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Queer Void: Autoethnographic Notes on Queer Melancholy and Transgender Shame

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By

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Abstract

Despite the affective turn in critical and cultural communication research, there is little scholarship on the interplay of affect, identity, and self-perception among transgender and non-binary individuals as they live within and chafe against dominant cisheteronormative discourses. With the understanding that affective sensations are products of acculturation and often reflect the demands of broader society, this thesis focuses on the sensation of shame within transgender bodies as a product of the imposition of categorical identifications onto individuals whose bodies, minds, and desires are rendered incoherent within the dominant cisheteronormative frame. Through qualitative autoethnography grounded in feminist, critical, and Queer theories, this thesis explores the situations and everyday communicative encounters in which the author feels shame, and the ways this shame functions to seclude, repress and regulate bodies in both the present and the future. I argue that shame as an affect in transgender people emerges from a tension between internalized transphobia and the desire for an embodiment and social presence within a desired gender role. I identify six major themes related to shame and melancholy. The first three are about shame as a distance from the process of becoming an idealized self, shame as a product of self-silencing practices, and shame as failure to become a recognizable subject within the cisheteronormative frame. The second three are about possibilities for overcoming shame through Queer affective moments which make life within the tension of being transgender in transphobic society feel more liveable, the possibility of developing affective resilience against harassment through developing bonds with community members, and in the possibility of using affective recognition to express inarticulable ideas about identities of which there is currently no language to describe in full.

Keywords: Queer, Shame, Melancholy, Possibility, Futurity, Affect, Queer Affect, Utopia

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Finally, my thanks to my friends and family, especially my fiancee Samantha. As I write this, we are in the laundromat. You are listening to music and folding clothes. There is a dryer sheet stuck to your shoe, which is adorable. I could not have completed this program, let alone college, let alone highschool, without your unwavering support. This thesis is as much a product of your support and love as it is a product of my work. I still believe that love can conquer anything - you remind me of that every day. There is nowhere I'd rather be than here in this laundromat with you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

As I write this, I am alone. Sitting at my desk in the teaching assistant's office, I compulsively imagine what a stranger would think of me if they were to walk through the door and see me sitting here. Would they see a man, a woman, or a man trying to be a woman? I imagine them feeling disgusted, sensing my longing, dysphoria, and shame, taken aback by the deceitful freak sitting before them. I sink into my seat and button up my jacket to obscure how estrogen has changed my chest. As I write this, I am alone, but always accompanied by an internalized cisheteronormative gaze with which I deride myself.

In this autoethnographic thesis, I investigate how transphobic messaging, expressed both interpersonally and in media, contributes to the experience of shame and melancholy among transgender individuals as they negotiate their identities. I also consider the possibilities for enduring shame and melancholy revealed in transgender identity negotiation in the face of transphobic messaging. My approach is grounded in affect, feminist, critical, and Queer theories. I am particularly interested in thinking about how internalized transphobia affects the ways transgender people engage with both themselves and communicative others in affective spaces and in the nature of the feelings produced by a clash between an individual's transgender identity and their cisheteronormative acculturation.

To explore these ideas, I draw especially on affect theory, which explores the intersections of sensation and acculturation, to investigate the interplay of transphobic messaging, sensation, and self-perception. When I see my reflection, my stomach hurts before I consider the ways my body causes me pain - the sensation of pain shapes the reading of the surface of the body before the pain is consciously encountered Ahmed, 2006). I imagine the

gaze of another encountering my body, the contour of my brow revealing a masculinity that somehow compromises the legitimacy of my transfeminine identity, a gaze which reveals the grief and melancholic desire for normativity that haunts me and many other queer individuals (Butler, 1990). Since I become myself through discursive encounters, my experience of pain is also discursive (Ahmed, 2006).

In this thesis, I theorize my position as a scholar who is marginalized both within the academic context in which this paper is produced, as well as in broader cisheteronormative culture. This thesis is an example of "theorizing from the margins," which is a type of research that has value both as a work of theory and as scholarship that amplifies the voice of a member of a community which is underrepresented in the broader body of academic literature (Hoang, 2022). Further, there is a desperate paucity of research that takes shame and melancholy seriously as emotions which uniquely affect many transgender individuals, especially in the current political climate, indicating a serious gap in knowledge about transgender experiences.

Using evocative autoethnography, this thesis attempts to situate radically subjective experiences of shame and melancholy within a broader cisheteronormative and transphobic political context. Most sections contain literary vignettes drawn from my experiences of living life as an ashamed and melancholic transgender person, which serve to both anchor the analysis and create emotional resonance with you, the reader. Ultimately, my goal is to consider how transphobic messaging affects transgender people, and what possibilities for overcoming the shame and melancholia associated with being the subject of transphobic messaging are revealed through the course of daily life in my transgender body.

Preview of Chapters

In Chapter One, I introduce the topic of the thesis and evocative autoethnography. In Chapter Two, I review relevant literature on social construction as an academic lens, and then situate this research project within feminist, affect, and Queer theories, which relate to my positionality as a transgender researcher who experiences sensations and feelings resulting from communication. In Chapter Three, I explain my methodology in detail, and argue for the relevance of literary writing and technique to the autoethnographic method. In Chapter Four, I examine shame and melancholy through the telling and analysis of three vignettes about transphobic harassment and the effects of transphobia on my psyche as I go about the world. In Chapter Five, I consider what ruptures and possibilities are revealed through experiences in which my feelings of shame and melancholia are subverted or temporarily overcome through affective encounters with others, art, and affective energies. In the final chapter, I reflect on the process of writing autoethnography and discuss the theoretical implications of this work within the context of communication studies and Queer theory.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Our identities are continually re-constructed through collisions and collaboration with others, simultaneously as the cisheternormative pressure of institutional discourses shapes them. Post-structuralist theorizations of identity situate identity in discourse, framing identity as a phenomenon that is not "coherent, unified, and self-determining" but is constituted by ideology (Jagose, 2010, p. 78). The 'self' that I perceive when I think about who I am, how others perceive me, or how I ought to interact with the people around me, emerges from my acculturation - the language others use to describe me is the language I use to describe myself. For example, I identify deeply with the term 'transgender.' However, my identification with that term has more to do with how my culture reads me and what possibilities culture makes available to me than anything immutable about my 'self.' In this sense, theoretical explorations of identity, self-perception, and communication must be rooted in theoretical approaches which enable us to think deeply about how the personal and political intersect. This literature review traces several relevant contributions to the post-structuralist study of the interplay between communication, identities, and self-perception within feminist theory, Queer theory, and affect theory.

Social Construction & Identity Formation

This study is grounded in a social constructionist perspective, which, among other things, explores how gender, identity, and affect are constructed through social and cultural processes. Social constructionist research conceptualizes our experience of reality as a subjective phenomenon shaped by language, communication, and social practice. A social constructionist perspective rejects the notion of any accessible universal truth and argues that social and cultural perception shapes any knowledge about the world and ourselves.

Although social constructionism was not named as a specific theoretical approach until the 1966 publication of Berger & Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality*, the origins of social constructionism can be traced to the work of psychologists in the 1930s who challenged the notion that reality, including the reality of our identities, is objective. George Herbert Mead (1934), a central proto-social constructionist from this era, wrote, "the social self is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the individual takes as a criterion for his conduct" (p. 182). Here, Mead emphasizes the interplay of ourselves and communication with others in forming our identities. In essence, our notion of self is a system of associations between shared symbols that emerges through social interaction and is not objective but is instead a continual process shaped by others and our social context.

Erving Goffman, another prominent proto-social constructionist, argued that our identities depend on the performance of cultural scripts, which progressed Mead's framing of identity as a product of social interaction to framing identity as something which is learned and performed with self-consciousness in social contexts. For Goffman (1959), all social activity of any human being is like an actor's performance; we present a face to others and manage the impression that others have of us to create specific outcomes. Goffman argued that individuals play an intentional role in managing their identities and that when they act, they implicitly request that others take their performance seriously, accepting that the impression they create accurately reflects themselves (Goffman, 1959, p. 10). For Goffman, identity is a complex social process that involves an intentional construction and preservation of our sense of identity.

Additionally, in his book *Stigma* (1966), Goffman identifies how identity management can be complicated for individuals who possess markers of culturally marginalized identity characteristics as they navigate their society. As an example, for transgender individuals, these

markers may be physical characteristics that do not conform to the traditional gender norms of their cultural location; the pitch of our voices, the absence or presence of facial hair, the way we stylize our bodies, may reveal our transgender identity to individuals or groups who would punish us (Butler, 1988). Goffman (1966) argues that stigmatized individuals face a dilemma in which they must choose to either disclose or conceal their stigmatized identity - disclosing a stigmatized identity may lead to acceptance and reduce the risk of social rejection if others are amenable, or it could lead to dramatic social consequences, such as rejection, isolation, discrimination, etc. In this sense, the performance of identity for stigmatized individuals is a complex process of managing a stigmatized identity within a potentially hostile situation, choosing whether or not to disclose it, and figuring out how to protect themselves.

For transgender people, this is often accompanied by social pressure to 'pass' as their preferred gender. Passing, as used colloquially by transgender people, usually refers to whether or not a transgender person is indistinguishable from a cisgender person. Goffman (1963) notes that passing as an unmarked or unstigmatized individual is a stigma-management strategy, as passing enables them to blend into dominant groups and avoid social sanctions.[1] However, this compromise comes with its costs. Passing may provide some relief from specifically transphobic abuse, but it can also produce stress and anxiety for transgender individuals who may feel they are constantly performing or hiding an aspect of themselves (Bornstein, 1994).

For both Mead (1934) and Goffman (1966), the self is not fixed or innate but is constructed through social interaction. Mead's conceptualization of the self as a system of ideas that emerges through communication emphasizes the role of others in forming our identities.

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[1] Goffman does not mention passing as transgender, specifically. The dubious honor of being the first academic to use passing in relation to transgender individuals probably goes to sociologist Harold Garfinkel, in his discussion of clinical work with a transgender woman named Agnes (O'Shea, 2020).

Goffman's dramaturgical theory highlights the performative nature of identity and how we actively manage and present our identities to others.

Building from Mead and Goffman's ideas, Berger and Luckman's (1966) foundational work *The Social Construction of Reality* argues that reality and identity are created and maintained through social interaction. In their view, social structures, such as institutions, language, and communicative norms, create a shared cultural symbolism that shapes our perception of reality and our sense of self. Crucially, for Berger and Luckman, the world of everyday life is often mistaken for real, such that the world is "taken for granted as reality by[...] members of society in the subjectively meaning conduct of their lives" and actually "originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these" (p. 20). Such reasoning has been taken up by numerous disciplines, including Queer theorists (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998; Kimmel, 2000) who argue that gender is a social construct created and maintained through cultural institutions and social norms, such as gendered family roles, language, and gendered labor. While gender and its associated cultural implications may appear as natural biological facts, they are a product of social conditioning and should be understood as a social construct.

Institutional Construction of Identity

In addition to Berger and Luckman's insightful approach to the social construction of reality, I also draw on the work of critical theorists in order to examine the ways institutional discourses contribute to the construction of social reality and individual identity. Althusser's theory of ideology is particularly relevant to this thesis. According to Althusser (1970), institutions such as schools, the media, and religious institutions function as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), which work to transmit ideological messages that support existing social power relations. Critical feminist scholars, including bell hooks (1994), have extensively

analyzed the methods schools as ideological institutions use to reinforce normative gender roles. For instance, schools often promote STEM topic areas for boys and humanities and arts for girls or enforce misogynist school dress codes that are unfairly used to accuse women and girls of inappropriate sexual conduct, perpetuating discourses that shame women for their bodies and sexuality (hooks, 1994; Kendall, 2021).

Ideological messages about gender within schools are especially relevant and distressing to transgender students at the center of current controversies about access to bathrooms, sports teams, and gendered spaces (McGuire, et al., 2022), whose ability to participate within community spaces as themselves is often challenged and even denied, leaving detrimental effects on their mental health and social well-being that can linger long into adulthood. For example, even though I was not out as transgender during my K-12 education, I was often ridiculed and excluded from social spaces for my presentation as an effeminate boy. Even though I now have the language to vaguely articulate my nonbinary transfeminine identity, or at least to articulate what it feels like to be a woman-adjacent person, I still feel lots of tension and anxiety about stylizing my body in ways that are explicitly non-masculine. When faced with the dilemma Goffman (1966) describes, stigmatized individuals must decide to hide or open themselves to abuse. Personally, my overwhelming instinct remains to choose the former.

However, this preference is not only a matter of personal choice. Althusser (1970) describes a process of social conditioning Marxist theorists refer to as interpellation, which describes how ideological institutions shape our identities by "hailing" us or calling on us to perform specific roles and carry particular identities and beliefs. Althusser (1970) argues that interpellation is the process through which individuals become recognizable subjects within ideology through an imposition of identity onto an individual, who is then expected to accept and

internalize the identity as their own (p. 11). When a child is born, the institution immediately assigns the child biological sex and gender based upon the configuration of their genitalia (Butler, 2011). From then on, they are called upon by social institutions such as schools, religious institutions, media, and their families to perform and internalize the characteristics associated with their assigned gender. In the United States, a child assigned female at birth may be expected to make gummy cookies with Easy-Bake ovens and develop a nurturing homemaker personality. A child assigned male at birth might be expected to be highly competitive and aspire to be an engineer and design Easy-Bake ovens. These expectations are reinforced and reiterated through ideological messages. Over time, the individual is expected to internalize and identify with these messages, often subconsciously perpetuating and reinforcing the gender norms imposed on them by others. In this sense, interpellation affects individuals' self-perception and reinforces macro-level societal power relations and institutions, thereby sustaining inequalities.

Marxist feminists in the late 70s and early 80s argued that analyzing the process of interpellation provided a particularly fruitful terrain for the analysis of gender, as doing so revealed how gender roles and identities are constructed and imposed upon individuals through institutions and culture. For example, Vogel's (1983) *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* explores how women are interpellated as domestic caretakers, which limits their access to political and economic power and reinforces their subordinate position in society. Similarly, Hartmann's (1979) *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* argues that the process of interpellation is essential to understanding how gender operates within capitalism, as it helps explain why women's labor is undervalued and under-compensated. Marxist analysis is also relevant within current conversations about the role of Queer individuals within a neoliberal society which is content to capitalize on our identities in the form of merchandise while

maintaining structural systems of oppression. Within Queer theory, these debates usually occur in the context of an ongoing conversation about whether Queer people ought to aspire to assimilate or 'blend in' with neoliberal cisheterosexual society, or to advocate for the disruption of the neoliberal structures as a group of people who live openly against cisheterosexual assumptions about what it means to live a good life (Jagose, 2010). Queer scholar Conrad (2014), for instance, argues:

> If society is as racist, heterosexist, transphobic, sexist, classist, ableist, and xenophobic as many of us queers know it to be from our bodily experiences in the world, then society, as it exists, is detrimental to our well-being and we are better off dismantling it, not joining in to reinforce deeply inequitable legal and cultural traditions. (p. 114)

The future made possible through assimilation into the neoliberal framework would inevitably come with compromises. Queer theorists (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 2019) consistently argue that a hypothetical incorporation of Queer identity into cisheterosexual society would continue to perpetuate the very discourses that make Queer life so difficult for people whose identities fall outside normative scripts. Although major corporations like Target selling Pride merchandise during June is nice, it would be a mistake to see these merchandising deals as indicative of any actual structural change.

Marxist feminist discourses from the 1970s and 80s are still essential and relevant, but many white scholars from this period failed to sufficiently account for how racial discourses affect the experiences of broad swaths of women. Marxist feminists of color (Collins, 1990 hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984) furthered these discourses by highlighting the ways women's bodies are interpellated as racialized and how these racializations intersect with gender and class identities to produce complex systems of oppression which reinforce white supremacist and

patriarchal structures of power. The concept of interpellation is essential for understanding how social power relations and inequalities are sustained. These scholars emphasize the interconnectedness of systems of oppression to highlight the complexity of any individual's position within discourses of power. My body as a transgender person is a complicated site within the dominant ideology of patriarchy and gender binarism, but my interpellation into whiteness, with all its connotations, prevents me from experiencing the same racialized abuse a transgender woman of color might face. In the same sense, if I am trying to advocate for transgender women without accounting for my whiteness, I risk unconsciously perpetuating discourses that maintain my white privilege under the guise of progress. As Collins (1990) says:

> White women have been penalized by their gender but privileged by their race and citizenship status. Similarly, Black heterosexual women have been penalized by both race and gender yet privileged by their sexuality and citizenship status . . . . Depending on the context, individuals and groups may be alternately oppressors in some settings, oppressed in others, or simultaneously oppressing and oppressed in still others. (p. 246)

The insights provided by critical theorists and Marxist feminists highlight the complexity of identity and the ways identities are taught and reproduced through social discourse.

The French socialist philosopher Micheal Foucault's (1980) *History of Sexuality* provides rich insight into the social construction of sexuality and gender. Foucault argues that the distinctions between sexualities, such as heterosexual and homosexual, are socially specific constructs shaped by power and discourse rather than inherent or fixed features of individuals. Foucault (1980) argues that discourses about sexuality became more open during the late 18th century as culture and philosophy focused on individuals' desires and feelings (p. 5). He further argues this discourse was not *initially* repressive but *became* repressive when it was entangled

with a growing trend within medical institutions of pathologizing, categorizing, and medicalizing sexual desire. He argues, "homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault, 1980, p. 43). In other words, Foucault argued that the actions which connote Queer identities today were previously not understood as actions that indicated individuals were any particular kind of person at all; rather, the idea that certain practices indicate some fixed and inherent sexuality is a product of the institutionalization mentioned earlier. This transformation from action to sexuality, Foucault (1980) argued, had implications for the construction and exercise of power in modern society. It created new ways for institutions to categorize, pathologize, and control individuals by imposing regulations based on these newfound identity groups.

In this section, I explored social constructionism, which emphasizes how sociocultural processes influence identity formation and shape our experience of reality. I discussed several influential lines of inquiry, such as the idea that language plays a central role in structuring our experience of reality and ourselves and that social categories such as race, gender, and sexuality are constructed rather than innate. I also explored social constructionist arguments that describe how power is embedded within social institutions and the ways these social institutions maintain, and their ascendancy through interpellation, which reinforces dominant norms and values. In the next section, I turn towards a discussion of the social construction of gender through the lens of communication studies and feminist theory, which challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the ways gender is performative and constructed through social norms, such as biological essentialism and the notion that gender is strictly a binary opposition of male and female.

Gender and The Social Construction of Self

Within contemporary feminist and Queer scholarship, gender is usually viewed as a social construct rather than an objective or fixed biological characteristic of any individual. This perspective means that our understanding of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny is shaped by cultural norms and expectations rather than anatomy. This thesis draws heavily from the insights of Judith Butler, a prominent feminist scholar and Queer theorist, who argues that gender is performative.

According to Butler, understanding gender as performative means thinking about gender as something reproduced in culture through how individuals present themselves to others. By stylizing our bodies through gestures, movements, clothing, and symbols that align with cultural expectations of masculinity, femininity, or androgyny, we create the illusion of a stable, concrete gender identity (Butler, 1990). For example, in many cultures, women are expected to wear makeup to conform to societal beauty standards. By wearing makeup, women in these cultures are stylizing their bodies in a way consistent with their culture's expectations of femininity. In doing so, they create the illusion of a stable gender identity. This argument is social constructionist in the sense that it frames gender as a social construct and also argues the self is socially constructed. Butler (1990) argues reading "the gendered body [as] performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (p. 136). In this sense, there is no fundamental inner self that 'does' gender because identity and social action are so intertwined that they cannot be separated.

Butler (1990) challenges the idea that a stable, fundamental self exists before discourse. Instead, the self is a product of discourse, constantly being shaped and reshaped through interactions with others. For example, when I feel the urge to wear makeup, it is not simply a

matter of individual desires but rather a response to cultural norms and expectations of femininity that have shaped my identity, self, and thus, my urges. This is not to claim that individuals have no agency in figuring out who they are. Sekimoto (2011), a communication theorist, argues the self is "neither an autonomous cognitive entity, nor a mere product of social construction," (p. 56) but instead our identities are always shaped by the things we do and the way we act, how we participate in the creation of meaning and relationships with material things and others. Therefore, identity is not fixed but is constantly inflected by how we continually create meaning from our experiences.

The idea that gender performance reflects the internalization of a cultural role has roots in early social constructionism. Goffman (1959) argued, "... in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves - the role we are striving to live up to [...] becomes second nature" (p. 19). As we perform, or resist performing, a gender role, those cultural scripts become parts of our psychology - not only an external pressure to perform gender in a certain way but also an internal pressure that emerges from within ourselves. To borrow a phrase from Ahmed (2004), gendered socialization leaves an impression that has a certain stickiness to it, as it is reinforced through socialization and the repetition of cultural scripts.

This stickiness, or perhaps persistence, makes it challenging to break through traditional gender roles, especially for transgender people who have lived their entire lives performing a certain gender role. For many, transitioning involves unlearning deeply ingrained cultural scripts and norms associated with that role and adopting new ones. As a transfeminine person, I have never felt comfortable performing masculinity or being read as male or masculine. Still, I sometimes struggle to embrace a feminine presentation because of the impact being interpellated as a male subject has had on my identity.

In current discourse, transgender scholars often identify the persistence of internalized messages about the inferiority of femininity in some transgender women as a form of internalized misogyny (Serano, 2007; Bornstein, 1994; Stryker, 2008). In the United States, it is often presupposed that masculinity is somehow superior to femininity, that being a woman is somehow inferior to or less than being a man. Julia Serano (2007), a transgender media scholar, famously wrote that when people ask her the hardest part about being transgender, she tells them,

> The hardest part, by far, has been unlearning lessons that were etched into my psyche before I ever set foot in kindergarten. The hardest part has been learning how to take me seriously when the entire world is constantly telling me that femininity is always inferior to masculinity. (pp. 204-205)

Serano highlights the influence of being interpellated as a masculine subject on her negotiation of identity as a transgender woman. This does not mean that Serano's womanhood is less legitimate or that her internalized misogyny means that she still has some fundamental masculinity that excludes her from womanhood; instead, it only means that her social history continues to influence her thoughts and feelings. Critically, theorists (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990) argue that cultural ideas about gender are policed actively through discourse. Gender's stickiness emerges both from internalized pressure and from external messages. It is important to note that this internalized misogyny is not a common experience among all transwomen, though it does manifest in some transgender women, and does not delegitimize their identities.

Gender is a site of power and control, and individuals who do not perform normative gender expectations are subject to various forms of social and political marginalization. Such policing occurs on the individual level of street harassment and misgendering and at the level of

institutions, such as transphobic legal and policy frameworks (Spade, 2015). For example, when a nonbinary person who identifies as neither male nor female is asked to choose 'male' or 'female' on a government form, the binary choice erases their identity. This bureaucratic form also reinforces the notion that gender is strictly a binary between these two choices. From a Foucauldian perspective, this situation illustrates how power is inscribed in social and cultural practices - even the most mundane government paperwork is laden with cultural meaning and assumptions.

One of the functions of power is to produce knowledge and create seemingly natural categories that organize and classify people and things (Foucault, 1980). In this case, the notion that gender is strictly a binary between male and female is one such category. This binary reinforces the notion that gender is an essential category that defines the individuals it describes, thus excluding those who do not conform to normative gender expectations from social space and depriving them of the words to describe themselves. Moreover, this dualistic categorization upholds power relations and dominant cultural and social norms. Dean Spade (2015), a legal scholar and activist for the judicial rights of transgender people, argues that this erasure can have dramatic consequences for nonbinary individuals, such as a lack of access to gender-affirming medical services, legal recognition, and social acceptance. As Foucault (1980) argues, power operates not only as a repressive force but also as a productive force, shaping individual identities and creating identities through the imposition of cultural norms.

Such discourses create a disciplinary system in which individuals who cannot or will not ascribe to these norms are punished or excluded - in Goffman's (1963) terms, power creates the means to stigmatize individuals, who must then intentionally hide or manage their stigmatized identities to avoid punishment. In this sense, the failure of the government form to include a way

for a nonbinary individual to identify themselves as nonbinary perpetuates the dominant and cultural social norms that reinforce binary gender categories, and thus maintains the discourses which enable cisnormative people to harass, exclude, or delegitimize the experiences of nonbinary people for their gender identity (Spade, 2015).

These discourses about the gender binary limit who someone who identifies as nonbinary can become - both in matters of bureaucracy specifically and in every aspect of their social lives more broadly, as they participate in communities and navigate relationships with others. People who do not adhere to normative gender roles are often barred from participation in sports teams or gendered bathrooms and face harassment and discrimination in both public and private. In addition, these framings of gender take a toll on the mental well-being of individuals, leading to anxiety, shame, depression, and suicide (Lombardi, Wilchins et al., 2002). As a result, transgender women and transfeminine people sometimes face a particular type of harassment emerging from the intersection of misogyny and transphobia, usually referred to as "transmisogny" (Serano, 2007).

As demonstrated here, a central logic of gender policing is the maintenance of the gender binary. Therefore, in the next section of this literature review, I turn toward feminist and Queer scholarship on the gender binary and the impact of the gender binary on identity and self among transgender individuals.

Dueling Dualisms: Biological Essentialism vs. Social Construction

At the time of writing, overtly transphobic jokes abound about progressive 'gender ideology,' and assumptions based on the false notion that feminists are somehow ignorant of the materiality of the human body is abundant in public discourse. In addition, much of the current discourse surrounds what many conservatives refer to as "woke gender ideology," a reference to

how social progress for Queer rights, particularly trans rights, has been gaining visibility and acceptance in mainstream discourse (Correodor, 2019).

At the center of this discussion is a debate over whether gender should be seen as a rigid, binary concept or a broader one that allows for a more diverse array of identities and experiences. Those who argue for the binary view often suggest that two objective biological sexes exist and that an individual's gender always follows naturally from the sex they are assigned at birth. This includes some individuals who identify as feminists. Germaine Greer (2009), a prominent Australian activist and second-wave feminist scholar, has argued that progressives "pretend that all the people passing for female really are. … other delusions may be challenged, but not a man's delusion that he is female" (p.). The framing of transgender women as delusional men presupposes that gender is binary and objective and that gender identity is determined by biological sex at birth. This view, while common, is false on several fronts.

First, to claim that gender necessarily follows from biological sex is to mistakenly assume that the complexity of human gender expression follows from a natural sexed nature, that the network of associations and practices which congeal into the socially constructed and continually changing category of 'women' follow from some objective, feminine substance that is somehow fundamentally present in bodies with vaginas (Butler, 1990).

Secondly, this view presupposes that our understanding of biological sex has nothing to do with culture. As Fausto-Sterling (2000) argues, the notion that biological sex follows from a natural binary emerges from a naive ontology that depends "heavily on the use of dualisms—pairs of opposing concepts, objects, or belief systems, [including] sex/gender, nature/nurture, and real/constructed … usually employed in some form of hierarchical argument" (pp. 20-21). This dualistic thinking covers the ways seemingly separate dualisms are actually

interdependent pairs that can only be meaningfully described when taken as a whole (Butler, 1993; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Butler (1993) argues that when we try to think about biological sex as something entirely independent from the cultural construction of gender, "we discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put" (p. 29). In other words, our cultural ideas about gender are so entangled with cultural ideas about the body that it is impossible to separate the two - when we talk about the body, we are talking about gender. When we talk about gender, we are talking about the body. A non-dualistic view of the body recognizes that our bodies and the social meanings attached to them are inseparable and that both continually reshape each other over time.

In brief summary, the view of gender as a social construct rather than a biological fact is well established within Queer, feminist, and communication scholarship. Gender is performative, which means that it emerges culturally from social practice and is perpetuated through cultural norms and expectations rather than an innate feature of individuals. Gender is sticky because gender roles and expectations are deeply inscribed in our psyches through socialization and the repetition of cultural scripts - for many individuals, presenting as Queer or trans involves overcoming some amount of both internal and external pressure to conform to normative expectations. As a consequence, breaking through traditional gender roles and internalized feelings of shame or misogyny can be very difficult. In the next section, I turn towards a discussion of affect theory. Incorporation of affect theory into the discussion is crucial because it emphasizes the importance of emotions, sensations, and bodily experiences in shaping and perpetuating gender norms and provides a framework for understanding the ways in which cultural scripts and social constructions are deeply embodied and felt.

Affect Theory

To begin my exploration of affect theory, I will begin with an example. In the course of my everyday life, I often feel the urge to go to the bathroom. The sensations associated with needing to go to the bathroom - an upset tummy, pressure in my bladder - are accompanied by an emotional weight that affects how I navigate public space. As a transfeminine person, the need to go to the bathroom is also a sudden injunction to enter a gendered space. I find that I am not quite welcome in either the men's room or the women's room - in the men's room, I risk being harassed for being perceived as a feminine person who wandered into the wrong room, whereas in the women's room, I risk being seen as a predator or as an intruder. I often find that both the men's and women's rooms are diffuse with a sort of energy that carries the possibility of coalescing into a strong sense of anxiety or dread - leaving the cozy space in which I am reading or writing and entering the bathroom causes a shift that makes the emergence of anxiety more and more possible.

Affect is a slippery term, but generally, scholars of communication working with affect theories agree that affects are pre-discursive bodily forces that exist before and outside of thought (Ahmed, 2004; Sedgwick, 2003). According to affect scholar Sarah Ahmed (2004), affects are both personal and shaped by the social and cultural context in which the feeling body exists, and they always exist in our bodies. However, affects vary in the intensity to which they affect our emotions depending on the situation. In other words, the shame and distress I fear experiencing always exist in my body in potentiality as affects, but they become more present to me consciously as I enter gendered spaces such as bathrooms, and risk entering into my conscious mind as sensations while I navigate the semi-social space of a public toilet.

Affect is significant because it shapes our emotional experiences, which in turn have an immense impact on our daily experience. Feminist scholars Clough & Haley (2003) argue that affects 'do' many things - they provide the backdrop for the emotions that shape our encounters with others, influence us in the decisions we make as we navigate our social worlds, provide the possibilities for a sense of collective feeling, mood, or vibe in a social context, and mobilize us into action or force us into hiding. Importantly, affect is not only meaningful when discussing interpersonal encounters. Communication philosopher Papachrissi (2014) argues that media, television, and art have relevant implications for affect - for example, she argues that social media has the potential to reveal and facilitate the expression of affective experiences in marginalized communities.

Cultural anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2007) coined the term 'ordinary affects' to describe the particular shape affects have a tendency to take as individuals live in modernity - because affects are conditioned by the social and cultural contexts in which people live, they are a part of the fabric of everyday life - they are often mundane, subtle, and overlooked as we go about the world. In her book *Ordinary Affects,* she argues that

Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation. They can be funny, perturbing, or traumatic. Rooted not in fixed conditions of possibility but in the actual lines of potential that a something coming together calls to mind and sets in motion. (p. 2)

Ordinary affects are public and private, shaping our interactions and experience of modern-day life. They can have positive or negative, slow and fast, orgasmic and devastating effects. For example, the sensation of discomfort I feel in a public bathroom emerges from an ordinary affect, and so does the sensation of joy that I feel in my belly when, for a second, I feel confident, comfortable, and welcome in society within my transgender body. Goffman (1966) argues that stigmatized individuals who are privileged enough to conceal their stigma symbols often have to decide whether to hide or manage a stigmatized identity. The choice I make largely depends on my feelings, which emerge from affect - in some spaces, the vibe feels good and queer and nourishing, and I am happy to present myself as I am. In other spaces, like the DMV, I feel constrained and scrutinized, as if I am expected to perform my identity in a certain way to prove my authenticity as a subject, often at the expense of being myself.

This intersection of gender studies, communication studies, and affect theory is a vibrant study area, highlighting how gendered norms and the social construction of gender identities are intertwined with bodily experience. In addition, scholars working in these areas draw our attention to the affective dimensions of our experiences of gender, which helps us understand the interdependencies of gender and embodied experience. In this thesis, I draw specifically from Tomkins's (2008) and Sedgwick (1990)'s readings of shame as an affect, Halberstam's (2011) idea of productive Queer failure, and Butler's (1990) interpretation of transgender melancholia to guide my exploration of shame.

Shame

Affect theory is an approach that is particularly indebted to the psychologist Silvan Tomkins (2008), whose work on a personality model based on affect forms an essential foundation for several strands of communication, feminist, and Queer theory, especially those

that focus on the role of experience and emotion in shaping identity, power relations, and subjectivity (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2011). Tomkins (2008) argued that shame is among the primary affects that structure all human emotions, which include interest, joy, surprise, fear, anger, disgust, shame, distress, and contempt/scorn. Tomkins (2008) groups shame into three major types - shame of being seen in an embarrassing or vulnerable state, the shame of failure, and shame associated with a negative evaluation of ourselves. Critically, Tomkin's framing of shame is always directed towards a subject - it has aboutness, meaning that the emotions that emerge from the rising of shame are always directed towards an object, situation, or person in which the ashamed subject feels interested or emotionally invested. In Tomkins' (2008) words,

> Like disgust, [shame] operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both. The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy. Hence any barrier to further exploration which partially reduces interest . . . will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and reduce further exploration or self-exposure. (p. 123)

This relationship has several implications for a study of shame. One implication is that shame-associated emotions are a social phenomenon shaped by cultural and social norms, expectations, and values (Halberstam, 2011). Because the shape of the shame-affect in an individual is shaped by social discourses, as discussed earlier, the implantation of shame by institutions ought to be interpreted as a form of social control - a discursive weapon of prohibition in the same sense as the sexual discourses Foucault (1980) describes.

Secondly, this reading of shame can help us further develop our understanding of the subject/object relation. Sedgwick & Frank (1995) associate shame with the psychoanalytic

notion of object cathexis. Cathexis comes from the Greek *kathexis,* 'holding' (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Object-cathexis refers to how individuals unconsciously 'fill' a given person, object, or abstract idea[2] with psychic energy, investing it/them with emotional significance (Freud, 2001, as cited in Butler, 1995). Within the context of object cathexis, shame can be seen as a product of attachment or holding in addition to an orientation towards something emotionally significant to the subject. To return to the bathroom example, part of the shame I might feel when using the men's room involves the emotional significance I have unconsciously invested into my idea (or, put another way, my identity) as a feminine person. This invokes a sense of dissonance between the space I am interacting with and the gender with which I value being. I might say that the shame arises from a sense of dissonance from the feminine gender identity to which I am attached. At the same time, my presence in the public restroom represents a failure to act in a way that aligns with my gender identity. Thus, in simple terms, I feel ashamed when my relationship with something emotionally significant to me is not aligned with the reality of my actions or the situation in which I find myself. In this thesis, I argue, along with feminist theorist Mann (2018), that shame as an affect must be taken more seriously within scholarship as a force that affects our emotional and social development and well-being. The experience of shame shares common threads of isolation, loss, and self-doubt with melancholia, which I will explore further in the next section.

Melancholia

Melancholy is an emotional experience that has previously been explored within the context of Queer theory but is under-utilized as a conceptual tool for thinking about subjects' emotional experiences within the communication studies literature. Melancholia is often

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[2] The object of this psychic energy can be pretty much anything - gender, completing an MA program, religion, beauty, etc. Whether material/physical or discursive, such objects of psychic energy include anything to which one can attach, assign, or attribute meaning.

conceptualized as a sort of mourning and disconnection from a subject of object-cathexis that is unattainable or unreachable (Freud, 2001). Judith Butler (1995), a prominent Queer theorist, argued that melancholia can be a valuable framework for thinking about the emotional experiences of queer subjects marginalized from cisheteronormative society. Butler (1993) posited that a queer melancholic subject is incapable of fully identifying with the gender categories imposed onto them by society and feels some disconnection from themselves, and a sense of loss as a result.

Queer melancholia, as introduced by cultural theorist Ann Cvetkovich (2003), describes a particular form of depression felt by Queer individuals who feel disconnected and divorced from the world around them, stemming from the marginalizing effects of pervasive homophobia and transphobia. Ahmed (2004) noted the alienating effects of shame, arguing that feeling alienated from dominant cultural norms and expectations due to shame constitutes a separation from the broader cultural landscape that is particularly lonely. The social construction of gender plays a significant role in the construction of melancholy for Queer subjects. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2011) argues that because society imposes gender categories that are binary and heteronormative, subjects who cannot or will not be contained by those categories often feel a sense of disconnection or loss - a sense that they can never fully be themselves within cisheteronormative society. This experience of melancholia can be intensified by the ways society prevents Queer individuals from expressing the grief that arises from this disconnection (Sedgwick, 1990), such as conversion therapy for minors who express discomfort about their gender assigned at birth or the labyrinth of indifferent bureaucracy facing transgender people who are denied housing and medical care. In this thesis, I use the terms 'queer melancholy' and 'void' to reference the particular forms of depression I experience as a Queer subject.

Critically, melancholy does not only consist of sadness. It can also exist in the sense of rage toward the inaccessible object of cathexis or towards oneself for their identification with it. Butler (1993), commenting on Queer melancholy, remarks:

> As grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that very rage over loss is publically proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions. (p. 236)

Clearly, the emotional experiences of melancholy are complex and deeply intertwined with the social construction of identities. While melancholy is not traditionally conceptualized as an affect in the traditional sense, melancholy's connections to shame indicate that further study of their intersections in Queer subjects is a worthwhile avenue of research through the affect studies lens. Within communication studies, a growing body of literature has been devoted to understanding affect as a crucial component of communication and social relations, especially as affect intersects with the social construction of identity (Ashcraft, 2021). As a form of affective experience, melancholy offers a valuable tool for understanding marginalized groups' experiences and social construction.

Cruising Queer Failure

Within the context of Queer theory, the concept of queer failure is often deployed as an analytical perspective that challenges cisheteronormative ideas about success, failure, and what it means to live a life that is meaningful, fulfilling, and affirming. Queer failure, which was introduced by theorist Jack Halberstam in 2011, invites us to embrace the possibility of queer failure as an alternative to cisheteronormative success as a means of resistance and creation which re-tools the master's tools for revolutionary use. Advocating for failure, Halberstam says:

[failure is] a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and

. . . a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded

already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can

exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (p. 88)

In this sense, queer failure challenges the notion that success is always desirable - for many

Queer people, achieving external success at cisheternormativity is a failure to live authentically.

Halberstam's embrace of anarchistic queer failure speaks to the possibility of overcoming, or at

least fighting back against, the perverse implantation of shame and melancholy in Queer

subjects. Queer failure recognizes that power is never total and consistent, and that alternatives

are always embedded within the structures which construct us - possibilities for resistance and

change abound, Halberstam seems to argue, if you just know where to look.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Failure can be stigmatizing and lonely and often

triggers feelings of shame and isolation. Hence, Queer theorists who advocate for resistance and

alternative modes of life usually advocate for communities of resistance. Butler (1993) argues

that the melancholic rage that emerges from a lost object, such as a full expression of one's

gender identity, can drive political change. Melancholy and shame can become catalysts for

social change, as they can prompt individuals to challenge and oppose the dominant social norms

which construct our marginalization. Kate Bornstein (1994), a Queer scholar and performer,

argues that her life in the Queer theatre space offers her a space to resist cis-heteropatriarchy and

navigate her gender issues. She writes:

I open up to you, I cut myself, I show you my fantasies, I get a kick out of that—oh,

yeah. I perform in top space. I cover myself with my character and take you where you

never dreamed you could go . … My instrument is my audience and oh how I love to

play you. I've come to see gender as a divisive social construct, and the gendered body as

a somewhat dubious accomplishment. I write about this because I am a gender outlaw

and my issues are gender issues. (p. 144)

Although overcoming shame and melancholy is difficult, Queer theory offers a radical

alternative in the form of productive failure and the pursuit of community. Bornstein's example

reflects the role of community in helping Queer individuals navigate life within

cis-heteronromativity, as well as the radical potential of art as a means for negotiating identity.

Within a context of increasing transphobia and the continued stigmatization of Queer identities,

it is critical that scholarship recognizes the complex emotional lives and economic situations of

Queer individuals and offers alternative perspectives and strategies for resistance.

Queer and feminist theory share a tendency towards looking towards possible futures and

worlds, with the possibilities for alternatives often being revealed in encounters with others .

Audre Lorde (1984), a central feminist theorist, argues that women have an erotic "need and

desire to nurture each other … in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish"

(p. 26). Here, eroticism refers to deep and passionate connections between individuals which can

be, but are not usually or necessarily, sexual. Rooted in the Greek term eros, it refers to an

embodied sense of connection – something that makes us feel warm and fuzzy, like sinking into

a comfortable and reliable chair that supports the contours of our bodies. This embodied element

is important since it is from this position of warmth that alternative worlds become more

tangible, like a little glimpse of utopia in the eyes of another person.

In his essential *Cruising Utopia,* Muñoz (2019) draws on the idea of utopia, an imagined

future society in which human life has reached its fullest potential, to articulate a way of

engaging with culture and community that offers a means of resistance and survival within and

against cisheteronormative society, where we can imagine alternate modes of being and living that challenge oppressive norms. In this sense, 'cruising utopia' means an active engagement with art, culture, and community that engenders a critical awareness of power and where power structures betray opportunities for resistance. This active engagement can also be read as a form of queer failure, as it rejects singular, heteronormative notions of success, and is instead open to failure to meet socially-constructed markers of success as opportunities for creation, resistance, and erotic community.

Summary and Research Questions

In this chapter, I reviewed the current literature in communication studies related to identity, identity negotiation, and social constructionism. I then reviewed the literature on the social construction of gender and self, arguing that gender ought to be conceptualized as a socially constructed process that influences our psyches and demarcates artificial boundaries between male and female, which are often harmful to transgender and nonbinary people. Next, I reviewed affect theory, arguing that affect theory provides a relevant and well-established analytic lens for questions of identity within Communication studies. Finally, I summarized the concepts of Queer failure and cruising utopia as comparable frameworks for thinking about alternatives to cis-heteronormative life. This body of literature provides the foundation for my research questions:

RQ1: How does transphobic messaging, expressed both interpersonally and digitally, contribute to the experience of shame and melancholy among transgender individuals as they negotiate their identities?

RQ2: What possibilities for enduring shame and melancholy are revealed in transgender identity negotiation in the face of transphobic messaging?

Chapter Three: Method

Fundamentally, evocative autoethnography involves telling stories about ourselves, helping our readers and ourselves as writers make sense of our social world. Stories empower us to understand our cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and sensory experiences. Communication scholar Lawler (2002) argues succinctly that:

> We all tell stories about our lives, both to ourselves and to others; and it is through such stories that we make sense of the world, of our relationship to that world, and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves. Further, it is through such stories that we produce identities. (p. 239, as cited in Tracy, 2015)

Stories enable us to make meaning out of our experiences, which affect our perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors as we navigate both external social experiences and interior psychological experiences. Adams (2008) argues that the stories we tell about ourselves and others shape our epistemological assumptions, in the sense that they tell us what we know about who we are and help us figure out how we relate to others. As I write stories about myself in this thesis, I am inviting readers to join me in a process of self-discovery and exploration, with the hopes of generating dialogue and reflection as readers engage with my stories and use them to consider their own social positions.

This thesis is aligned with epistemologically postmodern research, which is a line of inquiry marked by a refusal to make claims about objective truth or reality as such (Tracy, 2015). Communication theorist Anderson (1996) notes that, although communication research emerging from the post-positivist tradition generally acknowledges that subjectivity plays a role in the way humans interact with knowledge, post-positivist research generally seeks to make generalizable and real claims about a somewhat objective Truth, proceeding axiomatically from the assumption

that knowledge of real ontological Truth about reality is a thing that is more or less accessible to us. However, postmodern researchers are more skeptical of our access to truth, and instead emphasize the situatedness and contingency of all knowledge claims - in other words, they generally argue that all knowledge is so shaped by culture and symbolic meaning that knowledge about 'truth' is more or less inaccessible to us (Anderson, 1996). Autoethnography as a postmodern research method is not about capital-T Truth, as much as it is about " sharing politicized, practical, and cultural stories that resonate with others and motivating these others to share theirs; bearing witness, together, to possibilities wrought in telling" (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011, p. 111).

As a transgender researcher, I come from an underrepresented community in academia. In writing my stories, I am engaging in a process sociology scholar Hoang (2022) refers to as "theorizing from the margins," which is a type of research that has value both as a theoretical exploration that extends an understanding of the affect of shame, as well as work which amplifies the voice of a marginalized community member. Transgender people are generally never allowed the opportunity to theorize their positionalities, to use the language of academia to give an account of it what means to live an emotionally dynamic life under the cisheteronormative regime. These stories are not about what it means to be transgender - this is not a Jerry Springer "I Used to Be a Man!!" transsexual tell-all. Instead, these stories are meant to evoke feelings that engender a productive dialogue about culture.

Autoethnography as a style of researching combines the 'auto' from 'autobiography' with ethnography, which refers to a qualitative style of research that involves studying the cultural perspective of groups of people (Tracy, 2015). In this thesis, I take inspiration from literary autobiographical and autofiction writers as I tell stories about myself. Since I am pursuing an

autoethnography aimed at helping readers understand the ways shame and melancholy function as feelings within my transgender body, it is critical that the stories I tell are descriptive and literary, as this enables my readers to more deeply engage with the sensations and affective experiences I am describing. This means that I am not simply providing an account of things that happen, but rather crafting a truthful narrative that engages meaningfully with the written word as a medium for conveying complex emotional experiences. In this thesis, I draw on experiences of shame, harassment and suffering, in addition to stories which speak to broader possibilities about living a good life as a Queer person in cisheteronormative times.

This style of qualitative research is generally referred to as evocative autoethnography, which preeminent autoethnography practitioners Bochner and Ellis (2002) describe as a writing style that employs a narrative mode reminiscent of a novel or a biography, blurring the traditional boundaries between the social sciences and literature. Like a novel, this style of writing is not intended to be easily extended into subsequent social science projects or even easily explained; rather, the primary goal of evocative autoethnography is to write with "narrative fidelity and compelling description of subjective emotional experiences [to] create an emotional resonance with the reader" (Anderson, 2006).

To turn briefly towards literature, French autofiction writer Proust (1954) wrote in his famous seven volume autofiction *À la recherde du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) that "L'impression, si chétive qu'en semble, si insaisissable la trace, est un critérium de vérité" (p. 458, as cited in Wimmers, 2003), which I translate to "the impression, so weak that it seems, so elusive the trace, is criterion of truth." For Proust, according to French literary scholar Wimmers (2003), "enigmatic impressions enter one's awareness through the senses, not unlike involuntary memory ... they are different in that they must be further developed by the mind" (p. 133). As I

embark on writing an autoethnographic thesis that draws on the memory of affect and sense data, I find myself on a journey of developing feeble and elusive emotional impressions into stories that, hopefully, provide insight into the possibilities and predicaments of Queer life. Proust's use of impressions as a criterion for subjective truth aligns with the aims of evocative autoethnography, which draws upon impression and memory to write stories that open up a particular experience to the reader in interesting ways, drawing attention to radically subjective interpretations, associations, and personal truths (Tracy, 2015). This literary connection between impression, narrative, identity and culture persists in many authors, including the Norwegian autofiction writer Karl Ove Knausgård (2016), who argued that our identities are "saturated with all kinds of literary and cultural impulses," and that writing about ourselves "enables you to offer fragments of your identity … every little [impression] opens up a world … that relates to other things and phenomena." In qualitative social scientific autoethnography as in literary autofiction and autobiographical writing, impressions become stories which help us make meaning out of complex and interdependent experiences.

Autoethnography as a research method, with its radical subjectivity, has unique ethical concerns. The primary ethical concern about autoethnography expressed by practitioners and critics alike has to do with the representation of the individuals who are depicted in the researcher's narrative (Edwards, 2021). Fundamentally, my use of autoethnography entails telling stories about embodied sensation and affective feelings, things that are difficult to capture from any perspective other than the interior. In other words, autoethnography is about telling stories about myself, and not about others as such (Adams, 2008). However, my stories cannot be removed from their social context, and this is compounded by the fact that half of my stories recount traumatic and difficult experiences in which others have treated me badly for being

transgender. I am certain that none of the individuals depicted harassing me in these narratives have any particular desire to be theorized by me, and would probably let me know as much if they had the chance. My goal in writing these stories is to evoke emotions, rather than use my privileged positionality as a researcher to frame anybody as bad and myself as good.

Qualitative researcher Tracy (2015) argues that a central feature of good qualitative research is self-reflexivity, which refers to an awareness of "the biases they bring to the research and of the ways these inevitably impact the scenes and the data collected," as well as the ultimate interpretation of the data (pp. 256-257). With cultural scholar Geertz's (1973) caution in mind, "that, as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might as well let one's sentiments run loose," I have taken several measures to keep my sentiments in check, as well keep any individuals from being identified or misconstrued by this thesis project (p. 29, as cited in Tracy, 2015, p. 234). My primary strategy was, simply, to avoid telling stories about people with whom I have intimate connections. The majority of the people who feature in my stories are strangers, people who exist only as blurs in my memory - I would not be able to identify them based on my memory of my own encounters with them. This is not because I have only experienced transphobic harassment from strangers, but because I am intentionally working to avoid telling stories which risk impugning others. In addition, this strategy keeps my writing focused on the topic of inquiry - the sensation of transphobic harassment and how it affects my interaction with others - and not on an autobiographical account of my changing relationship with another person. Secondarily, I have taken steps to protect the individuals depicted by de-identifying each narrative through minor alterations to names, time, and place while maintaining the emotion, sensations, and arc of events I recall from the actual occurrence. Through these preventative measures, I have done my best to tell the truth about my experiences

of shame and melancholy, while preserving the ability of the individuals depicted to tell their own stories from their own perspective without fear of any possible scrutiny that might result from this project.

The process of writing autoethnography is a process of developing impressions into stories that explore radically subjective interactions within culture and experience, which I accomplished through the extensive writing and re-writing of memos generated as I navigated my daily life and mined my memories for relevant and interesting encounters. The majority of memos were written somewhat impulsively, as a product of personal reflection on emotional experiences related to shame and melancholy, or as a result of personal reflection on bias, memories, and the experiences of both thesis writing and living in a transgender body. Informed by media scholar Boylorn's (2008) process for writing autoethnographic stories, I used these memos to compose literary tales which constitute an attempt to talk to myself, and in doing so, hopefully tell a story that resonates with you. A literary tale is not only concerned with giving an accurate account of events, but is also concerned with the use of artistic language which invokes mood, image, and associations in the mind of the reader. In my stories, I also use literary devices such as metaphor and symbolism to convey deeper meanings and connections between different moments of the story. Ultimately, the goal of writing a literary tale is to create a work which engages the reader and encourages them to make connections with broader ideas about culture.

The remainder of this thesis consists of vignettes about shame and melancholy. The first three vignettes, presented in Chapter 4 depict situations in which I am dominated by shame, melancholy, and grief. These stories were difficult to write, and may be difficult to read. The second set of vignettes, offered in Chapter 5 depict situations about the possibility of overcoming that shame and melancholy. These stories are moments of becoming, possibility, and deep

pathos. Each of these stories, fundamentally, are me, an ashamed subject, talking to myself, making sense of my transition within the context of life in cisheteronormative culture. Each vignette is followed by a brief analysis, in which I try to make sense of the story through the lens of theory. These analyses are not meant to be conclusive, coherent, or even useful - they represent another part of the story, in which I am looking back and attempting to put sensation and feeling into the language of research. In looking to the past, I am also looking to the future, trying to draw a map to utopia based on lessons learned.

Before that, a brief confession: I hope you find these stories moving, engrossing, and evocative. However, it's okay with me if you don't. I won't hold it against you.

Chapter 4: Three Short Stories about Shame and Melancholia

In this chapter, I present three vignettes describing instances of transphobic harassment, othering, and neglect by individuals and institutions. These stories illustrate my subjective experiences of being stigmatized and excluded - they capture a little bit of what it feels like to be Lake as they are mocked, isolated, and diminished by others and institutions. In these moments, my transgender identity is brought to the forefront of my mind, and I am acutely aware of my failure to fulfill normative expectations about what it means to be a 'proper' member of cisheterosexual society. By explicating the sensations associated with transphobic harassment, I hope to highlight the impressions transphobia leaves on the body and psyche.

Circe in Mankato: Shame and Change

Muddy water coats my boots, penetrating the thin layer of leather on my cheap Timberlands and soaking my socks. Springtime in Minnesota feels pregnant, alive, with finches dancing and earth churning as meltwater cuts through snow banks and gives the woods new life.

In this place, I feel a sense of freedom and possibility, the spring air fragrant with a grounding and exhilarating renewal. Watching the sunlight change, I trek along the dirt trail, skidded with recent marks of bicycle tires. Instantly, I become aware of my transgender body, how it might be perceived by others, whether or not I pass. Mentally, I assess myself: Thin blonde stubble, unaffected by electrolysis, lingers on my chin. I am not wearing my round glasses, so the sharp angles of my testosterone-affected skull are more evident than usual. I zip my open windbreaker up to my neck, obscuring my feminized figure.

As I walk, now hesitant, rustling leaves and snapping twigs sound muffled as I fall into my head. I imagine Circe, brown hair tumbling down her stern face as she turns Odysseus's men into swine, asserting her agency. I remember being a little boy in a dirty library, looking at a

laminated picture of a sculpture of Circe holding honey and wine, the first pang of recognition of myself *in* women, and desire *for* women and the desire to *be* a woman, and the prohibition of the latter but not the former.

I see a group of teenage boys ahead of me, lingering on the trail, leaning on bikes and loudly talking about some girl they know, what they'd like to do with her if they had a chance and her dad Mike wasn't home with that asshole look on his face.

I begin to pass the teenagers. The rocky trail dips into the earth, so the path requires some careful footing. They watch me balance, my moist boots pressed against uneven stones. One of them approaches me, and asks me something, so I say,

"What?"

And that is all it takes to out me.

The boy closest laughs so hard that tears come to his eyes, and he doubles over. He keeps eye contact, laughing, and I can only think to watch. I just stand there - another boy calls me, and this is a direct quote, a fat fucking tranny.

The boy closest to me catches his breath, asks me how far to the trailhead from the direction I came, and I politely tell him. He says okay and turns away. Not only am I a fat fucking tranny, I think, but I'm also a fat fucking tranny without a spine.

I don't chastise the boys or suggest that they treat Queer people with the same respect they should treat anyone else. I also don't turn them into pigs. I just continue walking - they stay the same, my body feeling heavy and hot and sluggish, and I am left feeling subhuman, unnatural, like fatty cooking oil staining this beautiful and wet spring morning. The sense of shame weighs me down, turns my gaze away from the renewal happening around me, drags it

towards everything wrong with my body. In this moment, shame feels like dragging a dead weight with me through the woods.

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Gender transition is a temporal process, usually involving changes in physical appearance, social presence, and personal identity over long periods of time. As I negotiate gender transition, I also find myself thinking about the ways gender transition parallels other temporal processes of change - aging, healing, grief, and the cycles of life and death, which are so evident when walking in the woods. For me, transitioning is not a denial of my childhood as a boy, nor is it a rejection or denial of the reality of my body. Instead, I see my gender transition as a natural reflection of the way my gender identity has evolved along with my body and mind; I age, I grow, I grieve, and I adopt a gendered presentation that reflects an authentic representation of myself. From my perspective, becoming a woman-adjacent person does not constitute the death of a man - it's an external change that aligns my body with my inner self.

As I walked through the woods, I was reminded of the ways my ongoing change in gender presentation paralleled these natural processes. Stewart (2007) writes that affects are "not about one person's feelings becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water" (p. 128). Being in the woods, encountering the bodies of changing things, squirrels and water and moss, charged the space with an affective sense of productive change and transformation, as if the environment and my associations with it were mirroring and validating my temporal process of gender transition. In this space, I felt myself becoming.

From a social constructionist perspective, change in identity is a natural and ongoing process inflected by social and cultural context and interaction, mainly influenced by how others

affirm or deny our identities (Robbins & McGowan, 2016). This process can be complicated, as changes necessary for survival, such as gender transition, may involve aspects of ourselves changing in ways that violate social proscriptions. Culture dictates what is considered appropriate stylizations of bodies with different configurations of genitalia, so for transwomen, changing our gender presentation when our bodies carry features associated with masculinizing puberty often leaves us vulnerable (Butler, 1990). We are expected to perform a style of femininity that makes us indistinguishable from cis women, and are punished severely when we refuse or fail. This was evident in the woods, as my masculinized voice ultimately outed me to the teenagers and made me a subject worthy of ridicule. Presumably, I was an unremarkable person walking through the forest until they recognized a perceived contradiction between my voice and body. This contradiction emerges from culture and not anything inherent in me.

When verbally harassed, I feel ashamed of myself for the changes to my body and social presentation. I feel the urge to hide. In this sense, this moment of discomfort, such as when I am verbally harassed in the woods, reflects a time in which cultural Others are presenting me with an injunction to stop changing in a way that is not culturally permitted. The sense of shame inflected by harassment can be interpreted as a way transphobic individuals limit the possibilities of whom transgender people can become. Often, I think, harassing transgender people has the effect of pushing us back into the roles associated with our sex assigned at birth and keeping us there, which is contradictory to the nature of identity, which is inherently fluid and social and always becoming something else. When I drift out into the void, transphobia calls me back, pushes me into my designated place.

The imposition of shame through transphobic messaging functions, in part, to make the possibility of a fulfilled life within a desired gender role seem impossible, arbitrary, and

ridiculous. In this way, shame overlaps with queer melancholy, making life as myself seem much more distant. As I am being harassed, I am thinking of Circe. I do not imagine myself literally becoming Circe. Still, I do imagine myself being someone with her sense of agency - the thought of Circe came into my mind, I think, as a reminder of the type of person I wanted to become, and my meek acquiescence to the people who were harassing me reminded me of how far I was/am from that. In other words, queer melancholy is the feeling of a void between me and myself. When I am shamed into hiding, my ability to change my presentation into something that brings me closer to my object-cathexis is stunted, and I become stuck. When I was harassed, this feeling of stuckness altered the affective meaning of the space I was in - it became a space of danger and trauma, and the affective sensations of shame that emerged reflected a melancholic stifling of possibility.

Tulip Shopping: Shame and Self-Silencing

I wanted to buy Sam, my girlfriend, another gift for the New Year. Because winter in Minnesota is so gray and miserable, an arrangement of tulips on one of the living room window sills would provide a pleasant break from the daily monotony of slush and concrete. I drove to Hy-Vee, nervous that the cops would pull me over and ask why I did not have my license. I was not afraid of the ticket, as much as I feared speaking to the cops and being asked to account for myself, to describe myself. I knew the masculinity of my voice would probably confuse them. I would have to explain that my legal name is G. Davis and that the image on file really, yes really, was me, but me before I had started hormones, that I was a transsexual driving my girlfriend's car, and that I had not gone to get my license renewed because I was nervous about explaining the same stuff to the staff at the DMV.

I wore a thick, black men's jacket and a pair of dark women's skinny jeans, my hair tucked underneath a baseball cap, and my face obscured by a surgical mask. Semi-consciously, I knew this outfit was meant simultaneously to hide my body and suggest that the body I was hiding had a feminine shape. My presentation was about the tension between the desire to hide and the fear of being seen and mistaken for a man.

I picked through the already-assembled arrangements. I knew that asking the woman working at the floral desk to arrange a bouquet with Sam's favorites, red roses and white tulips, would have been better, but I was not brave enough. The idea of asking her felt impossible and heavy, like I had swallowed stones. I hated the idea of opening my mouth and hearing the depth of my own voice, or even worse, opening my mouth and trying and failing to speak in an androgynous tone. Cringing at myself, I chose two bundles of tulips, one red and vibrant and the other off-white and sad. They would do. Fresh would be better, but I wasn't brave enough to ask the woman at the floral counter.

Standing at the self-checkout machine, I scanned the bundle of red tulips. The machine chirped, and I tucked them into my canvas shopping bag. I hovered the white tulips over the scanner, but the machine was silent. I waved it for a few more moments, then checked the barcode. To my horror, I noticed that the paper was damp and that the ink had become wet and unusable. I attempted to type the barcode into the machine, my heart racing. The code was wrong, and a young Hispanic employee patrolling the area walked over to help me. He nodded his head at me, and I smiled. He spoke, and instinctively, I pretended that I was deaf and couldn't hear him. He wiggled the white tulips over the scanner, grunted in frustration, and tapped the code into the machine. He shot me a quick smile, and I touched my fingers to my lip to signal my thanks.

Back in the car, my stomach was hot with shame. It clawed at my throat, made me feel nauseous. The shame I feel in these moments almost radiates from the point of my body I feel most dysphoric about, a hot and angry energy, like a swarm of wasps. I hated my appearance and felt terrible that I had involved the cashier in my impulse love purchase. Under my breath, I grumbled a little, the depth of my voice making me feel as if my guts were twisting together, trying to hide.

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For some of us, there's a deep shame associated with being transgender. This shame is not an inherent quality of being transgender, and every ashamed transgender person feels shame differently. Personally, I feel deeply ashamed, largely because of my experiences of being harassed. This shame is accompanied by a sort of hyper-vigilance, a sense that I must continually present myself in a way that falls within the discursive boundaries of legitimate womanhood in order to avoid being attacked, harassed, abused. As I navigate the social world, including the grocery store, I inevitably carry this shame with me into social space. In multiple senses, I carry the marks of these sensations on the skin - both in the form of physical markings and, as Ahmed (2015) writes, psychological markings, which generate the "sense of our skin as bodily surface, as something that keeps us apart from others, and as something that 'mediates' the relationship between internal or external, or inside and outside" (p. 24). For Ahmed, skin is significant, because we only become aware of our skin through sensations - in this sense, 'skin' is a term that refers to any physical or cognitive surface that marks the boundary between the world and something's interior (p. 30). The 'skin' that separates me from others when I feel ashamed is discursive, a product of negative messaging rooted in cultural transmisogyny that insulates me from negative and also positive interactions with others.

Shopping for tulips, I feel ashamed, but I also desire connection. Hiding my body is stressful, but not as stressful as being called a slur. Pretending to be mute is cowardly and annoying, but my body intimately knows the risk of speaking with a voice that doesn't match my presentation.

Often, when scholars describe shame, their description consists of two parts: that being ashamed is the product of negative self-evaluation, and that consistently evaluating yourself negatively is really bad for your mental health. What is frequently overlooked is the fact that, at least in my experience, shame is almost always associated with desire - I would not feel ashamed of my social presence if I were not interested in connecting with others, being myself. Tomkins (1963) recognizes that we only usually feel ashamed when people and things that we are interested in are involved. However, Tomkins still underestimates the specifically melancholic dimension of shame, in the sense that shame also inflicts a sense of distance between a thing and the ashamed subject - that shame involves the feeling of a gulf between me and the encounters, spaces, and conversation that have the possibility of helping me feel *un*ashamed. Queer melancholy is the sensation of a void, an irreconcilable gap between me and life in an identity proscribed by culture that renders me a subject. My usage of hand gestures during the encounter at the cash register reinforces this sense of distance, as I couldn't bring myself to fully engage with the employee, who was probably a perfectly nice and amenable fellow. Within communication studies, practices such as modifying communication style to avoid hostility are usually referred to as self-silencing practices, and have a markedly negative effect on mental health, usually studied through quantitative measures such as the widely-used self-silencing scale published by Jack and Dill (1992).

Finally, this self-silencing practice extends beyond me and affects my relationships - because I was too ashamed to speak up, the tulips I bought for my girlfriend were much worse than an arrangement the florist would have made. This encounter alone doesn't mean much, but this shame stretches into every aspect of my social life - restaurants, bars, spending time with family - and affects my ability to be fully present with the people I love most. What's worse, the damages accumulate. Because of my shame, I cannot be fully present with my partner or my community, and presence within my community and with her are spaces which provide me the means of overcoming shame.

Hormones: Melancholy and Medical Discourses

Last night, I dared to call about appointments with the gender clinic. The receptionist said I was lucky to get an appointment the next day, especially since there would not be another available time until October - really, yes, October, she remarked. I cried with catharsis, sniffling over the phone - it felt like fate, or at least a lucky break. I had never told anybody about my gender issues before, and now I was hoping to receive an official diagnosis of gender dysphoria.

It is May. I am 23, hoping to start hormone replacement therapy today. I wiggle my feet on the dusty institutional tile floor, my bottom firmly planted on a lumpy, antiseptic hospital waiting-room couch. An elderly couple, a man and woman, glance in my direction, and I smile nervously at them, admiring the delightful pompadour of hair on the older woman, like a bichon was napping on her head. My hair is cropped short, and I am wearing a respectable sweater-trouser combo with a nice leather-banded watch, which I will later pawn to buy estrogen. I've spent so much energy trying to cope with life as a man, and now, I am shedding the symbols of masculinity in exchange for little blue pills designed for the needs of menopausal women.

I wonder, what will I look like six months from now? How will Sam react when I tell her? This is stupid, you should just go home. Someone comes out the door from the clinic, and the pompadour lady and her husband stand to leave. I imagine myself wearing eyeliner, growing out my hair, and dating women as a woman - does that make me a lesbian now?

A nurse calls out my name. I follow her, she weighs me. She is a pleasant middle-aged Black woman, who later also tells me to have a nice day, young man. As she takes my blood pressure, she asks me if I have a girlfriend, feigns surprise when she learns that I don't.

"How could such a nice young man like you not have a nice young girlfriend?" She asks. I smile weakly, lie about being too busy with college, it being the last semester of senior year and all. The nurse finishes taking my vitals and asks me to wait for the doctor. My mind feels like an overloaded washing machine, heart is racing - can I even afford hormones? This stupid. You're so fucking stupid.

Before I could dwell any longer, the doctor enters the room, looking bored. He asks me why I'm looking to start hormone replacement therapy, and, dutifully, I spill my gender beans. I tell her that I had always identified more with women than men, that I had fantasized all my life about being female, but not like a fantasy about being a professional snowboarder or running for president, but like a fantasy about coming home after being on vacation for so long that it's gotten boring, sliding into a warm and familiar bed.

He yawns, lists off the six-listed DSM-V symptoms of gender dysphoria, and asks if I've experienced at least two of the symptoms and whether or not I have a family history of breast cancer. I tell him that I have and that I don't, so he writes a prescription with a well-practiced clinical indifference. As the doctor declares that I indeed have gender dysphoria, I feel a mixture of relief and anxiety. On the one hand, it's validating to hear someone respond to my issues and

label them as a condition, as experiences that correlate to a sickness that medicine has a response to. On the other hand, I feel some anxiety about officially being labeled as a subject with gender issues, since being transgender still carries so much stigma. He asks me when I'm planning on getting sexual reassignment surgery, and looks confused when I say that I haven't really thought about it. I am instantly aware that I have said the wrong thing. As I leave, an attending nurse remarks that after four months on hormones, transgender women no longer look like "men in dresses." I am wearing pants, and I consider whether or not she would have liked me better in a gown.

I take the lightrail north to the 46th street station, then pawn my watch. I then scurry into a Wal-Mart pharmacy, where the pharmacist tells me,

"I'm sorry, sir, but your insurance won't cover the cost of the prescription of uh.. Estradiol valerate, is this correct?"

I affirm that it is, and he dispenses twenty 2mg pills, which are all I can afford. I sense a gulf forming between me and the future I was imagining.

I have just turned 24. It is now six months later. The hormones have not been effective, blood tests indicating that my testosterone is barely suppressed and that my levels of estradiol are essentially normal for a man. I look the same, with slightly longer hair. Because I look the same, I am no more confident about coming out. My body feels even less like home, knowing that it is refusing to accept my attempts to feminize it. I often cry at night, knowing that my body is continuing to masculinize and that I haven't been able to stop it. I reach out to my doctor about my concerns, who replies with a curt email about maybe increasing my dosage, let's keep an eye on it for a few more months, and the number for the suicide hotline - the move strikes me as rather presumptuous, given the fact that I had expressed no desire to kill myself. The next time I

visit the doctor's office, a nurse refuses to call me by my preferred name. She calls out for "Mr. Davis," she tells me, because she felt uncomfortable calling "a man by a woman's name." The doctor off-handedly makes an inappropriate comment about my genitalia that is too embarrassing to repeat here, and assures me that I will still be able to get sexual reassignment surgery in the future.

I am still not brave enough to tell anyone about my gender issues. I begin electrolysis for my facial hair, and the technician expresses surprise that a nice young man like me would be seeking hair removal, that I look like her husband when he was my age, and that his beard filled out eventually and maybe mine would as well. I don't say anything, just smile. I periodically mention that I am transgender and on hormones, but she only looks uncomfortable, ignoring it. As time passes, I feel increasingly alone. I only become more acutely aware of how far I really am from existing as myself.

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The irony of seeking medical care as a transgender woman is that, while healthcare providers are expected to provide compassion and care, transgender individuals often face discrimination and stigma in the same spaces that are meant to provide us with support for some of our most intimate issues. Institutional discourses often position transgender women as aspiring cis women, rather than as individuals with complicated and sensitive relationships with their gender identity and the ways it relates to their bodies. Additioanlly, nearly half of all transgender people have experienced healthcare discrimination from medical professionals (Yurcaba, 2021). Seeking healthcare as a transgender person is often lonely, expensive, and intrusive, and, in my experience, often feels profoundly disempowering.

When I first got access to hormone replacement therapy, I was lucky enough to receive an appointment almost instantly. This experience is unusual, and most transgender patients have a much longer wait before they can even see someone about maybe starting hormones. This is often compounded with financial barriers to treatment, access to facilities for people with physical and mental disabilities, and systemic racial inequities (Lane et al., 2021). In addition, transgender women are expected to perform an exaggerated hyper-femininity in order to be seen as legitimate (Bornstein, 1994) When I visited medical providers and therapists early in my medical transition, I got the sense that they wanted to see a woman trapped in a man's body, and I failed to deliver.

Queer theorists and feminists have written extensively about the ways medical practices and diagnostic criteria, such as the DSM-V, have a way of ontologizing identities and experiences (Ahmed, 2006 Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). This means that medical institutions have a tendency to treat gender as a fixed characteristic of a patient's identity, not recognizing the complexity and fluidity of gender expression. During my early medical transition, the shame I felt about my body not responding to hormone therapy is intimately connected to these discourses of fixed gender identity. I found myself at the mercy of health professionals who constantly evaluated the extent to which I was performing femininity 'properly' and being mistreated because the life-saving feminizing hormone therapy I was seeking was not effective enough for nurses and electrolysis technicians to take my transition seriously, let alone recognize the nuances of my gender identity. The overwhelming message I received was, essentially, that because I was not doing femininity 'correctly,' I would not be taken seriously as a woman, and because I was not performing femininity 'correctly,' any shame I felt as the product of being mistreated was essentially my own fault, a product of a personal failure to follow the gender

rules. I would be interpellated as a man until I did the dance, and doing the dance meant crossing the melancholic distance between me and a desired gender role in society, which felt increasingly impossible as I felt more and more ashamed of myself.

Previously, I argued that much of the transphobic harassment I have experienced often felt like it was intended to make my desire to exist in society publicly as a woman seem ridiculous and impossible, and the discrimination I experienced at the doctors served a similar function, albeit less explicitly. The message from the teenagers in the woods was that my femininity was ridiculous, and the messages I got from medical practitioners was that my femininity was offensive, and would only be taken seriously when I met an arbitrary standard of what a woman ought to be like, which is impossible and always changing, a melancholic reminder of the distance that separates me from a life in which I am rendered intelligible as myself.

Conclusion

While taking a break while working on this chapter, I coincidentally came across a poem called "make me a vessel for anomaly" by poet Simon Iris as I was flipping through old books. Below is an excerpt:

> *[...] feel a weighted void where my gender used to be. see my gender bleeding helplessly on the curb, kicked and downtrodden by odd words like "man" and crying for recognition; blundering down a hollow hallway saying, "call me nothing instead," and waiting to be released.* (Bornstein et al., 2010, pp. 103-104)

It is strange to see a poem that summarizes so many complex feelings, and even stranger to find it in the moment I am attempting to theorize these embodied sensations into a form recognizable as academic research. As I navigate the social world, I find myself carrying a

melancholic void around with me, see myself in Iris's poem. I feel it primarily in my tummy, but sometimes, it travels through my entire body - my feet, hands, head, and heart - always worse around people who I perceive as cisheterosexual. Like the poet, I find myself crying out for recognition from a social and cultural context from it will probably never come - at least, not fully and not without serious compromise. I blunder through grocery stores, parking lots, and research symposiums, longing to either be seen as myself - some sort of women-adjacent nonbinary-ish person - or ignored, because the alternative harassment, discrimination, micro and macro aggressions accumulate on the psyche and make my life unlivable.

See me with my hair hidden under a baseball cap, my breast tissue bound against my ribcage, what's left of my facial hair poking through facial skin, hiding in plain sight. See me fawning,[3] my voice delicate, and perfect wings in liquid eyeliner, ironed business-casual women's clothing, stuffing down my inner tomboy and performing as the perfect transsexual subject, all for a scrap of recognition. These stylizations are my way of hiding from the void - submitting to either masculinity or femininity, but never empowering myself.

Here, I would like to take another moment to emphasize the radical subjectivity of autoethnography. I do not intend to claim that all transgender people experience this kind of shame and melancholia; not all transgender women are ashamed of themselves, and not all transgender women feel this kind of separation between their social presence and their identities. These stories are moments of shame, terror, alienation, and melancholy in the life of one transgender person, Lake Davis, who is always changing, coming and going, integrating and disintegrating. Fundamentally, these are my stories and my feelings.

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[3] 'Fawning' is a people-pleasing strategy (Finch, 2019), sometimes referred to by transgender women as a description of protective and exaggerated performances of femininity that help us avoid confrontation or harassment.

To claim that I feel the sensation of a void implies a feeling of emptiness. A true void contains nothing. All I have done until this point is describe the contours of the void - how it sits in my tummy, how I can feel it grow or shrink or twist as social context changes. In the next chapter, I explore what it might mean to explore this melancholic internal space in my daily life in external social space - to cross the void between me and myself with the help of others.

Chapter Five: Three Short Stories about Possibility

In this chapter, I present three vignettes which explore the ruptures in the cisheterosexual regime and the possibilities which are revealed to me as I go about the world and encounter others. These three stories are also about shame and melancholy, but end in moments of subversion, hope, and connection. In telling these stories, I hope to highlight the liberatory potentiality of Queer theories, identities, and communities as we endure a cisheteronormative present which often seems unlivable.

Amateur Drag: Unexpected Subversion

I am sitting on the hot concrete of a public amphitheater in Mankato, Minnesota. It is the second day of PrideFest, and I am waiting to watch a drag show. The air is warm and fluid, laced with the energy and happy chatter of the assembled community. So many young families sit near me, young parents and their children, playing, laughing, and eating snacks. The right side of the amphitheater hugs a small patch of trees lining the lazy Minnesota River. As I sit waiting, I imagine forest animals milling in the understory, a deer with all her fuzzy children playing around her.

As I write this, drag shows are central to conservative hysteria about transgender people. They are framed as corrupt, seedy events in smoky clubs where children are insidiously converted into the cult of transgenderism. Fox News frames drag as something that corrupts children, something so sinful and seductive that they need to be banned outright for fear of its dark powers. In reality, drag is simultaneously so much less and so much more than it's made out to be. It's not about converting anybody into any particular identity, but it is a powerful affirmation of life and a delightful subversion of restrictive gender norms.

Anyway, I am sitting in the public amphitheater. Club music begins to play, and a middle-aged queen dressed like Dolly Parton sways across the stage. Her performance is a little stilted, and as she moves, she can barely control the motion of her large prosthetic breasts. I admire her effort but struggle to get involved in the performance – something feels amateur about it, like it hasn't quite captured any particular energy. As the music stops, the transgender woman announcing the performers tells us that this had been the Dolly Parton queen's first performance and that she had been a sort of hobbyist queen. I feel a jolt of shame. I realize that I had been judging her too harshly, that I shouldn't feel ashamed of her like she had somehow embarrassed both of us.

As the show progresses, the crowd begins to stir. We had all been sitting rather politely, watching the performance as if it were somehow sterile, separate from us. Some of the children were fussing, and several small crowds of people had left the stands. Eventually, during the performance of a transwoman drag queen, a little girl broke the barrier between the audience and the performer and began to goofily dance to the club music. Other children began to stand up and play around the peripheries of the stage space. As the energy accumulated, children began to wiggle and play in the performance space, following the performing queen, swooping in and out of her path. The queen, a stunning brunette wearing a gorgeous flowing blue silk outfit, cheekily dodged the children as she arced across the performance space. A little boy wearing a Fortnite shirt jovially sways his arms back and forth, illuminated by a patch of sun, and a little girl offers the performer a dollar. The queen reminds me of Artemis, a girl dancing with sacred animals playing around her.

In a few hours, Sam and I leave PrideFest. We are walking down the street, and I see the Dolly Parton queen driving past in a painfully average car. We make brief eye contact, and she

smiles at me, and I wave. The surge of children into the performance space felt like a glimpse into a world where I could feel unashamed as if their goofy dancing around the queen revealed some authentic and joyful potentiality. Surrounded by children who had not yet learned to feel ashamed, the queen's performance took on a utopian quality - she is dancing, and surrounded by children, her dancing takes on a spontaneous, clumsy, loving quality that reveals the possibility of overcoming shame altogether.

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The subversive potential of drag has been extensively theorized within gender studies and Queer theory, often used as a way for scholars to ground theoretical essays about gender performativity in an experience that demonstrates the social construction of gender and the way the repetitive norms that constitute gender can be subverted or challenged in the performative space (Jagose, 2010). However, recent scholarship is more skeptical of the revolutionary potential of drag, and framing drag as an inherently revolutionary or subversive performance that necessarily provides any substantial commentary on gender is increasingly interpreted as naive. For example, Butler (2011) argues that drag has no inherently subversive quality, that drag "may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual norms. . . . At best . . . drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power" (p. 125). In other words, drag performers may simultaneously subvert and reinforce gender norms, which reflects the tension about being part of and resisting social structures more than anything about gender or performance.

What I would like to suggest here is that this ambivalence, this tension between resistance and capitulation, is also present in me as an ashamed Queer subject who blunders

through the social world, and my experience of shame as I watched drag Dolly Parton saunter around the stage reveals a certain internalized uneasiness with the complexity of gender performance and the limited space for real subversion within cisheterosexual cultural narratives. When I judge drag Dolly Parton for her performance, I am also judging myself - I see the queen bravely venture out from cisheteronormative norms. When I interpret her performance as an embarrassment, I am capitulating to those cisheteronormative expectations, discouraging me from trying to break away from them. I feel ashamed of her because I feel ashamed of myself.

As I write this thesis, news stories abound about conservative protestors intimidating and harassing both performers and attendees with assault rifles at drag brunch events because they fear that children are somehow swayed or 'converted' into Queer identities by witnessing these performances (Ball & Carless, 2023). While I absolutely disagree with the idea that drag shows have any adverse effect on children, I think these conservative protestors have, ironically, identified a sort of affective allure generated by some drag performances.

Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2011) argues that spaces become charged with feeling as the things that are happening shape how individuals collectively sense their surroundings - to use a colloquialism, spaces become charged with a 'vibe' as individuals, objects, bodies, and space interact, and these interactions accumulate into a sort of affective atmosphere to which attuned individuals respond. As the second queen moved about the stage, I felt attracted to her on multiple affective levels, and as the feeling of the space changed, children and parents matched her energy and joined her. I did not dance, but I was overwhelmed with feeling - in this sense, I crossed the void and joined her. I felt closer to myself.

What I would like to suggest here is that the subversive potential of drag is not necessarily in explicit resistance to cisheteronormative injunctions about gender and sexuality

but rather, perhaps, in the ways drag can generate affective atmospheres which allow us to live inside the tension between resistance and capitulation. This eases the sensation of melancholic distance and makes it easier to live with. The drag queen's performance did not resolve my gender issues, but it did leave an impression on me, and I felt closer to myself.

Belonging: Affective Recognition

My arms are wrapped so tightly around my chest that my fingers dig into the soft fabric of my maroon University of Minnesota sweatshirt. I can feel the material stretching against my skin, the scratchy fibers rubbing against my sensitive fingertips. The sensation of the fabric against my skin is almost suffocating, but I can't let go. It's the only thing keeping me from falling apart. I feel as if I am suffocating, the burden of hiding my body hanging like a dead weight from my windpipe. I feel like a liar, lying here with her, and I decide that I must either tell her the truth, or roll out of this cozy bed and walk out of her life.

We are laying together in her bed. She is kissing me. Her lips are warm and soft, but my mind is somewhere else. She slides her hand up my shirt, but I flinch and pull away. I feel her confusion, but I cannot bring myself to explain. I try to give an account, but the words disappear into the void.

I sit up, gently, lean my aching back against the wall. Her walls were yellow, blue moonlight crossing the vast expanse of space and casting weird shadows around the room. I fill my lungs with hot, cheap-furnace apartment air. I have been on hormones for a year now, and the changes to my body have become undeniable, something unfair and impossible to hide from a lover.

"Hey," I start, barely whispering. "I need to…"

She scoots over to me and leans her head against my shoulder. I make a broad, vague gesture over my body. The familiar scent of her shampoo calms me. I close my eyes, feeling the warmth of her breath on my neck, the gentle rhythm of her heart on my shoulder.

"Before anything else, I need to…" She interrupts me.

"It's okay. I already know."

I lean back onto the pillow and relax my arms. She snuggles up against me. I belong here. She knows me in a way that no one else does - my fears, my desires, my vulnerabilities. With her, my muscles relax, all the tension I carry in my body as I navigate social space dissipates into the air, like I am shedding a layer of tight clothing or a cast is being sawed off my leg, broken bones mended.

~ ~ ~

There are often things left unsaid in any conversation, and these silences can be as important as what is actually articulated. In such moments, affect and sensation can work together to communicate tacit knowledge that is difficult to grasp with language. The moment of silence between my attempt to come out and my girlfriend's comforting remark was a pregnant silence, laden with affective meaning. As Foucault (1980) says, "there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say . . . There is not one but many silences, and they underlie and perpetuate discourses" (p. 27). Reading gender as performative, we understand that gender identity is not only about what we say we are or how we present, but also about the ways others interpret our speech and presentation. In addition, as Sedgwick (1990) argues, to recognize the ways being in the closet or avoiding being recognized as queer depends on the ignorance and silence of others - the things *we* don't say interacting with the things *they* don't say. So, what does it mean for the moment of coming out to happen in silence?

Coming out is usually framed within popular culture as a communicative moment consisting of a declaration in which someone reveals a queer identity to unwitting or unknowing cisheterosexual Others after a period of long deliberation. It usually goes down like this: A teenager comes downstairs from his bedroom in a beige suburban house, sits at the kitchen table with his parents, and says, "Mom, Dad… I'm gay." Parents either embrace their child or kick them out of the house, depending on the type of story being told.

This type of story reflects the experiences of some queer people, but its proliferation within popular culture reveals a broader ignorance towards the nuances of coming out, the ways it can come unexpectedly, impulsively, or in the case of me and my girlfriend at the time, without any declarative statement. Sociolinguist Deborah Chirrey (2003) argues that, when we reduce coming out to declarative statements in which we perform/adopt a queer identity, "we are in danger of neglecting other, non-linguistic ways of coming out" (p. 35). I don't know what way of coming out happened with my girlfriend in her bed that night, but I do know that an affective moment occurred between us, and that moment removed the necessity for me to explain any further. Some unspeakable latent force, energy, intensity, or current brought her knowledge of my transgender identity to the forefront of her mind, allowing her to say what I was too ashamed to express.

Perhaps it's best to theorize my coming out as a moment of queer affective recognition - a moment in which the way I moved through space, stylized my body, and (failed to) hide my body allowed me to make my inner identity intelligible to another queer individual, despite my best attempts at hiding myself from her. Ahmed (2006) states that a queer person in cisheterosexual culture "is made socially present as a deviant" (p. 21), in the sense that they are people who veer away from the typical rhythms and tendencies of cisheteronormative life - in

my case, being cisheterosexual and not taking estrogen if you're assigned male at birth. In this sense, my girlfriend's recognition of my queer identity was not only a recognition of my inner self, but also a recognition of my deviance from the norm, our shared queerness allowing her to understand my experiences and feelings without any declarative speech act to guide her towards recognition. This is not to say that verbal declarations of queer identity are not useful or important; rather, that affective and non-verbal communication has special and perhaps inarticulable meaning for queer individuals as they navigate their identities.

The notion that there is such a thing as a uniquely queer affect does not come from me. Scholars such as Cvetkovich (2003) and Muñoz (2019) have explored the idea that queer affect is an emotional experience that arises from aesthetics and the experiences of marginalization and community building which frequently mark individuals with queer identities. However, for the ashamed and melancholic subject, I think these affective moments have an especially potent significance. Moments of queer affective recognition allow me to be seen, even when I might submit to the instinct to hide. While cisheterosexual people may recognize me as a deviant in moments where I fail to either hide as a man or to pass as a cisheterosexual woman, Queer recognition enables me to be 'out' in spaces and in ways that are nourishing and helpful, even if I had gone out the door that morning expecting the worst. These moments often occur in silence - a moment of recognition from across the room, a sudden feeling of connection with a stranger whose hair has that queer *je ne sais quoi*, a moment in which your lover recognizes her boyfriends' softening face and widening hips and continues to love them, even though they aren't ready to tell her what she already knows. In these moments, I feel a sense of belonging, a moment of lightness that cuts through the void and helps me arrive at home.

Finding Home: Affective Resilience

Sidney and I stumble down a rainy Minneapolis Street, ravenous for cheap pizza. It was 11 PM, and we had met at a support group for transgender people earlier that day. After the meeting, which had been an underwhelming presentation about petitioning insurance companies for money for sexual reassignment surgery, we returned to her apartment. We talked for hours about being trans, crying together, telling each other things about ourselves and the people that we wanted to be that we had never told anyone before. My fiancée understands a lot about my experience of being transgender, but making "common cause with those others identified as outside the structures, to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" is an experience that has a deeply redemptive pathos all its own (Lorde, 1983, p. 26).

Stumbling down the street and chatting, my poorly trained voice must have outed me, because a stranger sitting on a doorstep shouted at me, "Hey man, when are you gonna cut your dick off? You almost tricked me! Man, when's he gonna cut off that dick of his?" Sidney and I hurry down the street, duck into an alleyway, and laugh until we cry. Usually, that sort of insult would ruin my day, but there was something delightfully absurd about the situation. I felt light, exhilarated, as we ran down the alley, holding each other. My day spent deeply connecting with another person from my community had helped me imagine a better future, helped me come to terms with my own sense of distance from identity categories, and helped me see the cisheteronormative trappings of these sorts of transphobic catcalls as the trite, meaningless, and goofy insults they were.

~ ~ ~

When I am harassed, bullied, or assaulted in public, my response to these damaging stimuli is highly influenced by the affective environment: the people, things, and energies I am

sensing in the moment of the encounter. Here, I suggest that individuals develop affective resilience as they engage in meaningful, deep encounters with others who share their struggles and/or identities.

As I walked through Minneapolis with Sidney, I felt the glow of our time together in her apartment, the kind of genuine warmth and connection between two people that only sets in after three hours of crying and just as many margaritas. This warmth permeated my body and gave me confidence, and when faced with transphobic harassment that would have otherwise made me feel very ashamed, I brushed it off quickly. The insult failed to make me ashamed, and it became a source of humor in and of itself, as if the attempt to humiliate us was so ridiculous and ineffective that it was meant as a joke, something intended as parody.

I do not mean to suggest here that the solution to feeling ashamed by transphobic abuse is simply to make friends. I am lucky enough to have a full social life, but I am still emotionally and physically vulnerable to harassment as an individual. The burden should not fall on marginalized individuals to travel in packs to constantly defend themselves from discrimination. What I would like to suggest, however, is that positive and queer affective environments can help individuals cope with these negative messages - that, in my experience, it is possible to develop a sort of affective resilience against cisheteronormative harassment. Complex social forces constitute any communicative encounter. As I have argued in this thesis, affects and the sensations that spring from them have particularly strong reverberations through speakers as they interact. Returning to Ahmed's (2015) conceptualization of skin as a socially-constituted barrier between the surface of an individual's body-mind and the outer world, I find myself wondering what it might mean for an individual's skin to be warmed by positive affect, in the sense that

affect, sensations, and others can help fortify ourselves against abuse and help us survive in positions that might otherwise feel very precarious.

Queer individuals have long drawn on each other for support against systematic discrimination, marginalization, and neglect by both systems and individuals. This is evident in the lives of Queer individuals, communities, art, and theory. Developing affective resilience is a continuous and fragile process that requires individuals to find strength and warmth in themselves and others. Affective resilience is not a solution to the problems facing the Queer community. However, positive queer affective environments can help us cope and withstand the discriminatory behaviors we encounter as we traverse cisheteronormative time and space.

Conclusion

In my experience, transmisogynistic discourses work to implant a melancholic desire for cisnormative femininity in transgender women, which is an impossible and moving standard. These stories represent times in which life became liveable as myself, allowing me to exist within the moment and imagine better futures for myself untethered from cisnormative demands about how a legitimate transgender subject ought to move, think, and act. Community, connection, and liberatory affective spaces offer me the ability to explore myself, learn to cope with the present, and imagine alternatives.

Muñoz (2009) argues that these glimpses of alternatives often arrive unexpectedly, coming to Queer readers as we navigate texts and worlds which were not necessarily intended for a Queer audience, filling them with new life as we seek queer utopia within cisheteronormative space. As a Queer individual born and raised in the midwest of the United States, these moments often occur to me within art that reminds me of the landscapes in which I live and write. As I began my medical transition, I found myself reading extensively from Joanne

Kyger. At that time in which I expected to enter a period of renewal and transformation, I often

took shelter in a poem depicting one of Kyger's experiences on a rural horse farm. Kyger

(2004)'s poem, "September", goes like this:

> *The grasses are light brown*
>
> > *and the ocean comes in*
> >
> > *long shimmering lines*
> >
> > *under the fleet from last night*
> >
> > *which dozes now in the early morning*
>
> *Here and there horses graze*
>
> > *on somebody's acreage*
> >
> > > *Strangely, it was not my desire*
>
> *that bade me speak in church to be released*
>
> > *but memory of the way it used to be in*
>
> *careless and exotic play*
>
> > *when characters were promises*
>
> > *then recognitions. The world of transformation*
>
> *is real and not real but trusting...* (p. 42)

Queer life exists in a world of transformation. While Kyger (2004)'s poem was not directly

related to Queer politics or identity, I 'felt' a reading of this text which spoke to the particularity

of my transgender experience. Balanced on a knife's edge between real and not real, now and

then, possibility and impossibility, Queer utopia and Queer resonances exist as potentialities

which shine like long shimmering lines of ocean waves through ruptures in our

cisheternormative confines. Queer life is fertile soil for renewal and growth, and as we go about

the world, moments in which memories "of the way it used it to be in careless and exotic play" (Kyger, 2004, p. 42) emerge into the present asglimpses of alternatives to the void. "The world of transformation is real and not real" (Kyger, 2004), but reveals itself as potentiality in moments in which cisheternormativity cracks and possibilities are revealed. Queer theorist Muñoz (1999) argues that Queer subjects engaging with cisheteronormative art and aesthetics don't "dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life" (p. 12). Agreeing with Muñoz, I suspect that nourishing affective spaces provide particularly fertile soil for the development of Queer interpretation, fulfilling Queer life, and glimpses of Queer utopia.

Chapter Six: Findings and Reflection

As I wrote these stories, I always had you, the reader, in mind. Attempting to write a final chapter that concludes this project, I find myself worrying about you. I wonder what you think of me, whether or not my stories resonated with you, and if you regret reading them. I have shared many of these stories with friends, collaborators, and professors, and several of these individuals have described these stories as "heartbreaking." What does it mean for a researcher to tell stories that break hearts? I don't know.

Typically, heartbreak describes a type of distress that emerges from a sense of melancholic loss or a deep sadness that emerges from a difficult or painful experience. As a writer telling personal stories, when someone tells me that my stories are heartbreaking, I can't help but wonder if I've done something wrong - if I've hurt you for no justifiable reason.

I don't have any great observations about coping with shame or melancholy as a transgender person to share with you, nor do I have any revolutionary methods for smashing the cisheteronormative patriarchy that produces this cultural landscape in which so many transgender lives are heartbreaking. These stories only begin to describe how it feels to be Lake Davis - there is so much that I want to tell you, but I am not skilled enough with language to communicate it all. However, I would like to offer some observations about shame based on my experience telling and living these stories. I hope these make up for any pain I've caused you.

First, I would like to present you with a list of themes approximating findings. Just like my vignettes, these themes are not intended to be perfectly tidy, obviously separate from each other, or even comprehensible from any position other than that of Lake Davis. Instead, like me and my stories, they are partial and sometimes contradictory.

Each of the six vignettes written for this thesis represents one of six major themes present in my body of memos. The first three have to do with shame and melancholy. The first, as epitomized by Circe in Mankato, was shame as a distance from the process of becoming an idealized self. Imagining Circe as a sort of embodiment of my idealized self, I was harassed and called slurs, which reminded me of the distance between me and someone who is easily recognized as a cisnormative subject. In contrast, the second theme, as represented by Tulip Shopping, was shame as a product of self-silencing practices that prevent both harassment and the possibility of positive encounters with others. Finally, the third theme, shame as failure to launch, was explored in Hormones. This theme explores the feelings of shame I experienced as a result of medical practitioners who treated me as a failed transsexual, someone who was failing to 'successfully' transition into a cisnormative woman. These broad categories, I think, begin to mark associations between encounters with transphobia and the feelings of shame and melancholy that continue to mark my psyche.

The second set of three vignettes are also related to shame and melancholy, but focus more on the possibilities of overcoming shame and melancholy that reveal themselves to me as I go about the world and experience events from the perspective of my transgender body. In these stories, the behavior and thoughts inspired by my feelings of shame and melancholy reveal interesting and unexpected glimpses of alternatives to cisheteronormative culture. My experience with Amateur Drag helped me imagine a world in which life within the tension between myself and the person I imagine becoming, whoever that is, is a liveable, vibrant, and even fulfilling space in and of itself. Even though I felt ashamed as a transgender person watching drag, even judging others for their presentation, possibilities became evident to me as the affective space evolved. The experience in the second story, Belonging, of coming out to my girlfriend at the

time without speaking spoke to a possibility of articulating feelings, sensations, and identities that cannot be contained within language grounded in cisheteronormativity - I literally did not have the words to describe myself in this moment, but I still managed to connect with her on an authentic level as myself. The final story, Finding Home, describes the possibility of developing resilience through cultivating an affective bond with another person, which provided me a sort of 'buffer' against an instance of transphobic harassment.

In the rest of this section, I will discuss several implications of these observations. First, shame and melancholy change. No experience of shame and/or melancholy is the same as any other, and each cisheterosexist or transphobic encounter elicits different sensations. There is no consistency, aside from the possibility of grouping these sensations into broad categories. This is because, I think, shame and melancholy are often intertwined with each other. The embarrassment of shame and the longing and loss of melancholy feed each other. When I experience transphobic harassment, I feel disgusted by my own transgender identity - I feel like I am doing something wrong, illicit, revolting. No part of me wants to feel disgusted by myself, but these feelings are impossible for me to escape in our transphobic culture. Despite my best efforts, I cannot and do not want to conform to cisnormative ideals of femininity - it would feel wrong, fake, artificial. However, I cannot simply stop being transgender or simply be a man - I would not survive life pretending to be cisgender. It would be an emotional death which would, inevitably, lead to my physical death.

In addition, shame and melancholy are feelings that obscure the means of overcoming themselves as an effect of their presence in the psyche. This creates a cycle where the emotions gain momentum, further obscuring the possibility of a life in which we feel unashamed and fulfilled. When I feel disgusted and unlike myself, I struggle to bring myself out into society, to

interact with others and find community. When my feelings of shame overwhelm me, I hide from others, whether through self-silencing practices or through literally avoiding interaction. While this prevents me from being harassed, it also prevents me from connecting with others in ways that are nourishing. A stereotype about transgender women is that many of us spend lots of time with hobbies that are typically read as nerdy or lonely - reading, playing video games, writing theses, that sort of thing. I think there's some truth to this, not because transgender women somehow dislike socializing with others, but because many transgender women have been taught through transphobic messaging that they're simply unwelcome in many social spaces. When I am afraid of being treated like a predator in the women's bathroom, it is not because I have any intention of preying on anyone, but because I am aware that transphobic harassment and airwaves saturated with fear mongering about transgender women as Buffalo Bill-style sexual predators interpellates me as someone who ought to feel like a trespasser in these spaces.

Second, transphobic messages that make individuals feel ashamed and melancholic do not only occur within singular encounters, such as a transphobic stranger harassing a random transgender person in the street. Sometimes, transphobia accumulates over time from educated professionals who might mistreat a gender nonconforming transgender person, but be inclined to support a transgender person whose gendered performance adheres to cisnormative expectations. Each time I was misgendered, asked unnecessary questions about my genitalia, or had my identity ignored within professional contexts, I was aware that these responses to my transgender body were coming from generally well-meaning people who seemingly didn't believe that I was actually a legitimate transgender person. Transgender people should not be forced to conform to cisnormative expectations about gendered presentation in order to be taken seriously in the same spaces we are expected to reveal vulnerable information about our minds and bodies. These

microaggressions made me feel acutely ashamed because, at the time, I *wanted* to present as the cisnormative transgender woman that the practitioners who misgendered me seemed to expect. It wasn't only that I had a sense of melancholic distance from cisnormative femininity, but now, others were also expecting me to achieve that mode of presentation, and they treated me badly when I did not succeed. Transphobia is not only the domain of conservatives and apolitical transphobes - it also comes from people who position themselves as allies.

Further, the fact that these individuals were medical professionals complicated the task of doing autoethnography. As conservative discourses about access to medical care for transgender people become more heated, I am simply not willing to compromise the job security of the medical professionals who *are* willing to treat transgender individuals in any capacity. I have concerns about my doctor's bedside manner, but he is also a practitioner who specializes in work with transgender patients, many of whom experience marginalization compounded by poverty or racialized abuse. In this sense, I not only had to obscure the identities of my specific doctor and the specific clinic at which I sought care, but also cover for an entire set of medical practitioners- I wanted to discuss the ways these experiences compounded my sense of shame and melancholy, but I did not want to risk the possibility that any transgender people would actually feel discouraged from seeking care or that any doctors would be further dissuaded from working with transgender individuals. This is a profoundly lonely experience for a writer.

At this juncture, I worry that I am coming off as a cynic. My auto-ethnographic narrative, grounded in a radical subjectivity and methodological near-indifference to reader comprehension, has thus far only alluded to the possibility of overcoming these discourses. I am, as a subject, still overwhelmed by melancholic shame. It is more difficult for me to theorize moments of possibility than it is to theorize moments of shame because, for me, the moments in

which I viscerally believe in the possibilities of Queer futurity and the possibility of acceptance are outweighed by moments in which I am confronted with the horror of the present. I accept Queer futurity as an intellectual position and as a theoretical tool for conceptualizing Queer potentialities within an anti-Queer present, but my daily reality as a melancholic subject is more about enduring the present than imagining alternatives. This is a challenge and limitation to me as an autoethnographer. The negative feelings I am trying to examine from the position of myself as both subject and researcher obscure alternatives to themselves from me as part of their affective function.

However, as an academic who is privileged enough to write a thesis, I do think it is important to think about alternatives, rather than abandon this aim of the project. In order to accomplish this, I turn eagerly towards Queer theory and Queer utopianism. Muñoz (2009) argues that queer critique in modernity is still fundamentally shaped by an internalized desire to assimilate into cisheteronromative structure, and that actual 'queerness' as an identity is rendered impossible through this melancholic desire for assimilation into cisheteronormativity- we are not yet "queer," in the sense that being "queer" is still a position that only exists in ulteriority to cisheteronormative identities. This internalized desire for assimilation can lead to a form of melancholia in which we mourn the loss of what we believe we should be striving for, rather than actively imagining and creating something different. For many Queer theorists (Edleman, 2004; Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 2009), being Queer within modernity is often conceptualized as both an identity which is adopted by many individuals despite its possibility, as well as a theoretical, aesthetic, and personal orientation towards disruption of the cisheternormative structures that make Queer life impossible. From my perspective, Queerness/being queer can be read as a process of continual and intentional de-identification with the lost object-cathexis,

cisnormative femininity in my case, and a re-identification with an identity that continually

positions itself against the norms that make life as myself impossible. In this sense, the

possibilities revealed to me in moments where my shame and melancholy are overwhelmed by

recognition or aesthetic beauty are the possibility of becoming Queer in the sense of Muñoz, the

possibility of being untethered to cisheternormative gender, just being myself. Maybe that's how

I felt walking with Sidney, a transwoman friend, laughing off transphobic harassment. Like I was

already myself in that moment, and the person heckling me had actually identified something

true about me - that I am not someone who is ashamed of being trans. Because in being trans, I

am closer to my Queer self than I would be if I conformed to the norms he was enforcing.

That's a reading of Queer that works for me.

~ ~ ~

Writing this, I'm reminded of Bornstein (1994), who wrote that leaving rigid categories

of identification unchallenged within transgender discourse is like "trying to apply the laws of

solids to the state of fluids … it's our fluidity and the principles that attend that constant state of

flux that could create an innovative and inclusive transgender community" (p. 69). I find myself

wondering what a future looks like for a transgender community that embraces flux, or accepts

constant evolution as a key feature of rejecting cisheteronormativity instead of as a potential

challenge to our legitimacy. Maybe a solution to overcoming my feelings of gender stickiness is

to embrace the fluidity, the everchanging and impermanent tide of associations that constitute my

gender at any given moment. I don't think I'm genderfluid, at least in the sense the term is

commonly used today as a description of someone who oscillates between gender categories. I'm

confident that I am a binary-ish transgender woman. I just think it would be productive in

overcoming shame and melancholy for me to intentionally practice being less certain about what exactly that means, and how I'm failing to perform it correctly.

In this thesis, I have described my melancholy as a void several times, a distance between me and a life in which I embody a gender presentation that makes me feel fulfilled. I don't think that's a healthy way of looking at it. Here's an alternative: There's this Norwegian fairytale called Soria Moria Castle (Lang et al., 1967). It's about a young man named Halvor traversing an incredible distance on a mountainous path, in order to arrive at a castle full of treasure. Along the way, he runs into trolls and witches as he struggles to scale the towering mountains between him and the castle. He also runs into people who help him, including a magical horse. Eventually, he arrives, and marries the princess he meets there. In Norway, the young boy's journey to Soria Moria Castle is often framed as a metaphor for the trials someone faces as they pursue success (Kittelsen, 2019). Theorizing my experiences with shame and melancholy as a transgender scholar, I feel a strong resonance with Halvor. Making peace with a Queer identity which is ulterior to cisheteronormative life is a difficult, often excruciating journey, but I think it can also be profoundly nourishing. My gender transition has not been a void, not really. I've encountered witches and trolls, but I've also met supportive communities, friends, and allies. What I would like to suggest, here, is that the possibilities revealed in moments of shame do not only reveal ruptures in cisheteronormativity that speak to a distant utopia, but that they also make the journey itself worth pursuing.

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