

Trans(subject)formations: Feminist Healthcare, Medicalized Life Narratives, and Why I'm a Trans Feminist

By Dylan McCarthy Blackston

Introduction

"You're a straight man now, right?"

Oh, hell no.

"Why, as a man, are you wearing a shirt that says, Protect Women's Health?"

A. My gender is far more complicated than you, stranger, realize.

B. Women, a majority of the population, receive inadequate health care, threatened access to certain health care procedures, and generally seek health care less because their schedules are often built around work and providing family care. Furthermore, when women (not surprisingly) cannot make ends meet or be present for certain events because of complex expectations of their time, they are blamed for their inadequacies as mothers, workers, and caretakers.

I concern myself with these problems because women do matter and because I, as a feminist, can see no other way of ethically functioning in the world. "So, you're gay, right? You act gay." Ummm, sure. "There's still something that's un-man about you; you'd never pass as a man." Thank you. I no longer desire to pass as any specific gender. However, I do not think you are paying me a compliment. Rather, I believe you are implying that my position in the world will never be normative embodied in an intelligible way, or meaningful in its fluidity.

These are real questions I have gotten from feminists, some of whom knew I am trans and some of whom did not. For me, participation in certain feminist spaces has been wrought with conflict. That being said, I have also felt my way into and out of certain trans “communities”¹ because I found, in moments, they lacked a clearly articulated, feminist statement on how gender systemically structures our everyday lives. Put simply, I have found that medically transitioned people, including myself, are often placed at the top of a constructed trans hierarchy. This is especially unsettling for me as a feminist who finds such hierarchies completely counter to playing with and deconstructing gender in order to understand some of the manners by which it dramatically structures our experiences. While some feminists have historically excluded transpeople from groups by using language such as, “You lack a woman’s experience,” for transwomen, or, “You copped out,” for transmen, feminism has also functioned, in meaningful ways, to make other versions of gender intelligible in a binaristic system. This is not to say that the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for trans identity. After all, parts of the movement functioned to stymie butch/femme representation and burgeoning trans visibility. Contrastingly, in much of trans identity politics today, there is an often overt linearity expected of trans people. This is occurring at the same time that academics employ a queer framework to analyze how identity categories can enable exclusionary politics.

Trans(subject)formations

¹ Throughout the paper, I use quotation marks around the word communities to indicate a discomfort with the word. Because this paper attempts to explore non-linear narratives of trans lives, assuming there is one community of trans people with one unified story counters my hope of figuring multiple forms of trans embodiment and trans subjectivities into and against dominant narratives of trans-ness.

I state all of this to provide some background for how genderqueer and trans-identified people often have complex relationships to both feminism and trans identity politics. This only reiterates how deeply intertwined feminism, trans studies, and queer theory are. Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation is infused with notions of synchronous hailing and subject formation. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," he notes that individuals are always-already subjects (Althusser, 2008, p. 46) as they are born into ideological structures that will constantly "hail" them to comply with their orienting path. Even in utero, fetuses are granted subjectivities as girls or boys. Thus, from birth, individuals are hailed by the family ideological state apparatus to become the subjects they already are (Althusser, 2008, p. 50). However, this simultaneous hailing and subject formation must be questioned in the case of queer subjects; specifically those whose gender is reformulated after they are born. Pointed in specific directions by Ideological State Apparatuses such as family, school, or religious institutions, queer subjects are pushed to recognize certain hails that they in turn, defy through disidentification with normative media, gender expressions, and sexual interest and/or behavior. However, queer subjects whose gender is redefined beyond birth also respond to normative hails originating from within their self-formed families and peer networks. These hails are often more challenging to defy insofar as they are produced within one's supposedly non-normative "community." Yet, the gendered hails originating from within a queer individual's "community" are still alternately formulated and the subjects formed remain non-normative bodies. Therefore, it is critical to imagine ways by which trans subjects can and do take agentive, feminist

action against normalizing hails in order to inhabit yet-to-be determined subject positions and forms of embodiment.

By analyzing the first meeting of an Atlanta, Georgia-based trans group, I begin an exploration of how the hails of multiple ideologies often fail to interpolate queer individuals into heteronormative subjects. Conversely, I analyze how genderqueers have been pushed by ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) as well as their own “communities” to medically transition in order to adequately orient themselves toward fulfilment—albeit only partial fulfilment—of certain ideological expectations. Analysis of this meeting will be layered with an analysis of Feminist Women’s Health Center’s Trans Health Initiative,² including its overall purpose and mission as well as its function within and against normatively gendered subject formation for trans individuals.

With regard to the normative hails from ISAs and trans ‘communities,’ I will employ Jasbir Puar’s theorization of the homonational subject to explore how the medically transitioned subject, even when seeking totally normative gender expression, still remains a non-normative body. Furthermore, Saba Mahmood’s theoretical exploration of “uncoupling the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 14) is useful to this analysis because she suggests multiplying the ways that agency is represented. She pushes for removing the concept that agency can only be achieved through resistance (the progressive model) and instead looks to ethics—especially in their local-ness and particularity—for help (Mahmood, 2005). When her

² Feminist Women’s Health Center is located in Atlanta, Georgia. For more information, see www.feministcenter.org

theory is compared to medicalized transgenderism, the ties to enlightenment thought and liberal subjecthood are apparent.

At its core, the concept of transgender as a pathology based upon gender dysphoria and subsequent healing through medicalized transition conjures notions of freedom through transition. Simply put, the hormone-taking, surgically altered subjects might be considered “free” or “healed.” Their post-transition bodies are seen to medically match their mind and, to some degree, they are granted agency as the correctly gendered subject. However, as will be discussed later, the subject that results from this ‘healing’ is still only an almost-citizen subject. Furthermore, Mahmood (2005) argues that not everyone has the same (or any) desire to be free (p.10). She notes that ideals of the liberal subject are deeply imbricated with existential thought inasmuch as both suggest that individuals can overcome all obstacles, throw off restraints and seek transcendence (Mahmood, 2005, p. 7). This transcendence for the transgender subject would be synonymous with freeing oneself by medically transitioning and thus enabling body to match mind. The dominant discourse is that transpeoples’ minds/hearts do not match their bodily morphologies. Yet, in attempting to decouple agency from resistance in her discussion of women’s involvement in the piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood provides an opening for other versions of agency. Mahmood (2005) suggests that because history and culture are not fixed and thus reactions to and acceptance of historical and cultural practices are not fixed, one cannot assume that agency, generally, or how individuals can be and are agentive in their actions is fixed either (p.14). Using this idea as a framework, I explore how presenting a singular, dominant narrative of trans bodies,

particularly as our bodies relate to medical transition, leaves out the multifarious gender experiences that trans people articulate in order to create new forms of agency. In short, it is a fallacy to suggest that one narrative or one form of agency is universally applicable.

Trans Double Bind

I began periodically volunteering with the Feminist Women's Health Center's Trans Health Initiative (THI) in early 2011. I was interested in seeing how trans healthcare could be safely and kindly provided. When I began hormone replacement therapy, I did not have health insurance and the THI did not exist. I had a very difficult time finding care, let alone quality care. In fact, I know very few people who had an adequate first experience with a healthcare provider once the discussion of hormone replacement therapy was broached. Indeed, just receiving any general healthcare as a genderqueer person is ridiculously challenging and often differently formidable if one has medically transitioned. Furthermore, while I had support from my friend-family, some of whom were facing similar struggles with gender and healthcare, I found that my stance on the needs of my body was often at-odds with a faction of people who called themselves gay or feminist. While volunteering at the Feminist Women's Health Center (FWHC), I found a different type of feminist and trans healthcare. For example, though trans patients are often trained to act unwavering in their decision to medically transition in order to get the diagnosis they need to receive hormones, the care I witnessed FWHC provided openings for patients to ask questions, even if those questions contained hesitations and concerns. It is incredible that this type of conversational care is considered a radical

approach to healthcare, but frankly it is radical in comparison to the care trans people are likely to receive at many other clinics.

Through my volunteer experiences and my general interest, I began to participate in more trans-specific events, such as attendance at community gatherings relating to trans healthcare. One of the first meetings I attended as a THI volunteer was organized by a new Atlanta trans group. Rather than providing information about the services their organizations provided and the activism in which they were engaged, the central focus of the meeting quickly shifted to a space for sharing personal narratives about not receiving adequate healthcare or not receiving acceptance from the gay community. Furthermore, with the exception of a couple of staunchly self-identified feminists, almost all of the speakers made medical transition into an expected step for all transpeople without regard to other needs. Herein lies a double bind for trans people. On the one hand, these spaces enable information sharing and the capacity to voice grievances about the availability of healthcare, even in its liberal formations. On the other hand, there is a false unity with regard to the healthcare that trans people are seeking, thus disabling a broader discussion of other ways in which trans people are excluded from care.

Without becoming excessively critical, I should note that I believe this type of rhetoric to be counterproductive to what José Esteban Muñoz considers the opportunity that many queer people take to “tactically misrecognize the hails of dominant ideology” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 168). He states, “Disidentification permits the subject of ideology to contest the

interpellations of the dominant ideology” (Muñoz, 1999, 168-169). But this resistance to expected interpellations is more than a contestation to dominant ideology through alternate interpellations; rather, it is splitting the dominant hail from subject formation by queering not just the type of subject one becomes, but also when the individual becomes that subject. Put into simpler terms, genderqueer subjects, though always-already subjects to ideology, tactically resist ideology’s total control over the timing of their gender formations.

For example, if an infant is identified as female at birth and is subsequently hailed to become what she was already identified as prior to her birth (referencing sonogram technology), she has already been oriented in a specific direction. Sara Ahmed explores the family line of son replicating father by analyzing the hopeful utterance of “Look, there is a little John and a little Mark!” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 83). Ahmed (2006) states, “Through the utterance, these non-yet-but-to-be subjects are ‘brought into line’ by being ‘given’ a future that is ‘in line’ with the family line” (p. 83). She is speaking in phenomenological terms about the straight line that forecloses the future by naturalizing the past. By producing a naturalized past and a foreclosed future via the straight line, any derivation from the line is read as queer. Thus the queer person “can only ... be read as the source of injury: a sign of the failure to repay the debt of life by becoming straight” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 91). Even more importantly, there are certain time and spatial implications of following a slanted rather than a straight line.

The straightening effects of gendered hails can be re-read as spaces for different turns. If one does not respond correctly and as a result does not become correctly oriented toward normative gender, one becomes a queer body with endless directions in which one can turn (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107). If the queer body does not respond correctly, then ideology's control over the future is not a given fact. Let us say that the female child mentioned above deviates from the straight path and decides to embody what would be considered, by normative culture, masculine traits, masculine comportment, and masculine dress. Furthermore, let us say that she decides to identify as a gay man named Roger. Then, let us say that Roger decides to perform as a woman in high-femme fashion in his local gay bar's drag performances. In the end, is Roger correctly gendered? Is he back on the straight path? No, he is not. If one of feminism's main tenets is to question why certain gendered bodies are required to participate in specific naturalized gendered roles, it seems that transgender bodies would inevitably be a part of this model of self-determination.

Correct Information: The Regulation of Truth and Time

It should be noted that many health care providers and community groups alike attempt to provide "correct information" to trans people. While this information is frequently needed and incredibly well-intentioned, providing "correct information" often simply means providing correct information about medical transition. It is clear that the effects of dominant gendered ideology are intense and constant. However, the push and pull of trans subjects to conform to society's gender normative behavior and appearance should not be furthered by people who have found access to healthcare and safety just as difficult. Through this narrative, a new gender hierarchy has been created, one that

promotes a linear trajectory to gendered self-formation through medical transition. This hierarchy has formed a new ideological expectation where a trans individual is hailed into becoming a 'real' man or a 'real' woman through medical transition and, as a result, is following a newly formulated version of straight time.³ The top of the hierarchy becomes the surgically altered, hormone-taking subject. Are certain feminist theorizations of gender, particularly those that explore gender as wholly constructed and fluid in representation, elided to create a singular trans life narrative?

I do not mean to imply that a personal decision to medically transition is negative. After all, to say that it is wholly negative would be to imply that I have made a bad decision by choosing to medically transition. These decisions are much more complex than that. To the contrary, alternate gender expressions and behaviors should come in all forms. It is disturbing, however, when these myriad expressions and behaviors are expected to comply with a newly formulated, though equally exclusive and linear, path that does not leave room for multiplicity and imagination. The agentic particularities that accompany altered interpellation or "tactical misrecognition" (Muñoz, 1999) of heteronormative hails should not be reinstated by a group of transpeople or health care providers attempting to provide "correct information." It counters the communal functions available through "tactical misrecognition" (Muñoz, 1999). Moreover, personal narratives and healthcare providers who present 'correct information' of medical transition are discursively reconfigured to universally represent the trans "community" story. This reconfiguration

³ For more information regarding straight time, refer to the writings of J. Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Elizabeth Freeman.

does not conflict with the dominant discourse, but rather supports the claim that transgender is an illness that is only 'healed' once body matches mind.

Queer Time, Real Bodies, and Feminism

Because trans people are more likely to have different histories than they are perceived to have had (e.g. a transman who is expected to have had a 'normal' boyhood), time is altered, re-worked, and shows dynamic qualities that do not perpetuate the circulation of the same normative histories. There is an interesting divide here with regard to the 'realness' of the material body and the hope of queerness. For example, Gayle Salamon (2010) notes that many trans theorists have asserted that the trans self is formed through a dismissal of social construction's gendered ideologies (p. 74-75). Salamon (2010) claims that these theorists argue that social construction is only able to formulate normative bodies (p. 75). To the contrary, this is assuming that the self is constructed outside of ideologies or dysphorically functioning beyond ideologies, which is certainly untrue (Salamon, 2010, p. 75). Furthermore, the ability to formulate a gendered self outside of genders' ideologies while still being interpellated through other ideologies (e.g. race- or class- specific hails) seems to be a separation too stark to deal with a messy lived subjectivity (Salamon, 2010, p. 100). Lastly, stating that one can construct one's gender completely outside of ideology dismisses the hope of "becoming" and presupposes that gender can become "set" through complacently defined transnormative linearity. The word transnormativity could thus be filled in for homonormativity in Lisa Duggan's statement, "complacency is the affect of homonormativity" (Duggan, 2009, p. 280). Having hope could thus be a defiance of the

complacency that beds itself with linear medical transition — a model that ignores ‘sideways’ (Duggan citing Stockton) notions of multiple trans subjectivities which could be useful in activist struggles.

It seems that some trans people simultaneously reject ideology’s expected gender representations while also accepting that there is linearity to transition where the end result is to alternately fit into heteronormative expectations of gender. However, insomuch as it is expected of all genderqueer people to perform the same actions to be considered correctly trans (and healed), I consider this rejection part of a more dominant transnormative path that is counterproductive to the agentive capacities that “tactical misrecognition” (Muñoz, 1999) could provide. Transnormativity, therefore, allies itself with a stagnant identity defined primarily through medical interventions. But these interventions, on the individual and communal level, can certainly be ethically and critically examined through a feminist lens. Medicalized gender transition coupled with a feminist stance that understands gender to be a primary locus of oppression and privilege can provide alternate formations of the trans-feminist subject.

Healthcare and Identity

Jasbir Puar states, “Intersectionality privileges naming, visibility, epistemology, representation, and meaning, while assemblage underscores feeling, tactility, ontology, affect, and information” (Puar, 2005, p. 128). The aforementioned Roger (our queer subject) does not necessarily have a constantly fluctuating ontology, but rather, one that can fluctuate. His subject formations are not contingent upon correct responses to

gendered hails. Rather, the queer subject, Roger, is queered from multiple directions and thus has been formed by hails that are not “separable analytics” such as race, gender, or class. Instead, he is formed by a confluence and dissipation of “time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (Puar, 2005, p. 127-128). This brings Butler’s theory of performativity (Butler, 1990) to the fore as well as Foucault’s attack of the repressive hypothesis (Foucault, 1978) inasmuch as ideology is not only repressive, but also produces performative acts that are agentic as well as discourse-altering. I am drawing from these three scholars and converging their theories to assert that the queer subject who embodies this confluence and ephemerality is agentic through performative enacted responses to ideologies’ hails from all directions.

The Trans Health Initiative, which specifically provides care to trans/intersex people who were deemed female as infants, does not require the letter⁴ from patients in order to prescribe testosterone. As Chloe Kupfer, Trans Health Initiative Coordinator at Feminist Women’s Health Center, states:

Requiring a letter would make therapists the gatekeepers for HRT [hormone replacement therapy], requiring many clients to follow difficult and sometimes dangerous guidelines. The THI program respects the fluidity of gender identity and expression, and rejects the notion that one must live within their ‘gender,’ which often means conforming to binary, social norms, for a period of time. (SEWSA presentation)

Kupfer goes on to note that mental healthcare professionals can provide excellent services for transpeople facing a variety of issues, including societal pressure and abuse that result from their gender expressions. However, it is my assertion that the

⁴ The “letter” refers to the letter from a therapist that many trans patients in the U.S. are expected to obtain prior to being allowed to begin hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

Trans Health Initiative—by recognizing the terror, impossibility, and extreme participation in a gender binary that accompanies being asked by a therapist to pass a “real life test”⁵ —is taking a huge step toward radicalizing linear transition. After all, how is the “real life test” real? What is more real about inhabiting that particular form of embodiment than inhabiting one’s pathologized, dysphoric body? It should be noted that the care that FWHC provides is enabled through a feminist understanding of gender, not through the exclusion of feminist thought. By functioning under an informed-consent model rather than requiring a letter, Feminist Women’s Health Center acknowledges the monetary struggles associated with multiple therapist visits and also, in many ways, depathologizes care by removing barriers put in place to prevent trans people from making decisions about their own bodies.

Conclusion

Althusser makes it clear that individuals are always being hailed by ideologies to become correctly oriented subjects. The capacity for “tactically misrecognizing” heteronormative gendered hails can be productive for alternate subject formation; but when the hails originate from within the transgender ‘community,’ they can also be reinscribing the same gendered roles and expectations. While medical transition can be a form of “tactically misrecognizing” the hails of dominant gendered ideology, when this is the only alternate subject formation deemed ‘correct,’ it becomes alternatively hegemonic. As such, it seems that because the queer individual is formed by hails from

⁵ Passing the “real life test” typically involves completing a year of living in, dressing as, or “correctly” performing the gender to which you desire to transition.

all directions, there is an opportunity to turn in unknown directions, react in different moments, and thus become an unexpected subject.

These multiple opportunities for alternate responses to gendered hails suggest that queer subject formation is fluctuate. Therefore, it seems apt that the Trans Health Initiative at Feminist Women's Health Center provides testing and care that does not foreclose the agentic actions that trans/intersex people could take in response to gendered ideologies. Rather, THI recognizes that the broader healthcare system, even in its attempts to "help and heal" trans people, often manages to perpetuate a binaristic gender system that values a certain linear, individuating path to be followed prior to and during medical transition. The Trans Health Initiative actively counteracts this narrow foreclosure of future agentic actions by trans people and works under a feminist framework to make this type of care available. Therefore, it is impossible to unknot the relationship between trans subjectivities and feminist subject positions because in many cases, and for many of us, the relationship is one of constantly embodied trans feminism.

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Jezebel's: A Place for Conformity and Subversion

By Lindsay Steuber

Dystopian novels such as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* have the potential to cause panic and also provoke thought; moreover, dystopian novels pinpoint aspects of society that are unsuccessful and often beckon for change. One of the main components of dystopian novels is that they have a direct correlation to the events happening in society during the time of publication. Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, explores women's position in the dystopian Gileadean society and how power is stratified and managed. Much of what she delved into in her novel is a reflection of what was happening in the Women's Rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States (Bouson 132). Atwood used *The Handmaid's Tale* as a vehicle to provide commentary on how women were controlled in society through social customs, gender identity and binary sexuality groups.

One forceful section of Atwood's novel, the nine chapters that encompass and frame Offred's secretive visit to Jezebel's, includes many examples of gender hierarchy, gender/sexuality crisis, and the conformity-subversion relationship. Jezebel's is a microcosm of the power and gender structure; it is a place that both reinforces and also encourages dissent from the kinship system and binary gender/sexuality roles. Through the characters of Offred, Moira, the Aunts, and the Commander, a precarious dynamic is demonstrated to depict an abysmal gender hierarchy and evolution of the gender/sexuality relationship among women. Atwood created a novel that embodied

trepidation because of the real potential for these actions to occur in contemporary society; it also served as social commentary on how she experienced and interpreted the emerging sexuality/gender shift during the Women's Movement of the 1970s and 1980s.

The stratification of the women in the dystopian Gileadean society is what evokes the necessity for change in society. When interpreted through the lens of Gayle Rubin's female kinship studies in "The Traffic of Women," the reality of this threat seems even more poignant. "The exchange of goods and services, production and distribution, hostility and solidarity, ritual and ceremony, all take place within the organizational structure of kinship...Kinship is organization, and organization gives power" (Rubin 31). A kinship system, in Rubin's traditional sense implies the creation of a family and the exchange of women and women's goods among relatives. However, Gilead uses the kinship system by creating a "family" system within a household. The kinship system in Gilead is the Commander and his wife, a Handmaid, and Marthas to cook and clean. The wife of the Commander takes part in the kinship system through ritualistic ceremony, while the Handmaid and Marthas take part in the kinship system through goods, services, production, and ceremony. Furthermore, the Handmaids are literally exchanged and "trafficked" between households across the society; they represent the barter of human commodity. This is the smallest level of organization of the kinship system in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the large-scale organization and observance of this system is enforced through ritual practice. Thus, a reader's reaction stems from the pre-existing kinship structures already observed in contemporary society; for example, in

contemporary society the Commander equates to the father/man of the household, the Wife equates to the mother, and so on. What makes this novel so compelling is that Atwood's exposition of the hegemonic kinship systems already customary in society gives the dystopic future which she posits has a sense of immediacy and potentiality.

In this section of the novel, the community "Prayvaganza" takes place to reaffirm the stratification in the Gilead society. Because the kinship system is endorsed through rituals and gains momentum and strength through public rituals, the "Prayvaganza" is an exemplary mode of obedience to the system.

Ranks of folding wooden chairs have been placed along the right side, for the Wives and daughters of high-ranking officials or officers, there's not that much difference. The galleries above, with their concrete railings, are for the lower-ranking women, the Marthas, the Econowives in their multicolored stripes...Our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope. (Atwood 213-214)

What Offred describes is the visual separation of the women at the Prayvaganza by the level to which they belong. Atwood pays special attention to the detail of the language in this passage to emphasize the boundaries between the different women that intensify the levels of oppression.

Her use of the words "ranks of folding chairs" to describe the higher-ranking women, who are recipients of the exchanges of Handmaids along with the Commanders, places

distinct emphasis on the social status of the Wives and their proximity to the militaristic state that enforces the laws of Gilead. When describing the Marthas and Econowives she uses “concrete railings” to describe the barrier and relate it directly to the strong undesired mixing with the other members at the Prayvaganza. The description of the Econowives wearing “multicolored stripes” elicits two associations for the reader, one of convicts and the other as a potential reference to ethnicity that really depicts their status as inescapable. Finally, the Handmaids are separated with a “silky twisted scarlet rope” that is reminiscent of fertility, blood, and even female anatomy; this description and the softness of the language reflects the kind of physical care that is extended to the Handmaids. After all, the women in good “working” condition, ready to produce babies. This kind of kinship stratification in society produces the utmost level of control as portrayed in the novel. While all the women are assigned specific roles within the “family” of the household, the emotional bonds and true camaraderie are eliminated by additional restrictions such as prohibiting conversation on the street and the Handmaid’s responsibility to have a child on behalf of the Wives. The women are oppressed as an entire group as a gender by the kinship system in Gilead, and also oppressed within their social divisions within the gender.

The social status of the Handmaids wholly exemplifies the concept of Rubin’s trafficking women as a control mechanism. “As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges” (Rubin 30). Although, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Wives and Commanders both benefit from the trafficking of Handmaids, the Commanders are in the position to have complete

control over the Handmaids. This controlled relationship is explicated by Offred's name being a combination of "Of" and "Fred" indicating ownership, and it also is explicated by the liberties that the Commander takes with Offred, such as playing Scrabble and taking her to Jezebel's for his entertainment. "The treatment of the individual Handmaid by both husband and wife reinforces the concept of person as property: the Commander uses Offred for his private as well as public service" (Friebert 283). The trafficking of women through the movement of Handmaids from house to house and their treatment by the Commanders fortifies the power structure of the kinship system.

Women are also trafficked in more conventional and recognizable ways as is present in the wedding ceremony at the Prayvaganza. "The mothers have stood the white-veiled girls in place and have returned to their chairs...The Commander continues with the service" (Atwood 221). Both the Wives and the Commanders have a role in the ceremony of giving their daughters as gifts in marriage, and this participation in the trafficking on women is partly what gives the Wives some of their power in society. The Commanders' power over time is increased by the assignment of a Handmaid by society. For example, the men move from the rank of "Angel" to "Commander" through the receipt of a handmaid: "The Angels will qualify for Handmaids, later, especially if their new Wives can't produce." (Atwood 221). The language in this quotation emphasizes the concept of women as property and commodity beyond their duties; this example solidifies the double trafficking of women among Wives and Handmaids that oppress them similarly and differently simultaneously.

This Gileadean society, where men have more opportunities to exercise freedom, also enforces a strict gender/sexuality prescription through its kinship organization that requires the men to conform to the system as well. “For although he wants to make Offred’s life more bearable and although he can be ‘positively daddyish’ in his behaviour, he also affirms the male supremacist ideology which subordinate and sexually enslave women” (Bouson 145-146). Offred, as a Handmaid, is seen only has a vehicle of reproduction, but the Commander struggles with this separation of emotion from the physical coital connection. He desires a deeper connection with her emotionally and intellectually through the Scrabble game and he desires a freer sexual connection with her that he attempts to fulfill at Jezebel’s. “He’s stroking my body now, from stem as they say to stern, cat stroke along the left flank, down the left leg. He stops at the foot, his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership” (Atwood 254). This passage clearly reveals the Commander’s desire for physical contact that has feelings behind it, but it is clear, from the Braille tattoo, that he is not capable of attaining that in this society. While behind closed doors he feels comfortable extending more conventionally romantic emotions, but in the public eye of Jezebel’s he must treat her as property: “He retains hold of my arm, and as he talks his spine straightens imperceptibly, his chest expands, his voice assumes more and more sprightliness and jocularly of youth. It occurs to me he is showing me off” (Atwood 236). Therefore, attending a place like Jezebel’s allows the Commander to both subvert the lack of lust and feeling in society and also further exercise his place in the kinship system. He affirms his place in society as an owner of women and also shares an intimate moment of forbidden physical contact with Offred.

“The power of males in these groups is not founded on their roles as fathers or patriarchs, but on their collective adult maleness, embodied in secret cults, men’s houses, warfare, exchange networks, ritual knowledge, and various initiation procedures” (Rubin 34). Jezebel’s becomes the place where sexuality is enforced and sexuality is also explored. These elements of enforcement and creation are further explicated in Davina Cooper’s *Power in Struggle*: “As a form of disciplinary power, sexuality organizes identity...and social interactions around particular desires, libidinal practices and social relations. At the same time, it constructs and articulates desires, libidinal practices and social relations” (Cooper 67). Jezebel’s is the intersection, in the novel, where control, power, and gender/sexuality meet. It is the one place where women have some power over their own sexual expression and also they have power over the sexual needs of the men of Gilead.

Gayle Rubin asserts that “sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product[...]Sex/gender system is a neutral term and indicates the oppression is not inevitable in that domain, but is the product of the specific social relations which organize it” (Rubin 37-38). Rubin’s outline of the sex/gender system being enforced by the “social relations which organize it” relates directly to how the kinship system in Gilead serves to only allow for the expression of compulsory heterosexuality and blocks/controls everything else that is ambiguous or subversive. The characters of the Aunts and Moira represent these elements of the ambiguous and the subversive.

Though no women in the novel are described as feminine or wearing cosmetics, Atwood portrayed the Aunts in a meticulous way to stress their masculinity. When Moira mimics an Aunt to escape the Red Center she acts in a fashion more masculine than feminine and very different from when Offred describes walking through the checkpoints earlier in the novel when she purposely sways her hips to tease the guards.

In that brown outfit I just walked right through. I kept on going as if I knew where I was heading, till I was out of sight...I kept my shoulders back and chin up and marched along...putting on that frown and keeping myself stiff and pursing my lips and looking right through them, as if they were festering sores. You know the way the Aunts look when they say the word *man*. (Atwood 244)

Atwood chose to have the Aunts wear brown, as opposed to the Handmaids' red outfits, perhaps to indicate they are barren, dry and not fertile any longer. Moira's recollection of knowing "where I was heading" indicates that the Aunts had more mobility on the streets of Gilead. When Moira says, "I kept my shoulders back and chin up and marched along," there is a depiction of natural confidence and recognized authority that the Aunts were able to exercise. Though the physical description of the Aunts' body language is more indicative of a masculine gait and posture, the detail about how the Aunts purse their lips when uttering the word "man" also contributes to their separation into an ambiguous gender group. This description not only highlights the Aunts as exhibiting more masculine qualities, but it also hints at a disdain for men in general.

The Aunts are also the only women, besides the Wives in *control* of women working in the household, that have power and freedom in the novel and are in charge of molding the new Handmaids for their duties as well as patrolling the women working at Jezebel's. When Offred encounters the bathroom attendant at Jezebel's, she notices that "she's an older woman, wearing a purple caftan and gold eye-shadow, but I can tell she is nevertheless an Aunt. The cattle prod's on the table, its thong around her wrist. No nonsense here." (Atwood 241). Even the Aunts' accessories of "cattle prods" and their resemblance to phallic objects suggest a more masculine identity within the society. The identities of the Aunts as more masculine seem to directly correlate to the amount of power they are allowed to exercise in the novel. The Aunts are also one of the few groups of women, the Wives being the other, who participate in gift giving and the trafficking of other women. The Aunts are responsible for training and bestowing the Handmaids into society for their service; this leading role in the trafficking of women gives them power. Additionally, the role that the Aunts have as regulating the trafficking of the women at Jezebel's also concretizes their involvement of prostitution and sexual oppression. The portrayal of the Aunts in this way suggests potential commentary from Atwood.

An initial interpretation of the Aunts could be that Atwood is furthering her satire of contemporary society during the Women's Revolution in the 1970s. By purposely portraying the Aunts as overly masculine and also as one of the groups of women with extensive control in the novel, Atwood is attempting to draw out and expose the parallel of masculinity and power. The Aunts suggest that in order to have power and exercise

power, individuals must be more masculine. Atwood also portrays the Wives and Aunts participating in the trafficking of other women to call attention to these similar modes of trafficking in contemporary society and highlight that women and men are guilty of perpetuating this derogatory system. This brings up questions about whether women can hold more power without being labeled as masculine and it also brings up controversy about the spectrum of femininity and whether or not women must act like men to advance their power in society. Also, the Aunts conjure questions and speculation about sexuality in the novel because of their lack of sexual expression.

Because the Aunts' sexuality is kept very ambiguous, Atwood is attempting to also correlate masculinity to ambiguity and possibly lesbianism. By depicting characters in certain ways Atwood opens up a dialogue for why masculinity and femininity are tied to sexuality, when in reality they should be completely separate arguments. Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler were contemporaries and very much exploring the same women's and gender issues. However, Butler's analysis focuses more on gender/sexuality and power than solely the kinship system. Her essay on gender as a performative act solidifies the concept and argument that societies create acceptance and rejection for femininity and masculinity standards and associate them with sexuality. Her main assertion, "that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler 165), is applicable to the kind of conformity seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* and also serves to supplement the stratification of the women functioning within the kinship system. Each group of women have accepted ways their gender-class should perform its femininity and sexuality: the Wives are more

conventionally feminine in appearance, the Handmaids are not permitted to be sexual but must act as vessels of reproduction, and the Aunts are asexual trainers/regulators for the Handmaids. Atwood recognized the engrained gender roles in society, recreated them in the novel, and then inserted dissenting characters to question and oppose the system. Moira, in particular, is the one character that overtly challenges the gender/sexuality system.

Moira, through her expression of lesbianism and her desire for power and freedom, attempts to combat the “sedimentation” that Butler explicates in her essay. “[Sedimentation produces] a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes which exist in a binary relation to one another” (Butler 166). Moira is the character who fights directly against the binary sexuality system and also the stratification of the control of women. While the Aunts were void of sexual expression, Moira fully embraces the expression and articulation of her sexuality in the novel. She is open about sexuality to the level of crudeness, and, like the Aunts she is depicted in masculine ways through descriptions and dialogue. Therefore, again, there is the likening of masculinity to the desire for freedom and power.

There are various instances in the novel when Moira uses vulgar and coarse language and acts in masculine ways. “Camaraderie, shit, says Moira through the hole in the toilet cubicle. Right fucking on, Aunt Lydia, as they used to say. How much you want to bet she’s got Janine down on her knees? I bet she’s got her working away on that dried up old withered—”(Atwood 222). Moira’s use of profanity and also her reference to women

giving women oral pleasure in this excerpt exemplifies her irreverence for socially constructed femininity standards of speech and conversation. Even in Jezebel's, where she has the ability to exercise a ration of freedom, Moira still speaks in her masculine and impudent manner; "You'd have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard. The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights" (Atwood 249). This statement by Moira shows that she has been able to separate emotion from her position at Jezebel's, and her use of "snatch wears out" exemplifies the crude speech she still exercises while speaking about sex. While Moira and Offred are friends, Offred is still jarred and surprised by the way that Moira speaks and reacts to situations. Offred represents the traditional femininity lens of sexual experience that the reader can see through her fantasies about Luke and her trysts with Nick. However, Moira's attitude about sex and sexuality is liberated and deregulated of over-emotionalized language. Atwood juxtaposes these two characters' views on sexuality to mimic the two sides of the sexual liberation movement in society; Offred is the representative for the conservative group, while Moira is the representative for the radical lesbian group.

The relationship between these two characters is truncated in the novel but it offers adequate interaction to explicate the old and new views on sex that Atwood satirizes. Offred sees Moira as someone with courage but also is intimidated by her assertiveness and contentment with her existence in Jezebel's. J. Brooks Bouson has asserted that "the Handmaids also find something frightening in Moira's freedom...Ultimately cross-questioning the possibility of female heroism in such a regime, the narrative, while

typecasting Moira as a feminist rebel, also dramatizes her defeat. Caught, tortured, and then forced into prostitution, Moira ultimately loses her volition and becomes indifferent” (Bouson 151). Bouson’s reading of Moira neglects to take into account any lesbian/queer theory; the interpretation reflects the same ignorance that is intended to be exposed through Moira’s situation. A more accurate interpretation is that Moira’s existence among other women allows her to express her true sexuality and experience female nurturing, while subverting the hierarchy. Adrienne Rich points out that “women’s choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe, has been crushed, [and] invalidated” (Rich 632). Bouson’s interpretation perpetuates this crushing of women’s relationships in society. While Moira, lives only in Jezebel’s, it is the only place where she can attempt to exercise the female bonds and sexual expression that is prohibited in society proper. Moira is not “indifferent” as Bouson asserts, but she is working to subvert the system in ways that will benefit her sexual expression. Therefore, Bouson’s interpretation perpetuates the misunderstanding of “lesbian sexual difference...that cannot be comprehended from within the most common definitions of heterosexual difference” (Adams 476). Atwood’s inclusion of Moira’s inability to fit into the sexuality in the society has a direct correlation to the instances of gay prejudice in contemporary American society.

The perceived dramatic nature of Moira’s situation is also alluded to in the novel because it is meant as a commentary on the concept of gender and sexuality as a performative act. Moira’s role as a heterosexual prostitute at Jezebel’s illustrates the

falsity that socially constructed gender and sexuality pervades. In an interview between Butler and Rubin the following comment arose:

As soon as you get away from the presumptions of heterosexuality, differences in sexual conduct are not very intelligible in terms of binary models...There needs to be some kind of model that is not binary, because sexual variation is a system of many differences, not just a couple of salient ones" (Rubin and Butler 81).

This assumption of a binary sexuality system is precisely the mindset that led to the misreading of Moira's situation at Jezebel's and the subsequent assumption of her unhappiness. Moira concedes to Offred that "it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (Atwood 249). Her happiness is in the freedom to express her sexuality and at Jezebel's she is able to do so; with her freedom of sexual expression Moira may have her true identity within this niche in Gilead.

Additionally, the correlation to Moira's sexuality and her assertive desire for freedom and power also aim to subvert both the Gilead society and contemporary society. "Sexual assertiveness and women's full, empowered participation in sexual decision making are clearly restricted [in society]. Each of the factors... gender expectations, social controls, childhood victimization and the various source of dependence on men – can be conceptualized individually, but operate in an interactive manner to limit women's sexual autonomy" (Travis and White 312). Women's power is controlled socially by both gender stratification such as the kinship system and sexuality through

performance acts. A commonly held standard in contemporary society and in Gilead is that it is unacceptable for women to be sexually forward and seek sexual power, as Moira does in this novel. Atwood purposely foils Moira with Offred as to compare two spheres: assertive and submissive, and homosexual and heterosexual. By paralleling homosexuality with assertiveness and subversion in Gilead, Atwood reveals the stereotypes and struggle that these women experienced during the Women's Liberation and still experience in today's society. However, Moira's personality and perseverance puts forth a hope for the future of the sex/gender system. Moira makes multiple attempts at escapes to attain some kind of ability to exercise freedom, while Offred is content with merely fantasizing about subverting the system.

Although the reader experiences the story through Offred's eyes, there is no compelling reason to applaud her because she fails to make any bona fide efforts at freedom; mostly Offred fantasizes about freedom. "Offred is not a revolutionary...Her own position is much closer to the traditionally feminine role of woman as social mediator" (Howells 102). Atwood shapes Offred in this way to first and foremost reinforce the kinship system and her value as a Handmaid as nothing but an exchange of property between men. Offred's immobilization illustrates the effectiveness of the kinship system. Also, Offred completes the representation of Atwood's society and experience during the Women's Liberation Movement. "It is significant that Gilead is a society 'in transition' where all the women are survivors of the time before, and their voices represent a range of feminine and feminist positions dating back to the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s" (Howells 98). One significant point of Offred and Moira's friendship is

that Offred does truly admire Moira's ability to be fearless and masculine in the face of the Gilead society. Offred often mentions in the novel how she wishes she knew how to do things that Moira could do, like fix things or have the courage to stand up to people. Moira represents the potential actions that the Handmaids, paralyzed by fear, only fantasize about executing. This desire and curiosity about subversion brings Offred to Jezebel's in the first place.

While Moira takes large leaps towards subverting the system and exercising freedom by escaping from the Red Center and speaking openly about lesbianism, Offred moves towards subversion in small calculated steps. As a resulting action of Offred's habitual Scrabble games with the Commander, the secretive trip to Jezebel's was arranged and executed. The act of going to Jezebel's, as well as many of the occurrences that take place within the secret space, create simultaneous subversions of the Gileadean society. While the kinship system is reinforced through this secret male club, Offred's mere attendance at Jezebel's is an act of subversion. However, in this subversion she does find freedom;

There's an enticement in this thing, it carries with it the childish allure of dressing up. And it would be so flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free. Freedom, like everything else, is relative...I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things. (230-231)

It is as if, by the latter half of the novel, Offred has actually learned a new Butlerian performative act of sexuality, gender, and power. Moira has achieved some kind of transfer to Offred, and Offred finally accomplishes an authentic act of subversion to the rules of the Handmaids, to the kinship system, and to asexuality in the novel. Without this imprint of a new performative act, Offred would not have been able to fulfill her affair with Nick later in the novel. Moira is the catalyst for change in the novel and the reader witnesses how Offred is encouraged and affected by her revolutionary mindset.

In this section of the novel Atwood combines despair and hope. While Jezebel's is a secret club that serves to support the power in the kinship system, it is also a place where two of the oppressed women of Gilead are able to find some kind of freedom, if only temporarily. Atwood uses Jezebel's to explore the reader's prejudices against homosexuality and also to make strong assertions about sexuality stereotypes in society. "Masculine women tend to be read, at least initially, as lesbians, while feminine lesbians tend to be read as heterosexuals" (Queen 293). The way that sexuality and gender are fused together in Gilead is a direct parallel to the way they are linked in contemporary American society. The prevailing hypocrisy in the novel is also something worth noting: "In order to survive they and the narrator among them are constantly obliged to pretend to espouse a system of values which denigrates and threatens to annihilate them" (Hammer 40). The prevalent correlation to contemporary social issues makes this novel a poignant piece of satire.

While some critics view *The Handmaid's Tale* as a large satire of society and the controls of society, it also delineates how social control can weave its way into the most private and intimate aspects of life. The way that Gilead devises a system to control the construction of the family unit, the reproduction of people, and the conformity to strict sexuality codes is not far off from social constructions of contemporary society. Though the kinship system described by Rubin has evolved in the United States and women are not only seen as a commodity in the home, women are still struggling to achieve equality in the workplace. "Although most women in the United States are employed in the paid workforce, they have lower wages than men, are concentrated in different occupations, and are thinly represented at the highest levels of organizational hierarchies" (Eagly and Wood 274). There are also certain professions in which women are still not equally represented, and ironically many lesbians are acting as the trailblazers in those fields because they do not mind to be considered more masculine in doing so. Through the various characters of *The Handmaid's Tale* analyzed above, Atwood promoted the possibility of social change. Moira's character champions the Women's Liberation movement in areas of gender and sexual equality. Atwood's depictions are particularly interesting considering that current research shows "the dominant ethos among lesbian, gay men, and bisexuals is of egalitarian relationships" (Sinfield 59). Perhaps with the deregulation of sexual hegemony there can be a complete eradication of the oppressive kinship system and also elimination of compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, the disappearance of oppressive gender and sexual systems has the potential to conjure heightened equality in society.

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Critically Analysing Responses to the Work of Andrej Pejic

By Keava McMillan

While androgyny is not a new trend in the high fashion industry, the model Andrej Pejic has received a lot of attention recently for his ability to model for both men's and women's clothing lines. The reaction to Pejic's work and appearance in British newspapers is especially interesting as it reveals how the British media is struggling to come to terms with the need to interact with transgender figures. While Pejic's appearance may be androgynous, the work which brought him to the attention of the mainstream press has not been his unisex modelling (which highlights his potential to visually reference both traditional genders) but his cross-dressing work (which focuses on his feminine potential). In light of this it seems odd that the term 'cross-dressing' is rarely used in tabloid media reports surrounding Pejic which instead seem to employ a vocabulary that suggests transsexuality. This interest is confirmed in an interview with *The Telegraph*, where Pejic circumnavigates a direct question concerning transsexuality by laughing and commenting that he would only consider a sex change for a Victoria's Secret contract. This comment was subsequently widely disseminated (often as the title of an article) in both the tabloids and the broadsheets, confirming the media tendency to fixate on the subject of the model's sexuality and to assume (or invent) a homosexual or transsexual identity (see Alexander). This is an assumption that is not endorsed by the model himself who repeatedly expresses surprise at the media interest in his sexuality and refusing to confirm rumours (Iannacci), an action that seems to have further heightened his association with sexual ambiguity. Taking this into account, this paper will not presume to examine Pejic as transsexual or psychologically androgynous but will examine the media reactions to a model that appears to aesthetically transcend gender.

The language used in British newspapers to designate and describe Pejic reveals a number of contradictions and reflects a number of key issues (objectification, generalisations, insensitivity) for which it criticises the fashion industry. This essay will use an analysis of the linguistics of reporting as a strand to connect several trends apparent in the representation of Pejic. The first issue is the foregrounding of Pejic's appearance either as a novelty or within the framework of the 'Size 0' debate where commentators adopt an ostensibly feminist framework to argue that the trend towards a thin, androgynous body neuters the gender of models in a negative manner. The second issue is commentators who use this stance as a platform to suggest that the cross-dressed gendered male is committing an act of violence by appropriating traditional female forms and trappings. This subtext of transphobia is closely connected to homophobic claims that gay designers are deliberately perpetuating an image that is detrimental to women as a direct result of their sexual preferences.

As Amanda Platell's article for the *Daily Mail* (entitled "Fashion's ultimate insult to women: the latest way of demeaning real women is a male model dressed as a girl") is one of the most blunt and controversial works on Andrej Pejic to date, I will focus my attention on this piece. This is not because it represents the most sensationalist or vitriolic spectrum of the debate but because its candidness reveals attitudes towards Pejic that are expressed more subtly in a range of other sources. This is not a quantitative survey of the press reaction to transgender models but rather an examination of some key trends in the reporting that highlight interesting issues. An analysis of the representation of Pejic in the mainstream British newspapers allows a number of wider issues to manifest such as anxieties concerning transgender individuals, gender essentialism and the power of the

fashion industry.

As previously noted, the attention Andrej Pejic has attracted in the mainstream British press tends to be framed in one of two distinct ways. Some articles seem simply to note how convincingly Pejic presents as a woman. The bluntly titled Dulcie Pearce article “Tran or Woman?” from the tabloid paper *The Sun* is an interesting example of this. While the paper is not noted either for its political correctness or its sensitivity to its subjects, the neologism “tran” (presumably because it helpfully rhymes with “man” and is reminiscent of the offensive but widely circulated term “tranny” used to describe cross-dressers) as an umbrella term to describe transgender individuals seems particularly excessive as it is so close to the more acceptable term “trans” (*Trans Media Watch*). The accompanying quiz where readers are invited to guess the “real” gender of the models reveals an essentialist attitude that fixates on the original biological sex of the sitter as proof of their identity. It also posits the reader as a default subject who is in a position to judge the ‘correct’ (original) gender of the individuals’ pictures. This presumption is highlighted by the wide range of individuals who are categorised using the unqualified term “tran” which include a male performer in drag and a male to female transsexual. Despite the fact that the quiz was presumably designed for entertainment value, there is a sense of pedantry in the way it is linked from the main article on Pejic. Through this detection quiz the *Sun* almost appears to be arming its readers against the possibility of accidentally being aroused by a non-genetic female by presenting them with images of scantily-clad, hyper-feminine people.

While *The Sun's* approach bears an uncomfortable resemblance to a right-wing freak show, more socially liberal papers show a similar trend. Carola Long's article for *The*

Independent entitled “And over to Paris for the menswear. Yes, really...” deviates from this trend by examining Pejic and Jean-Paul Gaultier's work in the James Bond themed menswear section of the Paris show and comments on the unconventional decision to associate an androgynous model with the hyper-masculine fictional spy. However, the title of the article capitalises on the same incredulous reaction to a non-heteronormative presentation of gender as the *Sun* article. Long focuses her attention on Pejic's most feminine costume, conjuring a decadent image of gold and fur which (combined with a somewhat romantic description of Pejic's Balkan background) exoticizes the model. Androgynous celebrities who rose to prominence in early 20th century America often bore signs of otherness that separated them from their intended audience. This can be seen in the highlighting of the 'exotic' European accents of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo or the outlandish costuming of Louise Brooks. However, it should be noted that this focus on the otherness of Pejic (in this case racial as well as visual) achieves the same effect as the focus on gendered deviance in the Pearce article; it alienates and feminises the androgynous figure.

The second debate that tends to frame articles on Pejic is that concerning 'Size 0' models. The majority of newspaper articles that mention Andrej Pejic either do so in the context of weight issues in the fashion industry or choose to mention his weight. While the body mass of models and the trickle-down impact this has on public body image is a matter for concern, I would assert that this is not the primary issue that Pejic's appearance in the industry has raised. Pejic's figure is not exceptional in the context of high couture fashion where a tall, thin silhouette is considered most complimentary to artistic designs that are not necessarily intended for street wear. It is incredibly rare for larger or older models to appear on the high fashion catwalks, though Gaultier (who employed Pejic in Paris) has

shown models who fit both these categories. In the context of fashion shows that are segregated according to the gender binary, it could be unreasonable to expect one of the first men to model in the women's section of a show to simultaneously deviate from accepted standards of height and weight.

Amanda Platell's *Daily Mail* article "Fashion's ultimate insult to women: The latest way of demeaning real women is a male model dressed as a girl" does not consider Pejic's appearance on the female catwalk as transgressive or progressive but as an inevitable conclusion to the trend for designers to exhibit clothes on women who don't display traditionally feminine attributes such as pronounced breasts and hips. This is an interesting (and damaging) cultural phenomenon in itself but Platell's analysis of the situation is flawed in several ways. The most obvious is the assumption that the "perfect hourglass" (Platell) figures of the 1950's stars she cites throughout the piece are somehow more naturally (or appropriately) feminine than the androgynous female form. As Debra Ferreday points out, the nostalgia for previous ideals of femininity can be equally restrictive, particularly considering the mid-century fashions which promoted high-maintenance hair and make-up, high heels and a small waisted figure which was often created using girdles or corsetry which could result in lasting physical damage (52). The anger Platell channels towards the more androgynous female form (via Pejic's body) is perhaps displaced as she is conflating a boyish figure with an anorexic form while presenting a voluptuous alternative which is both labour-intensive and unobtainable for many women. This reveals an attitude to gender that suggests there is a correct version of femininity which is embodied in a physical feminine body, a position that is echoed in other articles on London Fashion Week by Liz Jones (*The Daily Mail*), columnist team Richard and Judy (Finnegan, *The Daily Express*) and other commentators.

Richard Mandelej and Judy Finnegan's rallying cry of "Girls, let's leave them to it" as a response to Pejic's donning of womenswear encapsulates this position, suggesting that since a male body can be imbued with the characteristics of the female high fashion model, women have no place in fashion. Essentially this position neuters the gender identity of the female model not only denying her agency (by employing a narrative of victimisation so extreme that all three articles not only employ numerous synonyms for cadaverous, but also the analogy of the Holocaust victim), but also access to the limiting alternative female form which is prescribed as more natural. While criticising the thin body type both of Pejic and of other (predominantly unnamed) female models, none of the articles examined here consider female models who actively cultivate an androgynous image. Though the bulk of their criticism is reserved for the shape of the body, the articles which examine Pejic from within the Size 0 debate use images of female models wearing traditionally feminine clothing (predominantly dresses in floral prints or pastel colours) to illustrate their points. This exclusion of female models in androgynous clothing (of whom there are currently many in the high fashion world) serves to illustrate their idea that extreme thinness is unnatural for women by juxtaposing 'masculine' body types with 'feminine' clothing; however, it fails to recognise the transgressive potential of female androgyny. Individual female models (such as Freja Beha Erichsen who posed with a codpiece as the Greek god Apollo) have asserted their agency in the industry by visually ascribing to androgyny (with devices such as cropped hair, tattoos and thinness) in a manner which limits their work to their own preferences and not those of their firms.

The arguments put forward in these articles equally deny Pejic the right to own his gender identity. The lack of validity granted to the body of the female androgynous model is

equally applicable to him. Pejic's gender identity, however, is compromised to an even greater degree as not only is his presentation of femininity androgynous (and therefore invalid in their polemic) but his masculinity is also called into question. Jones dismisses non-muscular male models as “nerdy, weedy boys” which not only employs derogatory terms with connotations of an 'incorrect', feminised version of masculinity but also infantilizes them. Platell further restricts his gender, rendering him inhuman through the use of terms such as “creature” and analogies like the “bride of Frankenstein”. The particular strand of argument examined here may be primarily expressed in the tabloid papers but language which suggests parallel attitudes also manifests in the broadsheets through the use of the word “it” to avoid the choice of gendered pronouns (which may indicate an anxiety concerning writing about a transgender subject but serves to alienate Pejic) and terms such as “freak of nature” which clearly both exploit his novelty value and denote him as a dehumanised subject (Williamson).

This extreme trend of objectification culminated in a poll for *FHM*, the popular men's magazine which specialises in full-colour spreads of nearly nude women, where Pejic was voted the 98th sexiest woman of 2011 by the magazine's readers. The article accompanying the poll simply referred to Pejic as a “thing” who induced nausea (see Swann for a screen-shot of the now unavailable article). Perhaps surprisingly, considering the slightly hysterical representations of the model in British papers, a number of high profile papers criticised *FHM* for its choice of words. The *Guardian* (Sweney) and the *Telegraph* (Whitworth) criticised the tone of the article. Even the *Daily Mail* lamented (slightly hypocritically considering it was the site of Platell's diatribe) that the inclusion of Pejic in the poll was sadly not in a progressive spirit (Paxman). The *FHM* entry on Pejic has since been removed and replaced by an apology (*FHM*). While this step was taken

ostensibly due to media and social networking pressure, the wording of the 'apology' remains ambiguous. While originally the FHM website showed a list of the "100 Sexiest Women in the World" which linked an offensive article on Pejic, now his link leads to a vague apology "for any offence caused" (*FHM*). While in context this apology seems to be a response to the criticism of the original article, the visual effect of clicking Pejic's entry and finding an apology (which appears without a replacement article or picture) suggests that the removal of his entry could also signify an apology for including an androgynous male in a list of desirable females.

The image of the androgynous body is a site of paradox which holds multiple possible, and often conflicting, signs: sexual liberation and oppression, confidence and vulnerability, attraction and repulsion. Perhaps most importantly the androgynous body signifies the potential for the subject to perform their gender as male, female, both, or neither, and to be able to achieve this without the dominant gaze (for example the heterosexual male *Sun* reader) necessarily having knowledge of this deception. Like cinema, high fashion deals in desire. Laura Mulvey's assessment of film actors is equally applicable to high fashion models: "the glamorous impersonates the ordinary" (271). The two frameworks from which Pejic tends to be considered in the British press highlight this sense of likeness (he resembles a woman) and difference (he is not biologically female). These responses to his work both embody the fear that heteronormative desire will be displaced onto a sexually ambiguous body. This simultaneous reaction of fascination (attraction to the likeness) and fear (repulsion to the difference) to the androgynous body can be seen in films such as *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner* where the hero or viewer is initially attracted to the androgynous heroine but alienated from her when it is revealed that she is not wholly human. While Brigitte Helm (*Metropolis*) and Sean Young (*Blade Runner*) portray

characters that are more transhuman than transgender, Constance Penley argues that there is a precedent for using the feminised androgynous body to signify the ultimately inhuman nature of a character who embodies the physical attributes of more than one gender (36).

While authors such as Platell and Jones who criticise Pejic from the perspective that his thin figure reinforces an ideal of beauty that seems unhealthy and unobtainable do make necessary points about the damage perpetuating an emaciated ideal can have (both on models and the public who are exposed to these images), these points are already part of well established criticisms. The feminist framework they seek to adopt to support their arguments seems designed to mask several disquieting transphobic and homophobic strands which need to be unpacked. A degree of female transvestitism is now normalised and considered socially acceptable but male androgyny and cross-dressing is highly stigmatized, perhaps as a result of staged male cross-dressing and androgyny being strongly associated with the perceived social decadence and sexual deviance of the turn of the century cabarets. Previous fashion trends which used androgyny or blurred the gendered divide with clothes (in the 1920s or 1960's for example) attempted to use aesthetics to imbue the female body with masculine powers and freedoms (Arnold 122).

Androgyny for women has connotations of sexual liberation (the rejection of the corset by the 1920's socialites) or the acquisition of power (the 1980's business suits). However, a potential radical feminist interpretation of Platell's claims that "the latest way of demeaning real women is a male model dressed as a girl" is that a cross-dressed white male is an individual who seeks to appropriate the appearance of a woman and is committing an act of symbolic violence from a position of privilege. This negative interpretation is not unique

as feminist theorists such as Sheila Jeffreys, who links male cross-dressing with misogyny and transvestic fetishism, also display an aversion to the challenging of gender roles in this manner (57). These positions often display antipathy towards forms of transvestitism, personal or performative, seeing it as a humiliatingly malicious satire of femininity. However, this argument assumes not only that a feminine identity is alien to non-genetic women but also that there is an essential, natural original for impersonators to imitate. By applying this interpretation to Pejic as an individual, Platell not only directly attacks his labour as a female clothes model but also his right to express his gender identity in day to day life. While Platell's position on cross-dressing represents a more extreme attitude to Pejic's appearance, similar attitudes are hinted at through the language used to describe his actions and appearance in other articles. Even traditionally left-wing broadsheets such as *The Independent* employ an excessive amount of inverted commas around female-associated nouns and language, such as "teetered" and "peroxide" (Fury), which highlights the conceit that Pejic's femininity does not come 'naturally' to him.

The images of a convincingly feminine male in the mainstream media also provide an interesting juxtaposition to the language of the articles which attempts to suggest that femininity is alien to men generally. The most circulated image in news reports and articles (particularly those that appear in British papers) concerning Pejic is one of him modelling Jean-Paul Gaultier's wedding dress for his Paris womenswear collection. Though the sensationalist, partially sheer, gown is far from traditional wedding-wear, it is still decidedly bridal in cut and character; the train trails dramatically behind the model and the lines of ruffles allude to the frills so heavily associated with the bridal gown. The juxtaposition of the bridal dress with the accoutrements (black opera gloves and a black veil) of another feminine stereotype, the femme fatale, makes this an image which is highly charged with

feminine associations. While Pejic's work to date has revealed a versatile model who can adapt to female, male or unisex clothing, the promotion of this particular image associates him with the connotations of two distinct (decidedly female and revealingly contradictory) fashion archetypes.

This merging of two female-associated stereotypes in a male model could well be considered a satire of feminine gender roles. However, it does not necessarily follow that this satire is either malicious or misogynistic as the blushing bride and the femme fatale are stock character types which are not embodied wholly in any individual woman. They represent two very specific incompatible ideals: the hyper-sexualised, dangerous temptress and the pure, virginal bride. That these two types of femininity can be convincingly presented simultaneously by a male model unveils them as social constructions of gender that can be performed equally well by biological males.

The attitudes to femininity apparent in the articles by Jones and Platell, among others, rely on gender being based in biology and not in studied performance. Pejic's adoption of Gaultier's wedding dress challenge these assumptions so it is not surprising that it is this particular image which has been so widely disseminated and has provoked such a visceral response from critics. Judith Butler argues that it is the repetition of the performance of gender roles that reveals their fundamentally constructed nature (137). The repetition of these forms of femininity by Pejic could be seen as revolutionary in this light.

Specifically focusing on Platell's stance, it is interesting to note that one of the Paris catwalk photographs used to illustrate her article on Pejic was taken during the menswear section of the show. As only six images of Pejic are shown, dedicating a significant portion

of these images to a man wearing clothing designed for a male body seems to contradict one of Platell's main issues with his work; namely, his adoption of female clothing. While Gaultier's 'Bond' range of menswear is unconventional, it is not designed specifically for women. The adoption of this image therefore suggests that it is not Pejic's appearance in particular that irks the reporter but the general trend in fashion to blur the boundaries of acceptable gendered dress. The idea that the weakening of traditional gender barriers is the most controversial aspect of Pejic's work is underlined in the treatment of his topless cover image for the fashion magazine *Dossier* when American shops requested the magazine be bagged (Moss). Employing a practice normally reserved for pornographic material when confronted with a magazine featuring a topless man seems confusingly excessive. Considering copies of *Dossier* are placed in shops with (non-bagged) magazines featuring heteronormative topless males (such as those on the cover of *Men's Health*), it can be seen that a male body (or torso) is treated as obscene when it is overtly presented as feminine.

Perhaps the most alarming assertions made by Platell (and echoed by Richard and Judy among other commentators) involve her linking of the homosexuality of some designers with the trend for female models to look androgynous. She argues that an elite group of gay male designers have been: "creating catwalk designs for pre-pubescent teenagers, and each year wanting models who looked less and less like women" (Platell). Here the author is not only implying the invalidity of an interpretation of femininity embodied in fashion models and making broad generalisations about the sexual and gendered divisions in the fashion industry, but also bluntly accuses gay designers of misogynistic practices against women for their own aesthetic satisfaction. As these authors clearly draw a link between the designers' sexuality and their visual preferences, it could be suggested

these practices also fulfil an assumed sexual satisfaction. Throughout their articles, Jones and Platell in continuously link the cult of youth in the fashion industry to the androgynous trend instigated, they claim, by gay designers. This is openly playing on severely damaging homophobic assumptions which link male homosexuality with pederasty or paedophilia (Arnold 122).

It should be noted that a number of the designers Pejic works with could be criticised for misogynistic representations of women. Marc Jacobs, for example, has run several campaigns which could be seen as sexualizing victimisation whether through photographing models in demeaning contexts (such as standing in toilets) or positioning them in poses which are reminiscent of corpses. If Platell's assertions that openly homosexual designers tailor their fashion campaigns to their private sexual fantasies were true, would this not also indicate an inclination towards scatology and necrophilia on the part of Jacobs? Images of symbolic and staged violence against the female body are unfortunately common in the fashion industry. However, to fixate on a small number of gay designers as the source both of these tendencies and of society's obsession with thinness neither recognises the ingrained nature of misogynistic attitudes or the complex nature of their effects.

While the tabloid articles hail gay designers as powerful and demonize them for their control of women's bodies, they also portray them as weak by alluding to deviant pederastic desires. The description of an all-powerful gay male elite controlling the fashion industry given by these tabloid articles (and delineated again by Sheila Jeffreys in *Beauty and Misogyny*) is reminiscent of Umberto Eco's outlining of the fascist mindset where he claims that the (invented) enemy must be rich, linked in a manner that is not necessarily

visible, and simultaneously very powerful and very weak (13). The claims that evoke this mindset are so immoderate in nature that, while Barbara Ellen briefly challenges this position in her article for *The Guardian*, it is surprising that this has not attracted more criticism from the left-wing broadsheets.

In conclusion it is important to consider the impact that the media reports on Pejic will have, not only on the career of the model in question, but on public attitudes to gender in general and transgenderism in particular. The trends evident in the tabloids use emotive issues such as anorexia and body image (in fashion sections aimed at a female audience) or the ability of genetic men to 'pass' as genetic women (in mainstream news reports that assume a default heterosexual male reader) to create an ambiance of hostility both towards transgender individuals and homosexual men working within the fashion industry. While less overtly stated, it can be seen that the broadsheets often assume language that fails to challenge or even actively reinforces this trend. A manifestation of this hostility can be seen by comparing the already discussed victimisation narrative used to represent young female models with the lack of exploitation content linked to Andrej Pejic. As a young, working class individual entering a notoriously exploitative industry, it seems odd that Pejic's vulnerability has not been mentioned; he is cast as an offender who is helping perpetuate body image problems. This is revealing as it suggests that the British media has a tendency to reserve victim narratives for female celebrities.

Although Pejic is widely rumoured as expressing an interest in working with brands such as Playboy and photographers like Terry Richardson, both of which have attracted widespread criticism for taking sexual advantage of teenage models (Harding), the danger of sexual exploitation only seems to interest the press (or titillate the public) when the

narrative concerns women. I would suggest that this is the result of a deliberate attempt, by the authors who engage with the 'Size 0' debate, to employ a feminist rhetoric in order to justify blaming female body issues on gendered and sexual minority groups who are easier to target and identify than the patriarchal value system.

The transsexual American commentator, Amanda Lepore, suggests that the transgender model is the ultimate vehicle for advertising aspirational fashions: "Who better than us to show others how the right make-up, clothes and hairstyle can transform you into something you are not born with?" (Iannacci 57). However, the tendency towards biological essentialism and the calls for the reinstatement of a clear gender binary on the catwalks that can be observed (in varying degrees) in the literature examined here suggests that the blurring of gendered fashions will not be adopted into an acceptable mainstream aesthetic yet. As Givenchy quietly drops the transsexual model Lea T. from his books after attracting a considerable amount of publicity for signing her, it remains to be seen whether models, such as Andrej Pejic, who evoke transgender issues will continue to be hired to fluidly model clothes designed for any gender after the initial public interest dies down.

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Talking like a Woman: Feminist Group Dynamics in the Queer/Trans Israeli Performance Group Dirty Laundry

By Jonah Winn-Lenetsky

Dirty Laundry, or Kvisa Shchora in Hebrew, developed as a queer political performance group in Israel in 1999, a year after the first Gay Pride festival was held in Tel Aviv. According to founding members of the group, Dirty Laundry formed in response to the depoliticized and homonormative nature of Israel's emerging gay and lesbian movement. The movement ignored issues of Palestinian oppression and transphobia, while eliding feminist critique and ideology. In 2000, the second Intifada would begin in earnest and it would become impossible for Israeli citizens to ignore the Palestinian crisis. Members of Dirty Laundry represented an incredibly broad makeup of ethnicities genders and sexualities, including Palestinians, Jewish Israelis, transgender men and women, gays and lesbians, and Mizrahim and Ashkenazim and took their cue from a growing worldwide queer activist movement.

Within Israel and the Middle East queer sexuality has only recently emerged in discourses of the left. Israel and the Palestinian Territories have been written about extensively, with little attention paid to non-normative sexualities and their role in Middle Eastern history and culture. Dirty Laundry used street performances to parody Israeli state militarism and to demand an end to the occupation of the Palestinian territories through an agonistic call to solidarity and coalition. Dirty Laundry emerged out of a tradition of queer protest performance and Gay Shame activism which can be traced to

New York and San Francisco in the late 1990's. Dirty Laundry re-imagines the Middle East as a place where queer aesthetics and political activism can make an important and unique intervention into state sanctioned violence and identity struggles.

In 2007, I had the great privilege of interviewing several of the primary and founding members of Dirty Laundry. (Note: the quotes from these members are from these interviews and are listed in the "Works Cited" section). It became immediately clear in both the interviews and the political actions staged by the group that feminism functioned as an ideological grounding for all group processes and events, both within their meetings and within the political protests and actions they staged. Despite the cross-gendered, cross-cultural nature of the group, each group member with whom I spoke reiterated their commitment to feminist practice and the ways in which a strong culture of feminism allowed the group to feel productive, inclusive, and affective for everyone involved. This article explores how four members of Dirty Laundry saw feminism operating within the group and the important role feminism had in making Dirty Laundry a unique and important activist group. In addition, I will explore two events staged by the group, which I believe demonstrate a queer and transgender feminist Middle Eastern politics. The first event, a beauty pageant staged in Holon, pointed to the violence of beauty standards and body fascism. The second, an action at the 2003 Gay Pride festival in Tel Aviv, challenged the governmental policy that would not allow gender to be changed on official Israeli ID cards.

Feminism emerged early in the group as a way of talking and organizing and was not solely the domain of bodies that were gendered female. The importance of feminist forms of practice and political action was seen as a necessary point of departure for all actions, meetings, and discussions. Dirty Laundry was a group premised on connectedness and inclusiveness. Seeing gender and sexuality activism in a network of political connections, associations, and entanglements formed a common thread within the narratives of the individuals with whom I spoke.

Dirty Laundry did not set out to accomplish one political goal, such as ending the occupation, or empowering women, but instead saw these as connected struggles. Dani, a transgender woman from Tel Aviv and one of the founding members, talks about Dirty Laundry's approach to connection early on in their work: "one focal point is the connection of things together. Like viewing the class oppression in Israel, as connected to feminism and viewing feminism as connected to militarism, viewing militarism as connected to something that has to do with homophobia." Dani described finding Dirty Laundry as a place that brought together all the pieces of her identity:

But the way I felt was like: 'I am being torn in pieces,' every time I went to an organization that had an issue to deal with. For example, something against the occupation, I would really love the action they did, or the political work, but I would really get annoyed at things that would contradict other parts of my identity. For example, I went to a place where it was anti-occupation, but it was terribly chauvinist.

For Dani, the majority of the activist groups with which she had been involved were misogynist and were premised on masculine systems of discussion and power; groups in which a lot of jockeying for position and dominance took place. In Dirty Laundry, things were different. A feminist praxis was employed in all aspects of discussion and decision making. I asked Dani to define feminist practice within Dirty Laundry and she talked about the need for consensus, but the fact that consensus is only one aspect of a complex of ways of operating that constitute feminist practice, “this is a very small expression to actually describe the atmosphere, which is much more important, at least for me, than actual consensus.” The feeling Dani describes was one of value, where every idea was recognized and considered. “The atmosphere was that every view mattered, no matter if you’re just one person.” Intention and feeling were also important aspects of the group’s praxis, “the way the discussion goes is really by: what’s behind your view? What do you mean? How would things make you feel wanted and whole?” Avdan, a transgender man from Jerusalem discusses Dirty Laundry’s feminist decision-making as having influenced activist groups throughout Israel and Palestine:

In terms of being able to be inclusive. Because, we did all the time have issues about Mizrahi agendas and Mizrahi people in the group and transgender people. I think that the meeting(s) in Kvisa Shchora were the best example I’ve ever been to of how (a) real feminist decision making process can happen.

For Avdan, issues around race and gender did not become divisive in Dirty Laundry's meetings, but were instead handled with openness and respect.

Dirty Laundry also used the feminine linguistic form whenever possible in all of their discussions. This may not seem significant to an English speaker, but in Hebrew the masculine form of words is used as a default even in a room of women if one man is present or enters the room. This seemingly small feminist move had a massive impact on how the group ran and its relationship to gender. As a speech act on a large scale, this shift asked that the feminine linguistic form be given as much (if not more) weight than the masculine. Rania, a Palestinian woman who had been a member of Dirty Laundry since 2000, explained the complexity of this shift. "If you speak in a feminine version you speak certain words and if you speak in a masculine version you speak different words. And it's enough for one man in a room of a hundred women for you to speak in a masculine version." Rania went on to explain that there was no hard and fast rule about speaking in the feminine, but that group members simply adopted that form of speech in order to further the goal of operating in a feminist framework.

During our interviews, body fascism and particularly beauty standards applied to women's bodies emerged as a theme of Dirty Laundry's work in general. The group regularly staged actions at beauty pageants, but one such action really demonstrated the group's creativity, compassion, and playful aesthetics. In this particular action, members of Dirty Laundry gathered on the same day that Tel Aviv's only gay and lesbian publication was holding a pageant for gay men in Tel Aviv and staged a counter-

pageant in Holon a nearby suburb. This pageant was meant to counter-act the objectification, exclusion, and body fascism of the actual pageant through appeals to individuality, affirmation, inclusion, and a total lack of competition. Avdan describes the pageant:

It was the day of a beauty contest and Kvisa (Dirty Laundry) had a tradition of doing a demonstration against beauty contests. Instead of demonstrating in front of the beauty contest we decided to go to Holon. We just brought a very long purple carpet and crowns and we let people just go on the carpet from side to side with a crown on their heads and people were clapping their hands. Feeling how it was to be a beauty queen and the idea was everyone is beautiful. We had, well a lot of children, but also old immigrants from the Soviet Union and middle aged men. (2007)

Dirty Laundry's beauty pageant was an attempt to share the group's internal philosophy of feminism, inclusion, positivity, and community building with a group of suburban Israeli's who might not otherwise have access to political action and feminist critique. Rania also noted the excitement of the crowd. Whether or not they understood the full critique of body politics the pageant was making, everyone in the audience enjoyed performing and taking part in the performance of beauty. "We had this carpet, this red carpet. And we asked people to go on it and to be a queen for a day. It was amazing to see the faces of the women, or the kids, or the people there. And no matter how you

look you are beautiful and to go with this feeling, it is amazing.” The red carpet, as a signifier of glamour, celebrity and recognition, was an important aspect of the ritual, emphasizing each individual’s right to be the object of adoration and to participate in the act of being viewed.

Another event staged by Dirty Laundry at the 2003 Gay Pride Parade in Tel Aviv involved creating fake Israeli ID cards. The government mandates that Israeli ID cards should be carried at all times by Israeli citizens and must be presented whenever a soldier or policewoman (man) asks. This is especially vexing for Arab Israelis, who are often hassled and detained even if they are Israeli citizens (not to mention Palestinians living in the territories, who are not recognized as citizens at all). Though the designation Jewish or Arab has been officially removed from the ID cards, every Israeli I spoke to said that it is still possible to discern their identity based on coded information on the cards, such as systems of stars (Palestinians are given a certain number of stars, while Jewish Israelis have a different number). In addition, one’s name is still a clear indicator of whether they are Jewish or Muslim. The ID cards also discriminate against transgender Israelis, because the only recourse for officially changing one’s gender on an Israeli ID is through undergoing an official sex-change involving hormone therapy and surgery under the advice of a physician and clinical psychologist. Even then, it involves a lengthy bureaucratic process. Dirty laundry created facsimile Israeli ID cards that were made to look like the real thing and were distributed to the Gay Pride attendees. Dirty Laundry’s cards had a lot of verisimilitude, but still contained certain modifications that would draw the attention of anyone who looked at them. The cards

would ideally inspire their holder to examine them carefully and think more critically about the “real” ID they carried in their own pockets. Rania translated the ID cards. First, the card asks the recipient to “open for a moment your ID,” but this is written in a feminine, instead of a masculine form. Where the actual card lists the person’s first and last name, Dirty Laundry’s cards say, “Name: ‘If I’m transgenderd and (have not had surgery) then the internal office won’t give me the right to change my name from Jacob to Ester.’” According to Rania, you have to have both top and bottom surgery in order to change your name on an Israeli ID. However, other Israelis with whom I spoke suggested that only top surgery and hormones are necessary. “The Internal Ministry decide(s) when to change you sex on your ID to female, or male. All psychiatric exams, you have to go through a lot of psychiatric committees to allow you to make the surgery.” The card also discusses the ways in which Israeli ID cards discriminate against Palestinian and Israeli Arabs. These cards were distributed in large numbers to those who attended the Gay Pride celebrations that year and squared well with Dirty Laundry’s slogan, “No Pride in the Oppression of Others.” These cards did not alter the way Israeli ID cards are designed today, but it did force Israelis to look closely at the very fundamental ways discrimination and classification on the basis of race, nationality, gender and sexuality are reified and enforced in every aspect of daily life in Israel.

Dirty Laundry has since disbanded, but all of the members I spoke to have gone on to do other activist work. They work to support such causes as ending the occupation, transgender activism, feminist activism, and anti-capitalist activism. In some cases, members have joined or formed groups that are working on multiple issues, like Dirty

Laundry. The legacy of Dirty Laundry has dramatically changed the activist landscape in Israel, influencing other activist groups to be more feminist and queer friendly. Everyone who I spoke to said that their time with Dirty Laundry had been important in their development as activists and that they have tried to bring feminist group dynamics to all the groups with which they have worked since.

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Teaching Transgender Issues through Documentary and Southern Comfort

By Heather McIntosh, Communication Department, Boston College

In January 2010, President Barack Obama appointed Amanda Simpson, a transwoman, as Senior Technical Adviser to the Department of Commerce. Several states have laws that prohibit types of gender discrimination, including Minnesota, California, and more recently Massachusetts. Advocacy group Make the Road New York organized a protest of clothing retailer J. Crew in March 2010 about its practices of not hiring transgender individuals ("Transgender Need Not"). Transgender issues appear as part of college-level courses, and sometimes those issues become the subject of entire courses, such as Transgender History, Identity, and Politics at the University of Oregon (see Reis). Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* outlines these issues and their tensions as they arose throughout the last century, while memoirs such as Jennifer Finney Boylan's *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* and Jamison Green's *Becoming a Visible Man* offer individual experiences and perspectives on being transgender in U.S. society.

Outside books, mainstream media continue to represent transgender individuals, with some representations still relying on long-held stereotypes and others bringing forward the issues of lived experiences, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *TransAmerica* (2005). Documentaries in particular represent a range of transgender experiences. *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary, focuses on the Harlem drag balls in the 1980s. Tami Gold's 1992 *Juggling Gender* explores the life of Jennifer Miller, a circus performer who appears female but wears a full beard (see Straayer). Some documentaries about transgender issues address the subject through

aspects of performers and performance, such as these two as well as Venus of Mars (2003), which connect to some of the popular cinematic representations such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001). In the fiction films, the comedic spectacle of these performances potentially renders the transgender individuals as “others.” But for many documentaries, the overall goal becomes to represent transgender people as not “others,” but as human, as people. Kate Davis’s 2001 documentary *Southern Comfort* tells the story of Robert Eads, a transman who was living in rural Georgia and dying of ovarian cancer. The documentary follows Eads and his family during the last year of his life, exploring his past, his relationships, and his health problems. With a two-person crew and small camcorders, Davis captured highly personal moments and exchanges in an understated, simple visual style that consisted primarily of on-location shooting and interviews. This style allows for a more intimate kind of documentary that offers an alternative to the over-the-top representations of transgender individuals. It also serves as an effective documentary for teaching transgender issues, as many of the issues it raises still affect the community even today.

In this essay I explore the teaching of transgender issues through documentary with *Southern Comfort*. I begin with addressing the political act of defining some key terms fundamental to these issues. I continue with a very brief consideration of some transgender stereotypes and suggest the possibilities of documentaries as a corrective to these stereotypes. I then discuss the background of *Southern Comfort*, its production, and its reception to provide a foundation for some of the themes that emerge within the documentary. These themes include family, acceptance, medical establishment

dealings and attitudes, and identity boundaries. In the end, I bring this documentary and its discussion into questions of pedagogy, including teacher positionality, classroom environment, syllabus placement, assigned readings, and classroom strategies.

Key Terms

Defining labels provides a starting point for discussing transgender issues, but it must be remembered that this act is political, power-laden, and overall just plain messy. As Wentling, Schilt, Windsow, and Lucal explain in "Teaching Transgender," "Any discussion that attempts to define the terms beneath the transgender umbrella should first offer the caveat that putting labels on and creating boundaries around identities is a politicized practice that can be a difficult, awkward and exclusionary process" (50). Binary oppositions of male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, and sex and gender quickly become blurred. Further terms such as "cisgender," "hir," "sie," "ze," and "genderqueer" attempt to shift away from these binaries (Beemyn "Transgender Terminology"). For students facing these issues for the first time, however, defining some key ideas helps provide a foundation on which to build. Some of the terms outlined here are used interchangeably, but they should not be.

"Sex" refers to biological sex, the sex assigned at birth, such as male or female (Stryker 7, Wood 20). "Gender" refers to the social and individual construction of masculinity and femininity, which are not tethered to the sexual assignment of male and female respectively (Stryker 11, Wood 21). Often, particularly in the popular press, the

word “gender” gets used interchangeably with the word “sex,” thus obscuring the power implications of each term’s construction and their conflation (Stryker 11). “Transsexual” individuals feel the bodies they are born into fail to match their identity (Stryker 18, Breemyn “Terminology”), and some will undergo “gender reassignment surgery” and hormone treatments in order to align their bodies with their identities (Breemyn “Terminology”). “FTM” individuals, or “transmen,” were assigned female at birth but identify as male, while “MTF” individuals, or “transwomen,” were assigned male at birth but identify as female (Breemyn “Terminology”). (Some individuals reject all four of these terms, however.) The term “transgender” serves as an overarching term for transsexuals, transwomen, transmen, transvestites, drag, cross-dressing, and other forms of “gender expression” (Reis 166; also Breemyn “Terminology,” Ekins and King 18, and Stryker 19). In her book *Transgender History*, Stryker uses the term “transgender” “to refer to the widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities,” noting that its definition changes depending on historical, cultural, and other contexts (19). Throughout this essay, I use the term “transgender” in this way.

Transgender Stereotypes

Many students’ ideas about transgender identities originate in the mainstream representations of transgender individuals. Most mainstream fiction representations exaggerate the extremes of personality in service to the storylines and spectacles of entertainment. The unknown gender identity of transgender characters in television procedural dramas such as *CSI* and *Law and Order: SVU*, for example, become part of

the puzzle the forensic scientists and police detectives must solve in various episodes. Cinematic representations span both comedy and horror. In comedy films transgender characters inform the humor, such as in *Myra Breckinridge* or *Desperate Living* (Kraus "Transsexuality"). In some of these films, transgender characters become part of "camp" or even "fetish," and not necessarily in transgressive ways (see Robbins and Myrick). In horror and suspense films transgender characters become killers, sometimes because they are denied gender reassignment surgery, such as in *Silence of the Lambs* and *Dressed to Kill* (Kraus "Transsexuality"). Other dramatic films offer more measured representations, but in the end many of the transgender characters end up killed, such as in *Boys Don't Cry*.

The documentary form offers the potential to represent corrective alternatives to these stereotypes. Documentaries begin with the real world, not fictional stories, for their representations, and they attempt to engage audiences in more ways than just entertainment, such as through educating on issues, raising of awareness, or calling for action. Instead of primarily aiming for humor or spectacle, documentaries are situated within "discourses of sobriety" alongside science, education, and politics (Nichols 3). According to documentary theorist Bill Nichols, "Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them power exerts itself" (4). While the sciences can privilege that "direct" relation, documentaries can make no such claim, but that connection to reality still affords them a greater cultural weight than fiction-based texts.

But a documentary does more than just "show" us a reality. It also makes some kind of argument, or point, about that reality. As Spence and Navarro explain in *Crafting*

Truth, “The form they [documentary makers] choose, the way they assemble their argument, far from being neutral or innocent, entails choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications” (114). Documentary makers build that argument through the different conventions they use, such as interviews, on-location shooting, archival materials, re-enactments, voiceovers, and others. Despite popular conceptions that documentaries achieve a degree of objectivity, that conception is a false one. In making any argument, a documentary comes from a particular point of view. Some documentaries make that point of view explicit, while others attempt to hide that viewpoint within the conventions that point more toward this perceived objectivity, such as a voiceover narration, archival materials, and some interviews. While some critics reject the ideas of a documentary reality (see Trinh), the construction of reality as an argument provides a useful starting point in unpacking the deeper meanings within a documentary. It also is the key idea to remember in teaching *Southern Comfort* or any other documentary.

Production Background

Documentaries offer an opportunity to show lived experience in ways that move beyond the spectacle and entertainment-driven values of mainstream fiction-based programming. Documentaries, particularly more independent ones made from outside the mainstream, bring forward voices usually relegated to the margins (Straayer 208), and they can do so without pushing them back into those margins. With *Southern Comfort*, “[V]iewers experience the loss of a proud, wise, eloquent, and highly original

human being” (Allen 39) in Robert Eads. The roots of the documentary began with a short segment within A&E television’s documentary titled *The Transgender Revolution*. Eads appeared in a couple segments of that documentary, but director Kate Davis saw a deeper story in Eads than just those parts. Born female, Eads married and had two sons before making the change to his chosen identity. He opted for the “top” surgery (a double mastectomy) but not the “bottom” surgery (a hysterectomy), and he took testosterone for several years as well. He lived as a man, had several relationships, and cultivated a chosen family. Eads even drew an invitation to join a group affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan. Overall, though, he lived a simple life in a trailer in the Deep South. According to Allen, Eads “had never been a political activist” and “tended to live his life in private” (38), thought the making of *Southern Comfort* offered him the opportunity to make a political statement.

Eads avoided going to a gynecologist for more than a decade, and ultimately he was diagnosed with cervical and ovarian cancer. At the time of the documentary’s making, he was dying from it, but he still managed to note, “It’s kind of a cruel joke that the last only part of me that was really female is killing me.” He had attempted to seek medical care, but multiple doctors and hospitals refused to treat him. In making the documentary, Eads wanted his story told, hoping “he could make a contribution in his last days” (Allen 38). With the two-person team, Davis was able to capture the closeness of Eads with the people in his life, sometimes living with him in his trailer and helping with his medical care when needed. As *Advocate* reviewer Jan Stuart notes, “One is amazed at the level of intimacy that filmmaker Davis is able to achieve [...], as her subjects make out in hotel rooms, administer hormone injections, and debate the

nature of intimacy” (“Family”). Davis captures Eads’ relationship with Lola Cola, his lover in his last years; Maxwell Anderson, his best friend; and even with Eads’ son and beloved grandson, among others. Davis also follows Eads on his journey to Southern Comfort, an annual conference for transgender people held in Atlanta, Georgia, each year since 1991.

Davis committed to making the documentary about Eads without funding. Southern Comfort went on to be featured at the Sundance Film Festival, where it received the Grand Jury Prize in Documentary, and to be shown at the Hot Docs conference in Toronto, where it won the Audience Award. The documentary also won acclaim in receiving about 20 different awards. It aired on HBO during April 2002 and was released on DVD through Docurama. Eads’ story as told through this documentary resonated with audiences and created him, and his life, as a human story.

Key Themes

Several key themes emerge in a close viewing of Southern Comfort. The first theme relates to the importance and complexities of family, both biological and chosen. The second theme of acceptance follows closely from the first, which involves acceptance by others. Attitudes toward the medical establishment become the third theme. The final theme involves the blurry lines of different identities. While I set these themes up as different sections, they are not discrete categories. In many cases they overlap, connect, and blur.

Family, both biological and chosen, becomes a central issue in Southern

Comfort. The documentary introduces us to Robert's chosen family first. Maxwell, whom Eads has known for ten years, is a brother to him. Eads describes their relationship: "It's kind of almost a father-son relationship. Maxwell has become one of my children. I've taken him as a responsibility of raising him." Other members of Robert's chosen family include his partner Lola Cola, Cas and Stephanie, and Cori, Maxwell's girlfriend. With the exception of Stephanie, all of them are transgender. This chosen family extends further to the attendees of the Southern Comfort conference, wherein transgender people gather for community and support, and Robert's final speech there honors them and includes them in his family as well.

Eads also connects to his biological family. He grew up as Barbara, and a couple sequences show a young Eads clothed in dresses and fancy shoes. Eads jokingly calls these his "cross-dressing days." Also as Barbara, Eads married a man and had two children with him, Doug and Bo. The biological family line continues with Keegan, his young grandson. His parents remain part of his life, though not without periods of estrangement.

Types of acceptance follow closely from these different families, as some members accept Eads and others struggle with it. Eads certainly finds acceptance among his chosen family, which Davis shows well through their warm-hearted interactions among one another and through their expressions of support and concern for Eads. Support from his biological family, however, manifests some of the difficulties some people have with understanding transgender experiences. One person offering acceptance is Bo, Eads' younger son. Though Bo struggles a bit with the identity labels, once switching between "he" and "she" in one sentence, he does accept his mother's

transition, particularly when he states, “Had I gotten married, I would have chosen Mom to be the best man at my wedding.” Even though Eads identifies as male, Bo still refers to him as “mom.” A source of unconditional acceptance that Eads enjoys comes from his grandson Keegan. Eads explains, “I am, have been, and always will be his Pawpaw. Pure and simple. And that’s -- I just am.”

Eads’ parents offer a more complicated set of reactions to their struggles with accepting Eads’ transition and identity. Eads’ mother originally accepted him as part of the gay community, but the news of his being a transsexual, according to Eads, brought on “tears. There was the usual, ‘Where did I go wrong? What did I do to make you this way?’” and it also brought on an estrangement for almost five years. Eads’ mother never speaks on camera in this piece -- we only hear about her reaction through Eads himself.

Eads’ father refuses to appear on camera, but he does offer his thoughts through voiceover. He struggles with reconciling the identity of Robert with Barbara. He discusses introducing Robert as his nephew and telling people that Barbara is estranged from him. He further explains his disappointment: “I had dreams my daughter would grow up and marry the man who would be president of the United States [...] I knew my daughter was that kind of a woman. And those dreams, as you well know, were shattered. But I will say this: I am very proud because I know that in him today beats the heart of my daughter Barbara.” Instead of seeing Robert as himself, his father sees Robert with Barbara still inside.

Acceptance also can come from outside immediate family and the transgender community. Early in the piece, Eads heads to the grocery store and talks about driving

through what he calls “Bubbaland,” home of the “good old boys.” He relates one instance in meeting one of those boys while smoking his ever-present pipe outside of Wal-mart. As the two sat and smoked, the other man invited Eads to join his group, which turned out to be an offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan. Robert laughs while telling this story, noting, “If people give you half a chance, they accept you without realizing it.” The acceptance in this sequence is based on Robert’s ability to pass as one of those “good old boys.”

These differing levels and types of acceptance provide a complicated theme throughout the documentary, but integrating acceptance and family complicates it further. For Robert, family provides the bedrock, the foundation, which makes losing family the hardest “because family is the core, family is the stone. It’s what holds everything together and all of a sudden -- it’s gone.” His statement follows a common issue with coming out. When individuals announce their identities, many of them find the liberation of becoming part of a group and gaining an identity, but at the same time, they might lose the only core support group they ever had with their families. As Southern Comfort shows with Eads’ father’s statements and his mother’s reaction, not all families embrace these changes.

The medical establishment, including doctors and hospitals, becomes a prominent theme throughout Southern Comfort. For some in the transgender community, the medical establishment offers a key step in their transition processes through the different surgeries. For Robert, the transition involved a double mastectomy and hormones, but not a hysterectomy due to a doctor’s advice. Eads explains, “Being a man or a woman has nothing to do with your genitalia. It has to do with what’s right here

in your heart and what's in your mind." He also notes how some people seek the complete transformation, however.

But the transgender community represented in this documentary feels that the medical establishment treats them unfairly. One of the first discussions in the documentary centers on bad surgeries and even poorer aftercare that those seeking changes have experienced. Cas's surgery ran about \$4,000, and the lacking aftercare resulted in a hole in his chest, through which muscle could be seen. Eads points out how those receiving a mastectomy for breast cancer sometimes receive careful incisions with minimal scarring, but that same level of care fails to appear in cases of transgender surgeries. Several mentions throughout the documentary point to the surgeries' prohibitive costs, as well.

Other discussions point to the medical establishment's failure at caring for the transgender community. Maxwell mentions how the medical establishment refuses to understand what transgender individuals experience and refuses to support them in their processes of transitioning. He states, "They refuse to make us complete." In their refusal, they also fail to make changes look more real, and not so fake. He continues, "And I think they do it on purpose."

The more dangerous and damaging claim about the medical establishment lies in its refusal to treat Eads' cancer. Robert's friend Debbie talks about calling 20 doctors and multiple hospitals in seeking treatment for him, but once she tells them he is transgender, all of them turn her down. Eads discusses how the doctors turned him down, too. According to him, some doctors were honest and said, "I'm sorry, but it would be too much of an embarrassment to my other patients." Also according to him,

another doctor said, “Oh, I’m sorry, but we’re not taking any new patients right now.” Eads sums up their responses to their motivations with, “To them, I’m expendable.” While Eads did delay going to the doctor for several years, the documentary makes clear that proper medical treatment might have improved the quality of his final years and maybe even extended them a bit.

The final theme comes from drawing and blurring identity category lines, particularly ones of sexual identity and sexual orientation. These comments come primarily from the interviewees themselves in discussing how they see themselves then and now. Cori, Maxwell’s girlfriend, for example, used to identify as a gay man. Lola talks about John, whom she still identifies with for business reasons. She says, “In some ways John is very much me, but in a lot of ways he’s like a construct.” Eads complicates this labeling further, when he talks about being pregnant and how that messed him up a bit: “The only time I ever felt like a homosexual was when I was married to their biological father because I now and always have been a heterosexual male. I like women, always have. I’ve never felt like a lesbian. I was just a man in love with women.” Further discussions about intimacy complicate this theme further. Cori and Maxwell, for example, talk about their intimacy, describing its emotional fullness without the physical penetration. Of all the themes that emerge in the documentary, these uses of labels prove the most confounding and will provide the most challenge in terms of class discussion.

Pedagogy Questions

Teaching transgender issues in general, and through documentary in particular, raises some key pedagogical questions, including teacher positionality, classroom environment, syllabus placement, assigned readings, and classroom strategies. Teacher positionality serves as the most important pedagogical question to consider when teaching transgender issues, documentary, and Southern Comfort. For me, teacher positionality first refers to my role as a teacher within the classroom space and my own viewpoints on the subjects at hand. Teachers' roles vary in their approaches and in their effects on the classroom. Facilitators lean toward the co-creation of knowledge, while Socratic techniques use questions toward the creation of knowledge and understanding. These two approaches invite students to participate in the discussions at hand. The authority model, however, positions the teacher as the expert within the classroom space, and it sets up knowledge as a one-way, one-sided conveyance. Overall, I prefer either the facilitator or questioner roles, but when discussing transgender issues and Southern Comfort, I have found that sometimes I end up as an authority offering background or clarification on some of the terminology and aspects associated with transgender experiences. Answering these questions is important to building discussion, but it is also important to prevent these questions from overtaking the entire discussion (Wentling, Schilt, Windsor, and Lucal 52).

Teacher positionality also refers to my personal attitudes towards the subject of transgender issues and Southern Comfort. It further refers to my decision of whether to disclose my attitudes. Sometimes, students sometimes try and guess the teacher's viewpoints, and other times, they project their or other opinions onto the teacher. Sharing personal views may prevent the guessing and projecting from happening, but

doing so also might derail a discussion as students may fear expressing a differing viewpoint or appearing “uneducated” to their peers. Some teachers feel comfortable sharing, while others prefer not to disclose. Ultimately, the decision remains up to the teacher, but reflecting on these matters beforehand helps with guiding the discussion and determining the teacher’s place within it.

Classroom environment becomes another important consideration in teaching issues that remain outside many students’ experiences and understandings. Ideally, classroom spaces should be set up as “safe” places for critical inquiry and general queries about transgender issues. Further, the spaces should be safe for students to share their own experiences, should they feel comfortable enough to disclose them. The boundaries for this safe space should be set up at the outset of each semester and maintained throughout the semester. While I do not want students to agree with every opinion brought forward, I do outline what constitutes respectful approaches to handling views they disagree with. I include these guidelines in both the syllabus and in class. Reis notes the importance of creating these expectations at the outset (167), and I suggest reinforcing them throughout a semester as needed.

Transgender issues can be integrated into a wide variety of courses related to gender and sexuality. In addition to Reis’ class on Transgender History, Identity, and Politics, Abbott writes about incorporating them in literature classes such as her course titled *Passing in American Literature*. Wentling, Schilt, Windsor, and Lucal list several topics within sociology and gender studies, noting gender binaries, gender performance, and social constructions of gender (50). I have taught transgender issues as part of classes on film theory and criticism, gender and communication, and women’s

documentary, with *Southern Comfort* becoming my primary text for that inquiry. Several authors writing about teaching transgender issues mention other documentaries such as *Toilet Training* (Wentling, Schilt, Windsor, and Lucal 53), while Abbott mentions *Just Call Me Kade* and *Venus Boyz*. For other titles, check out *Outcast Films* (www.outcast-films.com).

One advantage of *Southern Comfort* and other documentaries is that they provide a contrast to the popular representations students might already be familiar with, and this point might be useful when considering placement of this documentary in a course syllabus. I usually position *Southern Comfort* after a more mainstream text such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* to highlight this comparison. The camp of *The Adventures of Priscilla* (see Robbins and Myrick) brings the reality of Eads' story into sharp relief, and so the differences between the texts provide one accessible starting point for discussion. If the course focuses more on documentary, *Paris is Burning's* use on the performative mode (see Flynn) provides a more complicated starting point, but it still offers a distinct enough contrast to *Southern Comfort* in subject, style, and approach.

Choosing readings to accompany *Southern Comfort* still offers some challenges as few if any essays address transgender issues and this documentary specifically through a sustained inquiry. Though not from an academic journal, "Transpotting," written by E.J. Graff and published in *The American Prospect*, brings together transgender issues, *Southern Comfort*, and other related documentaries with questions that students might have about transgender identity, the transitioning process, and others. Graff offers her own observations about the documentary and about Eads that

could offer starting points for class discussion. For example, she writes, “Robert Eads, probably like much of his rural Georgia peer group, describes manhood and womanhood in sexist ways that make me grit my teeth -- and yet his idea of being a standard-issue heterosexual man is to get involved with Lola, who is newly transitioning from male to female” (37). This sentence alone raises questions about Eads’ representation and about Graff’s assumptions, and it might point to some attitudes held by students as well. For another example, Graff writes, “I’ve started to realize that transsexuals don’t conform to stereotyped ideas of how either sex should behave; rather, they give up a great deal—beginning but not ending with family acceptance, money, and bodily safety— to deviate drastically from what most people consider their ‘natural’ path” (39). This excerpt, too, raises some questions for discussion.

Some writing addresses Eads’ story and Davis’s production. Eads’ long-time friend Maxwell Anderson wrote “Remembering Robert” for *Transgender Tapestry*, a poignant tribute that addresses Eads’ life and the documentary. Anderson appeared in *Southern Comfort*, and interestingly, Anderson and others in *Southern Comfort* reacted poorly to their representations at first, but eventually they came to accept them (49). This short piece includes some background about the production, particularly more with the medical challenges Eads faced. Another article, also from *Transgender Tapestry*, delves into the production. Mariett Pathy Allen’s short piece, “The Making of ‘Southern Comfort,’” tells Allen’s first-person experiences with Davis and the documentary’s origins and production. It offers slightly more background on the production.

Here are some strategies for using *Southern Comfort* in classes. These suggestions are only starting points and can be modified easily.

1) Show the entire documentary during scheduled class time, if possible. Create an active viewing situation through providing students with some questions or prompts to guide them, such as themes briefly explored here, other related class texts, or other critical questions.

2) Before starting the class discussion, ask students to write a personal reflection on the documentary or to compose a discussion question. Once they complete these writings, ask them to share, if they are comfortable.

3) Divide the class into small groups, and assign each group a theme to discuss and then report back to the entire class. Ask them to find ways in which the documentary helps support the development of that theme. Another tactic here is to ask each group to brainstorm a discussion question.

4) Instead of the individual or small-group starts, begin with a full-class discussion. Start with asking them for questions they have about Southern Comfort, and encourage them to answer each other, if possible, instead of you answering for them.

5) Wind up the class with asking them to write a reflection on the documentary and the discussion.

6) Follow up the session with a discussion through a course management system, if available. Some students uncomfortable with speaking up in class may express themselves more fully in this forum.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this piece, I did gloss over some potential transgender issues to address.

One is passing, mentioned briefly in the discussion of Robert's "good old boy" story. Passing is a complicated issue associated with transgender studies (see Stone), and it is an idea developed more fully in documentaries such as *Paris Is Burning*. In *Southern Comfort*, though, it gives passing an affirmation of identity from a normative group, and I wanted to avoid offering that group further power. I also wanted to avoid possibly reinforcing a fixed, external point for identities, instead redirecting them back to the documentary subjects and the documentary's construction.

Another glossing point come back to the disconnect some transgender people feel between their identities and their bodies. The medical establishment labels this gender identity disorder, which creates a divide in the transgender communities. For some, the disorder provides affirmation, but for others, it creates a sense of resentment at being classified with a mental disorder (Stryker 13). This disorder also intersects with medical care and access to it, as the medical procedures related to it are not covered by health care plans (Stryker 14-15). Further, the situation creates a "double bind -- if the transgendered is not considered psychopathological, it should be delisted as a mental disorder; if it is to be considered psychopathological, its treatment should be covered as a legitimate healthcare need" (Stryker 15). A common issue in framing communities created around specific diseases is that sufferers might become "othered" through their symptoms, and thus become dehumanized into their symptoms. Addressing this possibility moves the discussions away from the documentary and into areas I prefer not to go in my classes.

A final idea is queer theory. In my discussion of the themes, I attributed identity definitions to the people interviewed in the documentary. Queer theories offer a

complicated and enlightening way of exploring the implications of transgender identity in *Southern Comfort*, but such a question warrants an extended inquiry in its own right. For a queer reading of identity in documentary, see Straayer's piece on *Juggling Gender* and *OUTLAW*.

In all, *Southern Comfort* tells a powerful story of Robert Eads' last year and the friends and family who supported him. It shows the power of acceptance and family, and it shows the complicated medical factors in transitioning and in getting general care. The intimate style, powerful story, and engaging subject all create an accessible documentary that only begins to touch on the issues that transgender people face, and it provides a useful starting point for classes in beginning their own inquiries into these matters.

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Inadvertent Praxis: What Can “Genderfork” Tell Us about Trans Feminism?

By Ruth Pearce

Introduction

Trans feminism is an emerging form of feminist theory and practice, grounded in the experiences of trans¹ people but relevant to all². Trans feminists seek to apply feminist ideas to trans discourses while establishing a place for trans subjectivity within the wider feminist movement, thereby expanding and fundamentally altering the remit of feminist liberation (Hill, 2000: 2).

In this article I examine a number of issues pertinent to trans feminism in the context of a gender-diverse Internet community. Curson (2010) argues that “some thinking and writing on the nature of gender by trans individuals, often in non-academic contexts, goes beyond the current level of sophistication of thinking within transgender studies itself”(144). Trans feminist ideas are explored with increasing

¹ I use the broad term “trans” throughout this article to refer to the multiplicity of transsexual, transvestite and drag identities and communities that existed prior to the 1990s, as well as the diverse transgender, genderqueer and trans* movements that have emerged more recently. It is important to note that “trans” is itself a contemporary descriptor – situated within a very particular socio-historical context – and, despite the term’s increasing popularity, many gender variant and/or transitioning individuals still prefer not to describe themselves as such. Nevertheless, in the absence of a genuinely universal referent the term will suffice.

² In an important early paper on trans feminism, Hill (2000) states that the movement “relates to transsexuals” experiences, but [...] is applicable to all women.” (2). However, trans feminism has since expanded to encompass (trans)gender pluralism in a way that is no longer rooted simply in ideas of womanhood.

regularity and intellectual rigour in the English-speaking world within a variety of non-academic contexts, including reading groups, conference workshops and dedicated events. This development is reflected and amplified online, with popular feminist blogs (such as the UK-based *The F Word*,³ and the US-based *Feministing*⁴) and trans blogs (such as the US-based *Questioning Transphobia*⁵) frequently offering a platform for trans feminist writers. Such grassroots elements of the trans feminist movement have attracted remarkably little attention from within the Academy (which concerns itself primarily with trans feminist theory and related academic praxis) despite a growing range of contributions to contemporary forms of both trans and feminist advocacy. I therefore aim to address this gap in the literature with an initial discussion of how several concepts central to trans feminism are explored and utilised within a community context.

I draw upon research undertaken on Genderfork,⁶ a popular, gender-diverse blog driven by user-contributed content, centring my discussion upon a pre-existing qualitative social analysis of the blog community. In doing so, I explore how relevant trans feminist principles are to those whom trans feminism seeks to champion, and investigate what Genderfork can tell us about this nascent movement. I argue that the blog is the site of an inadvertent trans feminist praxis, in which community members adopt principles that will be familiar to trans feminists without explicit reference to trans feminism.

³ <http://www.thefword.org.uk>

⁴ <http://feministing.com>

⁵ <http://www.questioningtransphobia.com>

⁶ <http://genderfork.com>

This article is inevitably shaped by my white, middle-class transsexed female subjectivity. My situated identity affords me a certain amount of insight into gender variant experiences, but also a certain level of privilege. I therefore seek to prioritise the voices of a multiplicity of trans and gender variant people within my analysis, deriving my theoretical assumptions from their lived experience whenever possible. I draw upon the language of trans feminism, utilising many terms that have been coined by trans theorists or within trans communities in order to illustrate concepts that might initially appear quite alien to a cis⁷ audience. I therefore aim to briefly define such terminology within the text each time a new word is introduced.

The first part of the article explores the background to my analysis. I begin with a discussion of anti-trans sentiments within feminism, and explain how transphobic arguments laid the groundwork for an explicit trans feminism. I then move to identify three key principles within trans feminism: the self-determination of (gendered) identity, a defence of bodily sovereignty and an intersectional analysis of gender difference. An introduction to Genderfork follows, accompanied by a related explanation of my methodological decisions. In the second part of the article, I separately examine each of the aforementioned trans feminist principles in the context of Genderfork content.

⁷ “Cis” (in contrast to “trans”) refers to those individuals for whom assigned gender, gender identity and preferred gender expression are aligned in a normative fashion. Cis is often regarded as an antonym of trans; similarly, “cisgender” may be considered an antonym of “transgender” and “cissexual” an antonym of “transsexual.” “Cissexism” refers to the institutionalised prioritisation and validation of cis interests and identities at the expense of trans individuals (Serano, 2007).

Anti-trans feminism

The trans movement has had a complex and often difficult relationship with contemporaneous feminist trends. Anti-trans sentiment from within feminism is epitomised in Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979), a work infamous for its attack upon the idea of transsexualism. Raymond reserves particular vitriol for trans women who describe themselves as feminist, accusing them of an attempted "male" colonisation of "feminist identification, culture, politics and sexuality (104)." She also offers an extensive critique of the specialist medical services that emerged to manage physical and social transitions from one normatively prescribed gender role to another. In her argument, the eponymous "transsexual empire" is a patriarchal psycho-medical conglomerate that (re-)enforces sexist norms by presenting transsexualism as a cure for gender deviance. She therefore contends that "the problem with transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence" (178), suggesting that feminist consciousness-raising would be better used to address any desire for transition.

Raymond's work relies upon "monolithic, stereotypical representations of trans individuals" (Bettcher, 2009: 3). The term "transsexual" is used within *The Transsexual Empire* to condemn a wide range of gender variant identities and behaviours, a theme expanded upon in Raymond (1994). Raymond's argument is rooted in binary thinking that recognises only female and male, woman and man. Trans women are portrayed as artificially, stereotypically feminine within everyday settings, and aggressively masculine within feminist spaces. Trans men are

dismissed as dupes of the patriarchy on the rare occasion that they warrant a mention within the text. Similarly limited representations of trans people have retained a place within radical feminist discourse, with Raymond's arguments echoed more recently by Hausman (1995), Jeffreys (1997), Greer (1999) and Bindel (2009).

Stone (1991) – herself targeted by Raymond for her contribution to *Olivia Records* – responds to this trend in *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*. She accepts certain elements from the radical feminist critique of medical institutions and transfeminine conformity. Her article highlights the absurdity of autobiographical trans narratives that rely upon the idea of a perfect and remarkably rapid transformation from normative (assertive, dominant) heterosexual masculinity to normative (passive, submissive) heterosexual femininity, concluding: “No wonder feminist theorists have been suspicious. Hell, I’m suspicious” (Stone, 1991: 227). However, she argues that the medical establishment bears a great deal of responsibility for this situation, as practitioners frequently expect gender variant people to conform to certain gender norms in order to access medical resources. The paper ends with a call for a “posttranssexual” paradigm, in which trans people no longer seek to erase themselves through necessarily seeking to “pass” as non-trans.

In Stone's groundbreaking work we see how radical feminist critiques of transsexualism ironically served to spark an intellectual response from feminist trans advocates. The next decade saw more calls for both trans visibility and an engagement with feminist ideals (Bornstein, 1994; Califia, 1997; Feinberg, 1992, 1999; Namaste, 2000; Stryker, 1994; Wilchins, 2002). These writers sought a space

for gender variant subjectivities within feminism, drawing attention to interests and oppressions common to both women and trans people whilst laying the groundwork for a distinct trans feminism.

Principles of trans feminism

Hill (2000) draws upon qualitative research to describe the emergence of a grassroots trans feminist praxis. He portrays a “genre of feminism” grounded in the needs of transsexed and intersex⁸ women: a movement concerned with tackling the structural and social inequalities responsible for both sexism and transphobia (1). This trans feminism is informed by existing feminist ideals, but also resists transphobia and ciscentricism from within feminism, thus providing “a critique of the second wave feminism from third wave perspectives” (Koyama, 1999: cited in Hill, 2000: 2). In this sense, it is comparable to other feminisms – such as black feminism and fat feminism – that recognise cultural specificity and intersecting oppressions in opposition to the (predominantly white, middle-class) concept of “woman” as a singular oppressed class (Koyama, 2006; Salvador, 2006). Hill also emphasises the importance of pedagogy in trans feminism. His research participants regarded “reaching out” to other trans people, fellow feminists and wider society as “essential” to trans liberation (2000: 3-4). Being “out” as trans is portrayed as an important part

⁸ Intersex individuals are born with some combination of both female and male sex characteristics (for instance, an intersex individual might possess XY chromosomes and a typically female phenotype, or sexually ambiguous genitalia. Some intersex individuals are content in the gender they are assigned at birth, whereas others are not. The category “intersex” is therefore both analytically and socially distinct from the category “trans,” although there is some community overlap in the form of individuals who identify as both intersex and trans.

of this process, reflecting Stone's (1991) call to arms.

The emergent trans feminism explored by Hill is crystallised in Koyama's (2003) *Transfeminist Manifesto*. Koyama outlines and analyses the movement's principles and tensions, effectively providing a blueprint for trans feminist theory and practice.

She proposes two key principles of trans feminism:

First, it is our belief that each individual has the right to define his or her own identities and to expect society to respect them. This also includes the right to express our gender without fear of discrimination or violence. Second, we hold that we have the sole right to make decisions regarding our own bodies, and that no political, medical or religious authority shall violate the integrity of our bodies against our will or impede our decisions regarding what we do with them. (245)

The first of these principles – that of self-definition – is formulated in response to the challenges that gender variant people encounter whilst navigating the social world. Such individuals are commonly denied the opportunity to define and articulate their own gendered subjectivity; this occurs when trans genders are regarded as artificial and/or frivolous. Conversely, cis genders are typically regarded as both natural and serious: worthy of respect, and not to be questioned. Cis genders are therefore perceived as real and trans genders as unreal. Whilst a cis man's masculinity may be called into question if he does not conform to hegemonic ideals of manhood, he will still be regarded as a "man," albeit a man perhaps less worthy of respect. In contrast, a trans man's manhood can be rejected altogether if his trans status is

disclosed. The situation creates a double bind for trans people, with the gender presentation and identity of trans women (for instance) condemned as artificial if they engage in traditionally feminine behaviour and “masculine” (i.e. male) if they do not. Indeed, this very fallacy is committed by Raymond (1979) in her accounts of artificially feminine trans women and overly assertive “transsexually constructed” lesbian feminists (Bettcher, 2009: 3). For Serano (2007), this “trans-misogyny” – which extends to media representations of trans women as either predatory “deceivers” or “pathetic” fakes – arises from a more widespread tendency towards viewing any feminine behaviour (although not the female gender) as necessarily artificial (36, 44). Moreover, whilst a considerable number of trans people identify into a binary category of Western gender, others define their gender identity in non-binary terms. Non-binary identified individuals might subscribe to a “third gender” category, or describe themselves as being between, beyond and/or without gender(s). These genders – or, indeed, a declared lack of gender – are a source of confusion within societies that regard binary gender categorisation as both natural and real. Non-binary genders are therefore also rejected as unreal within the cissexist paradigm.

A new language of (trans)gender is evolving to account for and validate both non-binary identities and transitions within the binary. Gender variant individuals have historically used medical terminology such as “transvestite” (Hirschfeld, 1991) and “transsexual” (Benjamin, 1966; Cauldwell, 1949) to describe their own experience of (trans)gendered embodiment. These concepts are still commonly referred to within gender variant communities alongside contemporary identities such as “autogynephilic” that similarly draw upon discourses of pathology (Ekins & King,

2010). However, over the last two decades a myriad of new terms have emerged within the English language to account for and codify gender variance in a more affirmative manner. Internet communities have played an important role in this process because they enable members of the disparate and widely invisible gender variant population to come together and forge “new modes” and “different codes” of gendered understanding (Whittle, 1998: 393). “Transgender” and “trans” alike offer an alliance of difference and diversity, uniting transsexuals and transvestites with other “gender outlaws”, such as androgynes, butches, femmes, drag kings, drag queens and sissies (Feinberg, 1992, 1999; Whittle, 2006). “Cis” enables the de-centring and de-normalisation of normative genders within the discourse of gender variance, while “transphobia” and “cissexism” denote anti-trans prejudice and power relations (Koyama, 2002; Serano, 2007). Terms such as “binding,” “packing,” “tucking,” and “gaffing” describe gendering (and de-gendering) practises (Ekins & King, 2006). Identities such as “androgyne,” “bi-gender,” “genderqueer,” and “genderfluid” denote non-binary gender(s), while “pansexuality” and “omnisexuality” account for non-binary forms of sexual and romantic attraction (Bauer, 2008; Bornstein & Bergman 2010; Nestle et al, 2002). Gender-neutral pronouns such as ze/hir, it/its and the singular form of “they” further deconstruct binary gender norms (Feinberg, 1999). This new language enables the acknowledgement and articulation of complex identities, empowering individuals to more appropriately define and describe themselves.

In rejecting cissexist conceptions of gender validity, trans feminists tend to agree that all non-oppressive forms of gender identity and expression should be regarded as equally valid in both trans and cis people. However, trans feminists may also hold

quite different positions on the genesis of gendered characteristics. Hill (2006) argues that differing views of gender amongst trans people – which may be largely essentialist, largely social constructivist, or some synthesis of the two – reflect tensions within the wider feminist movement. Prosser (1998) and Serano (2007) posit that there is some biological basis to elements of gendered behavior. This may extend to feelings of body dysmorphia in trans people, which Serano accounts for with her concept of “subconscious sex” (2007: 78). However Koyama (2003) urges trans feminists to resist “the essentialist notion of gender identity,” explaining that: “To say one has a female mind or soul would mean that there are male or female minds that are different from each other in some identifiable way, which in turn may be used to justify discrimination against women;” she therefore urges that we “construct our gender identities based upon what feels genuine, comfortable and sincere to us as we live and relate to others within given social and cultural constraint” (248). This approach – which allows for deep-seated feelings of gendered belonging whilst drawing upon the queer theory of gender performativity articulated by Butler (1990) – challenges not only the female/male gender binary, but also the additional binaries that typically divide cis and trans: real/unreal, natural/artificial, frivolous/serious.

The second of Koyama’s (2003) trans feminist principles – that of body sovereignty – asserts the right of trans persons to make decisions about their own bodies. This principle clearly addresses access to medical resources for those who desire hormones and/or surgery. Trans people throughout the world frequently encounter difficulty when attempting to access specialist medical services, with state healthcare providers and private health insurers alike often refusing to cover interventions

related to physical transition (Grant et al, 2011; Whittle et al, 2008). Policies of non-intervention are usually defended with the argument that transition-related treatments are cosmetic and therefore unnecessary (thus also reinforcing the perception of trans gender as artificial). Trans feminists respond that all individuals have a right to medical treatment, and may further assert that many trans people cannot properly flourish without access to physical transition (Serano, 2007). A number of commentators also note that trans people who have transitioned physically are less likely to encounter harassment and violence because of their appearance⁹ (Bettcher, 2007; Namaste, 2000).

The principle of body sovereignty also relates to several more traditional feminist concerns, such as fertility, abortion and genital mutilation. A number of countries refuse to recognise the gender identity of trans men and trans women until the individuals concerned have been rendered sterile through hormone treatments or surgery (Whittle et al, 2008). This approach effectively requires trans people to be sterilised in order to access rights taken for granted by cis individuals. While state-sanctioned sterilisation is taken for granted, trans fertility can lead to moral panic: this may be seen in the recent international media furore over trans male pregnancies (Halberstam, 2010). Opponents and supporters of trans fertility both argue that pregnant men (and, indeed, pregnant non-binary individuals) threaten to undermine traditional gender roles and binary gender distinctions. Less attention has been paid to non-binary individuals and men who wish to access abortion services, but such individuals are still likely to encounter confusion and (therefore) difficulty.

⁹ This argument does not of course apply to those trans people who – through choice or accident – cannot pass as cis following transition.

The mass-mutilation of intersex infants also remains largely invisible. Intersex babies with ambiguous genitals often undergo “corrective” surgery shortly after birth in order to assign them an appropriately female or male sex/gender. (Hird, 2003). These procedures resemble transphobic and sexist assaults insofar as they serve to reinforce binary gender norms through the means of physical violence directed at an unacceptable body. Trans feminists condemn all efforts to manage gender through external societal and/or institutional control of human bodies.

Koyama explicitly centres the experiences of trans women when unpacking the principles of self-definition and body sovereignty. She uses the term “trans woman” in a broad context, referring to “those individuals who identify, present or live more or less as women despite their birth sex assignment to the contrary;” however, there is an explicit focus on the experiences of trans women as opposed to trans men and individuals “who do not conform to the male/female dichotomy or those who are transgendered in other ways” (2003: 244). In a postscript added to later editions of the manuscript, Koyama addresses this “overemphasis” on trans women, explaining that it stems from the idea that feminism necessarily should concern itself with the category of “woman.” She acknowledges this privileging of trans women as “a mistake” that resulted in her neglecting the “unique struggles that female-to-male trans people and other transgender and genderqueer people face” (259). This theoretical shift is often echoed in later trans feminist work, with Bettcher (2009) describing a trans feminist politic centred around trans women as “inadequate” as trans men and other gender variant individuals may also be subject to misogynist forms of discrimination and violence (9.3). An effective trans feminism should therefore be capable of acknowledging and incorporating what Monro (2005, 2007)

describes as “gender pluralism”: a multiplicity of (sometimes contradictory) trans subjectivities, which may involve sexual fluidity, the rejection of gender, and/or an awareness of the gendered self as somehow innate. This acceptance of trans diversity and difference is necessary for a trans feminism that truly embraces self-definition and self-determination.

Koyama’s (2003) postscript also highlights a second failing of the *Manifesto*: an “inadequate intersectional analysis” (259). The original essay thoroughly interrogates the manner in which sexism and transphobia can intersect, but makes little mention of how trans feminism might also acknowledge and address issues such as classism, disablism and racism. Understanding how various axes of difference intersect with gender variant identity is important if we are to acknowledge the diverse multiplicity of trans subjectivities. Moreover, it is worth noting that trans people in the Western world are particularly likely to experience homelessness (Grant et al., 2009; Mitchell & Howarth, 2009), and may be especially susceptible to disability (Mitchell & Howarth, 2009: 55), while non-white individuals and sex workers are considerably more likely to experience transphobic discrimination, harassment and violence (Bettcher, 2007; Grant et al., 2011; Namaste, 2000). The importance of an intersectional trans feminist analysis is highlighted by numerous writers (Bettcher, 2007, 2009; Feinberg, 1999; Koyama, 2006; Namaste, 2000) and within grassroots activism, as epitomised within blogs such as *Questioning Transphobia*. If we are to follow Koyama in regarding self-definition and body sovereignty as two primary principles of trans feminism, then an acknowledgement of (and engagement with) intersectional oppressions should therefore form a third key principle.

I concentrate upon self-definition, body sovereignty and intersectionality for this article. However, these principles by no means delineate the boundaries of trans feminist concern. Scott-Dixon (2006: 25-28) briefly outlines seven themes key to trans feminism: these include “self-definition and self-naming,” “bodies, ability and sexuality” and “intersectionality, multiple identities and differences”: concepts that broadly tie in with the principles identified by Koyama. Other themes noted by Scott-Dixon include “safety, shelter and women-only spaces,” “groups, power and organising” and “legislation and discrimination;” these areas of interest broadly concern trans feminist praxis that draw upon the aforementioned principles. Finally, the very first theme in Scott-Dixon’s overview is entitled “sex/gender systems of power.” This theme draws upon the Foucauldian concept of capillary power relations (Foucault, 1978), thus reinforcing the trans feminist association with the “third wave” of feminism. It incorporates:

[...] the focus on and analysis of how gendered structures of power and privilege operate to proscribe and constrain choices, and how gender (and other intersecting dimensions such as race, class, sexuality, age and so forth) serves as a marker of social differentiation, organisation and stratification. (25)

Scott-Dixon’s description of gendered systems of power therefore operates less as a guiding principle for trans feminism, and more as an overarching concern to be addressed within any trans feminist context (whether theoretical or practical).

Introducing Genderfork

Genderfork is a blog – a website that displays “dated entries in reverse chronological

order [...] containing links and other kinds of interactivity between websites and [...] conversational features [...] for instance, a comment section” (Karlsson, 2007: 138). This interactivity is a key element of its appeal. Genderfork was originally an individual project, but has grown into a popular¹⁰ community space in which the majority of content is contributed by readers (whom I refer to as “users” in recognition of the key role they play in producing and interpreting the (hyper)text). Any user may submit their thoughts about gender, questions, a personal profile, a picture, a video, a web link or recommendations for a book, film or work of art. A team of volunteers select contributed content for publication, with the blog’s front page usually being updated at least once a day. The publication of blog posts on Genderfork is therefore mediated by this team. Any user may directly comment upon any post; in such comments users typically respond to entries and discuss their own feelings about gender and gendered subjectivity. All of the blog’s content is public, meaning that anyone can visit the site and read any post or comment.

The very first post on Genderfork announces the founder’s intention to “explor[e] androgyny and other gender intersections.” The blog’s current remit arguably extends beyond this, with the Genderfork “frequently asked questions” page stating that the site is a “supportive online community for the expression of identities across the gender spectrum.” This non-prescriptive description reflects the diversity of the

¹⁰ Analytics for Genderfork – kindly provided in personal correspondence by Genderfork administrator Sarah Dopp – indicate that the site received 540,362 visits from 180 countries during 2010. The majority of users live in predominantly English-speaking Western countries, with 354,653 visits from the United States, 45,241 from Canada and 43,754 from the United Kingdom in 2010.

blog's users, who variously describe themselves using terms such as "androgynous," "dyke," "feminist," "genderqueer," "gay," "intersex," "lesbian," "queer," "straight" and "trans." Genderfork is not specifically a trans community space, but is instead a space in which trans individuals are explicitly made welcome. The blog therefore provides a platform for exploring the relevance and appeal of trans feminist principles within a gender diverse, trans-friendly space.

I base the following discussion of trans feminist principles upon user-contributed content and comment-based user discussions on Genderfork. I draw my data from a qualitative research project undertaken in 2010, in which I undertook a retrospective investigation into how androgyny, gender ambiguity and gender variant identities are explored and managed within the blog. Concentrating broadly upon the site's textual content, I re-analyse my original data through the lens of trans feminism. The Genderfork community now extends into social networking platforms Facebook and Twitter, but the research took place within the original blog itself, providing a snapshot of the hypertext at a particular point in time. My observations encompassed the blog's entire contemporaneous archive, from 15 September 2007 until 31 May 2010.

I place the voices and identities of Genderfork users at the centre of my analysis. I refer to users with the pseudonyms that they have chosen for themselves on the site: names that have already been selected for use within a public setting. In taking this approach, I acknowledge Genderfork users as authors who have contributed to the hypertext, and cite their work appropriately. This approach is also based upon an acceptance of the fact that further anonymization is rendered impossible by Internet

search engines, as any quotation from the blog cited within this paper may easily be found in its original context. I refer to Genderfork users by their preferred pronouns where possible, and with the third-person singular (gender-neutral) form of “they” if their preferred pronouns are unknown to me.

Analysis

An exhaustive review of the data collated during my original Genderfork project revealed that a considerable number of Genderfork users describe themselves as “feminist” or refer to overtly feminist texts. Some users refer to being both trans and feminist, while others refer to trans issues in a feminist context or vice-versa. However, there was no explicit discussion of trans feminism. In spite of this, much of the site’s content might be considered evidence of an inadvertent trans feminist praxis, and it is to this subject that I now turn.

I regard a great deal of Genderfork content as trans feminist insofar as it addresses trans feminist concerns and offers contributions to trans feminist thought. I do not presume to assert that Genderfork users are themselves trans feminists – I have no way of knowing how individual users relate to the term – but instead justify my claim with the aid of two questions. How relevant are trans feminist principles to Genderfork users? What can Genderfork tell us about trans feminism? I answer these questions in the context of Koyama’s three central trans feminist principles, as Genderfork users variously explore gender variant identities, seek to transform their bodies, and confront intersecting oppressions.

Self-definition

One of the central features of Genderfork is the exploration of gendered identity. A considerable number of posts and comments on the blog hence centre around self-definition, as users variously describe their gender(s) and discuss gender issues with one another.

I don't think I'm ever going to have a "gender identity." I'm unspecified, neutral. I'm not M or F, not even any kind of X or GQ¹¹; I'm N/A. (anonymous user)

This tendency is particularly evident within the "profile" posts. Users wishing to contribute a profile are given the opportunity to respond to a number of prompts. These encourage contributors to outline personal details such as how they identify, who they are attracted to, and which gender pronouns they prefer. For instance, within hir profile Emile writes:

You can call me... Emile

I identify as... mostly nothing. "No, no gender for me, thanks." Also: asexual, loner, geek, politically queer and pan/a-romantic, among other things.

As far as third-person pronouns go, ... "ze" and "hir" are preferable, but I'm not picky.

Such posts offer users the opportunity to assert their gendered subjectivity and share their thoughts in a public context. Both Emile and the anonymous user quoted above do not define their gender: a personal act with immense political connotations. In refusing to conform both to the gender dichotomy and to the wider assumption that all people have a determinable gender, these users posit a non-gendered

¹¹ "GQ" is a common abbreviation for "genderqueer."

subjectivity as both serious and real. This does not necessarily mean that they reject the possibility of gender altogether: indeed, Emile later adds that ze is attracted to “any sex/gender combination.” Ze does not ascribe an exclusively essential or social origin to gender, opting instead for an assertion of gender complexity: “gender is more than just a person’s body and how they dress it.” This non-prescriptive approach to gender definition is typical of Genderfork. The blog encompasses a spectrum of gender possibilities reminiscent of Monro’s (2005, 2007) gender pluralism, with some users describing themselves in terms of non-binary gender, others (both trans and cis) describing themselves as female or male, and many intentionally mixing elements of female, male and (gender)queer. Indeed, as one user comments in an enthusiastic response to Emile’s post:

Yay, my opposite! Where you’re neither gender, I’m both. (Lyn
Aven)

Genderfork users hence advocate a radical form of gender liberation in which individuals reject the prescriptive definition of gendered referents in favour of a fluid, interpretative approach. This approach does not necessarily attempt to establish gender variance as natural; indeed, many users echo Stryker’s (1994) provocatively monstrous rejection of a “natural” gender order. By focusing upon self-determination rather than gendered origin (through biology or society), Genderfork users move away from the essentialism/social constructivism debate. Gender variant identities are rendered “real” within the resulting gender pluralism, constituting a powerful intersubjective reality that encompasses both those who believe that their gendered feelings are to some extent innate and those believe gender to be little more than a socially constructed convention. From a trans feminist perspective, this gender pluralism provides a strong

example of liberating social practice.

Genderfork is therefore a space in which non-binary gender, feminine masculinities, masculine femininities, androgyny and transsexed binarism become real through mutual recognition and celebration. This celebration is sometimes quite frivolous – as evidenced by playful photographs and whimsical film shorts – but it is significant in consequence for those whose gender is recognised publicly by others, perhaps for the first time.

[...] my gender identity is not related to genderfucking or “playing” with gender for shock value. I like performers who do this, as they disturb the foundations of the gender binary. But it’s entirely different from being genderqueer, actually having a fluid and ambiguous gender, and dealing with this in your day-to-day life. (Naomi)

By posting about their gender on a website that anyone can read, Genderfork users offer a powerful statement. Having established the intersubjective reality of gender pluralism through mutual recognition, they portray gender diversity as real to the wider world. This resembles the trans feminist pedagogy described by Hill (2000), as Genderfork users provide educational material to others by talking openly about their gendered experiences.

The value placed upon self-definition within Genderfork emerges in direct opposition to the cultural restrictions imposed by Western binary gender norms:

I want people to understand... that the gender binary system is more destructive than they realize. It’s the

reason boys are teased in school for not being good at sports, and why girls are told to sexualize themselves at an early age. It gives people a reason to hate and ostracize others for not fitting in and expressing themselves. (Chase)

when I was kid, everyone told me girls can do whatever boys can do. Unfortunately, [sic] they were ONLY referring to occupations. I wasn't allowed blue shoes or black t-shirts or short hair. It is sexist to deny children (or teens or adults) oportunities [sic] to feel COMFORTABLE with their bodies, faces, clothing, etc. (Chris)

Chris notably highlights the sexism inherent in the very act of gendering. Serano (2007) describes this phenomenon – “the belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories, each possessing a unique and nonoverlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities and desires” – as “oppositional sexism” and argues that it lies at the root of transphobic and homophobic attitudes (13). She contrasts this concept with “traditional sexism,” which she describes as arising from the idea that maleness and masculinity are superior to femaleness and femininity. The embeddedness of oppositional sexism ensures that non-binary identities can be particularly confusing and unnatural for female- and male-identified individuals.

My mum is entirely supportive of my MtF¹² sister, but on the whole she still thinks in terms of the binary. [...] [Transsexualism] still pretty much fits into the binary,

¹² “Mt” is a common abbreviation of “male-to-female.”

whereas with GQ you have to define whole new perimeters. (Marion)

The principle of self-definition thus has consequences for gender diversity that reach beyond the lives of gender variant people. We see through Genderfork that individuals who seek to break down binary gender norms necessarily form a principled resistance to oppositional sexism: a resistance relevant to all who are impacted by gender limitations.

A number of Genderfork users warn that terms such as “genderqueer,” “androgynous” and “trans” risk becoming “just another box” (Chris), thereby limiting the potential for self-definition. The concept of a “third gender” in particular might become a normative restriction if established within the wider Western social consciousness. There are many cultures within which genders other than female and male are defined in accordance within certain role restrictions in much the same way as binary Western norms (Monro, 2007; Roen, 2001; Sue-Ellen et al., 1997). Moreover, the establishment of a “third space” does not necessarily entail the abolition of traditional sexism. The oppressive power relations that arise from the current binary gender system privilege malehood and masculinity; this situation would not necessarily be different under a system that recognises more than two genders. The abolition of gender is no solution either: as Bettcher (2009) argues, it is “transphobic” to regard female and male genders as necessarily oppressive, insofar as this approach “requires disregarding the self-identities of trans people from the outset” (9.3). It is therefore essential that trans feminists follow Genderfork users in championing a non-prescriptive gender pluralism rather than a mere expansion or expurgation of gendered options.

In their articulation of gender variant identities, Genderfork users also interrogate the language that has emerged to account for new understandings of gendered identity. Numerous posts and comments explore the possibilities of non-binary and transsexed subjectivity by drawing upon conceptual terms that expand the boundaries of gendered meaning. We can see how this language is used within Emile's profile post, as ze assumes some level of reader familiarity with gender-neutral pronouns and the concept of panromanticism (which refers to a romantic attraction to others regardless of gender). This emergent lexicon can be confusing for newcomers. Some users ask what is meant by particular words and concepts, while others admit that it took them time to understand the new terminology.

Questions and comments about the language of gender variance indicate that a process of pedagogy is once again taking place. In this instance, newcomers are introduced to fresh, liberating concepts that might better articulate their gendered identity.

[...] certainly, as we began to seek out other genderqueered people to relate to, none of us just *knew* all the lingo that goes with it. It's stuff we learn. (Cat)

It is important to note that this pedagogical process is focused almost entirely inwards within Genderfork, targeting existing community members. The apparent necessity of this work highlights the inherent difficulty of non-binary and trans/gendered language and the fact that it is potentially inaccessible to those with less time and/or motivation to learn from others.

The language of non-binary gendered folks is a foreign

language, and like a foreign language, I don't expect people to know how to communicate, or even know how to start. (Nicholas)

The above comment – posted in response to a question about the appropriateness of certain language in reference to non-binary individuals – highlights the potential exclusivity of this new language. There are, moreover, users who feel that neologisms such as “genderqueer” and gender-neutral pronouns do not appropriately describe their experience of gender. However, Nicholas also expresses a reflexivity typical of Genderfork users in their statement: “I don't expect people to know how to communicate.” Their comment therefore echoes Cat in recommending patience to those who have already had the opportunity to learn.

The trans feminist principle of self-definition is therefore deeply relevant to Genderfork users. Moreover, the limitations of new terms and concepts within Genderfork thus pose an important challenge for trans feminism. The language of gender variance is not simply of academic or trans concern. A wider educational programme is essential if the language of liberation is to be accessible, rather than the preserve of a minority. However, Genderfork also offers a tentative glimpse at a society in which individuals are taken seriously and respected as “real” regardless of their gendered identity and appearance. Trans feminist pedagogy may hence benefit from the example of Genderfork by seeking a suitably non-prescriptive gender pluralism; as Koyama (2003) recognises in her postscript, a mere acknowledgement of binary transitions and/or a third gender category provides an insufficient challenge to sexism.

The gender pluralism and pedagogical activities found in Genderfork therefore form an inadvertent yet inspirational trans feminist praxis. Genderfork users do not regularly refer to feminist theory, but instead draw upon many of the same trans community concepts that inform trans feminism in order to develop practices of recognition and respect that may themselves be described as trans feminist.

Body sovereignty

The trans feminist principle of body sovereignty is also of great relevance to a large number of Genderfork users. This principle intersects complexly with that of self-definition as many of the considerable minority of users who are undertaking (or considering) a physical transition discuss the challenges inherent in their respective body projects. Such challenges may be physical. For instance, some users contemplate a non-binary transition:

I identify as... a hermaphroditic androgyne. Someday, they'll have a surgery for that. (Mx. Anomaly).

Mx. Anomaly indicates the possible desire for a sex reassignment surgery that directly reflects their androgynous identity. This desire resembles that of those transitioning men and women who seek phalloplasty and vaginoplasty surgeries in order to "match" their body with their identity. The hope for physical transition is not so straightforward for all Genderfork users though:

I am not a boy. I do not wish to be a boy. But I'm not really a girl. I def do not want a penis... but I wouldn't mind having the rest of a boy's body. (Caitlin/Caito)

I identify as... a genderqueer I suppose because I am a

gay male that wants to have a vagina but is not
transsexual (Caleb)

Both Caitlin/Cato and Caleb imagine a non-binary transition resulting in a body that mixes elements of a typically “male” physique with “female” genitals. These similar preferences arise from quite distinct identity positions: Caitlyn/Cato identifies as a gurl/boi/person and prefers female pronouns, whilst Caleb identifies as a “gay male.”.Caleb’s emphasis on their sexuality suggests a desire to be perceived as male by others, but they also expresses ambivalence regarding their preferred pronouns: “I don’t care what you call me as long as you acknowledge me.”. Caitlyn/Cato and Caleb’s respective profiles demonstrate that body preference is not necessarily determined by gender identity in a simple, categorical fashion. This may also be seen in content contributed by users who describe themselves as transsexual men or women whilst opting not to undergo genital surgery (although, interestingly, Caleb associates the desire for a vagina with male-to-female transsexualism, suggesting that they is perhaps not acquainted with the idea of “non-op” transsexualism). All of these positions extend the idea of gender pluralism into the realm of the body, thus positing a non-binary model of gendered embodiment. The accounts of such users suggest that a trans feminist position on body sovereignty cannot simply account for transitions simply from female to male or vice-versa, but must look beyond the sex binary as well as the gender binary.

Some of the Genderfork users who do transition into a female or male body link this process to a greater comfort with androgyny:

I have a sneaking suspicion that my favorite parts of
being post-op (MtF) will include wearing a strap-on, and

the ability to wear boxer shorts without feeling weird.

(anonymous)

In this account, the anonymous contributor associates a surgically reassigned “post-op” female body with a certain level of gendered confidence. The implication is that she will no longer feel uncomfortable whilst engaging in penetrative sex or wearing boxer shorts following surgery because her body is more physically reassuring. Serano’s (2007) concept of subconscious sex suggests that this user harbours a deep-seated understanding of how her physical body should be: an understanding that exists independently of gender cues but influences the user’s experience of gendered embodiment. Through ending her physical dissonance, the user feels that she will be able to successfully perform a masculine femininity without having to link it to her body image. In contrast, a different user suggests that they feel most comfortable “living as a man” in a “woman’s” body:

I used to be a boy. Now I’m a woman, living as a man. My shrink, and my parents, can’t understand why I would need to do such radical things to my body in order to find comfort with masculinity. I tell them, masculinity is not about having a penis, nor is femininity about having a vagina. If it takes rearranging my parts to discover my gender, then so be it. (anonymous)

Whilst the first anonymous user seeks to break down gender boundaries from within a “female” body, this second account portrays an individual who has found comfort in a binary gender role that contrasts directly with the societal assumptions that might be made about their body. Once again, the concept of subconscious sex comes into

play: the second user does not appear to regret their transition into a female body, but instead enjoys a new-found “comfort with masculinity.” These experiences affirm the importance of subconscious sex as a concept that accounts for physical transition without promoting a restrictive, essentialist account of the link between (binary) gender identity and gendered embodiment.

The second anonymous account of physical transition also raises the issue of societal attitudes towards bodily change. The user’s “shrink” and “parents” alike are confused by their decision to transition into a complexly gendered state. For many users, such confusion results in opposition to their transition. The account of Mx. Anomaly highlights the fact that reassignment surgeries continue to focus upon the creation of normative female and male bodies, demonstrating that medical institutions continue to manage gender in the manner criticised by Stone (1991). This institutional control of queer bodies does not simply prevent non-binary surgeries: in many countries, it can also result in non-consensual genital reassignment for intersex infants. A number of Genderfork users explain that their parents actively supported surgical “corrections” whilst opposing the idea of a transition later in life:

It makes me sad to know that my parents, the ones who so willingly took me to the doctor and had my genitals mutilated when I was too young to speak, are so hesitant to let me get hormone therapy and a nose job.

(anonymous)

The experience of this anonymous user highlights the horrific irony of intersex genital mutilation, whereby non-consensual body alteration is regarded as normal and appropriate while consensual body alternation is perceived as abnormal and

inappropriate. Such accounts highlight the importance of establishing body sovereignty as a principle that is ultimately based upon consent, whereby “no political, medical or religious authority shall violate the integrity of our bodies against our will or impede our decisions regarding what we do with them” (Koyama, 245).

The principle of body sovereignty is therefore important to Genderfork users insofar as it relates directly to gendered embodiment. Feminists have long been concerned with the relationship between societal pressure and the demand for cosmetic surgery, but the desire for physical transition is hardly regarded as cosmetic by Genderfork users. Moreover, the accounts of those who hope for a non-binary transition in the face of social opposition show that the pressure to conform to particular gendered standards cannot be the only factor driving the desire for physical change. The experiences of users who wish to transition and users who have experienced non-consensual surgery therefore demonstrate how important it is that trans feminists pay take care to assert the rights of individuals to modify their bodies while also defending the rights of individuals not to have their bodies modified against their will.

However, there is little Genderfork content relating to other issues of bodily consent and coercion, such as fertility and abortion. These issues are undoubtedly as relevant to gender variant individuals as they are to women, but may be less likely to gain attention within trans and queer spaces. The onus is therefore upon trans feminists to explore how issues such as fertility and abortion matter within a gender variant context.

Intersectionality

The acknowledgement and celebration of diversity is central to Genderfork. In functioning as the site of “a supportive community for the expression of identities across the gender spectrum,” the blog celebrates all forms of gender diversity: from cis, straight androgynous people, to transsexed women and men, to non-binary individuals, to intersex people of all genders. However, the site’s team of volunteer administrators¹³ regard this gender pluralism as just one of axis of difference among many. A statement on the Genderfork “frequently asked questions” page illustrates how the team commits itself to diverse representation on the blog:

Q: Why don't I see more [insert group here] represented on your site?

A: This is the hardest part of our work, and we know we're not doing a perfect job. We try to show a diverse mix of genders, ages, ethnicities, body types, classes, styles, cultures, and anything else we can think of, but we're also limited by what material is sent to us, and what's on the copyright-friendly resources we pull photos and videos from. If you're seeing an under-abundance of something you care about, the best thing you can do is *go find it*, and send it to us as a recommendation. We *guarantee* you that someone else who reads the site will be very, very grateful.

¹³ The team consists of Genderfork founder Sarah Dopp and a small number of volunteers who fulfil specialist roles, such as “profiles curator” and “photo curator.” Volunteers are very occasionally recruited through one-off posts that invite users to apply for any position that needs filling.

This statement echoes the recognition of difference found within both trans feminism and the wider third wave. It acknowledges that diversity within the “gender spectrum” goes beyond the category of gender itself. The respective gendered experiences of a black, abled androgynous person and a white, disabled androgynous person are likely to be quite different in a world that boxes and oppresses individuals on the ground of difference. Moreover, whilst a small majority of Genderfork users live in the United States, the international reach of the blog ensures that the community includes individuals from many different countries and cultures. In acknowledging – and seeking to account for – difference in this wide sense, the blog’s administrative team recognises intersecting axes of difference and takes the trans feminist position that multiple factors matter in any true celebration of gender diversity.

The presence of this diversity statement on the Genderfork “frequently asked questions” page is of particular interest because the page serves to visibilise and explain the otherwise largely hidden work of the volunteer team. Most of the “answers” explain the process by which the blog’s content – contributed largely by users – is selected by team members. The commitment to diversity is one of several reasons given to justify this editing process; other explanations include the sheer quantity of contributed material, an intention to represent everyone once, and a desire to spark “lively discussion”. It is also noted that anyone can directly contribute content by commenting on a post. The inclusion of the diversity statement in this account shows how seriously the volunteer team take the concepts of difference and intersectionality. It also indicates the degree to which the diversity of textual narratives and visual depictions of bodies is directly managed on Genderfork. While the majority of images and profiles posted on the blog depict individuals from the

United States in particular and Western cultures more generally, these representations nonetheless showcase a wide range of “genders, ages, ethnicities, body types, classes, styles [and] cultures.” The fact that an intervention from those with administrative privileges is apparently required to achieve this might appear to demonstrate that the Genderfork community is not necessarily as diverse as it aims to be: after all, if an appropriately representative range of contributions arose directly from users, there would be no need for this kind of content management. However, the volunteer team must also contend with the institutionalised ageism, racism, disablism, classism and other factors that contribute to the prioritisation of certain bodies within even gender variant media. By directly intervening in favour of diversity in Genderfork’s content output, the volunteer team seeks to directly address the impact already made by a multitude of inequalities.

A number of debates have taken place amongst Genderfork users in regards to intersectionality. A discussion centred around the racialization of gender within pop culture aptly illustrates what is at stake within such conversations. In a post entitled: “Recommendation: Lady Gaga’s Genderforking Style,” psuedony explains that, “Gender controversy seems to follow this lady,” in probable reference to the pop icon’s surreal high-femme image and rumours about her gender.¹⁴ The majority of users who comment upon the post express their approval for Lady Gaga, but Laura tempers their praise with a note of caution:

I am not so ready to jump to supporting Lady Gaga as
“someone who pushes boundaries.” This is the argument

¹⁴ psuedony’s post was written in 2009. At this time, rumours circulated to the effect that Lady Gaga might be intersex and/or trans.

I see in a lot of spaces (feministing [sic] is one mainstream place I can think of), but I think it's important to note that Lady Gaga is still white. She still has the privilege to do what she does.

In a later comment, Laura later expands upon their argument to explain that Lady Gaga's challenging of gender boundaries is enabled in part through her white privilege:

It is because she is white that she is validated. And it's important to recognize her privilege in this scenario because people with other identities might not be able to "push these boundaries" in the ways she is.

Laura's point is that a non-white musician with a similarly extravagant and surreal approach to gender presentation is less likely to achieve popular acceptance within the Western world's cultural mainstream. They thereby highlights the intersection of race and gender (variance) within pop culture, and the manner in which a certain level of privilege on one axis of difference may enable an individual to overcome particular difficulties related to another axis of difference. From a trans feminist perspective, this intervention complements the pro-diversity policy of the volunteer team. Whilst blog's administrators utilise an intersectional analysis to inform their diversity work, Laura draws upon the concept of intersectionality to inform her critique of white privilege within Genderfork content.

Similar points are raised about age and appearance by users elsewhere on Genderfork:

And isn't another problem the fact that the term androgynous in its most common use doesn't actually mean partly male, partly female. As used, it most typically refers to skinny women with fabulous features and short hair. (Jools)

Sometimes I wonder if the only people who are recognized as genderfucking are skinny, young hipsters. Most of the pictures I see of people on Genderfork are of people at least 10 years younger than me, with androgynous faces and flat bellies. I just wonder where this 30-something boy in a skirt fits into the picture. (anonymous)

Such discussions highlight a tension within the blog that is caused by the site's inevitable reproduction of wider inequalities: many users wish to see a truly diverse representation of gender, but this task is made difficult by the very imbalances they seek to address. As the diversity statement notes: "we're [...] limited by what material is sent to us."

The above examples demonstrate that whilst some Genderfork users (including, importantly, the team of administrative volunteers) prioritise an intersectional analysis in their approach, the principle does not carry the same weight as self-definition and body sovereignty within the blog community. A universal respect for individual identities and body choices may be found among users, but the very recognition of intersecting oppressions can spark debate and controversy. This may

be because intersectionality is a more complex and less immediately intuitive principle: indeed, the concept seems as likely to baffle feminist scholars as it is non-academics (Davis, 2008). The presence of privilege may also play a role: for instance, most of the “skinny young hipsters” referred to by the anonymous “30-something boy in a skirt” user probably do not stop to consider that older, larger individuals are under-represented on the blog when they decide to contribute a photograph. Of course, this situation also highlights the fact that individuals who are more privileged are more likely to be confident in themselves, and therefore more likely to contribute content.

Both the administrative intervention on the part of Genderfork’s volunteer team and the individual interventions on the part of users such as Laura and Jools are therefore entirely necessary from a trans feminist perspective. These individuals recognise that Genderfork must be sensitive to the myriad of factors that shape our experiences of gender in order to truly celebrate gendered diversity. The appeal to intersectionality indicates an awareness of feminist theory, most probably accessed by users through academia, feminist blogs or grassroots groups. This suggests a possible explanation for trans feminist praxis within Genderfork. The concept of intersectionality is itself widely recognised within third wave feminism, but specifically gender variant ideas of self-definition and body sovereignty that originated from within trans feminist works or groups may have successfully entered the queer consciousness through feminist as well as trans/gender variant channels.

Genderfork as a trans feminist space

To conclude, I return to two questions I have sought to answer throughout my

analysis. The first of these questions asks how relevant trans feminist principles are to Genderfork users. The fact that Genderfork users do not reference explicitly trans feminism would appear at first to demonstrate that trans feminist theory has a somewhat limited discursive impact upon this community. However, the extent to which Genderfork users put trans feminist ideas into practice within the hypertext suggests that certain concepts of gender liberation have gained a significant cultural impetus within gender diverse spaces.

By drawing upon the user-contributed content of Genderfork, I have shown that trans feminist ideas are deeply relevant to members of this blog community. This is the case because Genderfork has developed into a truly gender diverse space out of respect for the diverse identities and experiences of its users. Assertions of gendered identity are recognised and upheld in an atmosphere of mutual recognition. The idea of body sovereignty is also understood in gender pluralist terms, and built around the idea of consent in a manner that acknowledges both users who desire and/or undertake a physical transition and those that have undergone non-consensual medical interventions. These positions form the basis of an effective, albeit inadvertent trans feminist praxis in their adoption of a gender pluralist approach to liberation.

Most users tend to pay less heed to an intersectional analysis. It may seem that most Genderfork users are therefore interested in those elements of trans feminism that directly impact them, with mutual recognition emerging in a context common to all users (i.e. gender diversity). In this assessment, trans feminism principles are important to Genderfork insofar as they address the oppression of gender variant

individuals. However, the interventions undertaken by individual users and the blog's volunteer team do provide a trans feminist response to issues of intersectional diversity: one that is perhaps more directly informed by feminist theory. The success of Genderfork's diversity policy – while inevitably limited – demonstrates the importance of basing group practice upon an intersectional analysis.

In my second question, I asked what Genderfork might tell us about trans feminism. In reviewing my data, I came to realise that the blog's users have a great deal to offer trans feminists. The community's gender pluralist approach offers a cohesive model of gender liberation, with the emphasis upon individual autonomy rendering gender variant identities "real" through intersubjective recognition. This gender pluralism is made possible through extensive use of new language that builds upon the "different codes" that have developed within trans Internet communities since the 1990s (as described in Whittle, 1998 and Stryker, 2008). Genderfork challenges trans feminists to make full use of this language, bringing it into our streets, our homes and our classrooms. The experiences of blog users also highlight how a flexible respect for definition may be utilised in challenging both oppositional and traditional forms of sexism, contributing to a wider gender liberation.

The respect for all gendered identities must also extend to the desire for bodily change. Trans feminists frequently champion the availability of transition-specific medical resources for trans men and trans women, but the accounts of many non-binary individuals on Genderfork show that the issue of transition has a wider relevance. Genderfork also demonstrates the importance of consent as a concept central to body sovereignty. Consent is vital to any form of sex reassignment and to

issues of fertility and abortion alike. By highlighting consent in discussions of body sovereignty, trans feminists may successfully link the intersecting struggles of trans/gender variant people, intersex individuals and women.

Finally, Genderfork demonstrates both the advantages and limitations of a top-down attempt to account for intersecting inequalities. Most of the work on intersectionality is performed by isolated individuals or imposed by the team of administrative volunteers. Intersectional analyses are not afforded the same space and respect as discussions centred around self-definition and body sovereignty. In contrast to the recognition of gendered identity (where gender exists in the abstract, stripped of a certain level of complexity), factors such as age, class, disability and race are not universally acknowledged by users. Although efforts to ensure the representation of diversity should be welcomed, trans feminists should be aware that any top-down approach cannot be sufficient: intersectionality, like gender pluralism, must be acknowledged whenever possible within broader social interactions.

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About the Contributors:

Dylan McCarthy Blackston

Dylan McCarthy Blackston, who also goes by and performs as Rocket, is a photographer, spokenword performer, and scholar who is currently a graduate student in the Women's Studies program at Georgia State University. Dylan's research primarily revolves around performance theory, queering/s, trans-ness, and counterpublic space creation through affect circulation, all with a sharp focus on feminist thought.

Jonah Winn-Lenetsky

Jonah Winn-Lenetsky is a writer, actor, director and teacher, who is currently based in Panama. He is a PhD candidate in Theatre Historiography at the University of Minnesota, where he holds a Master's degree. Jonah's research involves the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class, in the street performance work of queer activist groups.

Heather McIntosh

Heather McIntosh holds a Ph.D. in mass communications from the Pennsylvania State University. Her current research interests focus on women and documentary, gender and media, and new media production. In her free time she enjoys digital photography, hiking, and road trips.

Keava McMillan

Keava McMillan graduated in History of Art from the University of Aberdeen. After working as a cabaret performer she returned to complete an Mlit. in Visual Culture with the Translating Cultures project. She is now working towards her Ph.D. on the impact of the Weimar cabarets on modern conceptions of performance and deviance.

Ruth Pearce

Ruth Pearce is a doctoral candidate and trans advocate based at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom. Her research interests encompass transgender studies, social interactions online, and the discursive gaps that exist between academia

and activism. In her thesis, she will explore trans experiences of primary health services.

Lindsay Steuber

Lindsay Steuber is a PhD candidate at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. She holds an MA from The College of New Jersey and a BA from Rutgers University. Her research interests include gender studies, contemporary poetry, and critical theory. She is a regular contributor to APIARY magazine, a Philadelphia-based literary magazine.