in health and human services contexts to indicate as style service provision that is tailored toward each individual client, as opposed to a one-size-

As Irving has compellingly argued, the hidden capitalist ideology of the rehabilitative model of care that promotes “productive” bodies means this shift to consumerist market-driven care requires critique. Notably, this mode relies upon the ability to access capital and mobilize resources that not all individuals can afford, due, for example, to their socioeconomic and/or racial status.

While such a critique of capitalist market economy healthcare is valid, my point is to show that the loosening of restrictive criteria via a client-centered model removed some pre-existing barriers to accessing care and that condition enabled variability. This shift in institutional practice established a context whereby the personal narratives that usually parallel a univocal medical narrative could begin to speak with polyvocal voices; a change in institutional practice resulted in new narrative structures.⁴⁸

Within the space of *My Right Self* we can see and hear Stone’s polyvocality in the featured narratives. A good example is by Val who is a gender norm-challenging subject with a full-beard. Val is a female-birth-assigned person who neither identifies as male or female in any traditional sense. Instead of using binary gender structures, she describes what makes up the “space” of her self through use of language that articulates a radically specific combination of identity, embodiment and narrative structure.

Val explains:

fits-all model that imposes strict protocols of care on every individual without variation. It also indicates that the client/patient has more control over how services are received and utilized.

⁴⁸ I do not mean to suggest it was a shift in the medical paradigm alone that facilitated transgender polyvocality and categorical proliferation. Increased access to medical care in the 1980s United States coincided with other political and cultural changes that were enabled by the category transgender—new social formations, discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, emerged from the political movement that gained full momentum in the 1990s.

My body is a complicated net of tissues and enzymes anchoring my spirit in this world. I don't pretend to understand why or how this works. I do know that my body's shapes, its lengths and folds, are determined by many different patterns. Some of these patterns are imperceptible, like DNA; some are conscious patterns that I can exercise or not. [...] Some of these patterns, transcribed in flesh, are broadly understood to transmit primary and secondary signals of the phenomena known as "gender": my breasts, the shape of my hips and ass and waist, my hands, my lips, my voice, my cunt (n.p.).

Val's eloquent description of the constellation of elements that make up her "self" includes the unseen markers of sex (DNA) and the potentially visible signifiers of gender (breasts, hips, ass, waist, lips and cunt). She also includes her "conscious," whether "exercise[d] or not," gestures of gender such as voice inflection, posture, or hairstyle. She even admits to enacting "unconscious" cues like "flirting" that are often "perceived as a feminine [act of] manipulation." Val also catalogues the "raw state" of her fleshly contour that "sends some signals about gender without me having to do anything." While all of these dimensions of sex, gender and sexuality may not add up to a coherent image for every viewer of the exhibit, they do make sense for Val as a personal assemblage.

Then she goes on to say that

[a]ll these emanations are produced by my body and of my body and are thus representative of myself. And yet, the self that claims the space being represented is androgynous, or even more accurately, is genderless. Androgyny is a portmanteau word of the root words for man and woman, but the me that knows itself does not know gender as two binary polar options that are combined. [...] This self knows a far more complicated story, represented in several dimensions, and in time as well as in space. My body cannot help but be representative of me, for it IS me.

The tone of Val's self-description—presented as a critique of Western binary gender systems—asserts the primacy of her body and the specificity of her embodiment as defining the "me" or the "right self." Yet Val argues that her embodied self is not sufficiently described by the word "androgynous," which is a mere blend of binary-

gendered linguistic structures: “andro” to signify man and “gyn” to signify woman.

Portmanteau words, generally, are constructed from existing linguistic elements that use normative discursive frames, yet they also signal representational excess. “Androgyny,” for example, cannot adequately explain the radical specificity and “myriad alterities” that make up the multi-dimensional space-time being of Val. The mere combining of binary gender terms cannot contain the excesses of Val such that she asserts her right self is, in fact, “genderless.”

All of the sexed and gendered aspects of Val add up to a genderless complex of selfhood that appears to be something of a paradox. Gender/*less* suggests that Val is without gender or, alternately, that there is less gender than meets the eye. But when reading Val’s self-description, and seeing her images, a viewer could potentially be overwhelmed by the sheer *excess* of sexed and gendered signifiers. A female-bodied person with a full beard and non-binary gendered self-presentation is hardly the picture of less gender. As such, when someone claims they are “genderless” this utterance requires translation. Because there is no outside of gender, even as a subject can exist in violation of its laws, genderless beings of Val’s sort show how to inhabit a body and gender identity and/or expression in excess of *normatively* gendered frames of representation. As such, I would argue that Val does not appear as gender *less*, but rather, as gender *more*: more is where the excess is found.

While it is not possible to move outside of gender by exceeding *all* frames of possible representation at the same time, one can surpass particular frames such as the medical model centered on wrong embodiment. Through the exceeding of this frame, one approaches a potentially disturbing representational limit. And this limit-condition of

representation requires an interpretive capacity on the part of a viewer in order to apprehend. The word apprehension suggests an affective state whereby one is poised at the precipice of the radically unknown. The term is understood to mean beholding and also fear, sometimes indicating both simultaneously. To behold a “genderless” being such as Val, for example, means to reach the limit of normatively gendered representation. It means to approach the edge of the abyss of meaning and possibly to experience anxiety or even fear in reaction. Apprehension also means simply to understand: to apprehend is to know or understand something.

As such, Val’s articulation of a “genderless” self might also be because as gender exists now—a binary male/female structure—it is an inadequate frame for understanding her. Like the transgender umbrella that is imagined to have an ever-expanding capacity, the “more” of gender here ultimately points toward a failure of the containment apparatus. In Val’s case, failure leads to sublimity: contrary to being “genderless,” Val’s images and story create the condition for an affectively charged response to interpretive failure characteristic of a transgender sublime.

Gender*More* and Radical Specificity

Trans-identified legal theorist Dean Spade writes about the “more” of gender in a blog post titled “more gender more of the time.” He addresses linguistic structures and gender categories starting with an iteration of Butler’s contention concerning the dual-edged nature of identity formation.⁴⁹ According to Spade:

⁴⁹ Dean Spade, “More Gender More of the Time,” *Makezine*, n.d., <http://makezine.enoughenough.org/bibi.html> (last viewed on 2 October 2011).

Judith Butler once wrote something about how identity categories are both political rallying points, and tools of regulatory regimes. I never get tired of thinking about this—how identity terms are fundamentally strategic, how we can use them to define in opposition [to enforced norms] at any given moment, but how they also include policing powers that are painful and displacing. [...] I am committed to the idea of gender that is about an ever-changing layering of gendered characteristics and perception, not at all about two poles, a continuum, or any boxes. Please don't misunderstand me to be promoting "non-labeling." What I love is specific, detailed, stimulating inventive uses of language to constantly re-inscribe and re-identify body and sex experiences, rather than simplistic terms that shut down conversations about how hot we all really are (n.p.).

Here Spade argues for specificity that allows individuals to inhabit categories and to take up "labels" of identification not to live beyond gender or to be "genderless." Rather, his precise articulation requires *more* not less gender: more terms of identification, more positions within and against the social sphere, and more movement within, across and in excess of normative identity, embodiment and narrative structures. Like Stryker, Spade promotes re-inscription rather than narrative, and subjective, foreclosure. Like Stone, he supports "[e]mergent polyvocalities [...] present at least in potential" that cannot be contained within existing representational frames or discourses.

Spade's conceptualization of radical specificity fits with a transgender sublime that produces myriad specificities out of an excessive proliferation of categories, subjectivities and embodiments. Proliferation thus exceeds the existing frames of representation such that the "more" of gender means each combination of gender identity and embodiment must be understood on its own terms. Along these lines, radical crip and genderqueer poet Eli Claire writes:

All the language we have created—transgender, transsexual, drag queen, drag king, stone butch, high femme, nellie, fairy, bulldyke, he-she, FTM, MTF—places us in relationship to masculine or feminine, between the two, combining the two, moving from one to the other. I'm hungry for an image to describe my gendered self, something more than the shadowland of neither man nor woman, more than a

suspension bridge tethered between negatives. I want a solid ground with bedrock of its own, a language to take me to a brand-new place neither masculine or feminine, day nor night, mortise nor tenon.⁵⁰

In this passage, Claire articulates a version of radical specificity through his yearning statement of negation: it is *not* either side of a binary (man/woman; day/night; mortise/tenon); rather, it is something “solid”—not gender indeterminate or androgynous—and “with bedrock of its own.” So while this is not the only story to be told, it is a story that is radically *specific* to Claire.

Radical specificity, as I am theorizing it, is constituted through use of a particular image and a grounding language that can transport someone, who does not simply live in the shadow of existing binary frames of reference, to “a brand-new place.” This place, as I have suggested, is both collectively multiple and radically specific to each subject, whether they be Spade, Stryker, Stone, Val, Claire, or ... any other. Furthermore, radical specificity pertains to each type of narrative structure such that not all are created equal. This means a wrong body narrative produces limited, and limiting, forms of subjectivity that operate quite differently from a right self model. The latter provides a proliferative space for multiple identifications and embodiment that are not restricted by categorical containment and associated narrative foreclosure.

The “White Coat Card”: Definitional and Narrative Foreclosure

My Right Self includes both stories and images that represent the “more” of gender and the narrative possibilities that exceed the standard medical model. Since it

⁵⁰ Eli Claire, “Gawking, Gaping, Staring,” *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (2003): 260.

presents polyvalent and polyvocal articulations of self and embodiment, it is a good example of a space that enables what Stone describes as “irreducible [...] myriad of alterities, whose unanticipated juxtapositions [...] exceed the frame of any possible representation.” However, as stated, this frame is not *any possible* representation, but rather the frame of the project under analysis.

This frame includes a medical (ethical) education component—a “white coat card” [Figure 18]—that threatens the representational excess of the featured subject’s stories. Specifically, through inclusion of a reductive set of identity definitions on the card, a narrative foreclosure encroaches upon the polyvocality of the stories: it attempts what Jordy Jones, quoted in my previous chapter, termed a “provisional intelligibility.” As an element in an otherwise paradigm-shifting project, it is even more curious as to why *My Right Self* should include a medically reductive containment technique called a “white coat card.”

In healthcare settings, a white coat card includes medically necessary information that a healthcare practitioner can quickly reference, such as the proper treatment protocol for a specific health condition. The card sits in the pocket of a white lab coat and provides easy-to-access standards of care for conditions that a provider might not be familiar with. For example, the white coat card for *My Right Self* includes a section header “Medical Complications” that explains the administration of hormones to “MTF (patients on estrogens)” who “may [be at] increase[d] risk for blood clots,” or “FTM (patients on testosterone)” whereby androgens “can impact cholesterol, liver enzymes, heart disease, acne [and] baldness.”

This information about complications related to hormone use is valuable and necessary to reference in medical settings; in itself, it does not constitute definitional containment or narrative foreclosure. Instead, the project's containment work begins in another section titled "Conceptual Terms" where there exists mutually exclusive definitions for "sex," "gender identity," "gender expression," and "sexual orientation." Notably, the separation of sex and gender criteria into discrete categories mirrors the same imprecise and ever-shifting scientific procedures of differentiation that preoccupied the nineteenth-century sexologists discussed earlier in this chapter.

Appropriately, the section titled "Definitions" produces the most extensive narrative containment via the use of reductive definitional terms of identification. As such, "Definitions" begins with the standard definition of "Transgender," described as "a more recent term referring to gender-variance broadly understood. An umbrella term, it includes the next four terms [transsexual, transvestite, drag queen, genderqueer] as well." Given this reference to an all-inclusive version of transgender defined as an umbrella, the included sub-types appear almost random. For example, "drag queen" is included but not "drag king" or "female/male impersonator." I point this out not to argue for a full inclusion of terms, which is impossible, but rather to highlight that the choice of definitions supplied is unimaginatively limited given the catchall imaginary of the transgender umbrella.⁵¹ As a schematic, this section serves the same function as

⁵¹ "Homosexual" is listed in this section too in order to differentiate between sexual orientation and gender identity. As I argued in chapter one, this is a key differentiation made within a particular transgender political movement particular to the US. For certain individuals this distinction does not hold true, especially for some gender-variant racial minorities in US and gender non-conforming individuals in non-western transnational contexts. An example of the non-separation of (homo)sexuality and gender variance can

Benjamin's S.O.S. diagram; specifically, it accomplishes typification and differentiation. So too, like Benjamin's metric tool, it also fails to achieve the maker's intended definitional precision and clarity.

However, the discursive containment function of the white coat card can best be demonstrated by comparing a term from the card to the narratives produced by the featured subjects. For example, "transsexual" is defined on the card as "a more traditional term typically referring to an individual 'born into the wrong body' who seeks (full) sexual reassignment surgery (i.e., FTM is female-to-male, aka 'trans man')." First, and most obvious, is that this definition relies upon the medical model of wrong embodiment ("born into the wrong body") to define a transsexual identity formation. Second, the definition specifies that such a person "seeks (full) sexual reassignment surgery" and proceeds to offer as an example: "trans man."

If this definition of transsexual is superimposed on the stories of the two people who most closely approximate a "trans male" identity and body, Dane and Jake, we can see a disjuncture between the definition (restrictive) and the personal story (excessive). A read of Jake and Dane's stories reveals that this definition does not even come close to describing either person. Jake, as noted, seems ambivalent about seeking surgery to modify this body—sometimes he feels fine in the body he has and other times he is very self-conscious and uncomfortable within it. He even states that while he does not

be found in the work of Don Kulick. See *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

necessarily want a “penis,” he does want something that appears less “female.” Either way, the idea of “(full) sexual reassignment surgery” does not seem to apply to Jake.⁵² Dane too, although he admits to using hormones and having had top surgery, does not adhere to the wrong body narrative in order to explain his body modification. Instead, Dane claims, that he has “always known [his] body to be enough—and it still is.” In comparing Jake and Dane’s stories to the information on the white coat card we see a disconnection between the articulated excesses of their identities and bodies, and the reductive definition provided. In fact, the definition of transsexual on this card, that includes the wrong body trope, is ironic for a project that uses “right self” in its title.

For individuals like Val, perhaps the included definition of “genderqueer” (i.e., “a non-binary sense of gender identity and refusal of labels”) might be a good fit. Still, taken together, this list of definitions pertaining to sexuality, trans-identity and embodiment starkly contrasts with the way that many of the pictured participants talk about themselves. The card, then, is the antithesis and the negation of the complexly layered and nuanced narratives of selfhood that the project’s participants provide. The subject’s stories are simply not reducible to a handy list of definitions designed for easy reference by a medical provider. Instead, the excess embodiment, identity and gender expression of the personal narratives move beyond easy categorization and definition.

My Right Self stories exist in excess of the representational frame of the project, particularly as they relate to the white coat card. The white coat card, as a medical artifact, reduces the complexly structured articulations of right selfhood to a simplistic

⁵² It is hard to define for a female-to-male person exactly what “full” reassignment means since most FTM-identified individuals do not have what is called “bottom” surgery due to the cost of the procedure, the compromise to their sexual functioning and/or the aesthetically unsatisfactory result.

list of definitions that foreclose upon the narrative excess produced by the participants themselves. On the one hand, the autobiographical stories provide a glimpse of the potentially disorienting polyvocality that, I argue, is associated with transgender sublimity. On the other hand, the project presents a containment device—residual of the medical model—exemplified by orienting definitions that defuse the productive disorientation of excessive narrative structures. As a whole, then, this *My Right Self* harbors an unproductive contradiction by containing a residue of the wrong body containment model.

Working within the organizing framework of my dissertation, the proliferating and radically specific stories of the *My Right Self* establish the conditions for transgender sublimity. The sublime possibility of narratives produced in relation to embodied excess, as I have previously argued, has a Deleuzian rhizomatic and unanticipated quality not reducible to medically sanctioned narrative structures and taxonomic or definitional containment strategies. If the medical model is productive of and reinforced by a wrong body trope that ultimately suppresses the sublimely polyvocal excess of trans-identity and embodiment, then re-inscriptions such as those produced by Stryker, Val or Claire, for example, are the antidote to narrative foreclosure.

The examples cited in this chapter demonstrate the myriad ways that gender can manifest as radically specific, mobile and above all polyvalent. I am not suggesting that Stryker, Stone, Spade, Val or Claire “get it right” and all other configurations of gender, identity, embodiment and discursive framing are wrong. There is no particular narrative utterance related to identity and embodiment that is entirely wrong or any other structure that is entirely right. Rather, the point is that individuals should not be limited by fixed

and rigid structures such that the “more” of gender, exemplified by Stone’s polyvocal discursive excess, is sacrificed at the altar of a narrative structure designed to foreclose all others.

The way toward becoming a right self, unlike simply being in a wrong body, is through multiplicity, radical specificity and self-narration. A right self also indicates a larger body that is simultaneously collective and open to the processes of proliferation, becoming and change. These narrative structures produced by polyvocal excess create conditions that are ripe for the resignifying and transfiguring potential of transgender sublimity. The result of such narrative excess, polyvocal discursivity, multiple subjectivities, and radical specificity of identity and embodiment is the potential to create new subjectivities and alternate worlds. Such subjectivities and worlds, unlike those produced by the wrong body model, offer many more individuals a chance for a future. In fact, new subjectivities leading to alternate worlds create a habitable future precisely because the future is unknown instead of delimited and foreclosed.

Possible Futures/Possible Wor(l)ds: A Politics of Transgender Sublimity

Jay Prosser’s “No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*”⁵³ is a text engaged with issues of narrative structure and transsexual autobiography. In this article, Prosser contends that queer theory misrecognizes trans-sexed subjects as the epitome of sex/gender performativity and transgression. Instead of re-embodiment being emblematic of gender transgression, he alternately proposes a theory, based on transsexual autobiography, of the subject

⁵³ Jay Prosser, “No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 483.

achieving a stably embodied “home.” In Prosser’s account, forward narrative movement is really a backward one since the subject has been there (home) the whole time in the sense of knowing oneself to be wrongly embodied. This is encapsulated in the classic “I always knew I was a boy/girl trapped in the wrong body” utterance. Thus, the stable and locatable body of the individual transsexual is verified by its affect—a felt sense of having always been in the wrong body.

Like the schematics and narrative structures based on containment previously discussed in this dissertation, Prosser’s theory circumvents the proliferative excess of transgender sublimity by privileging the closed narrative structure of a transsexual homecoming to a “real” (material) body. Prosser’s wrong body trope, as a fixed and identity-fixing narrative structure, subtends the many possible, but heretofore unknown, identities, embodiments, worlds and futures. According to critic Lucas Crawford, “Prosser’s defense of the wrong-body narrative runs the risk not only of settling on just one definition of ‘right’ trans affect, but also of figuring affect as an extremely personal phenomenon that has very little to do with others, or with places outside of one’s (embodied) home” (132).⁵⁴ Crawford thus critiques Prosser’s privileging of a singular narrative structure, the story of a nostalgic return to embodied realness, because it cannot generate forms of affect that enable other subjectivities, interpersonal relations and the imagining of alternate worlds. Indeed, these are not simply worlds of one or worlds inhabited only by those who share the same gender transition narrative: these are worlds in the process of becoming.

⁵⁴ Lucas Cassidy Crawford, “Transgender Without Organs? Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 127-143.

Crawford's Deleuzian inspired response to Prosser usefully distinguishes between *feeling* as that which holds someone in place and *affect* as that which moves us. Crawford emphasizes affect over feeling in order to get away from the nostalgic going home to a stably located body. Feeling nostalgic for a wrong body made right contracts in upon its self, whereas the affect Crawford proposes propels someone into an unknown future of identity, embodiment, social relations and world making. It is affect that simultaneously moves a subject and generates movement—of gender transitioning and also in terms of politics. Affect for Crawford thus enables unknown and unknowable, yet open, futures; and such unknown yet possible futures depend upon the narrative re-imagining of alternate worlds.⁵⁵

Butler is helpful in this regard when she talks in *Undoing Gender* of “the critical promise of fantasy” (29). Fantasy is not so much a narrative account of the unreal as it is the positing of the thinkable possibilities that challenge the “real.” It enables new narrative structures (and futures) and challenges normative discursive constructs such as Prosser's nostalgic return home transition narrative. Butler argues for the critical promise of fantasy by saying that while it can “move [...] us beyond what is merely actual and present into the realm of possibility” (*Undoing Gender* 28), such possibility is also

⁵⁵ When I reference the idea of alternate world making that counters dominant discursive and social practices, gender norms and forms of embodiment, I am following Berlant and Warner's notion of a “queer counterpublic.” The authors contend they are “trying to promote [a] world-making project” based on the notion of a queer counterpublic defined as “[...that which] constitutes itself in many ways other than through the official publics of opinion culture and the state, or through privatized forms normally associated with sexuality.” They go on to explain that such a world concerns “intimacies” (e.g., sexual practices and dynamics of relationality) that are non-dominant. Based on subjugated forms of intimacy, this is “an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation [to normative social relations, forms of sexuality and embodiments].” Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 558.

vulnerable to foreclosure: “[t]he foreclosure of fantasy—through censorship, degradation, or other means—is one strategy for providing for the social death of persons. Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses” (29). In a sense, then, fantasy does not represent something impossible or unachievable or even unreal, rather, it is only what is socially *deemed* impossible or unreal within existing relations of power.

In the context of this chapter, the re-imagining of worlds via fantasy represents horizons of possibility that extend beyond those realities which have already been framed and foreclosed upon by traditional medical or transsexual autobiographical imaginaries. As Butler states, such horizons of possibility are not luxuries but necessities, especially for people struggling simply to be recognized within hegemonic social structures.

Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent.

[...] The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity (23, 31).

Butler’s use of fantasy in this passage not meant to imply a fairy tale-like story, something that is made-up and impossible or unreal. Although, as I have argued in relation to Morris’s memoir sometimes the creation of fairy tales can aid in the imagining of possibilities that might otherwise be unthinkable. However, the potentiating sense of fantasy Butler describes is *already* present as the unthinkable excess within—and extending beyond—existing frames of representation. As such, fantasy is a readily available enabling force that can lead to all manners of becoming.

A good example of Butler’s notion of fantasy can be seen in *My Right Self*, especially if we look past the containment and foreclosure of the white coat card. Despite

this elements of containment, the project as a whole has altered the normative medical and autobiographical frames of representation in order to provide a space for seemingly fantastical stories of self, identity and embodiment to be told. Together, the stories and images constitute a multi-layered collage that allows for radical specificities of identity to be articulated in juxtaposition with other, and different, narratives. These stories, if considered together, move beyond the foreclosures enacted by reductive containment-based narrative structures.

Articulated fantasy in the context of *My Right Self* demonstrates that it *is* possible to make use of the sublimely proliferative excess that extends beyond the conventional boundaries of what is considered real. Moving toward a politics of transgender sublimity means promoting these vital conditions of possibility—as the ground for emerging forms of subjectivity—that challenge existing social categories and identity formations. In this way, a transgender sublime exemplified by fantastical, polyvocal excess conditions the material of which alternate words and worlds are imagined.

Appendix A: Slides of Needs Assessment Studies for Chapter Two

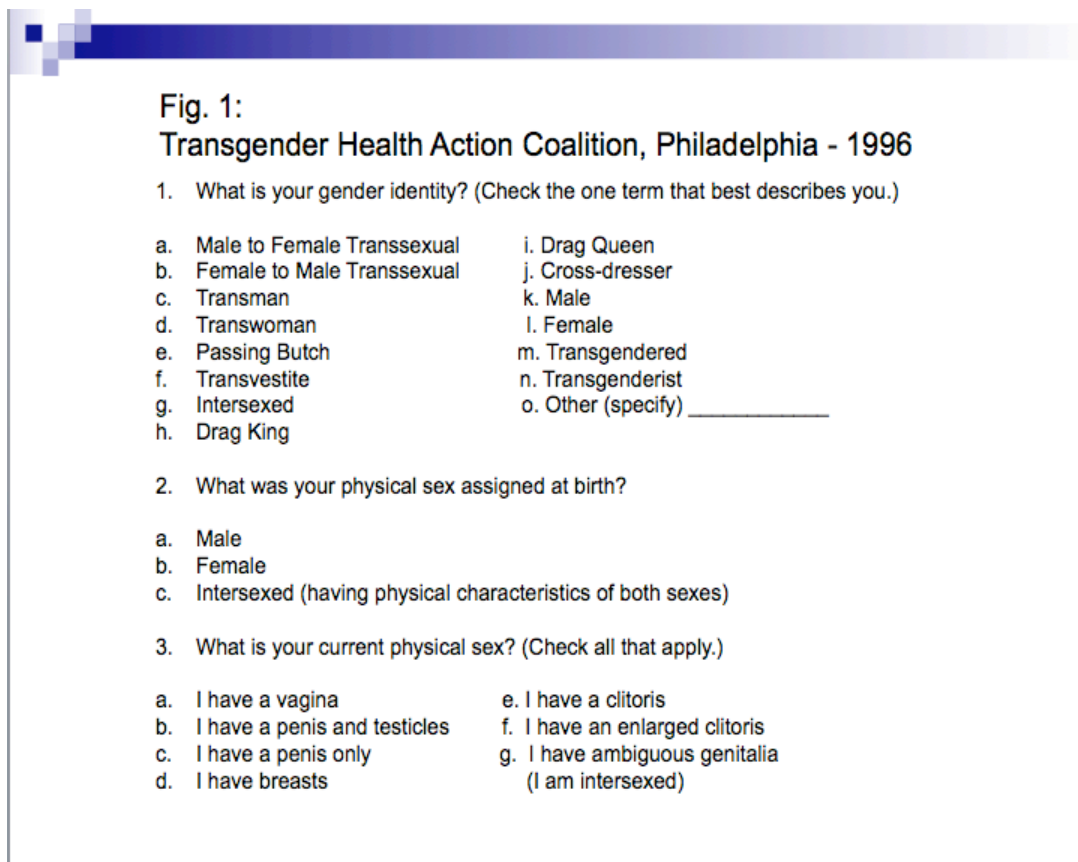


Fig. 1:
Transgender Health Action Coalition, Philadelphia - 1996

1. What is your gender identity? (Check the one term that best describes you.)

a. Male to Female Transsexual	i. Drag Queen
b. Female to Male Transsexual	j. Cross-dresser
c. Transman	k. Male
d. Transwoman	l. Female
e. Passing Butch	m. Transgendered
f. Transvestite	n. Transgenderist
g. Intersexed	o. Other (specify) _____
h. Drag King	

2. What was your physical sex assigned at birth?

- Male
- Female
- Intersexed (having physical characteristics of both sexes)

3. What is your current physical sex? (Check all that apply.)

a. I have a vagina	e. I have a clitoris
b. I have a penis and testicles	f. I have an enlarged clitoris
c. I have a penis only	g. I have ambiguous genitalia
d. I have breasts	(I am intersexed)

Figure 6

Fig. 2:
Washington DC Transgender Needs Assessment Survey
(WTNAS) - 1999

1. Your physical sex at birth was (Check ONE):

- a. Male
- b. Female
- e. Intersexed - Assigned Male
- f. Intersexed - Assigned Female
- g. Intersexed (no sex assigned)

2. Your present gender identity is (Check ONE):

- a. Man
- b. Woman
- e. Transgender
- d. Androgynous
- e. Questioning

Fig. 3
Washington DC Transgender Needs Assessment Survey (WTNAS)
"Anatomy Inventory"

22. What is your body's current physical status? (Check ALL that apply):

- | | | | |
|---|-------|---|-----|
| a) I have a vagina | _____ | Surgically constructed? | Y/N |
| b) I have FTM genitalia | _____ | Hormonally enlarged? | Y/N |
| | | Surgically constructed (phallo-plasty)? | Y/N |
| | | Surgically constructed (metaoidioplasty)? | Y/N |
| | | Surgically constructed (testicular implants)? | Y/N |
| | | Surgically altered (suspensory ligament release)? | Y/N |
| | | Surgically altered (vaginectomy only)? | Y/N |
| c) I have a penis | _____ | | |
| d) I have testicles | _____ | | |
| e) I have a clitoris | _____ | Surgically constructed? | Y/N |
| | | Surgically altered? | Y/N |
| f) I have breasts | _____ | Through hormone therapy? | Y/N |
| | | Through silicone injections? | Y/N |
| | | Surgically implanted? | Y/N |
| | | Surgically reduced but not removed? | Y/N |
| | | Naturally grown? | Y/N |
| g) I have ovaries | _____ | | |
| h) I have a uterus | _____ | | |
| i) I have mixed sex characteristics (I am intersexed) | _____ | | |

Figure 7 (above) and 8

Fig. 4
New York Department of Health HIV Planning Unit - 1999

Identity: The following section asks questions about your gender and sexual identity.

18. How did medical professionals assign your sex at birth?
 Male ____ Female ____ Intersex/hermaphrodite ____ Don't know ____
19. What gender role did your guardians raise you?
 Male ____ Female ____ Intersex ____
20. What word best describes your primary gender role today?
 Male ____ Female ____ Intersex ____ None of these ____
21. What is your legal sex today?
 Male ____ Female ____

Fig. 5
New York Department of Health HIV Planning Unit – 1999

22. Please circle the number(s) of terms that describe your gender identity:

1. Transgender
 - 1.a. non-operative (I choose not to have surgery)
 - 1.b. pre-operative (I have plans to have surgery, but I haven't yet)
 - 1.c. partial-operative (I have had some surgery)
 - 1.d. post-operative (I have completed 'SRS' surgery)
2. Transexual
 - 2.a. non-operative (I choose not to have surgery)
 - 2.b. pre-operative (I have plans to have surgery, but I haven't yet)
 - 2.c. partial-operative (I have had some surgery)
 - 2.d. post-operative (I have completed 'SRS' surgery)
3. Drag King
4. Transvestite
5. Cross-Dresser
6. Male
7. FTM (female-to-male)
8. Bi-gendered/Third gender
9. Intersex
10. Drag Queen
11. Female
12. MTF
13. Other _____

(If you choose more than one number, please put a check next to your primary choice)

Fig. 6
New York City Survey of MTFs (draft) - 2005

How did medical professionals assign your sex at birth?

1. Male
2. Female
3. Intersex/hermaphrodite
4. Don't know

[IF NOT MALE, R IS NOT ELIGIBLE FOR THE STUDY]

Do you currently see yourself as "male" in most situations?

0. No
1. Yes

[IF YES, R IS NOT ELIGIBLE FOR THE STUDY]

Fig. 7
George Washington University - "Young Men who have Sex with Men" (YMSM) Study - 2007

What sex were you at birth?

1. Female
2. Male
3. Other, specify
4. Don't know
5. Declined

What is your current gender identity...(Circle all that apply)?

1. Male
2. Female
3. Transgender
4. Transsexual
5. Genderqueer
6. Realness
7. Butch queen
8. Femme queen
9. Trannie
10. Intersex, specify
11. Crossdresser
12. Other, specify _____
13. Don't know
14. Declined

Appendix B: Images for Chapter 3

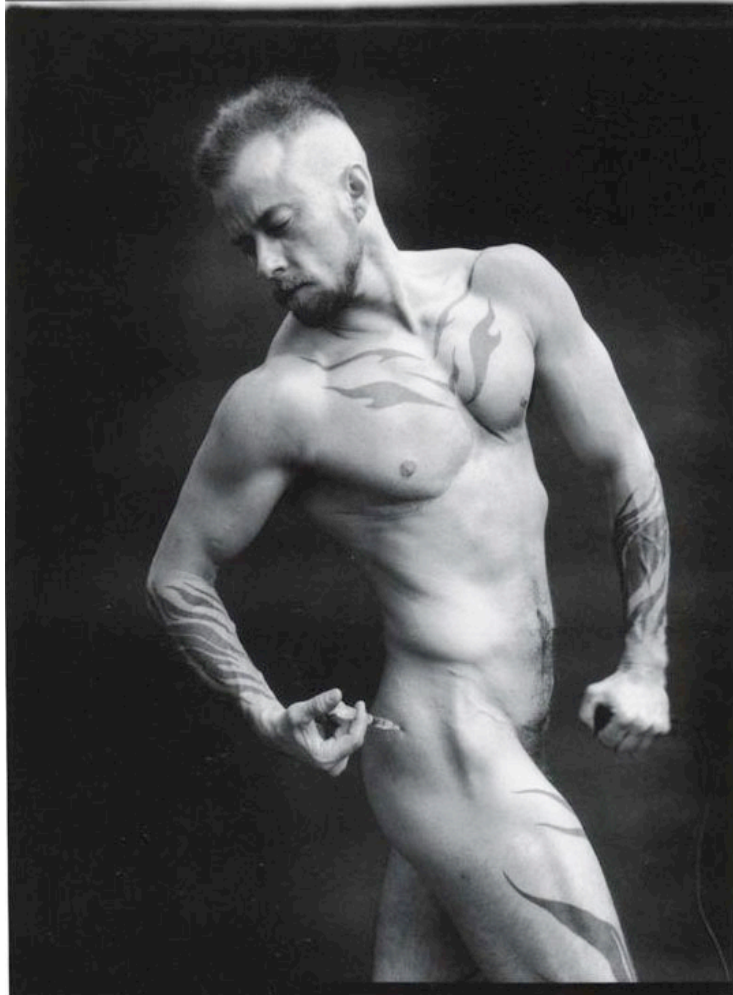


Figure 13

Loren Cameron, "God's Will" ©1995 from *Body Alchemy*
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Printed by permission of the artist.



Figure 14

Loren Cameron, "Carney" ©1995 from *Body Alchemy*
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Printed by permission of the artist.

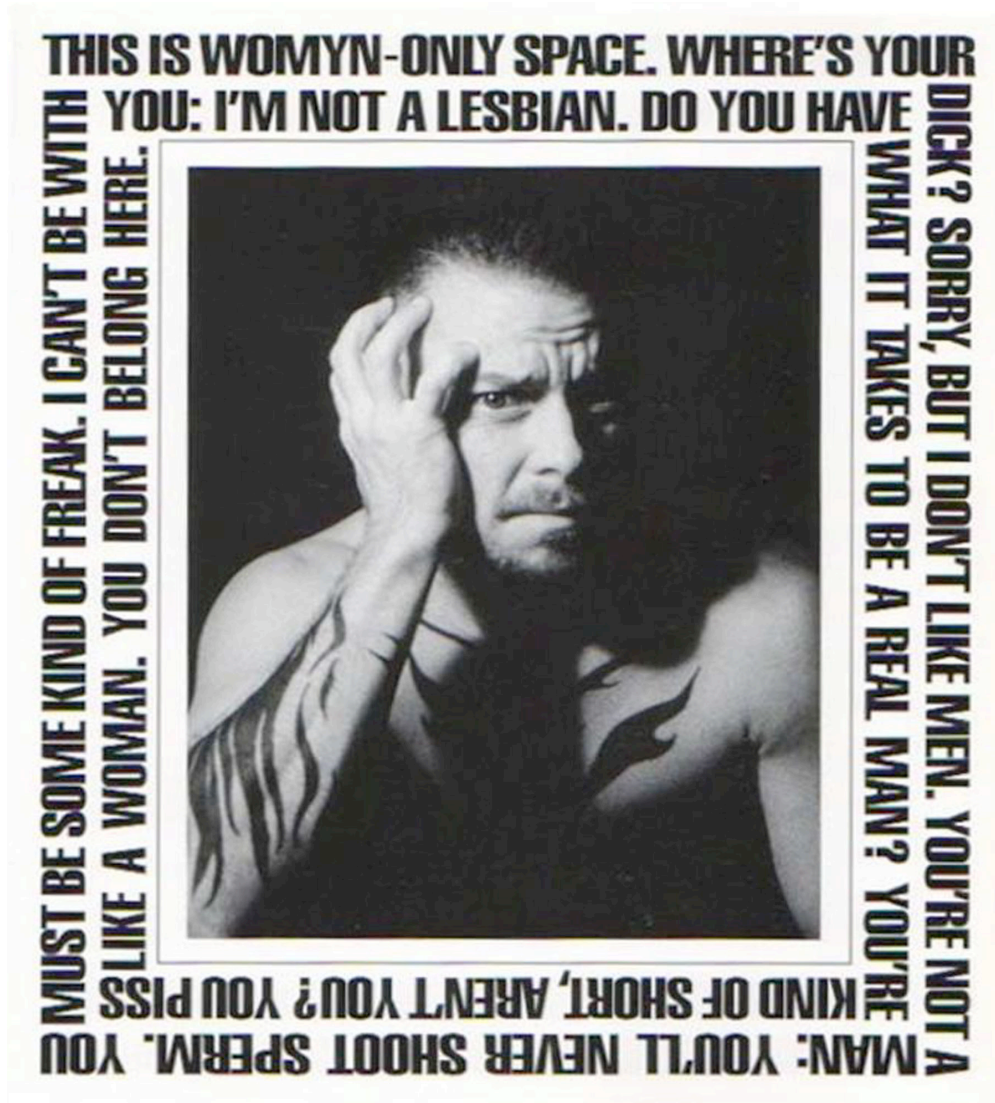


Figure 15

Loren Cameron, Third image of triptych "Distortions" ©1994 from *Body Alchemy*
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 Printed by permission of the artist.



Figure 16

Loren Cameron, "Mister" ©2005

All Rights Reserved

Printed by permission of the artist.



Figure 17

Del LaGrace Volcano, "Transcock 1" ©1994
From TransGenital Landscapes Series, *Sublime Mutations*

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Appendix C: White Coat Card for Chapter 4

Transgender Considerations: White Coat Card

Conceptual Terms

Sex: An identity, derived from anatomical or biologic features

Gender Identity: An identity, derived from the individual's internal sense of gender.

Gender Expression: Behaviors, derived from the individual's gender identity.

Sexual Orientation/Preference: An identity, referring to the individual's internal sense of sexual attraction toward others based on their gender and sex.

Definitions

Transgender- a more recent term referring to gender-variance broadly understood. An umbrella term, it includes the next four terms as well.

Transsexual- a more traditional term typically referring to an individual "born in the wrong body" who seeks (full) sexual reassignment surgery (ie: FTM is female-to-male, aka "trans man").

Transvestite- refers to a sexual fetish whereby a man/woman dresses in women's/men's clothing for sexual arousal.

Drag Queen- a male drag performer with entertainment or sociopolitical connotations.

Genderqueer- relates to a non-binary sense of gender identity and refusal of labels that may or may not involve sexual orientation.

Homosexual- refers to sexual orientation/sexual preference and is independent of gender identity. Trans individuals may be bi-, hetero-, homosexual, or use any other descriptor for their orientation.

Medical Complications

MTF (patients on estrogens): may increase the risk of blood clots (esp. if other risk factors)

FTM (patients on testosterone): can impact cholesterol, liver enzymes, heart disease, acne, baldness

Inpatient setting: patients should be maintained on hormone therapy unless there is a contraindication.

References and more information provided at:
www.MyRightSelf.org/booklet

Figure 18

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- 2004 "An Overview of U.S. Trans Health Priorities: A Report by the Eliminating Health Disparities Working Group." Co-authored with Jessica Xavier, Donald Hitchcock, et al. National Coalition for LGBT Health, Washington, D.C. (August 2004).
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