Trans joy: a space for self-realisation, resistance and intersectional community building

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Master's Thesis

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This thesis is a qualitative study that explores the topic of trans joy and its presence in the everyday lives of trans and non-binary people. It contributes to efforts of addressing the severe gap in research literature that currently exists on the topic of trans joy. The data for the thesis consists of 6 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and 5 written reflections. Voluntary sampling was used to recruit participants via two trans and queer focused online community platforms. Thematic content analysis was applied to the data in a recursive, ongoing manner to account for divergent viewpoints, paying particular attention to the exploratory nature of the thesis and the fact that trans joy is an emergent topic in research. The research questions were: 1) what is trans joy, and more specifically: what brings people trans joy, what does it mean for people and what are its impacts?, and 2) can trans joy act as a form of resistance against systems of oppression and if so, how? This thesis found that trans joy allows people to grow more connected and visible to themselves, that it centres the variety and creativity involved in people's gender journeys and that its impacts included newfound confidence and self-understanding, increased quality of life, an ability to envision a more fulfilling future, a firm sense of agency and a greater ability to support others. It also found that trans joy can contribute to new conceptualisations of dysphoria and euphoria: where previously dysphoria has been understood as a primary catalyst or prerequisite for transition, trans joy highlights that a vision for joy and contentment can be an equally significant motivation. To answer the question on resistance, this thesis brings together a body of literature on transnormativity, interrogating its oppressive functions for the ways in which they impact trans people's community building practices and disrupt social connections. The key findings in relation to this question were the importance of being in community, the potential of trans joy to comment on, question and re-frame existing transnormative understandings, its ability to highlight social conditions which expect trans people to be visible only strategically and its ability to facilitate spaces where trans people's personhoods can exist with a wholeness. This research shows that trans joy has a multifaceted significance both in trans people's personal lives and in the cultural contributions it can make for understanding gender transitions and the value of gender diversity more broadly. Its findings call for further research on trans joy across different settings, and for practical applications of trans joy where the provision of transition-related health care is protected and gender-affirming spaces for trans people are created across society.

Key words: trans joy, trans studies, gender euphoria, transnormativity, intersectionality, personhood, desire, resistance, visibility, community

Dedication

To anyone who feels that normative expectations are trying to disappear you, be that expectation cisness, whiteness, straightness, able-bodiedness or -mindness, richness, thinness, neurotypicalness, whatever (combination) it may be, I want you to know that your life and the fullness of your person is irreplaceable. You are more beautiful and more enough than any norm could ever think up. Thank you for being here.

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1 Introduction

1.1 What's it like at the edge of a cliff?

You are standing at the edge of a grassy cliff. Behind you is a barbed wire fence. The fence has a gap in it where a good portion of it has been stamped down to the ground. You crossed the fence from there. The metal of the fence creaked against your shoes as you made it bend under your own weight, the fallen-down wires digging their way deeper into the earth. The damp grass is hugging the wires tightly, soon their remains will be overgrown. It is nice to know someone has been here before you, gazing out. That someone has paved the way for you, so it is easier for you to cross this fence. You look out, up, and all around. The horizon stretches itself out in front of you, vaster than you have ever seen it before. You look down.

ROSANA

What's it like to be on the edge of a cliff?

IVOR

(laughs)

I'm not on the edge of a cliff!

(looks out)

IVOR

(comes closer)

Well, the thing is that when you come to the edge of the cliff, there's like a whole landscape down there that you can't see from there behind the fence. And you need to go a bit closer to the edge to be able to see it. Doesn't mean you have to jump off! But at least you can see what's there. And what's possible.

(locks eyes with you)

That's what it's like.

Transcript from a scene in the short film 'Taps Aff' by the artists Cade & MacAskill, screened at a trans joy/performance arts workshop in March 2021, organised by the artists and hosted by LGBT Health and Wellbeing Scotland. Transcribed verbatim and shared here with permission from the authors; I thank them for allowing me to include this clip into my thesis and for the inspiration it gave me for the structure of this chapter. More on their work can be found at: https://www.cademacaskill.com or @cademacaskill.

Now you are here. In front of you spreads a landscape you have seen before only in your dreams. You have imagined many times already what it would be like to arrive here. Or you stumbled upon this treasure trove by accident and in surprise. Which one was it again? Either way, one thing is for sure. The landscape would have remained obscured to you if you had not ventured away from the path that had been set out for you. That path followed the fence neatly, it ran on and on right by the side of the cliff, capturing momentary glimpses of what lay out beneath it. Still, never allowing you to get close. But now that you are here, at the edge of the cliff and with a new landscape glittering out in front of you, now you can decide for yourself which way to look and which way to go. You can fully take in all of the options ahead of you. Breathe. Your eye moves along from the land to the shore and beyond until you look out at the boundless form of the sea. There's that feeling. What might it be like to dream up some new possibilities of your own?

Just then the crumpled up barbed wire behind you makes a weak sound, a dry metallic cough. The wind is blowing in straight from the sea. It tickles the hair growing around your ears, just as it makes the fence shake a little. You look back at the gap where you crossed. Should we pause here for a moment? What did it take you, what did it take us, to get here?

1.2   What does silence feel like: Background

> I am interested in how happiness is associated with some life choices and not others, how happiness is imagined as *being what follows being a certain kind of being*. The history of happiness can be thought of as a history of associations.
>
> Sara Ahmed (2010: 2, emphasis mine)

In Western research, medicine and media, transgender people's gender journeys have been analysed in a manner that subjects those journeys to interpretations that privilege the ways non-transgender people see transgender people (Spade 2006: 327;), in ways that instrumentalise and pathologise trans people or place the burden of society's restrictive gender roles on the shoulders of trans people (Raun 2014: 13-14), questioning the choices trans people make about their bodies and lives instead of questioning the inhabitability of

rigid, binary gender systems and their global histories (Spade 2006: 326)[1]. Transgender[2] people can experience significant discrimination and prejudice, for example social shunning, loss of family support, discrimination in housing and employment as well as the risk of a wide-arching social tension that arises from not being permitted to have your correct gender on official documents, such as the possible inability to cross borders, to secure legal custody of one's children, to qualify for jobs or gain access to social services (Stryker 2017: 8-9).

Adding to this, in the eyes of society that has systemically built gender up as a marker of humanity, when someone fails to recognise your gender, they could have greater difficulty recognising your humanity (ibid.). The roots of painting gender as a human marker of social significance run far back in history and are tightly linked to colonialism. Maria Lugones writes about the inseparability of Western gender systems and colonialism, showing how Western cultural mappings of 'sex' and 'gender' were used to dehumanise colonised people: Colonisers reserved the human marker of 'gender' for themselves, whilst 'sex' was a biological marker used to dehumanise the colonised people so they could be judged as lacking against the normative understanding of 'man', 'the human being par excellence', and the 'normative understanding of 'woman, 'the human inversion of man' (2010: 744).

However, contrasting with this backdrop of discrimination, violence and institutional attempts to 'reduce the wide range of livable body types to two and only two genders' (Stryker 2017: 17) is the historical fact that diverse gender identification and expressions have always been a part of humanity on a global level. From peasants who fought enclosures of common lands whilst presenting in cross-gendered dress in medieval Europe to transgender priestesses who lived 4500 years ago (Feinberg 1996: 40, 78), gender fluidity and diversity have been a part of

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[1] This all links to cisnormativity, which can be defined as the assumption that it is the 'typical' or 'normal' way to be that a person's gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth. Cisnormativity often works to normalise the idea that there are two, binary genders – man and woman – that map onto two sexes – male and female and that one's gender identity should follow this model and should be stable and unambiguous.

[2] I like the way in which Susan Stryker uses 'transgender' as a term in the broadest possible sense: 'people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth' (2017: 1). Being transgender is 'a movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place, rather than any particular destination of mode of transition' (ibid.). Anyone who feels the need to resist an unchosen gender imposed on them can be transgender, but not all who do are – some people identify as gender non-conforming and experience a lack of fit with their birth assigned gender, but do not see themselves as transgender. Similarly, some transgender people might not see themselves as gender non-conforming whilst others do. Thus, to me it feels that the most important thing to remember is to respect how people identify and to use language that is sensitive to the diversity of gender expressions and identities. This thesis uses the terms 'trans' and 'transgender' in an open-ended and broad way, as suggested by Stryker, and aims to be inclusive of all trans identities as well as being attuned to gender-variance more broadly. This includes recognising indigenous gender diverse identities and people who feel that neither 'cis' nor 'trans' describes their experience with gender. Other relevant terms in the thesis will be defined for the reader as they are analysed.

human life around the world for thousands of years (at least). Moreover, in the past gender diversity was often appreciated and revered rather than stigmatised and punished. Still today, recognising and valuing gender diversity is a part of many indigenous cultures and yet, trans people also face gender oppression and scrutiny due to the Western gender binary: 'Lives that do not conform to the dominant pattern [of binary gender] are generally treated as lives that are not worth living and that have little or no value' (Stryker 2017: 17).

So if happiness is understood as arising from being a certain kind of being, as Sara Ahmed suggests (2010: 2), then it can be said that the Western normative narrative of transgender people's lives does not emphasise the role of happiness. Indeed, if an important life choice for you as a person would be to access medical services to support your gender transition, this life choice would not pass the screening of the medical establishment if you solely justify transition as a source of happiness. Most likely you must prove that it is your gender dysphoria, the sense of distress you feel from a mismatch between your gender and your sex assigned at birth, that leads you to seek medical services. All this is to say that there is a sociopolitical, cultural and historical context that all too often ascribes suffering as particularly prevalent to trans people's lives (as opposed to, say, exploring the ways in which everybody is subjected to forced gendering), and often also essentialises this suffering as something which exists in transgender people rather than as suffering arising from the way in which gender expression has become to be culturally and institutionally policed in Western, colonial binary gender system.

Out of these contexts, then, also arises the necessity to talk about trans joy – that is, all the ways in which being transgender is a source of joy and pleasure in people's lives as well as how being trans can actually foster joyful emotional expression. Holloway (2023) states: 'Trans people have hopes, dreams, and visions. That is worth highlighting. In a world where the dominant narrative pathologises trans and nonbinary people, shifting the paradigm is an act of resistance'. It is incredibly important that we fight against any reality that attempts to dictate that some lives are treated as lives not worth living (Stryker 2017:17). This is one of the foundational principles of this research.

1.3   Bringing down the fence: Aims, structure and research questions

Trans joy is saying that there is no such thing as an impossible trans body, that every kind of trans body is possible. It is saying that it is possible and meaningful to be trans and be happy; to find love and community; to derive pleasure and fulfilment from your body, life and

environment when you are trans, gender nonconforming, genderfluid. It is saying that all of this is not only possible, but it already is. It is right here, already an integrated part of the lives of queer and trans people. This is another foundational principle of this research and one that has influenced its aims the most. It is community driven in its topics and methods. It follows the central Transgender Studies tenet of centring the lived experiences and agency of trans people in a way that avoids homogenised and essentialist interpretations (Stryker and Bettcher 2016). These interpretations occur often when trans people's accounts are used primarily in service to 'prove' a theory removed from the lives of actual trans people or used in a way that presents a monolithic experience of transness, that is portraying one way of being trans as if it was a totality (Hale 2009). The current scarcity of research on trans joy is one example of this, because it is so removed from the lived reality of trans people.

The empirical data for this thesis consists of 6 in-depth interviews and 5 written reflections. The data collection took place between 16th of January and 21st if February 2021. Voluntary sampling was used to recruit participants via two trans and queer-focused online community platforms. In this research, big part of the significance of trans joy in people's lives was informed by being in community. Inspired by this, the structure of this thesis challenges academic conventions: literature, findings and discussion are all presented at once, instead organised by the main themes people raised in relation to trans joy. The central aim with this structure was to stay in community, even after the direct conversations with people had ended.

During his doctoral programme, Holloway found himself 'feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and depleted as a result of the tragic trans trope that was occupying academic scholarship' (2023). When so much of the existing literature is so one-sided and removed from the diverse meanings of trans life, not having a literature review that precedes findings rejects the idea that these one-sided portrayals ever accounted for understanding. The structure of the thesis, then, makes up a trans epistemological inquiry into 'the ethical and political aspects of epistemic conduct' (Fricker 2007). Knowledge systems, or epistemes (Foucault 1973 in shuster and Westbrook 2023: 1), model "proper" ways of telling stories with data, emphasising certain topics in canon-building storytelling practices (shuster and Westbrook 2023: 2). Writing through trans joy in ways that centre the knowledge building of trans communities is to question the canon-building storytelling practices of academia so far.

When I drafted my research proposal for this thesis in the autumn of 2020, the hashtag #transjoy had been used in Instagram in 3232 posts. There were also blog articles that touched

on the topic through a variety of themes. They analysed, for example, the need to create communal spaces where trans people can find reprieve and experience moments of joy and celebration (Crist 2018). They expanded the realms of what needs to be remembered, by discussing the Trans Day of Remembrance from the perspective of how trans lives need to be encountered as more than a remembrance: 'those kids and adults need to see, very specifically, trans fulfilment and trans joy as well' (Burt 2019). They shared a plethora of personal experiences and moments of joy and gender euphoria, from undercuts to knowing your ancestors to dreaming up better spaces or standing shoulder to shoulder against discrimination (Quenby 2019). As of today, #transjoy has 64 275 posts on Instagram. The conversations on joy within trans communities have not only been present for a while, they have grown more plentiful in recent years.

Yet, jumping into the context of social sciences and humanities research, the results are the opposite: back in 2020, using 'trans joy' as a key search term returned no results and research into the topic is still incredibly scarce today. This thesis aims to not only contribute towards bringing trans joy's importance into the existing literature, but also aims to straddle the contrast between academia's large research gap on trans joy and its commonplaceness within trans communities. Written from this crucial place in time, it questions framings which might place trans joy in continued limiting tension with the existing research landscape, if it is introduced into literature primarily in ways that demand it to comment on the supposed suffering that was previously inscribed.

Because whilst exploring trans joy can be about showing all the ways in which being trans is not an impossibility, a social death or a tragedy, whilst it can be used to re-diagnose the misunderstandings around transness and to point out that the fear and discrimination which trans people have to battle with in fact has nothing to do with transness itself, whilst it can be used to show that the source of the discrimination is found in society and thus it cannot be individualised onto trans people, whilst trans joy can support all this as true, this thesis finds that the importance of trans joy is also in saying that the joy can be found separately from all of this. Some of my participants felt that trans joy and gender euphoria existed separately from gender dysphoria. None of my participants resonated with the idea that trans joy could be described as a coping strategy in relation to systems of oppression because it was not felt to be a compensatory emotional expression that existed in relation to them. Instead, trans joy had value in and of itself, and was felt deeply also in its own right. Trans joy is not 'an add

on' to existing theory, it makes theory. And it makes theory that is lived in the everyday in ways that centre trans people's personal and collective meaning-making.

In this sense, the significance of discussing trans joy does not in fact arise from the existing research paradigm which has tended to focus on suffering. That is not what trans joy cares about primarily, because it first cares for trans people. As trans joy is entering into research, and whilst this thesis is a contribution that aims to course-correct the severe gap in current literature, it is also a proposal written with an intersectional community focus that asks researchers and practitioners interacting with trans topics and spaces to consider how trans joy is brought into conversations. bell hooks teaches us: 'It is not just important what we speak about but how and why we speak. Often this speech about the "other" is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were there' (1989: 22).

Drawing from literature in trans studies as well as intersectional and decolonial feminisms, this thesis believes that ethically and politically sound research involves people directing the conversations in ways that feel meaningful and powerful to their communities. This is another central framing running throughout the thesis, inspired by the finding that trans joy facilitated exploration and thus greater self-meanings, collective and personal. This explorative nature of trans joy is discussed in Chapter 3 ''I'm alive' What is trans joy and what can it do for us?'. This chapter explores the research questions: What brings people trans joy and how does it manifest in people's lives? What did it mean for people and how did it impact their lives?

Chapter 4 focuses on and is titled after the second research question of this thesis: 'Can trans joy be a form of resistance against systems of oppression and if so, how?' In answering this question, my participants introduced discussions on common misunderstandings surrounding transness into the data and reflected on trans joy's potential to re-frame them. The potential for trans joy to be a form of resistance was felt particularly in its power to bring people together and be in community. Inspired by these reflections, the chapter brings together a body of literature on transnormativity, interrogating its oppressive functions for the ways in which they impact trans people's community building practices and disrupts social connections.[3] The chapter then moves on to ask questions about how trans joy can exit the

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[3] NB: The discussion on transnormativity's oppressive functions, particularly the section pertaining to transnormativity in medicine, incorporates some heavy topics which can be emotionally impacting; I wanted to make an advance content note of them, even as I have aimed to discuss them with sensitivity: discussion of

conditions for personhood and social life set by transnormative oppression, offering people a different way of being in collectivity. This chapter lived in the current gap between community conversations and available academic literature, weaving between that 'which is immediately available as a story' and 'what [our] imaginations are reaching toward' (Gordon 1997: 4 in Tuck 2009: 420).

Overall, this thesis aims to provide a richly descriptive account on the different dimensions of trans joy. It converses with people's reflections not only through discussion that is centred on analysis but also by asking the reader questions as it goes along, inciting the reader to imagine possibilities of their own. These are questions which are sometimes asked with a kind of reckless abandon, that is they are asked even in the face of uncertainty when it comes to providing answers. This too was an expression of trans joy. Many misunderstandings around trans people are there to prevent transition, premised on the idea that it is 'a foreclosure of future life possibilities' (Wren 2019 in Ashley 2019: 223). Focusing on trans joy reveals the opposite to be true: transition can open future life possibilities. Thus, the thesis celebrates transition by living the questions, showing that deeply meaningful exploration of gender possibilities does not require one to have an answer or proof beforehand. So, for anyone who needs to hear it: 'Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Live the questions now.' (Rilke 2011: 29).

You are ahead and walking right towards yourself. You have scaled down the cliff, gotten your shoes wet in dewy grass and mowed through some waves. The fence has dropped so far back it is not even a backdrop. If you really want to, you can squint at the fence's rigid posture somewhere small in the distance, enjoying how different it looks from the perspective of the landscape you are now in. But the steady line of the horizon draws you towards it. You could lay down level just how it is, and rest. Or stretch out your hand and pull it towards you, its glowing long stretch like a warm blanket over your body. It feels beautiful to be here and feel your toes want to wander and the rest of you sitting inside yourself peacefully. You direct your gaze and ask the air blowing freely around all things, certain someone will hear: Where could we go next?

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conversion therapy and mention of its harmful mental health impacts, discussion of medical racism, homophobia, transphobia, mention of colonial violence and one mention of suicide.

Figure 1. Page 191 from the graphic novel 'Gender Queer: A Memoir' (2019) by Maia Kobabe.

2 Methodology

2.1 Short overview of research design

The data for this thesis consists of 6 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 5 written reflections. The data collection took place between 16th of January and 21st if February 2021. Voluntary sampling was used to recruit participants via two pre-identified trans and queer-focused online community platforms.

The interviews and the writing prompts were both semi-structured and organised around central themes which corresponded to the research questions: what trans joy meant to people and how it manifested in people's lives, what changes it had brought them, whether they felt trans joy had the potential to resist oppressive systems or help people cope with them, as well as imagining joyful futures for trans and gender-variant people.

Thematic content analysis was applied to the data in a recursive and ongoing manner, going through the data multiple times to account for a close and flexible reading which avoided structuring themes only based on similarity, but also accounted for ambivalence, discrepant divergent viewpoints.

2.2 Sampling Methods and Recruitment

This study used voluntary sampling. To reach potential participants, I posted notices about the research in two online groups whose membership consists of exclusively trans and queer people. The selected groups were both quite large in membership size; at the time of the data collection both had between 1000 and 2000 members. One of the groups is global with members from across the world, however most of its members were located in North America at the time of data collection. The other group's members are mostly based in the UK or were once based there and have then relocated elsewhere. It is worth noting that the nationalities of the participants did not necessarily correspond to the countries of residence.

The decision to utilise existing networks for participant recruitment was in many ways a practical one. Firstly, it was helpful in navigating the time and resource constraints involved in writing a Master's thesis because it made the recruitment phase quick and non-costly. In addition, this research was conducted under a global CoVid-19 pandemic and online recruitment felt like the most feasible and safest way to reach people at a time when everyone was battling lockdown restrictions of various kinds.

Using online community platforms for recruitment did also come with some added benefits for richness of data. It allowed people to take part in greater anonymity, as the groups were private and thus the reach of potential participants did not require people to be open or 'out' about their identities in their offline lives. Additionally, online spaces can play important roles for trans people when seeking community, and thus are also spaces of trans collective meaning-making (Nicolazzo 2021: 523). They are places which can foster safe exploration, where things such as new names, pronouns and presentations can be tried without questioning or judgment (Jacobsen and Devor 2022: 129). Whilst the topic of this study is not focused on looking at the role of online spaces in fostering trans joy, the online recruitment suited the exploratory focus of the research and contributed to the richness of the data, as the online space is itself felt as presenting opportunity for exploration and community connection.

Of course, the limitation of using online recruitment methods is that you will only reach participants with online access, and this thesis by no means pretends that access to internet is distributed with equity or that digital inequality does not exist.

2.3   Participant Demographics

11 people took part in this research, six of them by doing an interview and five of them by sending in a written reflection. All identity labels and pronouns used both here and in the rest of the thesis text are based on the participants' self-identification. All names are pseudonyms. When a name appears with changing pronouns, it signals that the participant requested the use of multiple sets. The option to not self-identify with labels and to not provide participant demographics was also offered, but this option was not taken up except by one participant when discussing gender.

In age, my participants ranged between 23 years old and 60 years old. Three of the participants were between 20-25 years old, five of them were between 25-30 years old, two were between 30-35 years old and one participant was in their mid-fifties.

The countries of residence represented were the UK (six participants), Finland (two participants), Canada (one participant), Germany (one participant) and the Philippines (one participant). Nationalities did not always correspond to countries of residence and were more diverse than the countries of residence. 10 out of 11 of the participants were white and one participant was a person of colour with mixed heritage.

I also asked my participants whether they considered their income to be low, medium or high in their geographical context. Six of my participants rated their income as low. Four participants said their income was between low and medium. Only one participant rated their income as medium. Occasionally my participants spoke of income precarity, for example one participant said their income varied between low and medium on monthly basis depending on the hours they could get at their job. Another participant said their income was reliant on fundraising and their immigration status currently prevented them from getting a permanent home.

In terms of gender, non-binary gender identities were in the majority. Eight of my participants used 'non-binary' to describe their gender. Out of these eight people, one person also added that they were agender, three identified as genderfluid and one used both genderfluid and agender to describe their gender identity. For the rest of my participants, one participant identified as a trans man and a transmasculine person, and another participant as a female/woman. Finally, one participant said that they ''make a point out of not describing my gender. It's there, and it's doing its thing, but I don't care to define or explain it''.

2.4   Data Collection and Anonymisation

The data for this thesis consists of 6 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 5 written reflections. The data collection took place between 16th of January and 21st if February 2021.

The interviews were an average length of 80 minutes, but the interview time varied from participant to participant and ranged between an hour and two and a half hours. The interviews and the writing prompts were both semi-structured, and organised around central themes which corresponded to the research questions: what trans joy meant to people and how it manifested in people's lives, what changes it had brought them, whether they felt trans joy had the potential to resist oppressive systems or help people cope with them, as well as imagining joyful futures for trans and gender-variant people.

The style of the interviews was left open and conversational, building depth around spontaneously emerging topics and centring participant direction. To introduce the opportunity for openness and spontaneity with the written prompts, the prompts were framed as suggestions and participants were encouraged to respond in any style and structure they wished to follow, including creative formats such as images or poetry. The format my participants pursued mostly took a form of direct personal reflection structured around the

prompts provided, although one participant did scrap the prompts entirely and another included a photograph.

Written submissions were anonymised[4] within 24 hours of receiving them. Interviews were recorded as .mp3 files and anonymised during the transcription process. The transcriptions were done verbatim and audible non-verbal expressions such as laughter or sighs were also transcribed when they were in direct response to the content of what was being said. This was to preserve the best possible nuance of emotional expression for data analysis purposes. I aimed to complete the transcription as soon as possible after each interview and did so within two weeks for all of them, sometimes sooner. The data was securely stored at all times using the VeraCrypt encryption software and my home University's encryption software as a back-up. Audio files were erased securely immediately after each interview transcript was complete.

2.5   Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative data is exciting, because it is rich and often contains new and surprising points of interest that the researcher did not necessarily anticipate beforehand (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2017: 79). The data was analysed through qualitative content analysis methods with special focus paid on how to conserve the descriptive richness of the responses. To achieve this, I carried out my analysis recursively, meaning I repeatedly read through my data and checked my notes at each data analysis stage. My stages went as follows: I began my data analysis by doing a preliminary scanning of my transcripts and written submissions. During this stage, my aim was to familiarise myself with the data to get an overall feel of it. I also took note out of broad, overarching themes. Next, I individually summarised each interview transcript and written submission, writing down key moments and quotes. I then checked the key points in each transcript against my initial themes from the previous stage and added any emerging themes that were missing. I repeated this stage to ensure I had not missed anything and then started to group the key points and quotes by theme. Once I started writing the thesis and bringing the responses in contact with each other, I went back and spend more time with my data to further get a feel for affinities, ambivalences and divergent viewpoints.

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[4] To ensure anonymity for all participants, all potentially identifiable information such as names, place names, names of workplaces and other personal information was removed. Participants had the option to choose their own pseudonym or ask the researcher to choose one. In the latter case, they could specify criteria, such as a cultural setting for the name or whether the name should be gender-neutral, come with masculine connotations or feminine connotations.

When looking through my data, I utilised various techniques for theme identification in order to get a close reading, such as the grounded theory-based 'constant comparison method' (Glazer and Strauss 1967:101, 116), as well as looking for linguistic features like metaphors, analogies, transition and connector words (Ryan and Bernard 2000: 6-7). Each time I went through my data, I also examined any 'unmarked text' (Ryan and Bernard 2000: 8), that is text that had not been coded into any theme previously. This ensured that I kept searching for themes as I went along and accounted for all of my data, rather than settling with the themes that jumped out during first readings. I made sure to remain flexible, to not presume that a particular theme must contain similarity over difference, and to remain attentive to moments in the data when my participants shared with me reflections on their intersecting social positions around gender, ability, race and class.

2.6 Ethical and Epistemological Considerations

2.6.1 Ethical review, data security and informed consent

The data collection was preceded by an ethical review process in the Autumn of 2020. This research follows the principles for ethical research set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity and received a positive ethical review decision from the Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the University of Turku on the 16th of December 2020. The data collection took place between 16th of January and 21st if February 2021. Interviews were done through the video conferencing software Zoom and the prompts for written submissions were sent out and returned to me using the secure email system offered by my university. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to them taking part in the research and participants had the option to ask any questions about the research before, during and after the data collection.

After the data collection, participants were offered an option to give feedback on the research process anonymously through an online form. The form offered space for open feedback about the recruitment and data collection process. One participant used the feedback form.

2.6.2 Epistemological questions on accounting for diversity

Before I started my data collection, one of the questions raised to me as feedback in connection to my research plan was 'which transgender people's experiences will you be focusing on'. I believe this question was meant to help me reflect on how to manage diverse

results in what was going to be rich data. When we proceed with the knowledge that transgender people's experiences are diverse and varied, what is the best way to account for this diversity in people's experiences? What is the best way to account for the fact that trans people's joys are also likely to be widely varied?

These are important methodological considerations that touch on both epistemological and ontological questions. I believe that there is no singular answer to them and that to figure out the best way to proceed, you must look at the specific research context in question, as well as evaluate your own beliefs as a researcher. After some consideration, I decided that I did not want to use homogenous sampling methods to narrow my participant sample down to a certain sub-section of the community. This decision came about for two reasons.

Firstly, I did not believe that using narrow selection criteria was necessarily a sound method for managing diversity in responses, at least not in this case. I feel that there are likely to be intra-group differences regardless of the sample group chosen. Moreover, I wondered whether a decision to narrow down the sample to a sub-section of the trans community could carry within it the presumption that the differences in people's experiences run along lines of gender group categorisations. When we approach the question from an intersectional lens, we recognise that the differences might come from a myriad of social positions and thus narrowing down selection criteria based on gender might not actually result in any less diverse findings. Therefore, I felt that a better way to manage diverse responses in the context of an exploratory study such as this one was to keep the sampling criteria open and to instead make sure that the approach to data analysis was flexible enough to encapsulate the epistemological fact that trans communities are always already heterogenous spaces, where 'the words are very often part of conversations we're having within our communities, and that we may be participating in overlapping conversations within multiple communities' (Hale 1997). In this sense, the research situation is never a container which exists separately from the world around it, however it may be organised, but is rather an extension of the daily lives people already lead outside of it. As such, the discourses that emerge within it should be allowed their complexity and interrelatedness, rather than trying to present them as 'totalistic', 'monolithic' or 'univocal' (ibid.).

Secondly, I felt that it was important to open this research topic up for all because it is a novel and emerging topic in research. By keeping this initial research into the topic open, it can possibly act as a starting point to inform more narrow sampling decisions in further research.

Moreover, by emphasising transgender as an umbrella term capturing anyone who does not fully identify with or questions their birth-assigned gender some or all of the time, my research is able to start exploring whether there might be *some* collective experiences or situations of joy shared by transgender participants with different gender journeys.

I raise these reflections here, because they are a window into some of the decisions I grappled with and learnt from during this research process. The decision to use voluntary sampling also flowed from the desire to keep the topic open for all. In hindsight, it is easy to see how voluntary sampling might only keep the research open to all in principle rather than in practice. Voluntary sampling includes random elements and thus it is difficult to know in advance what your participant demographics will look like at the end of it. An example of a random element in sampling from my recruitment would be that I only ended up posting the notices about the research once in each online community, because the surge of interested participants was so immediate that most of the people who took part happened to be members who were online when I posted. Of course, if you recruit in contexts that already have a diverse membership base, your participant demographics might mirror this to an extent. In my case, my participants came from fairly varied age groups and had diverse gender experiences, none of them had high income and all but one of them were white. The disproportionate shortage of experiences from people of colour and from Indigenous people during the data collection is an example which reflects the ways in which voluntary sampling can be theoretically open to all but in fact far from practically achieving this.

2.6.3   Note on feminist methodological practices of positionality and reflexivity

Feminist research often calls for positionality. Positionality can be described as 'the position from which one acts politically' (Naples 2011: 555), and involves interrogating one's social position by 'remaining sensitive to the perspectives of others and how we interact with them' in a way that can lead to 'a deeper recognition of the power dynamics in ethnographic encounters' (ibid.). In other words, feminist research recognises that the power dynamics at play in society at large also enter research, and sees this recognition as an important part of doing politically, morally and ethically reflexive research. In addition, much of feminist and queer research draws on the recognition that knowledge claims are situated and partial: the researcher cannot claim neutrality because neither that which is researched or the subjects engaged in research can be treated as 'innocent and waiting outside the violations of language and culture' (Haraway 1991: 109).

Thus, feminist and queer research stances have called for critical consideration over not only that which we think we know, but also how we come to think that we know it and what it might be that we are missing. The writing table in Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* can be taken as a comment on how knowledge production is oriented as a whole: 'The desk that is clear is one that is ready for writing. One might even consider the domestic work that must take place for Husserl to turn to the writing table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention. (…) To sustain an orientation toward the writing table might depend on such work, while it erases the signs of that work, as signs of dependence' (Ahmed 2006: 30). Similarly, Federici highlights how constructing a 'knowledge commons' necessitates us to 'change our conception of what knowledge is and who can be considered a knowledge producer': 'Currently, knowledge production on the campuses is insulated from the broad infrastructural work that sustains academic life, which requires multiplicity of subjects (cleaners, cafeteria workers, groundkeepers etc.) making it possible for students and teachers to return to the classroom every day' (2009: 101).

Such reflections call for a practice of positionality that does not involve the researcher casting itself outside the communities they are involved in as part of their research work. It is more than making one's identity markers public. From a point of view of a trans studies methodology, I wondered whether the ease at which positionality sometimes gets equated with public statements of identity imagines a scholar in a position of privilege in relation to their research context, where personal disclaimers do not induce vulnerability or result in power struggles. One of my participants was engaged in a research project involving trans life experiences and spoke of the way in which nothing in their academic setting prepared them for a moment where they had to give a presentation about their research topic and were required to be 'much more public about my identity': 'I was just like fuck, like here I am coming out to the entire department, suddenly you have like an audience of sixty'. Said observes that 'unlike the act of coming out for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, which can have the effect of affirming an ''identity''', for trans people coming out can have different stakes as it can be a moment in which one's experience actually becomes contested or misunderstood' (2014: 176).

An easy shedding of privacy in favour of public disclaimers presumes an ability to keep matters private in the first place and a comfort with upending such privacy, a privilege not everyone has: 'Just ask a seriously ill person, a gender ambiguous person, a non-passing trans man or trans woman. All these people experience public scrutiny, in one way or another, of

their bodies. In this culture, bodily difference attracts attention. For many of us, privacy is simply not an option' (2017: 7). Feminist and queer practices of positionality need to be expanded to better account for the ways in which privacy is already unequally socially distributed if they wish to incorporate more intersectional understandings of the ways in which demands for personal public displays can in fact undermine, rather than promote, the daily work of positionality that the person is already engaged in.

The position from which this thesis acts from politically is one of intersectional feminism and trans studies, and my writing and thought is indebted to the people who took part in the research, the different communities they drew from in their reflections and to trans, queer, disabled, brown, black and Indigenous scholars whose work I found inspiring and which consequently informed much of the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis.

3 'I'm alive' – What is trans joy and what can it do for us?

3.1 Chapter introduction and research questions

Trans lives are lived, hence livable (Scheman 1997: 132).

Trans lives are lives worth living (Melo 2023).

Trans lives are lives worth enjoying, loving, supporting, and celebrating.

An exploration of the joyful aspects of being trans supports the above statements as undeniably true. It shows that being trans can bring a richness of meaning and a sense of fulfilment to life. 'The beauty of being trans comes from the joy that our identity brings us' (Melo 2023: 185). Thus, trans joy can be defined as the joy of being transgender and all that this encapsulates. Gender euphoria can be seen as a related experience. It describes 'the happiness produced by presenting as one's gender and being perceived as that gender by others (Melo 2023: 186). It has also been defined as a homologue to gender dysphoria, where gender dysphoria is 'a negative, distressing experience of the body as differing from our gendered self-image' and gender euphoria is its counterpart: a feeling of 'distinct enjoyment or satisfaction' caused by person's gendered features being brought into harmony with their gendered self (Ashley 2019: 225). Gender euphoria can also be defined more broadly as 'positive emotions resulting from affirmation of one's gender identity and expression', and it has been a common term in trans communities for some time but has not received much academic attention (Jacobsen and Devor 2022: 119).

So, gender euphoria can be understood as connecting primarily to gendered joy, whereas trans joy is joy connected to being trans. Gender euphoria can be an integral part of trans joy, but trans joy can encompass more than gendered joy (Davis 2022: 5). Part of the aim of this thesis was finding out how these two terms might overlap, concord with each other or be distinct from one another when it comes to people's lived experiences of them. This thesis also aims to bring together different facets of trans joy and to explore the varied dimensions it took in people's everyday lives. This chapter will discuss my findings on how being trans fosters joyful emotional expressions through looking at: what brought people trans joy, what trans joy meant for people and how it manifested in their lives, as well as what the impacts of this joy were. The following themes emerged:

Trans joy allows people to grow connected and visible to themselves. Trans joy was the path to embracing one's gendered self, and the impacts of this connection brought newfound confidence, increased quality of life, a firm sense of agency and a greater ability to support others.

Gender euphoria is an integral part of trans joy, but trans joy and gender euphoria can be felt as having different qualities to them, as well as different qualities within them. Both, however, are felt in the everyday.

Learning about gender through the lens of trans joy better captures the variety and creativity of people's gender journeys. It shows that exploration is a key part of getting to know one's gender.

A focus on trans joy can re-frame existing discussions on gender dysphoria in new, conceptual ways.

As well as fuelling connection to the self, trans joy was also felt in connection with others. A final theme which emerged was the importance of being in community and dreaming up collective joy. This theme will be discussed in Chapter 4 and it also inspired the focus of that whole chapter, as I investigated the existing literature for the ways in which allowed or inhibited trans people's chances of being in community.

3.1.1 Navigating emerging framings of trans joy in research literature

Recently, Holloway (2023) published a call to practitioners, researchers, and educators to do the work of highlighting trans joy. Holloway calls for the realisation that such work is 'a collective responsibility of all of us across all disciplines, because 'damage' has too long been the default for how researchers, practitioners and educators have talked about trans and nonbinary people (2023:2). There is a need for a deep assessment of the culture of your immediate environment: moving beyond only using correct names and pronouns to creating a life-affirming environment for trans and nonbinary people (2023: 3).

In a recent study on trans joy, shuster and Westbrook highlight the way in which equating oppression with misery creates 'epistemic enclosures', or depleted knowledge systems: the presumption of misery leads to only certain kinds of questions being asked, and the possibility for producing new knowledge is barred (2023: 3). The trope of the transgender person in misery, shuster and Westbrook theorise, has become a culturally entrenched epistemic

enclosure when it comes to 'how cisgender people understand trans people and how transgender people come to understand themselves' (ibid.). In their findings, shuster and Westbrook highlight that trans joy challenges and breaks this kind of epistemic enclosure, because it shows that current conventions fall extremely short in understanding trans lives: shuster and Westbrook found that their interviewees answered questions about joy easily, expressed joy in being members of a marginalised group, saw improvements in the quality of their lives as a result of embracing a marginalised identity, and found that it facilitated meaningful connections with others (2023).

The first finding in shuster and Westbrook, that people discussed trans joy with relative ease (2023: 7), draws our attention to just how powerful these kinds of epistemic enclosures can be in informing the popularisation of a specific narrative: for it to even be a reportable finding that trans joy is easily described by trans people necessitates a field of knowledge that as a standard holds the population-based epistemological assumption that joy is not easily felt by trans people, especially not in relation to transness.

Bringing together Holloway's call for a deep cultural shift and the study of shuster and Westbrook, I believe it is worth paying careful attention to the tensions that including narratives of trans joy into academic context can involve, especially in this moment of time when the literature is just starting to emerge. Just as trans people have had to fight for the notion that one does not have to experience dysphoria to be transgender, it is important to also remember that experiences of trans joy are not a prerequisite for being trans. Melo argues that dysphoria must be decentred for a fully authentic representation of the transgender experience (2023: 185). I agree with Holloway, Melo, and shuster and Westbrook that the overemphasis on distress must be challenged. I also believe that precisely because trans joy has so much potential to add nuance to the existing popularised narratives of what it means to be trans, it can be a framework which helps us fight the question of authenticity altogether. By centring variety, we can begin to see more and more clearly that there is no singular trans experience, and that 'gender identities are not authentic or inauthentic, they simply are' (Ashley 2019: 226). In commenting on whether things would change for the better if joy was the more common emotion associated with trans people's lives, Arlie said to me that joy needs to be there 'in addition to':

> because if you take any emotion and you make it the defining emotion of an experience then it's kind of turning it into this codified thing. But just if there was more options, then a wider range of trans lives would feel possible and liveable

Emery who welcomed people to message em privately for support through eir social media channels said that ey spoke to four to five people a week and noticed that:

> many of them experience joy or the promise of joy but because they don't have as much pain as they think they need to have, they don't feel valid, they don't feel like they should transition. It's this thing where cis people tell us, unless you're miserable don't do anything. You don't need to feel miserable in order to make your life better, you can be perfectly content but if something makes you even happier, go for it

Ashley challenges 'the ethics of prediction' which has prevailed in discourse about gender development, especially in medicine, and instead suggests 'an ethics of exploration', where exploration is not recognised as 'prior to transition but operates through and alongside transition' (2019: 224). This promotes a possibility for gender to be 'tentative', 'provisional' and 'improvisational' where transitioning, socially and/or medically, is 'an integral part of exploring ourselves as autonomous gendered beings' (ibid.). In the above reflections by Emery and Arlie, we can see how researching, writing and talking about trans joy also needs to be a process of exploration that allows for open-endedness, nuance and variety. It calls us to pay attention to the fact that there is no one baseline or defining emotional timbre to being trans, and as a result you do not need to feel any particular way to justify your desire to transition. This realisation needs to be front and centre to support people's gender transitions, self-determination and gender exploration.

Whilst trans joy can help us to 'shift the paradigm' and challenge current epistemes on marginality, I think it has the potential to do much more than reform existing theories. Introducing trans joy into the academic research context must straddle the intellectual excitement that trans joy is 'novel' to research with the lived reality that trans joy is already known and felt by the communities in question, and do justice to the latter. For a deeper cultural shift, the focus should no longer be on what trans people's experiences can do for existing theories but what existing theories can do to themselves to better advocate for trans communities. To allow trans joy to exist only as 'a reaction' is to potentially place trans people in a continued tension which they are already very familiar with: the need to shift through existing beliefs, such as the idea highlighted by Emery that you need a baseline of misery rather than simply a vision of joy to transition. There is can be so much pressure directed at trans communities to 'provide answers' about their experience and to enter such discussions with a careful assessment of what the questioner already presumes they know about trans communities. Sky reflects:

what are they gonna know about it? Because then it might be like having all these kinds of weird assumptions and stuff that they've seen somewhere, so at least if you were able to not have to explain. […] So much teaching. I feel like I should be able to add it to my CV, I've spent so many hours explaining gender to people

Brinks (2022:57) echoes Sky's observations:

I know society is transphobic because trans kids do not get to experiment with their gender presentation, or even ask questions about identity, without being thrown into the deep end. They are often expected to know all the answers before they have begun their journey. It can be challenging to find joy in just existing when so many seek out and dissect transgender individuals for all to see.

My participants where not interested in epistemic enclosures, but rather in the opposite: in questions that build capacity to make sense of their experiences. A focus of trans joy in relation to prior epistemic enclosures can bring with it a covert focus on continued epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice 'wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value' (Fricker 2007: 6). Epistemic injustice can lead to hermeneutical violence: a situation where there is a collective hermeneutical gap, a gap in our shared tools of social interpretation, that prevents people from making sense of their experiences, comprehending them fully and rendering them communicatively intelligible to others (2007: 7). Where these injustices run deep, they can cramp self-development, so that a person may be, quite literally, 'prevented from becoming who they are' (2007: 169).

As we are about to see, trans joy centres the process of becoming who you are and living that with a wholeness. Epistemic enclosures can assume epistemic injustice without finding out to what extent people's sense-making has actually been impacted by the hermeneutical gaps, perpetuating the idea that people are wounded subjects a priori. In such scenarios, the epistemic enclosure can become an epistemic foreclosure in how people are seen. Trans joy can level such assumptions: it allows people to be where they are, to discover and explore, and to live out their lives with agency and self-determination that encompasses connection and autonomy. In my data, trans joy did not close out any life possibilities. I argue that in view of this, trans joy too deserves to stand in its own light: recognised not in terms of hermeneutical violence but in terms of its hermeneutical vitality, a profound desire to live. With all this in mind, I have sought to present the findings in this chapter as a kind of descriptive collage that does not shy away from contradiction, from the abundance of trans joy or from the times when trans joy is 'hard to find', as one of my participants put it. My hope, inspired by the conversations I shared during data collection, is that trans joy is allowed to enter discussion in varied and dynamic ways which allow it to exist, flourish and speak to

'polyvocality', 'the centring of our many voices as a vast and varied conglomerate of trans*
communities' (Nicolazzo 2021: 515).

Whether trans joy came easy, came with tension, grew habitual or was felt through a pressure
to be strategical in its voicing, such as when Ivy bracketed their writing response with '(It
feels like I ought not to say that there is anything good about being trans, because as a group
trans people face such marginalisation.)', one thing was held in common: Trans joy was
desired. It was remembered, presently felt or hoped for, as people recollected times of joy or
euphoria, talked about what they planned for or dreamed about when it came to their future,
or exclaimed how the very space to sit down and talk about joy brought the joy on. Tuck
writes about desire: 'Desire accounts for the loss and despair, but also for the hope, the
visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at
times, the *not anymore'* (2009: 417, emphasis in original). Spade has called for 'a critical
trans politics that is about practice and process rather than a singular point of ''liberation''
(2015:2). Q, who had been engaging in a lot of community-based writing about trans joy, said
that the experience of it had changed how they 'think about joy in general':

> I think joy is not just something that just happens, I live with depression, I'm not
> gonna be like 'oh you just have to choose to be happy', but you can be purposeful
> in making space to like express that and giving yourself permission to feel joy
> about things

In my findings, desire for joy and the feeling joy did not ask for sadness or other emotions to
exit. In the conversations about trans joy I got to have with people as part of this project,
whilst there were commonalities, the varied meanings of trans joy was what best characterised
the vitality that people felt trans joy as possessing. It is trans joy's many possibilities that keep
in focus the 'complexity, contradiction and self-determination of lived lives' (Tuck 2009:
416) and that give it its ability to promote a wholeness of self.

3.2   Growing connected and visible to oneself: 'I finally understand myself'

When I asked Ronin in an interview whether it was important for him to feel joyful about his
gender, Ronin said:

> Yes, I mean everyone has the desire to like know their identity, know who they
> are, that's one of the, I think, ways to achieve self-actualisation

For many of the people I spoke to, feelings of joy and euphoria relating to gender guided them
towards finding their way to their self. When asked what comes to mind when you hear the

words 'trans joy', Layah described it as 'the feeling of being yourself', and Zeo said it was 'getting to be yourself, getting to discover who you are without judgment or pressures'. Bo described the moment of finding a label that matched their experience as thus:

> Finding the label non-binary made me feel free. I felt like I finally understood myself and it was like my universe opened up. It felt like wearing glasses for the first time, or finally being able to see colour.

Q poignantly asked: 'don't you love what makes you feel comfortable in your body?' and described the feeling as 'a real you, sitting comfortably in your body rather than wearing it awkwardly, uncomfortable skin on top of your own'.

Arlie said that they found trans joy in 'small everyday moments, just sometimes when I feel particularly connected with myself'. When I asked what kinds of moments they were, Arlie said that they weren't 'anything concrete', but rather 'a sense of self-understanding'. They spoke of how aspects of their identity and personhood that related to gender and transness had been repressed for much of their life, and how they feel a sense of joy in the present when they acknowledge that 'these things are here now, and I'm connected to them'.

For Emery, trans joy and gender euphoria tied back to building self-worth, and the huge emotional change that liking the person they were 'for the first' time, brought them. It was connected to 'taking agency over my life and my body, so it's looking a way that makes sense to me and that I enjoy, it's having confidence in my person, not just physically, but also in general as who I am as a person and that's very much tied to my transition and my transness'.

For Ivy, feeling joyful or happy about being trans was felt when 'I get a new idea about presentation or what gender means to me', and whilst Ivy said that in their actual life they were not out to most people, gender euphoria and trans joy have 'changed stuff inside my head'. Similarly, Layah talked about discovering ways to explore their gender expression that removed pressures of being 'out', such as 'starting a secret Twitter' where they were able to be openly 'questioning' with their gender and how 'interacting with more and more people on there was exciting'. They had also bought themselves 'a palette of eyeshadows, and two chokers that live in a drawer under my bed' and said that wearing the chokers in private had made them feel 'very cute', and 'very joyful' and 'euphoric'.

Here we can see that the sources of trans joy can vary from finding language that describes your experience to embodying yourself physically in a comfortable fashion and to an overall, encompassing awareness of your experiences with gender and transness that do not

necessarily tie themselves back to concrete moments. The undercurrent that ties this bouquet of joy together is the way in which trans joy has the ability to bring people in touch with themselves and the present moment. In Q's words, trans joy allows you to shed uncomfortable skin and come to your own. It is a chance for exploration and discovery, an opportunity to feel free, to find confidence and comfort and exercise agency over one's life. It is growing in one's own self-understanding, and becoming more and more understood and visible to one's self. It is to be, in Arlie's words, in 'the here and now'.

I went into my data collection stage picturing in my head a kind of a gallery exhibition of trans joy that collected 'moments, objects, memories' of trans joy into one place, this thesis. I even structured parts of my suggested writing prompts in this manner. However, what gained a much greater significance in the reflections that people shared with me was this quality of trans joy to connect to yourself emotionally, to express yourself and through that process to grow more visible and known to yourself in a way that is enjoyable, confident and freeing. Ronin reflected on how he was never one to 'post a selfie before', but how tuning into his masculine features has made him happy to see himself to a point where 'now I'm like, here have my selfie!'. In this way, trans joy was also about self-acceptance and the ways in which the self-visibility through change flowed into self-acceptance and self-realisation, as Emery described:

> When it comes to like physical transition and actual presentation, that's the obvious part, that's the part that's like visible and everyone talks about, I think what for me is way more important and has had a much bigger impact on my life has been on the emotional side, has been on the mental side, it has been, actually for the first time ever not hating the person I am, actually like liking the person, this is something I've been working on the entire last year, where I was struggling a lot with self-worth and everything that is connected to that. Umm, and that's something that over the last year of transition, and of not necessarily even so much physical transition and more social transition and just like changing my life, has been really good

Exploring the qualities of trans joy, then, allows us to talk about transness in ways that do not tie the possibilities of being openly trans to being 'public' or 'out'. Nicolazzo discusses the pressures that the ''out and proud'' narrative can place on trans people's visibility when it 'denies that, for those most on the margins, coming out may be scary, dangerous, and/or undesirable state of being' (2021: 527). The way my participants created spaces to be visible and connected to themselves and to others could be described as not a 'coming out', but a

'coming in'. Often, people would speak of their experiences of trans joy in the present or present continuous tense: 'I exist', 'I'm alive', 'being myself', 'who I am'.

'Coming in' through trans joy disrupts the notion that we must 'come out' first to be socially recognised. Sky described how transition related administrative moments such as changing your name were 'not the most joyful', but 'stressful' as they involved 'coming out, and coming out, and coming out, and coming out and coming out', over and over'. Perhaps then, the power of trans joy is precisely that it does not need to come from particular objects, moments or events of transition, like I first imagined. It absolutely can, and yet it is not dependent on them. Instead, it is there to remind us that we do not have to repeatedly come out to arrive in ourselves. Zeo reflected how 'coming across moments of non-binary thinking and feeling' connected ey to er experiences and made ey realise that 'I'm already living as who I am'.

Trans joy as connection to the self prioritises a space in which 'coming in' and 'coming out', growing visible and known to oneself and to others can allow us to ask questions about 'how we come to know ourselves and each other' (Nicolazzo 2021: 514) that cast off the pressuring sides of representation which renders trans inclusion a project of including trans people only insofar as they can be portrayed as 'an intervention' into the dominant frame (Lehner 2022: 86). Trans joy is already more than a frame, more than an alternative frame, it is an everyday existence which grows from trans agency and self-articulation at the centre of things. It is also a space where no frame is needed, and is only called for when and if it is wanted and chosen. In this sense, trans joy could also be seen as resting and delighting in existence without having to battle the notion that simply existing as yourself as a trans person is somehow an act of cultural production, or as Brinks (2022: 56) says:

> We know that acts of rest are inherently radical in a society committed to the grind and hustle under capitalism. (…) The radical acceptance from the transgender community allowed me to settle into my gender at my own pace, with no pressure to be, or not to be, anything but myself.

3.2.1 The differences in emotional quality between gender euphoria and trans joy

Gender euphoria was an integral part of trans joy for the people who spoke and wrote to me, but the joy and euphoria were also felt to have different qualities between them. For my participants, the quality of the joy/euphoria varied in ways that were tethered to time.

In multiple conversations, gender euphoria was linked to novelty. Q described it as 'the burst, the amazing rush when you find a name that feels right, or you try out pronouns which fit, that first rush of discovery is a very intoxicating feeling'. They used adjectives like 'fresh', 'new' and 'exciting' and talked about how 'when you first come out, you get the low-hanging fruit of the things you can try, which bring you euphoria'. They described the reaction to a found source of euphoria as 'oh my god (…) how have I gone my whole life without feeling this!'. Sofie also spoke of the way in which euphoria was 'tethered to novelty' for her, saying:

> Instances of gender euphoria for me have been primarily transitional, I think euphoria is necessarily limited to transitional firsts, to specific special happenings (…) As a result, I find that gender euphoria has mostly trickled away over the course of my transition – as one settles into one's gender, as the rest of the world ostensibly settles into your existence as that gender, it loses its novelty, its contestation.

Q shared similar observations to Sofie, saying that having tried and experimented with new things and having subsequently found the things that fit, they no longer get that intoxicating rush and first burst of discovery. They said that occasionally they will find new sources of experimentation, but mostly the quality of the joy has changed. It has become 'integrated' and more subtle, it lives in everyday moments that have become habitual, such as hearing people use their name and pronouns. Q describes it as having 'slowed down', from an intoxicating rush to 'an undercurrent of affirmation'. Sofie's reflection of 'feeling settled in one's gender' converses with Q's remark of what they have gained from this process of trying things out:

> for me it's very much a thing of just being present and quite confident, and that for me is kind of what I've gained from having more experience and having worked out more of my shit and like, I don't get the heady rush of like 'oh this is a new thing, this is exciting', but I do get just the kind of sense of certainty and the power that comes with that, and feeling more established

So, on one hand there are the special happenings, the clear moments of transitional firsts that stand out in time and the first discoveries that bring on a surge of gender euphoria, and on the other there is a sense of feeling established and settled in oneself and one's gender. In my interview with Acorn, Acorn provided me with a snapshot of how these two aspects flow into one another:

> The peace itself is the joyful moment I would say. (…) It is balance and the peacebuilding yeah. In the process the operation was the best one I think, but then after that because you have that kind of the dysphoria is away, the rest is kinda smaller things because for me, the dysphoria it's one of the worst things so it gets a big proportion of the joy because it's such a big pain, so in proportion to the

> pain it causes, the joy is the relief actually, the relief is the joy, it's not kind of just a moment, it's a more long lasting joy. But I remember the operation as a joyful moment, (…) I remember waking up and then actually feeling like yes, now it's done and I'm alive.

Throughout our interview, Acorn spoke a lot about a sense of balance and peace that Acorn has gained over time when it comes to gender. The word 'peacebuilding' that Acorn uses in the reflection above speaks of this process. Whilst the operation stands out as a bright and clear moment of aliveness, Acorn also says that 'the peace' itself is the joyful moment, and one that is not singular. Acorn says it is 'joy in a sense of being balanced', and that it is 'not like euphoria' but rather a peace, a balance that comes from 'not having to fight or deal with issues all the time'. Acorn says thar once the worst dysphoria has been resolved, 'when you see yourself in the mirror, you don't have to react': 'It's a huge thing, that kind of peace or balance in being able to just go out in your t-shirt, and you don't have to hide anything or try to get rid of something'. You get to 'enjoy and feel good about your body'. The joy is a long-lasting presence, the everyday existence of being in one's body and being out and about. One can reside in one's self with a wholeness.

Ashley discusses the ways in which exploration, as it operates through and alongside transition, offers an understanding of gender as tentative, as 'always provisional and improvisational' (2019: 223). As a result, transitioning is 'an integral part of exploring ourselves as autonomous gendered beings' (ibid.). In the beginning of the previous section, Ronin drew our attention to the way in which knowing one's gender is a part of knowing oneself and of finding ways to self-actualisation. In the distinctions between joy and euphoria some of my participants made, the exploratory side of coming to your gendered being was tied with gender euphoria, specifically the way in which it 'guided people on their journey with gender' (Jacobsen and Devor 2022). It was tied to novelty, and to trying out and discovering new things, and could thus be said to have an improvisational quality to it.

Trans joy was also gendered joy, and in this sense gender euphoria and trans joy were felt to be present simultaneously. However, because trans joy is also joy specifically about being trans it meant that it could be felt when the novelty of euphoria had worn off or changed. In this way, trans joy can speak to a different space or time in one's gender journey or it can connect to a more encompassing journey with self-actualisation, as it was seen as a continuous, everyday presence in one's self or the sense of 'being established', 'being settled'. In this way, it also speaks with the other parts of ourselves: 'It's also in the things I

do for myself, like playing a sport or singing a song for example' (Hameed 2021: 201). It may speak to transness, to gender and simultaneously to the wholeness of personhood:

> We are artists, poets, teachers, activists, and scholars. We are partners and parents. We are children and elders. We are engineers, we are knowledge producers, and we are travelers (Nicolazzo 2021: 519).

Violet (2021: 109) captures the change of euphoria into a more habitual presence that is fully incorporated into the everyday that some of my participants also spoke of:

> There it was. Gender euphoria, welcome back. Calm, loving, elated, at peace. This feeling was everything. And yet it was everything because it was nothing. It was normalcy.

What the overlapping and sometimes differing qualities of gender euphoria and trans joy perhaps best attest to is the multitude of meanings that they possess. Whilst they can be experienced as 'a wonderful explosion' or 'positivity that makes the brain stop in the best possible way' (Jacobsen and Devor 2022: 126), they can also be much more subtle and transitory. Hameed (2021: 201) reflects:

> I learned that for me gender euphoria isn't an ocean of good feelings. It's the little waves appearing against the horizon before crashing into nothingness. It shouldn't be mourned, however temporary it is.

3.3 Centring the variety and creativity in people's gender journeys

3.3.1 Finding joy in ambiguous gender feelings and in 'genderfuck'

We have millions of trans and gender-diverse children and young people moving with us through this world right now. Not only that, but discovering your gender is a process that can take place at any point in the human life trajectory, whether you are six or sixty. Coming to your gender can be like that moment where you open your eyes after a first night's sleep in a new house. For a moment, your sight wanders the ceiling and you wonder where you are, only to realise you are at home. It can be a knowledge, a home you carried within yourself all your life without having a name for it, or it can be like opening a completely new door with unknown space swirling behind it.

Many of my participants were either non-binary, genderfluid or both. Their experiences with transition often chafed up against the binary notions set up by the medical institution. For example, people challenged the notion that transition is always a linear experience that conforms to the idea of opposite genders or has a set endpoint. Q reflected on the fact that 'not

everyone goes through a binary transition journey' and mentioned that there is an often-repeated narrative around transness which says that 'trans people have always known deep down what their gender is' and 'have always been that gender'. Q said that whilst this narrative may come from a well-meaning place, it does not do justice to the diversity that exists within trans experiences. They laughed about how 'I don't know what the fuck my gender is, my gender is chaos'. They elaborated how, for some trans people it is definitely a case of 'gender first': 'I know what I want, I want this, this and this, and then I'm done. I want to be a woman or a man first, trans second'. However, they personally did not see their experiences of gender reflected in this narrative, because they did not expect to be 'done' with their gender in this way. They said: 'I feel like my gender is gonna be a central part of my identity for a good while longer, maybe my whole life and I'm okay with that.'

In addition, some of my participants also reflected on the joy they found in 'genderfuck', 'in the grey space' and in other ambiguous feelings about gender. Bo talked about how they have derived gender euphoria from 'genderfuck', in other words 'any action that fucks with the gendered expectations' that people have socially or aesthetically. Sky talked about the way in which they found agency 'in the grey space' of being non-binary. They described the feeling as: 'I get to be out to whoever I wanna be, I don't actually have to tell everyone, I get to control and decide who knows'. However, once they decided to pursue some medical steps as part of their transition, they lamented that

> 'it's a bit annoying that people put me in that binary, because they see [medical] transition as a sign that I'm actually binary trans, which is not true, and it's just been a bit odd like after being so in this grey, now having to tell people, my family for example, because next time I see them I arrive with a beard, they're gonna be like what the fuck you know. [laughing] So it pushes you to have to explain yourself, and the problem is you don't always get the understanding and validation'

Other people's notions of gender also affected Acorn during transition, as Acorn recalled a therapist who was pushing Acorn to explain. Acorn mentioned the therapist grilling them with questions about why they simply could not 'broaden the category' of their birth assigned gender, rather than 'hopping out of it'. Acorn said the therapist 'was pushing and pushing and pushing', and that was when their gender became clear to Acorn:

> I said 'well it's just not my category, however broad it is, it's just not my category' and I don't even know why, you cannot demand me to explain because those kind of things are like space out there, nobody knows… but it's just not my category, and if you ask me why, I'll say I don't know why but I know that it's

> not. And it was somehow clarifying to be able to say that to her and to myself.
> 'Sorry, that's not me'. And I guess she was thinking for herself at the time, like
> how come she is there and I am not.

Despite the relational tensions involved in needing to navigate narrow societal understandings of what being trans means and what transitioning looks like, as well as cisnormative assumptions which assume that remaining in one's gender assigned at birth is somehow the preferable option, those participants who fell outside of the gender binary also sometimes derived joy out of society's gender confusion. For example, Q recalled how they sometimes love it when people cannot put a gender on you, because they do not know what 'passing' as a non-binary person looks like, since 'most people don't have a box in their head that says non-binary'. They mentioned that once a colleague confused them for a trans guy and whilst the colleague was embarrassed, Q was happy for the mistake that presumed they had in fact transitioned to their birth assigned gender, remarking 'honestly that's kind of goals'.

Sometimes people found humour in the profusive apologies directed at them from strangers who could not quite settle on their gender. Sky described their androgynous uniform at work and the tendency of customers to address them 'as a man', like 'hello sir'. Sky said: 'And then when I answer, they're like 'oh I'm so sorry! And I'm like 'don't panic, it's all good, it's like calm down, it's quite funny'. Similarly, Emery reflected:

> whenever I actually feel like I'm successfully opting out of the entire thing as it is
> and people don't know what to do with it, that's something that is fun and that I
> enjoy and that gives me a certain power, or like people assume that they can have
> power over me within their framework and because I'm outside of their
> framework, it just doesn't do anything. I'm just like 'okay sure' [chuckles]

Gendered embodiment, and feelings of joy around gendered embodiment, can involve a sense of unearthing and actualising 'a pre-constituted, coherent vision of the self' but at the same time trans embodiment can also be 'irreducibly creative', where creativity is a way 'to assert ownership over our bodies, transforming them into an art piece that is truly ours out of previously alienating flesh' (Ashley 2019: 225). Moreover, these opportunities for self-articulation should not be seen in mutually exclusive terms or in either-or binaries. Experimental genders, for example, should not be approached with a presupposition that they are any less 'established' or less 'confident' articulations. For Q, for example, their gender in all its chaos and changeability was precisely the way to feel 'established' and 'confident'.

Attesting to the variability of gender with openness and curiosity is a process which calls us to uncouple and re-articulate unquestioned associations which have been socially attached to

particular gender expressions, and to open the space up for more connected, less constricted meanings. It also calls us to pay attention to how given associations about gendered expression are connected to representations through the creation of such associative discourses. Discourse can be defined as rules and practices about how we represent specific social phenomena (Foucault 1980): 'All social practices entail meaning and meaning shapes what we do -- all the practices we have possess a discursive aspect to them' (Hall 1991: 291). As a result, different discourses are tied to social power, to the ability of certain discourses to influence what comes to be known as the widely understood and acceptable representation of specific social phenomena (Foucault 1972/1980).

Building new associative discourses around trans joy that aim to build value in varied meaning-making holds up a mirror to the way in which the social power of specific discourses, even hegemonic ones, never manages to be fully consuming. When discourses are defined from the locus of their power, as that which influences what comes to be known, in that kind of definitional dynamic what comes to be not known is all the ways in which meanings that are not captured by a specific discourse are already being lived and put to practice daily. In other words, what comes to be not known is the way in which any given discursive representation fails to fully influence what we know and practice, try it might. What comes to be not known are all the ways in which the meanings were never felt to be fully constrictive in the first place. As a result, the process of assigning social value or social acceptability based on how something responds to a discursive limit can be questioned. Epistemological frameworks that work from a point of view of epistemic enclosure presume that an enclosure, or a limit, is felt. They fail to imagine a social place where what has been socially constructed as a discursive limit never became one or where life was felt with a less constricted vitality regardless.

Tuning into the creativity and the varied possibilities of having or not having a gender, of gender confusion and ambivalence, into the humour my participants found in moments when they were intentionally or unintentionally failing to respond to gendered assumptions, speaks to the ways in which finding joy is not limited by the current imagined representations that associate themselves with particular genders. It can alert us to the way in which joy can arrive in moments of play which arise from the recognition that these precepts cannot contain us (Lehner 2022: 110). The impossibility of authenticating gender based on discursive or representational limits becomes the joke, the illusionary project it always was, when despite

'pushing' and 'pushing' we are able to exit categories into 'the space out there', as Acorn put it.

3.3.2   'The idea of trans joy that I desire is a kind joy that is not possible' – when trans joy is 'hard to find'

But what if the joke of the impossibility of authenticating gender does not generate joy in us? Or what if the 'space out there' is a known but a known which feels distant or difficult to access? Stryker deftly summarises queer theory's early analysis of shame as relating to societal processes which suppose 'the prior consolidation of a gendered subject', where shame can be generated by 'a subjective perception that one was a ''bad'' instantiation of something that one *recognised and accepted oneself as being*' (2019: 40, emphasis mine). Connecting subjective perceptions that attempt to fuel shame to 'materio-hegemonic discursive practices that produce the meanings of our flesh to render us men or women in the first place', Stryker says: 'I was not ashamed that in the name of my own physical life I needed to struggle against the dominant mode of gender's ontologisation – I was enraged' (ibid.). In light of Stryker's observations, I do not want to ontologise trans joy as if it contained only one kind of emotional relation.

So far in this chapter we have explored the different ways in which trans joy is a process of self-actualisation. The ability it gives people to relate to themselves more fully, and to know themselves, could be said to be a kind of 'consolidation of a gendered subject' (ibid.) that brings confidence, freedom, love, enjoyment and understanding with it. Liam's reflection in shuster and Westbrook (2022:8) converses with this sense of trans joy that my participants also brought forward:

> The more I move into being trans, this is just who I am, and I like it. I'm not going to sit in that shame framework. I feel really grateful. After years and years and years and years, it's almost like fighting for my own self-definition of my existence. Now that I feel pretty solid, this is who I am. I am who I am.

We have also just covered how there is many ways to arrive at this confidence, solidity and consolidation of one's gendered being: the process can be a blend of actualisation of a prior vision, the 'I want this, and this and this and then I know I'm done', of inhabiting transitory states of euphoria, it can be a sense of settling into a 'gray space' or other ambiguous feelings of gender, or shifting through them to something else. Thus, trans joy can be said to have a shifting or moving quality that changes over time and as we move through life and inhabit

different spaces, and at the same time it can lead us to be present within ourselves in a way that feels comfortable, established or at home long-term. Both, and other possibilities are sensed as true all at once, because through the connection to self that trans joy facilitates one arrives at 'something that one recognised and accepted oneself as being' (Stryker 2019: 8).

However, there is a tension that is generated when the recognition and acceptance already known and felt as a trans person is not recognised by the dominant mode of gender's ontologisation. Thus, the possibilities of trans joy can be difficult to access or navigate, they can be felt as a kind of impossible joy, a yearning or an aspiration towards a place that could exist societally in much more profound ways than it currently does. Sofie contrasted the ways in which negotiating the idea of trans joy had changed over time for her in significant ways:

> In the beginning, at the moment of outing, transness is liberating, and powerful and joyous, in an act of revelation, one can prompt a change in perception, can reorient how others look at you, can reorient your place in the social, in a fashion that is truly validating. Through a trans identity, one may finally be seen – ever in approximates, by all means – and be acknowledged for who one is. The fact of transness has that joyful power and energy, even if at the same time it is deeply ambivalent, frightening, stigmatised and painful. Transness carries the possibility of truth. (…) As someone who sees themselves, first and foremost, as a woman and only then as transgender, transness no longer bears the liberation of truth, it instead harbours the threat of artifice. How I am seen now is true to how I feel, first and foremost – to reveal that I am trans may threaten this very perception of me as a woman.

Sofie's reflection speaks of the power of claiming your space in the social as who you are, and the decision in the beginning to be out working as 'an act of revelation' or a catalyst to reorienting 'how others look at you', which is what allows you to claim your space, 'be seen – and acknowledged for who one is'. However, once you no longer have to claim your space by 'revealing' yourself but rather people are able to see you as who you are, 'how I am seen now is true to how I feel', acknowledging one's transgender experience goes from carrying truth to harbouring the 'threat of an artifice'.

When Sofie says 'how I am seen now is true to how I feel', she captures perfectly the tension that exists between finding yourself and connecting to yourself, bringing yourself into alignment in which you are 'true' to how you feel about yourself, the part of trans joy that we opened this chapter with, and getting to be seen as who you are, a process that due to its social nature tests our agency in various ways. Said (2014) discusses this tension placed on trans lives where openness about trans experiences is constructed as a 'reveal' that places trans people at a hazardous juncture: the act of 'revealing instead of being revealed' is a moment of

asserting agency that however carries the risk of meeting demands to 'continuously reassert and defend their truth' (2014: 176)[5]. Sofie concludes:

> The idea of trans joy that I desire is a kind of joy that is not possible – where I am able to be completely honest about my transgender status without it impacting my standing as a woman.

For Sofie, trans joy is a space that is not possible societally in the current moment. It is a space that she does not know how to '(re)achieve, to negotiate, to claim, in a way that is joyous and not destructive, that is healing and not dividing'. She says when she looks with realism to her future, 'the path of greater happiness seems to be that in which my gendered joy – that of living and existing as a woman – trumps that of any trans joy'.

Bo echoes Sofie's sentiments, when they say that the phrase 'trans joy' brings to their mind the words 'hard to find'. Bo describes it as

> a place outwith the binary and the patriarchy, where I can be who I am without scrutiny or judgment; a place where my actions are taken at face value and not prescribed external meaning or ownership

Discussing trans joy as a space with multiple and sometimes contradicting emotional relations, including those of difficulty or pain, can open up a space where trans experiences of pain can be discussed without becoming singular definitions or representations of trans life. Sky pointed out: 'I think we all acknowledge the hard stuff anyway, because you know we all go through it, but it's just a question of not becoming defined by it'.

In outlining a desire-based rather than damaged-based framework for 'Native, disenfranchised and dispossessed communities', Tuck (2009) argues that research which centres damage as a way of holding those in power accountable for their oppression operates on a 'flawed theory of change': it might be able to leverage reparations or resources for marginalised communities but it also does not allow for the sovereignty of those communities, because it first promotes thinking of those communities as damaged. It might result in particular political or material gains, but often does so at the cost of submerging the significance of the historical contexts, such as racism and colonisation, which produced much of the damage in the first place. And yet the essentialisation of damage onto the communities' personhoods is itself an aftereffect of the oppression which is being submerged (2009: 415). Desire-based frameworks bring

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[5] The 'reveal', and its functions as a transnormative narrative, are discussed in more detail in section 4.5 'Queer theory's transnormativity', pp. 94-100

forth spaces of agency that are concerned with sovereignty: with 'complexity, contradiction and self-determination of lived lives' (2009: 416).

Could trans joy, if recognised as a desire-based affect or orientation with its ability to speak to multiple emotions simultaneously, avoid the pain caused by essentialist portrayals which 'define' transness as pain? Could it allow us to discuss pain without evoking tropes of damage that try to define transness itself as pain? Tuck (2009) speaks of the way in which desire reaches for contrasting realities, even simultaneously, and as such can account for complex personhood[6]:

> that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward (Gordon 1997: 4 in Tuck 2009: 420)

Both Bo and Sofie simultaneously describe that which is available, and that which their imagination desires as possible. In this way, desire is not 'merely wanting, but informed seeking' (Tuck 2009: 418). Writing about trans joy in this moment of time feels like a paradox: the desire, the call to move away from centring dysphoria-based narratives (Melo 2023; Holloway 2023) can end up contrasting trans joy as a response to those narratives. This can be the 'paradox of damage': 'to refute it, we must say it aloud' (Tuck 2009: 417). But trans joy can manifest as moving away from stereotyped pain to self-articulations of pain grounded in the context of your personal situation and your determination of it. This kind of understanding respects the ways in which 'we all experience our trans*ness differently as a result of our varied, intersecting identities' (2021: 520). There needs to be no guilt, no remorse felt in a path where gendered joy is the path of greater happiness which trumps trans joy, as Sofie put it. Or in feeling that 'the fear and embarrassment outweighs the joy 99% of the time', as Ivy mentioned.

Perhaps understanding trans joy through the multiplicity present in desire, in the way it accounts for 'the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities (Tuck 2009: 417), is a way to centre the self-recognition that can be found in trans joy in transformative ways: it shows us that joy does not need to shy away from the aspects of our identities which might be informed by trauma or sadness. Meadow observes that some forms of gender might be 'made of scar tissue, produced as much by trauma as by

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[6] Trans joy's power to attune to complex personhood, especially for marginalised people, is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, Section 4.6.3 Trans Joy: from strategic personhood to complex personhood, pp. 116-126

tenderness', but this fact does not make them 'compensatory' expressions of trauma (2018: 91). They too can be just as 'central and constitutive of selfhood' (ibid.), and just as valued and accepted experiences. This too can be an important path to being able to experience your gender in the present moment, to being able to develop understanding around what you make of it right now without judgment or shame, a path which disrupts the power that trauma can possess in arranging time:

> Some people's lives seem to flow in a narrative; mine had many stops and starts. That's what trauma does. It interrupts the plot… It just happens, and then life goes on. No one prepares you for it (Stern 2010 in Van Der Kolk 2014: 7).

Starting from a place that 'all gender is [. . .] a call for recognition' (Meadow 2018: 91), discussions on trans joy and the absence of trans joy which include an open and fearless engagement with the complexity of emotions can lead to a fuller recognition, a recognition which does not operate through denial or a hierarchy of different emotions. It can make space for connecting with different stories within us, even with the unchosen ones, from an understanding that they do not ultimately have the power to determine our personhood or its sovereignty, we do.

3.4   Framing discussions on gender dysphoria in new conceptual ways

My participants questioned existing discussions of gender dysphoria and re-conceptualised them in three main ways: questioning the idea that dysphoria is essential to transness, reflecting over whether dysphoria and euphoria are oppositionally tied to each other or wholly separate experiences, and pointing out that dysphoria did not lead them to a trans identity but rather joy did.

3.4.1   The interaction of dysphoria and euphoria: interrelated or separate processes?

There were a lot of variances in the ways that people described the relationship between dysphoria and euphoria. On one hand, euphoria and dysphoria existed in relation to one another but on the other, they were also seen as distinct from one another. For example, Acorn stated that 'for me, the dysphoria is one of the worst things, so it gets a big proportion of the joy because it's such a big pain'. Sofie described euphoria not only as tethered to novelty, but also as 'relational', saying that it 'requires the mundane, the ordinary, the sad'. Moreover, the trickling away of euphoria over the course of transition was influenced for Sofie not only by

euphoria losing its novelty, but also 'its contestation', its counterpart, as you get more settled in your gender and it becomes relationally aligned: 'how I am seen now is true to how I feel'.

In contrast, there were times when people made a distinction between what brought them joy and what alleviated dysphoria in ways that suggested these to be separate processes or experiences. For example, when I asked Sky if they had objects that brought them into contact with trans joy, they seemed thrown off by the question and asked me: 'Objects? Like what kinds of objects, like what are you talking about?'. I responded that it could be anything, but for example objects to do with embodiment such as binders, bras, jewellery, or clothes. Sky then told me that for them binders were not an item of joy, because they were 'so uncomfortable'. Sky said that they only use them

> when I have proper dysphoria like I just cannot go outside, or when I have to dress up fancy and I don't necessarily like the way I look in shirts, but I wouldn't say that that's trans joy actually

Ronin also found the question difficult to relate to, stating:

> Oh not sure if it's euphoric but it helps me hide my dysphoria so I'm not sure if that would count, but I really love wearing jackets for these weathers, it hides (…) all those not so nice things about myself.

For Sky and Ronin, the aspects of life that alleviated dysphoria and the aspects of life that brought them joy were distinct. It is also interesting to take a moment to reflect that both Ronin and Acorn use the word 'hide' when discussing dysphoria. Additionally, Sky, Ronin and Acorn all talk about managing dysphoria when going out into the world. Dysphoria seems to contain a process whereby we must 'hide' certain aspects of ourselves in order to be seen more as ourselves, a kind of trade off, to make how we are seen more aligned with how we truly feel. It can involve a process of navigating the 'gazing cisgender eye' (Nicolazzo 2021: 513) whilst securing self-recognition to the best possible extent. Trans joy, on the other hand, is being able to be seen as yourself without having to hide. Emery talked about the complexity of dysphoria and how difficult the different sides of it can be to disentangle:

> I think dysphoria is a very wide and not a really useful term [laughs]. Like I mean in the end, gender dysphoria is an attempt by cis doctors to pathologise transness and to make it diagnosable and to like pin it down as a disorder that needs to be treated, and I think that's very reductive and doesn't actually touch on lots of things. I think that physical or body dysphoria is real, I think that it is not the only thing that people experience but it's definitely part of it. (…) I think for a lot of us, a lot of these things are things that are genuinely just so inherent and internal that it doesn't matter what society tells us. But, and that's the narrative right,

that's the medical narrative, I don't think it's quite that simple though, I think that there's also a lot of things where our dysphoria is more social, where our dysphoria is based around how we want to be seen, or how we think people see us and how that makes them judge our gender and our personhood. (…) And so yeah, I think there's social dysphoria, there's physical dysphoria and there's socially induced physical dysphoria and it's hard to disentangle those three, because they're hypothetical until you actually make changes and then see whether they work for you or not.

Other people I spoke to also interrogated and challenged the cultural narratives around dysphoria for their limitations, and specifically the notion that dysphoria is what teaches us that we are trans. Q said:

One thing I've been reflecting on recently is the focus around gender dysphoria, that is seen as the defining characteristic of being trans. (…) That's not how I worked it out at all, because I felt really uncomfortably in my body, but I grew up being fat. You have so many narratives around fatness saying 'oh you're fat, you should hate your body' so I just assigned all of that to my fatness. (…) There's a trans comedian who put it really well who was like 'people say you realise you're trans, because you hate your body. I was brought up as a woman, I was told my whole life to hate my body.

Q said that due to the narrative of dysphoria as the defining characteristic of transness, it took them 'a really long time' to come to their identity. When I spoke with Arlie, they said this was also the case for them: 'I think it was partly because of how strong this narrative of dysphoria was, as like the defining trans experience that it took me so long to come to my own identity.'

Like Q, Arlie also challenged the idea that dysphoria can be separated from other sources of oppression or suffering in life:

I've always had like a lot of fucked up stuff in my life and it's just like these different sources of suffering that I'm not even sure how one is supposed to recognise this neatly delineated experience of suffering related to gender identity as if it was isolated from the rest of your life and your identity and experience.

These reflections from Emery, Q and Arlie suggest that gender dysphoria is a complex and intersecting experience which cannot be treated as categorically separate from rest of our experiences in society. Another example of this comes from Ronin who reflected that he had received compliments on his looks which followed white, Eurocentric beauty norms influenced by the history of colonialism in the Philippines.

The specific examples Ronin gave were comments he had received on his nose, with 'people saying that my nose is nicely shaped for a Filipino society, they call it 'matangos' that means, umm 'sharp' I guess, Eurocentric features are very appealing in Filipino culture right now'.

Ronin also mentioned how he did not have the means to physically transition in the moment, which meant that receiving affirming feedback from people gained a heightened importance in helping him see himself as his self. Ronin said: 'anything right now that helps me deviate from what people see me as that I am not, that brings me joy', and later added that his relationship to his body was currently shaped by

> if people find it nice, attractive, but I'm still questioning if that attractiveness
> stems from their notions of feminine beauty. But still as someone who has been
> very insecure with their looks, it's still reaffirming.

Ronin's examples speak to the ways in which beauty norms are shaped not only by gender, but also by racism and colonialism, both historically and in the present. Ronin had to manage these intersecting norms coming to the fore in people's compliments, all the while finding ways of being seen as his self and trying to cultivate an affirming relationship to his body.

The above examples also suggest that the familiar cultural narratives around gender dysphoria, which interact with the history of Western medical field's approach to trans health care[7], do not sufficiently capture how people come to make sense of their transness and to discover their gender identity. So, if dysphoria fails to be a way marker towards ourselves, what else can we draw on to make sense of our experiences?

3.4.2 Coming to yourself through trans joy

Many of the people I spoke to said that it was the euphoric or joyful moments, moments of finding what fits, what feels comfortable or pleasurable, that helped them discover that they were trans and helped them come to their gender identity. For example, Q said: 'we wouldn't go through transition if it didn't make us happier, what would be the point?'. Dysphoria as a life experience, on the other hand, was related to moments or times in life where one's gender assigned at birth restricts or limits you in some way, but you do not necessarily know or have the language for it yet. Zeo talked about characteristics of their physique, such as broad shoulders and facial hair, that were policed when it came to feminine beauty standards. They mentioned that whilst still trying to 'achieve' their gender assigned at birth, these characteristics were something they felt shame around and were taught they should not enjoy.

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[7] The cultural power of Western medical science is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, Section 4.3 on transnormativity within medicine, specifically pp. 60-73 and in Section 4.6.1 on norms as impossible fictions, specifically pp. 100-103 where the consequences of medicine's tendency to group physiological phenomena as if mapped onto socially defined categories is discussed.

However, once thon discovered non-binary identities, Zeo said that these characteristics were transformed from 'a source of shame to a source of joy', because 'they make me feel more androgynous and that aligns better with my gender'. Bo shared a similar experience:

> Since realising I'm non-binary I feel freer to take joy in things that are coded in femininity, from clothing and make-up to colour and culture. I feel less shame now I understand myself as choosing to enjoy these things from the outside, rather than admitting defeat to the inevitability of my gender assigned at birth.

Both Zeo and Bo use language such as 'achieving' and 'admitting defeat' when it comes to one's gender assigned at birth and the shame associated with trying to make sense of your body through an externally imposed context that does not make sense to you. These expressions speak of the struggle created when people are made to try and fit their gender into a context which ultimately does not align with who they are. To understand trans life experiences primarily through the lens of dysphoria is understanding trans life through cis time: honing in on life moments where one's assigned gender is causing one pain, setting that up as the process through which transness unravels and thus making it a continuous present for people by asserting that their gender assigned at birth must continue to have relevance for them, when in fact all my participants described moments that break past the constraint and pain that one's gender assigned at birth can bring. And for multiple people I spoke to, realising they were trans was not centred around dysphoria but around joy and euphoria. An emphasis on dysphoria defines transness through negating statements: who one is not, how one is not seen or how one does not wish to be seen. Trans joy on the other hand defines transness through affirming statements: who one is, and how one can be seen as their authentic self.

The emphasis on dysphoria hinges on a cultural centrism. Cultural centrisms 'define themselves by what they aren't', thus implying that what falls outside of them is 'an exception to the ''normal'' relationships that ''normal'' people have' (Easton and Hardy 2017: 6-7). Defining transness with a sole emphasis on dysphoria is defining transness by what it is not: cisness, thus resulting in a ciscentric reading of trans experiences. By defining transness through dysphoria, a ''normal'' relationship to gender is implied: one that does not contain dysphoria. This implication allows one to insinuate two things: that by experiencing dysphoria, trans people are an exception to some ''normal'', and consequently that most people have straightforward and unscrupulous relationships towards their assigned birth gender.

Cis, then, is the assumed norm, and it is one that allows society to not question whether the rigid gender socialisation enforced by structures of patriarchy, ableism, colonialism and racism could be causing harm in majority of people's lives, simply by framing the issue as if they do not. Q, Arlie and Ronin all identified this tendency earlier in the chapter in pointing to how womanness, fatness or whiteness can be used as vectors which teach us to hate or love certain types of bodies. If trans joy is defining trans by what it is, rather than what it supposedly isn't, then what would be the consequences of defining cisness through transness? Perhaps one of the consequences would be a greater attention paid to the oppressive structures which affect all our lives, rather than projecting the negative consequences and constrains of these structures onto transness (Jacobsen and Devor 2022).

So, the emphasis on dysphoria and dysphoria alone seeks to lengthen the shadow that natal gender assignment casts in a trans person's life. But trans people have been and continue to be stepping out of that shadow, finding moments where their gender gets to be defined through the joy and happiness that discovering it brings, a process in which realising that you are trans plays a key part. It becomes a way to understand why you have been feeling like something is wrong, and it can open up a door for you to step through and find out what feels right. Q described this process like getting to take off an incredibly tight pair of shoes that have been rubbing you the whole time without you realising:

> the way I tend to think of how gender euphoria helped me realise I was trans was that it's like wearing a really uncomfortable pair of shoes, but you do it all day so you don't realise it's uncomfortable 'cause you get used it, and then you take them off at the end of the day and it's just that 'aahhhhhh' [gives a sigh of pleasure], that sense of relief, of like: oh that was a huge thing weighing me down and I didn't even notice, I got that like the first time when I shaved my head. Yeah, umm so that's what's helped me, all the euphoric moments, that's what helped me navigate my gender.

Earlier we caught up with Arlie who said that the description of dysphoria as the defining characteristic of transness acted as a barrier for them in coming to their identity. Like Q, they say that 'it was only through the experience of joy actually that I came to my own identity, which is kind of opposite to the general narrative of suffering'. Layah also described joyful moments that allowed them to reflect on their gender. For example, they talked of a Halloween night where they first got to wear make-up serendipitously, as their friend suggested they use eyeliner to create an effect of an animated character's eyes for their costume. Layah wrote in surprise: 'And I felt… amazing?'. They also said they used to visit beauty retailers' make up booths at airports to get some blusher applied on them and would

then joke that they were not 'a boy or a girl'. When I asked Layah if feeling joy around their gender changed anything for them, they reflected on the online trans community platforms they had used to experiment with their gender expression and wrote:

> I guess it's made me feel able to even call myself transgender? Before I was hiding all these thoughts and wonders. (…) And even if they were true, I thought "Yeah but I'm just a little curious…" (…) I didn't realise you could be transgender as long as you didn't fully identify as cis. I didn't realise how welcoming and widespread a community this could be. I also didn't realise how awesome it would be just to feel like that side of yourself is out there to someone you're speaking to? (…) I just feel like they're speaking to me more as I wish to be spoken to. They're seeing me as me, all of me. I just feel really happy tbh. Not to be cheesy (although this will be ENTIRELY cheesy), but whilst I've physically spent the last year mostly in one room, internally I've been soaring, and going further than I've ever gone before.

Zeo said that 'joy and finding euphoric moments has really helped me to accept myself and also process those emotions of shame and sadness'. Thon gave an example of finding thonself looking into the mirror and liking thons natural hair colour for the first time in thons life. Zeo wrote of this example: 'It might sound small, but I think it gave me this sense of 'okay, I'm enough as I am'. And I think that's something that being trans is helping me realise'.

If managing dysphoria includes a process where certain aspects must be hidden in order to make how we are seen more aligned with how we truly feel, finding trans joy can involve a realisation that aspects of ourselves do not need to be hidden, that they were wonders to be experienced, as Layah describes, and that they can be brought forward and celebrated in a space where you are seen with a wholeness and with a knowledge that you are enough.

Thus, for many people it was not dysphoria but joy and euphoria that brought them in touch with themselves and gave them a sense of certainty or confidence when it came to both their gender and their self as a whole. Jacobsen and Devor (2022) also found that it was euphoria, rather than dysphoria, that guided trans people on their journey with gender. In my responses, joy was experienced as a force of aliveness and something that provides you with a sense of existing as yourself. It brought on comfort and self-assurance and could be a path to envisioning yourself alive, in touch with life and yourself. Additionally, joy was not only something that connected people to the present, but also something that allowed them to move towards an affirming future. Zeo mentioned that the affirmation that grows out of feeling yourself existing as yourself in the present was 'an emotion that further tells me I'm on the right path'. Thus, joy can act as a guiding force for finding a path to what feels right going

forward. Furthermore, Emery also reflected on the path and vision for their future that transition and self-realisation provided ze with:

> I think my experience has very much been that before transition, before self-acceptance and realisation, I didn't really have a like a vision of my future, I didn't really have a vision of *me* in the future, I didn't have any kind of investment in that because I didn't like who I was so why would I be invested in who I would become, I didn't really have a path towards that before. And then with transition and with again like taking agency for the first time over my life and my body and with actually liking who I am, I got to a point where suddenly I do have investment in myself and in my future and in my body and in my mental health and my relationships and everything

Rather than envisioning transition as looking any specific way, as it often does in cis imagination (or as Emery put it 'once I had had 'my sex chance', to be very cis and dumb about it'), perhaps transition could be described as the process of taking agency over your life, becoming yourself in the present and thus also being able to see yourself in the future. This focus on transition as joyful and life-giving process is an important one. Due to the difficulties and lack of acceptance that trans people can face in society, and due to barriers in accessing transitional health care, the future can appear to not be in vision at all or to be arrested in one's vision only as a place of difficulty. Sky had come to know their non-binary identity as a teenager and reflected on coming to peace with their transness over time, and the fears they used to hold in the past about their future possibilities:

> I think I do feel a little bit more at peace with it [being trans] now, I used to feel like 'oh it's gonna be so difficult, it's going to be – it's such a difficult life for me if I sort of accept that I'm trans, but now I see the potential and the fact that actually there's plenty of people who I will still get to be friends with and be in a relationship with and we don't have to just feel like we won't belong, we actually belong somewhere else.

This moment came after Sky had spoken at length about the new queer community that they had a hand in building in their city, and the safety and belonging they had found there. When I asked Sky if they felt that they were now living the kind of fulfilling life they were not sure they would be able to have, the one with friends and loving relationships, the one with potential, they looked at me and said that it is true, they are living it. The future that was once arrested in fear had become a present in which affirmation, peace and connection could be found. We took a moment to celebrate this, smiled at one another and breathed in some joy and hope.

4 Can trans joy act as a form of resistance against systems of oppression and if so, how?

4.1 Introduction to the chapter and research question

Being in community was a huge source of trans joy for my participants, and this has inspired a focus which runs throughout this chapter: an inquiry into how to resist systems of oppression in community with one another. I tried to imagine the community as intersectionally and expansively as I could: I talk about academic communities, trans and queer communities, young and new and old communities, trans children, young people and trans elders; I try to talk about the trans community in a multi-faceted way, as encompassing people of differing gender identities, differing abilities, differing backgrounds, in line with Nicolazzo's imagining of a trans epistemology:

> we are not only comprised of, nor can we be reduced to, singular identities. In other words, we are not Black or trans* or disabled, but Black and trans* and disabled. We are not older adults or trans*, we are older trans* adults. We are not crip or queer or trans*, we are crip, queer, and trans*. Because we are ourselves more than one identity at a time, we must be a part of movement-building that recognizes and honors our multiple converging identities, along with how these identities influence our (in)ability to navigate our worlds with varying degrees of success (2021: 525).

I have tried to write in a way where in this thesis people are not forced to make the choice of visibility or invisibility between different aspects of themselves, a choice which trans people have to navigate too often in wider societal contexts. I have interrogated the question: what does it do to our community building when we are forced to choose between different aspects of our identity and what kind of social power does that choice serve? How else could our communities be organised?

When asked if trans joy can be a form of resistance against systems of oppression, Ivy noted that it depends on how you interpret the word 'resistance', and wondered whether it is more of 'a personal/internal resistance than group/external resistance'. My participants frequently brought these different dimensions together. As a result, this chapter answers the research question by looking at resistance on many levels, bringing together the personal and the collective:

1) the resistance that comments on, rejects or reframes existing transnormative tropes, how these existing tropes have structured community building practices and how they

have worked to disrupt trans sociality, that is trans people's social and communal connections

2) the resistance to the framing of trans joy as a resistance, which also works as a critique of marginalised people's personhood being recognised primarily by placing them in service capacity in relation to existing structures of oppression, and the need to be allowed to exist carefreely, restfully and with complexity as a marginalised person

3) Trans joy as a way of not only questioning existing structures of oppression but changing the terms and with that changing the scope of agency and imagination possible: the disclosure of your transness should not have to exist as only an agential negotiation, your transness should not have to exist or be recognised only as a strategic voicing of your personhood, but in its own right, as a gorgeous whole. In this kind of recognition, it stops having to be disclosure at all. It is allowed to just exist, as straightforwardly or subtly as you wish.

This whole chapter is an ongoing practice in trying to imagine how more transformative and nourishing spaces for discussing trans life experiences can be created. The people I spoke to inspired me to try and incorporate existing one-sided literature on transness with a continuous refusal to let it sit on the page and appear as something which once was considered 'understanding'. I tried to interject it in real time as I wrote (as this will also inform the timing that the reader encounters the information) by bringing in people's observations as interruptions that stand for the ways in which the authority of misguided views about transness has always already been challenged by the diversity of trans and gender-variant lives lived at all times, whether we call that time history, present or future.

The vision for the text was that it could be picked up, at any point or time, and read only in part without losing out on the voice of trans people. I also wanted to avoid a kind of 'before and after' composition in how the thesis arranges knowledge by refusing to follow the convention of writing a literature review that typically precedes findings, because such an arrangement would make the one-sided transnormative narratives appear as precedent to my findings. Instead, I tried to take the literature that is usually constructed as 'preceding' or 'existing in prior' and read it through the themes that my participants had already voiced in

the now, making up a kind of time-travel commentary where the present is allowed to travel to and transform the framing of what has previously been said. [8]

I wondered whether treating existing academic literature on the emotional lives of trans people as 'preceding' might be a framing that risks giving this literature an intellectual gravitas and portraying an impression of a time in which one-sided emphasis on suffering somehow accounted for trans experiences. Such 'before and after' framings risk portraying trans joy as simply an addition to a preconceived timeline, which narrows the role of trans joy in discussion. My participants challenged this framing from the outset: originally the research question was articulated as 'can trans joy be a form of resistance or a coping mechanism against systems of oppression?'. None of my participants felt that coping mechanism was a term that described trans joy. Some of them felt that such a framing reduced the possibilities of trans joy to be understood primarily as compensatory in relation to systems of oppression. Trans joy was important in and for itself, and it was an active force in people's lives both personally and collectively. Emery's reflection demonstrates this position:

> I don't feel like it's coping, because it's not just like trying to alleviate symptoms, it's actually fighting against systems of oppression. So that's why I think forms of resistance is a much better term for it than coping mechanism, (…) trans joy is not just something that's there for us, it's something that we push back with, it's something that we create space with for ourselves, it's something that allows us to make more space for ourselves in a society that doesn't necessarily make space for us

In the multifaceted way that my participants discussed trans joy, it was clear that it was felt to be much more expansive than terms such as 'coping' would suggest, and overall trans joy was not felt to be a coping mechanism. This chapter, then, explores the research question in a revised form: can trans joy act as a form of resistance against systems of oppression and if so, how? This revision also works to highlight how trans joy has much greater role than simply being additive to existing discussions, and this informed how literature is arranged both in this thesis and in this chapter specifically.

The way trans joy was desired and remembered by my participants in the past, present and future also highlighted for me that discussions on trans joy should not necessarily aim for temporal linearity: gender-variance has existed for all human history (Feinberg 1997), and so

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[8] I was inspired by C. Riley Snorton's way of reading the archive for its gaps and silences in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity,* as well as Fetterley's concept of resistant reading, a reading which contravenes a widely accepted interpretation and thus reads it anew, transforming it.

we can imagine that it has also been a source of happiness for people for all human history. This is especially the case when we consider that happiness and joy about transness can give people greater meaning and a sense of purpose in their life overall, as we saw in the previous chapter. Trans joy was also felt as a fulfilment in one's personhood, and/or a friendly signpost which pointed towards things that could be personally fulfilling. In trans contexts, happiness and joy then are emotions with the ability to direct awareness to that which gives us a sense of purpose, meaning and fulfilment. Conceiving trans joy in this sense opens up our imagination to not only thinking about all the ways in which gender-variance might have been a source of joy for people for all human history, but also to all the ways in which gender-variance can be a profoundly meaningful and valuable aspect of human life. This kind of attention to multiple meanings can help us practice ways of knowing and feeling that refuse any one-sided portrayal of transness, something which I believe is needed to honour trans people's full personhood and self-determination, and to transform the conditions set by transnormativity which we are about to outline.

This chapter tries to build a framework of social change theory in this vein, disrupting the closed circuit of social change theorising which categorises people as bound to either 'resisting' or 'reproducing' social inequality (Tuck 2009: 419) . Under trans joy, norms become read differently, for their lived content instead of their systemic tendency to categorise people's identities in binary terms through an assumed desire for normativity or anti-normativity, and thus for oppression or resistance to it. Norms become understood for what they are: impossible fictions which attempt to make our human value felt through them. Different, more fully life-giving spaces and terms of value can be imagined, as my participants imagined different worlds through trans joy and connected with other people through it.

4.2   Transnormativity: Organising trans life into hierarchies of legitimacy

Johnson (2016) brings together existing theoretical frameworks specific to transgender community groups, medicalisation, and legal transition to define the concept of transnormativity. Transnormativity, as argued by Johnson, is an accountability structure that organises 'transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon medical standards' (2016: 465). Johnson draws on Connell (2010) and West and Zimmerman (1987) to acknowledge that all people, cis and trans alike, are held to sociocultural standards of femininity and masculinity, such as gendered norms around

language, body shape, dress, behavioural mannerisms and other social markers. People's expressions are either validated or sanctioned by social institutions and actors, based on how well they are perceived to accomplish these normative standards in their social interactions. In other words, the social acceptability of gendered expressions is dependent upon those expressions being read as legible, and this legibility is governed by expected conformity to gendered norms. Whilst this policing based around sociocultural norms holds true for all people, cisgender people's gender presentation and experiences are not tied to official sanctioning mechanisms the way that trans people's are (Johnson 2016: 468). These official sanctioning mechanisms are organised around transnormativity.

In order to illustrate these systematic sanctioning mechanisms, Johnson gives examples of how the regulatory standards placed on trans identities show up in social interactions within community groups, health care and legal settings. In medical settings, transnormativity manifests through various gatekeeping effects. For example, the diagnostic requirements presented in the DSM make gender-affirming intervention contingent on adherence to a standardised set of symptoms (Johnson 2016: 469): they require trans people to put forth a biography that presents them as having displayed signs of gender non-conformity throughout life and suffered gender dysphoria as a result of it, and they grant the power of determining an individual's gender to medical professionals. In legal settings, transnormativity affects the legal identity recognition available to trans people and in the case of criminal and immigrant detention, trans people's social experiences of gender are held accountable to the narrow medical model of trans identity. When our medical and legal systems are structured to have the authority to grant or deny gender from people, those same systems then have the authority to define what that gender will look like and how it will operate in society (Keller 1999 in Johnson 2016: 470).

Transnormativity works to hold trans people accountable to a specific set of standards which is tied to a conceptualisation of trans identity that relies on a binary, medical model of transition that 'emphasizes a born in the wrong body discourse and a discovery narrative of trans identity'. (Johnson 2016: 468). The wrong body model, put most simply, asserts that trans people are those who 'feel that their minds and souls are ''trapped'' in the wrong bodies' (Benjamin 1966: 9), or that they were '*born in the wrong body* compared to cisgender individuals who presumably never experience bodily discomfort related to sex and gender' (Spade 2003 in Johnson 2016: 478, emphasis in original).

Johnson argues that medical and legal settings act as 'conduits of transnormativity', but that due to its societal and cultural quality, transnormativity is able to shape interactions 'in every arena of social life' (2016: 484). It is a 'regulatory normative ideology' that shapes how trans identity and autonomy comes to be understood (ibid.). It has tended to emphasise essentialist notions of trans experience, such as the aforementioned 'born in the wrong body' narrative, over 'alternative narratives of gender identity as fluid, emergent, processual or constituted by social norms and influence' (Butler 2006 in Johnson 2016: 469).

Indeed, as I was writing this paragraph, I happened upon an example which demonstrates the salience of the medical model in the public imagination. The Helsinki times, the most read Finnish broadsheet, ran an article with the explicit aim of familiarising its readers with up to date LGBTQIA+ terminology (Moisio 2022). The article wanted to emphasise the way in which language has diversified over the years and interviewed young people on the importance of correct terms to do so. It covered terms such as asexual, demisexual, pansexual, andro- and femisexual, queer, trans and questioning. At the bottom of the article, one could find a correction that had been added post-publication to the article's definition of a transgender person. Originally, the article had reduced trans identities to medical transition by stating that a transgender person was 'someone who is in the process of or has undergone gender-confirmation procedures'. After a reader correction, the article fortunately changed the definition to the more accurate 'someone whose gender does not match their gender assigned at birth'[9]. The fact that a correction such as this had to be issued in an article that specifically aimed to provide up to date insight into how terms have evolved is an example of the ongoing salience of the medical model in defining trans experience in the public imagination.

Since trans people's health care and legal documents are distributed according to the medical model, failure to adhere to it restricts access to trans people's gender recognition on a systemic level. In this way, Johnson argues, transnormativity is a way of evaluating trans people's identity and experience which deems some experiences as 'real' or 'trans enough' whilst disregarding other experiences, especially those that do not conform to the medical

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[9] Translations are by me, 'sukupuolenkorjausprosessi', literally 'gender-correction process' is the name given for medical and legal transition procedures in Finland. The original reads: 'Jutussa kerrottiin aiemmin virheellisesti, että transsukupuolisella ihmisellä tarkoitetaan sukupuolenkorjausprosessissa olevaa tai sen käynyttä henkilöä. Todellisuudessa transsukupuolisella tarkoitetaan henkilöä, jonka sukupuoli-identiteetti ei vastaa hänen syntymässä määriteltyä sukupuoltaan' (Moisio 2022).

model. It sets up a hierarchy of prioritisation and marginalisation which all trans people have to negotiate in some way, whether or not they wish to medically transition.

Whilst being cisgender is treated in society as the accepted state not requiring further verification or proof from the individual in order for them to be allowed to exist in their gender, for trans people authenticity is not assumed but is leveraged in complex ways as a prerequisite for acceptance and recognition. Johnson argues that a prominent way in which transnormative ideologies leverage this expectation of proving your authenticity is by making it dependent on a diagnosis and subsequent medical intervention, thus portraying the medical model as the highest arbiter of truth in the hierarchy of legitimacy imposed on trans life. By placing trans authenticity as dependent upon the medical model, transnormative ideologies do not allow for transgender volition, and leave very little room for trans people's faculty and power to use their own agency in making decisions about their identification with, and actualisation of, their gender expression (Johnson 2016: 469).

Johnson's discussion of how transnormativity shows up specifically in transgender community settings is briefer. However, Johnson notes that previous research has suggested trans people's understanding of their gender to be at least partially informed by the narratives of meaningful others who have come before them (2016: 471). In general, Johnson highlights the interactional quality of narrative construction by analysing the way in which trans experiences are constructed through regulatory practices spanning different actors. Johnson also describes an interactional feedback loop of transnormative reinforcement: reductive narrative accounts of trans identity work to create and sustain social and cultural understandings of what it means to be a person of trans experience, such as in the newspaper article above. These understandings are used as tools of social regulation to create structures and policies that measure identities and experiences of all trans people against the normative expectations. These structures and measures then prioritise the enforcement of transnormativity over consideration of its fit to people's actual experiences of gender (2016: 472). In reality, and this should not need stating, transgender people differ in their relationships to their gendered body parts, the types of gender-affirming medical care they might desire (or whether they desire medical transition in the first place), and the social consequences placed on their presentation of self before, during and after transition (Serano 2007).

Considering Johnson's aim of bringing together existing theoretical frameworks to define the concept of transnormativity and the overarching emphasis on the medical model of trans identity that emerged from this aim, next I will consider how the medical model came into existence and how its emphasis on a diagnosis relates to the transnormative narrative of the suffering trans person. The focus will be on self and on community, specifically the ways in which medicine's transnormative measures have resulted in disrespectful disruptions on trans self-knowledge and on trans sociality, that is, the social connections trans people could form both with each other and in their environment overall.

4.3 Transnormativity in medicine: the pathologisation and medicalisation of trans life

The word-forming element 'pathy', used as a suffix or prefix, comes from the Greek word 'patheia' and the Latin word 'pathia' and means 'an act of suffering', 'suffering' or 'disease'. In modern usage, it is used in medical terminology to denote disease. In 2019, the World Health Organisation formally depathologised gender-diverse identities, removing the diagnosis of 'gender identity disorder' from its global manual of diagnoses, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). The World Medical Association and the American Psychological Association have also depathologised gender-diverse identities (Vaid Menon 2020: 41).

Whilst formal depathologisation is an incredibly important step in securing safety, dignity and justice for trans people, expressing gender dysphoria is still maintained as an expectation for accessing life-affirming health care. In addition, the medical system continues to place 'a gatekeeper role' on clinicians, which gives them the power to decide which people should be eligible for gender-affirming health care. This gatekeeping approach on gender authentication has been directed specifically and selectively towards trans people, instead of providing trans people with care that is in alignment with the overall standard practice in medicine: a model of informed consent where the role of the medical staff is to support patient autonomy, ensure their capability for decision making and ensure their understanding of long-term risks and benefits (Ashley 2018).

The above is an example of how the history of pathologisation has influenced the way that gender-affirming health care for trans people is structured still today. Gatekeeping is a form of systemic discrimination since it makes accessing gender-affirming care harder than accessing other health care (Verbeek et al. 2022: 830). Sectioning trans people off as a distinct

population without the right to an informed consent model views trans people as less capable at decision-making simply by virtue of being trans. It also grants Western medical practices cultural power to define what counts as a legible transgender experience, because it prioritises institutionalised medical criteria over patient autonomy. Trans people's epistemic authority, that is the authority over knowledge, gets discounted in medical processes that suggest clinicians have privileged access to trans people's own experiences of the world, rather than recognising that trans people possess the self-knowledge to understand and communicate their gender (Ashley 2018). It is generally accepted that people have privileged access to their own inner states, as a result of living in their selves (Ashley 2018: 480). Denying trans people's authority over their own experiences is dehumanising, when such authority is granted as a baseline to others simply by virtue of being persons (Ashley 2018: 481).

Because of this situation, formal depathologisation found in a manual is not going to be enough. It needs to be accompanied by a hard look at the impact that pathologisation has had on trans lives and a committed effort to social change that aims to dismantle the oppressive hierarchies that are created when only some trans lives are cared for, and even those lives are seen as having to first deserve the care by meeting certain conditions. I will go on to demonstrate how these conditions are set by transnormativity, and how in the medical setting the prevalent transnormative narratives have been those of pathologisation, suffering and underpinning it all: a search for deviancy. So how did being transgender end up in the diagnostic manuals in the first place? And what exactly is the diagnostic method that sets out medicine's criteria for a legitimate trans experience?[10]

4.3.1 Early academic research sets up medical staff with the authority to arbitrate gender

The context in which gender-affirming health care became institutionalised within Western medicine was that of medical research, with academic gender dysphoria clinics being set up in the settler colonial nation state of US in 1960s (Stone 1987: 227). Before the first academic clinics were set up, there were non-academic clinics which performed surgery on demand, 'that is to say regardless of any judgment on the part of the clinic staff regarding what came to be called the appropriateness to the gender of choice' (ibid). You could say that these clinics

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[10] When I use phrases such as 'a legitimate transgender experience' I am not suggesting that such a thing can be found, but instead drawing attention to the different contexts, like medicine, which have taken the view that trans experiences must first be externally legitimated before they can be accepted.

operated with respect to people's self-determination, but with caveats. First reports of gender affirmation procedures come out of Germany in the 1920s, and in the early 1900s the clinics were based mainly in Europe and Casablanca (Reay 2014: 1043)[11]. Thus, one had to be in a social and economic position to travel, and then pay for the procedures out-of-pocket upon arrival, making cost and mobility a barrier for access. This is evident in the letters sent to Dr Harry Benjamin by young people in the 1960s, where many of them inquire about the cost for gender-affirming care (Hill 2008). Still today, there are some private clinics who provide trans people with the fundamental human respect of operating through informed consent, but the same barriers for access stand today.

When the academic gender dysphoria clinics were set up in the United States in the late 1960s, such as the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program and the Gender Identity Clinic of John Hopkins University, this allowed for trans health care to be billed through insurance for the first time (Hill 2008). However, this fact and the academic context the health care now took place in greatly influenced the framework of the care. Accessing care now occurred alongside trans life being placed in the context of medical research. This placed an emphasis on establishing procedures for differential diagnosis with a taxonomy of symptoms and clinical criteria for acceptance into gender-affirming treatments (Stone 1987: 228). The research centres were also invested in developing 'a clinical test' to identify someone as transgender, and the test needed to be 'repeatable' and 'clinically appropriate' (Stone 1987: 227). There was a heavy emphasis on medical classification, categorisation and evaluation in deciding what counted as legible transgender experience. As a result, the research context which trans people had to navigate at these clinics involved an unethical and intrusive fascination with their lives. For example, in the 16-page application for the Stanford Gender Dysphoria program used between the years of 1968-1980, applicants were asked questions about their sex lives, their parents' sex life, their involvement in the Armed Forces, amongst other things (Transgender Berkeley).

From today's standpoint, it most likely seems absurd that involvement in the army or your relationship to your parents could in any believable way be used as a decisive indication of

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[11] In the spirit of never citing uncritically, I want to note that in questioning the idea of gender-affirming care gaining unilateral institutional support in the 1960s and 70s US, Reay (2014) is able to provide striking historical accounts which work to evidence the open hostility some psychiatrists harboured towards trans people simply for the fact of them being trans. However, Reay's critique of a historical canonisation of unilateral support towards gender-affirming health care sometimes slips over to a critique of the health care itself in ways that can be harmful and remained unquestioned in the article. Full critique is outside of the scope of this chapter, but I found it important to specify the extent to which I find this citation's position on trans health care acceptable.

whether or not somebody was transgender. At the time, however, their inclusion in the diagnostic method was connected to the wider societal attitudes around diversity in people's gender and sexual orientations. For example, the questions about Armed Forces can be linked to the moral panic about homosexuality known as 'lavender scares' in the 1950s and 60s which treated gay people as 'national security risks' who were more likely to be 'exploited by enemies of the state'[12]. These views led to gay people 'being witch-hunted out of positions of government, industry and education' as part of McCarthyism and the related anti-communism campaigns (Stryker 2017: 71-72). Stryker points out that the transgender political struggles emerging during these decades 'cannot be separated from the history of official persecution of homosexuals', although it is worth noting that trans people were 'at greater risk of extralegal violence from the police and some members of the public' and that 'those without political connections, money, or racial privilege were especially vulnerable' (Stryker 2017: ibid).

In 1966 Harry Benjamin published *the Transsexual Phenomenon*, which became the standard reference manual for the new academic research clinics (Stone 1987: 228). It set out the criteria of 'a true transsexual', the endpoint at which Benjamin recommended gender confirmation treatment, and was the main evaluation tool used to assess applicants (ibid.). Benjamin was also a central figure in the movement 'to list transsexualism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (Hill 2008: 150). Over time, Benjamin's guidelines became known as the Benjamin Standards of Care, first published by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, named in his honour in 1979 (Baker 2016). So, it was Benjamin's work that largely set the framework for gender affirming health care in the United States. Was the pathologisation of gender variance also Harry Benjamin's influence?

4.3.2 The collective trauma of gender norm enforcement and turning the tide on pathologisation

The reason Benjamin's work influenced the early academic gender dysphoria clinics to such an extent was because Benjamin challenged the prevailing medical response to gender variance and transgender experience at the time, that of conversion therapy and forced incarceration. At the time, American psychotherapy erroneously viewed gender variance,

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[12] Notice again the strong cultural drive to find trans and queer people as lacking: lacking self-awareness or moral integrity, presenting them instead as gullible and unself-aware in order to build a kind of 'American national self' that allows for collectivity only through a kind of individuation which follows strict norms of gender and sexuality. And what norms those are! We're about to find out.

desires for gender transition and gender non-normative behaviour as psychopathological. Children who behaved in gender non-conforming ways could be placed 'in treatment' as early as from the age of five onwards, because of perceived gender non-conforming interests (Reya 2014: 1054). Not following gender roles was taken as a sickness in the child's development that must be weeded out to prevent any future possibility of the child turning out transgender: psychiatrists viewed children's varied skills and interests as signs of non-conformity which singled them out as 'pretranssexuals' (ibid.).

These psychiatrists also believed that transness was a result of parental failure to correct gender non-conforming behaviour, and the goal was to produce children who behaved according to strict societal gender norms informed by sexism, transphobia and homophobia. For example, it was considered effeminate and thus gender non-conforming for young boys to be interested in artistic things or in dress up, or to show physical affection towards their mothers (ibid.). In general, any expression that could be seen as effeminate in boys was interpreted as 'sissiness' and being 'sissy' in turn was seen as the path to a future life of transness (Reay 2014: 1055). Parents were blamed heavily, especially mothers, and developmental bonds between caregivers and children were disrupted as 'part of treatment' due to the view that it was inacceptable for the child to form a close bond with the "wrong" parent, that is the parent whose gender was opposite to the child's gender assigned at birth.

One has to gape in wonder at medical standards which chose to view any signs of human gender variance as supposedly so reprehensible that they advocated for the creation of collective attachment trauma within families as the morally preferable option by disrupting bonds of care. Transphobia and homophobia met patriarchy, as the male doctors saw to it that their authority and by extension the authority of fathers was protected: for example, if a boy had a close relationship with his mother, the treatment prescribed would include 'developing a close relationship between the male therapist and the boy, stopping parental encouragement of feminine behaviour, interrupting the excessively close relationship between mother and son, enhancing the role of father and son, and generally promoting the father's role within the family' (Reay 2014: 1055). In short, the work that these doctors dedicated themselves to was the work of pathologisation, stigmatisation and outright attempts at eradication of gender non-conforming behaviour and trans existence, both in the current moment they operated in and in the future they envisioned, through disrupting bonds of care and instilling bonds of discipline and punishment in their place.

Because of the stigmatisation and pathologisation of gender variance, as well as the criminalisation of both homosexuality and gender non-conforming behaviour, trans people as well as gender-variant and gender non-conforming people often faced rejection from their family and friends, as well as the threat of being subjected to the unethical harm perpetuated by psychiatry at the time. For example, in letters sent to Harry Benjamin by trans teenagers between 1963-1976, some of the young people were sent by their parents to be incarcerated against their will (Hill 2008: 154). Through using parental blame, parents were socialised to act in governing roles, with their decisions acting as extensions of the medical structures that wished to arbitrate gender variance out of existence.

Considering that a risk of alienation in speaking up about harm is a core component of trauma (van der Kolk in Williams 2021), the gender norm-enforcement within medicine can be said to have created collective trauma from which its own understanding is also suffering: 'in the end, psychiatry is simply society in a white coat, the medical end of the norm-enforcement and denial of reality that drives individuals to suppress their trauma in the first place' (ibid.). Q put it succinctly in our interview: 'trauma around transness is not trauma about transness, it is trauma about how society treats trans people'. Essentialising trauma onto trans lives by perceiving gender variance as an illness or by viewing trans lives as lives of suffering is a suppression of the very conditions that have produced this trauma within medicine: the enforcement of gender norms. As a result, it is also a denial of the harmful impacts of both gender norms and the impact that associating suffering with trans lives has on trans people.

In this context, Benjamin's work was ground-breaking and vital. Pathologisation predated Benjamin's career and it was largely the influence of Benjamin that made trans health care as we know it today possible (Baker 2016). Benjamin challenged the notion that conversion therapy should be used as a form of treatment and instead advocated for gender-affirming treatments, including hormone replacement therapy and gender-affirming surgical operations. Benjamin asserted that psychiatry's attitude towards trans people was 'a disapproval that touches much more on morals than on science' (1967: 5).

In the introduction to his book *The Transsexual Phenomenon* Benjamin states: 'At present, any attempts to treat these patients with some permissiveness in the direction of their wishes – that is to say 'change of sex'- is often met with raised medical eyebrows, and sometimes even with arrogant rejection and/or condemnation' (1967: 4). Thus, Benjamin argued that the resistance to gender non-conforming behaviour and to trans existence exhibited by medicine

did not have a scientific basis. Rather, it was a social response rooted in outrage at a perceived violation of a social taboo: 'Breaking a taboo always stirs quick emotions (…) Any interference with the sacrosanct stability of our sex is one of the great taboos of our time' (1967: 4-5). Benjamin acknowledged the existence of intersex people, as well as trans people, and went on to state that trans existence is natural: ''The forces of nature, however, know nothing of this taboo' (ibid.). Thus, Benjamin challenged both the ethicacy and efficacy of medical establishment in its response towards trans people. Benjamin argued that gender-affirming treatment, specifically HRT and gender-affirming surgeries, was the correct treatment model because it considered trans people's wishes and thus was of actual help 'in direction of their wishes' (1967: 4). In addition, it led to trans people being happier (1967: 92). He concluded that this treatment model 'will be accepted eventually as a legitimate treatment for a selected group of transsexuals' (1967: 92). The difference in attitude is comparably huge: not only did Benjamin advocate for trans health care that affirmed trans people's wishes, in doing so he also made the argument that trans people's contribution to the direction of gender-related health care should be heard and that joy was an important reason for this, although this was unfortunately not picked up on in the diagnostic criteria.

This was in sharp contrast with the previous medical model which operated entirely on forms of disciplinary governance which sought to exercise control over trans and gay people through criminalisation, forced incarceration and public imagery which suggested that trans and gay people did not possess full faculty and volition that made them acceptable for public life[13]. For example, with the aforementioned 'lavender scares', behind the portrayal of gay people as 'security threats' can be found a belief that gay people were supposedly more 'easily exploitable' than heterosexual people, a suggestion which implies capacity for lesser faculty and agency. However, whilst Benjamin successfully advocated for gender-affirming health care, his suggestions did not mesh easily with the existing practices and the social attitudes behind them. This posed limitations on Benjamin's approach, as the existing cultural attitudes

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[13] Latham asks: 'What would treatment practices look like if we treated trans adults (and trans requests) on an individual basis via presuming them to be competent, like (nontrans) surgery patients, instead of as a category of patients who have in common a psychiatric disorder?' (2017: 44). I think following this question, we should afford the same respect for trans children and teens. We should also keep in mind not only the transphobia, but also ableism and the management of mental health and ill health in the medical system and equally ask: what can the way in which transness is pathologised tell us about processes of medical pathologisation more widely and especially the ways in which medical attitudes about psychiatric disorders are sometimes being used to dehumanise people?

influenced the framework of care that Benjamin proposed. Next, we will look at how these limitations manifested.

4.3.3   The limitations that remained

Firstly, the very justification for medical research into trans experiences rested on the view that autobiographical accounts from the patients were unreliable (Stone 1987: 224). This attitude was part of what created the emphasis on establishing a differential diagnosis in the first place. With its taxonomy of symptoms, criteria and procedures for evaluation (Stone 1987: 228), differential diagnosis offered the medical staff the opportunity to embed an idea of expert consensus not led by trans people's voices. It also created a clash between the motivations of the patients and the clinical staff: the patients' primary concern was accessing gender-affirming health care but the extent of help that the clinical staff provided to them was influenced by their roles as researchers and medical gatekeepers, as the staff primarily wanted 'to know what this thing they called gender dysphoria syndrome was' (ibid.) as well as to make sure that the treatment was available only '*for a selected group* of transsexuals' (Benjamin 1967: 92, emphasis mine). So even though Benjamin advocated for treatment in the direction of trans people's wishes, and we could even retrospectively say that he recognised the importance of trans joy by acknowledging that trans health care made trans people happier (1967: 92), Benjamin's standards of care were not devised to promote every person's wishes, happiness and equitable gender affirmation. Instead of full self-determination, then, they rested on the view that trans people's gender actualisation should in some way remain restricted.

To this effect, Benjamin devised a categorical scale titled 'Sex Orientation Scale', which became a reference guide for the gender clinics in their quest to identify 'the true and fully-fledged transsexual' (1967: 15). Benjamin held that only those patients who showed intense physical and emotional discomfort with their gender assigned at birth, whose discomfort manifested specifically in an unequivocal desire for surgery and whose wishes for gender-affirming care would bring their sexuality into alignment with heterosexual desire qualified as 'true transsexual' (1967: 19). If your experience of gender-variance did not conform to this strict criterion, you were classed as 'transvestite'[14] instead. The categories of 'transsexual'

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[14] NB: Today 'transvestite' is considered by many to be a slur, a pejorative or a pathologising term, because of the way medicine has wielded it. It is outdated and the term cross-dresser is more common today. For some it might still retain a neutrally descriptive quality, but beyond situations where people personally apply the term to themselves or reclaim it, it is important to remember that it can be considered pejorative.

and 'transvestite' were hierarchically regulated in the medical context. At the time, 'transvestite' was used to mean someone who wanted to express their gender through clothing, and it is derived from the word 'vestments', literally to 'change one's vestments' (Stryker 2017: 38). In the medical context, it was used to pathologise people's sexual and gender expression, shaming that which was labelled kinky or non-heterosexual, as it was seen as 'a fetish desire' and consequently considered to be an indication of 'deviancy' rather than of 'true transsexualism'. This language also invalidates and stigmatises gender expression through clothing when it is perceived as aesthetically non-normative.

If you sought gender-affirming care but were classed as 'transvestite', Benjamin recommended psychotherapy instead of HRT or surgery, and viewed your 'clash to be with society and law' (1967: 14). For 'true transsexuals' their clash was considered by the medical establishment to be between their 'bodies' and their 'souls', which was seen as necessitating the changes to their physical bodies through HRT and surgery (ibid.). This became the 'wrong-body model' that came to represent what it meant to be transgender in the medical discourse. The idea of psychiatry as 'society in a white coat' (van der Kolk in Williams 2021) is shown again here, when those who medicine deemed to clash 'with society and law' where directed to be norm-corrected instead of offered the health care they intentionally sought.

The search for the 'true transsexual' funded entire research careers, but in the end the medical community had to concede that the expected criteria for differential diagnosis did not emerge: 'There is no mental nor psychological test which successfully differentiates the transsexuals from the so-called normal population' (Mehl 1986 in Stone 1987: 229). Regardless of this, in 1980, after over a decade of research, an official diagnostic category was established and 'gender identity disorder' was listed in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of American Psychological Association. This was 'a form of recognition that would go a long way toward legitimizing the "disorder", permitting doctors to diagnose, treat, and perhaps most importantly, bill insurance companies for treatment (Hill 2008: 150). At this point the researchers must have limped into work with a severe case of tautologitis, as the diagnostic conclusion they now put forward was the very same one as the assumption they started the process with: that trans people are those 'who feel their minds and their souls are "trapped" in the wrong bodies' (Benjamin 1976: 9).

What is more, in the beginning of the research process the need for differential diagnosis was justified through the professional outlook that 'a diagnosis for transsexualism' should not

depend on 'anything as subjective as feeling that one was in the wrong body' (Stone 1987: 227). Notice the way in which the same description of feeling, the sense of 'being in a wrong body', was considered 'subjective' and 'unreliable' when it arose from the autobiographical accounts of trans people, but once it came from the mouth of clinicians it was considered 'scientific', or diagnostically sound. This double standard reveals a lot about the basis that the academic gender dysphoria clinics operated from and consequently, how much change they were able to achieve.

4.3.4 The core of medicine's transnormativity: making a model for "a model human"

Benjamin recognised that there were people who fell in-between the strict medical categorisations used by the clinics as standard practice, and called this a clash 'still more pronounced and tragic': 'their clash is not only with society and the law, but also with the medical profession. Relatively few doctors are familiar with their problems; most doctors do not know what to do for them, except to reject them as patients or to send them to psychiatrists as "mental cases"' (1967: 13). Stryker observers that since medical practitioners and institutions possess a social power to determine 'what is considered sick or healthy, normal or pathological, sane or insane', medicine also holds the power 'to transform potentially neutral forms of human difference into unjust oppressive social hierarchies (2017 :53). In this sense, the 'gatekeeper role' medical representatives have had in transgender health has been about more than controlling access to treatment: it has also been a power 'to define and judge'.

As a result, 'far too often, access to medical services for transgender people has depended on constructing transgender phenomena as symptoms of a mental illness of physical malady, partly because ''sickness'' is the condition that typically legitimises medical intervention' (2017: 54). Considering gender-affirming health care has the potential to bring happiness, what possibilities for happiness did this kind of approach offer to trans people? If care was provided, benefits could be plentiful and yet the provision remained scarce, preoccupied as medicine was with perpetuating the very notion of suffering it stubbornly wanted to attach to transness rather than to itself.

The denial of treatment did not take much; a clinician's perception that one's gender expression did not fit medical categorisation could simply be born out of an attempt to access some parts of services and not others: for example, desiring HRT but not surgery, or vice versa. In this sense, I would argue, the denial of treatment was borne out of whether the

patients' desires could reflect structures of discipline, rather than structures of patient-centred agency. Foucault defines normalisation as a process that consists of 'positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result', where the operation of disciplinary normalisation consists in 'trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm' (1978: 58). In establishing a differential diagnosis, the medical practitioners were engaged in processes of disciplinary normalisation to determine which transgender experiences could be 'allowed'. Stone points out that the final decisions for eligibility at the gender clinics were made by the staff judging ''the appropriateness of the individual to their gender of choice'' and the clinics in fact acted in the role of 'charm schools' or 'grooming clinics' (1987: 227). One of the doctors retrospectively admitted that 'in the early phases we were avowedly seeking candidates who would have the best chance for success' (Laub and Gandy 1973 in Stone 1987: 228).

As a result, moral judgment continually crept into the diagnostic classification (Reay 2014: 1049), and whilst in a reference book there might have been a symptom-based model set out, in clinical interactions the classifications looked quite different: at the Gender Identity Clinic at John Hopkins, patients were divided into 'two morally classified groups' (Reay 2014: 1050). Who had the best chance of success was decided based on who could be interpreted as a respectable candidate for entry into normative woman- or manhood, and the criteria for this was drawn on classist, racist and homophobic lines. Anybody who was suspected to be a sex worker, anybody 'flamboyant', anybody who was suspected to be gay or anyone not white or sufficiently white-passing was in danger of being denied treatment (ibid). One clinician proclaimed: 'We're not taking Puerto Ricans anymore; they don't look like transsexuals. They look like fags' (Reay 2014: 1063). Another psychiatrist, Stroller, published an article in which he admitted that he let his perceptions of trans people as pathologically unreliable affect his diagnostic judgment, fuming that he could diagnose someone as trans completely 'unsighted' if they were not on time for the first appointment, because such an event was clearly a show of unreliability (Reay 2014: 1048). Today, when gender-affirming care is obstructed for many through unbearably long waitlists, perhaps a practice of diagnosing unsighted would be the ironically humorous fast-track we have been waiting for!

From these quotes we can see not only what normativity looked like (white, non-working class, straight), but also what character virtues were associated with it by the clinical staff: 'morally acceptable', 'better-behaved', 'more socially integrated' (Reay 2014: 1050) and thus

also more likely to be a 'reliable' and 'successful' candidate for gender-affirming health care. So, what actually was the difference between 'the sense of being in the wrong body' taken as too 'subjective' a descriptor for trans experience at one time, if articulated by trans people themselves, and at another time being the diagnostic conclusion which contributed to the official diagnostic category of 'gender identity disorder' being established? It seems to simply be the social authority that these different groups were able to yield in defining trans experience in the medical context.

Additionally, the 'sickness' that the clinicians were in the process of 'correcting' was in fact that of perceived 'social deviancy', where being transgender in itself was a life experience that represented 'deviancy' to the medical institution, and the process of classification and granting treatment seemed to be a project of deciding whose 'deviancy' had a chance of being 'corrected'. Perceiving trans people as having a medical condition was not a far reach: pathology was assumed from the outset where the desire to transition was taken as societally non-normative and non-normativity was tied to medical ideas of pathology as evidenced by the quotes above. Thus, the enabling of some gender-affirming health care went hand in hand with preventing other gender-affirming health care.

These practices are particularly egregious and disgusting, when we consider the following histories of racism and colonisation: 'many of the genital surgeries that became available were developed by practicing on the bodies of enslaved black women who were subjected to medical experimentation' (Stryker 2017: 54). Benjamin (1967) wanted to show that sex was mutable and that gender was an amendable form of being, in that he advocated that 'the physical sex' (read: body) should be brought in line with 'the mental sex', instead of causing suffering through conversion therapy which attempted to change the 'mental perception' trans people had of their gender'. But the idea of gender as mutable was produced through colonialism and through slavery, through the ungendering of black bodies 'wherein their flesh functioned as a disarticulation of human form from its anatomical features' as 'their claims to humanity were controverted in favor of the production of cultural institutions' (Snorton 2017: 19). Lugones (2007) similarly demonstrates the ways in which gender differentials were drawn through racist lines, and full humanity was constituted through the lens of white, patriarchal, binary and heterosexual gender norms. Through the gender dysphoria clinics and particularly through the way that they came to structure the contents of trans health care, medicine incorporated the idea of gender as mutable into trans health care but did so without addressing its own wider history of racist, heterosexist and classist violence.

4.3.5 The making of a social world where trans people exist out of space and time

As I tried to connect in my mind the way in which the enabling of some gender-affirming health care went hand in hand with preventing other gender-affirming health care, and further the way in which this process rested on 'correcting' deviance in favour of the production of particular cultural norms, it became clear that conversion therapy did not occur just in the psychiatry's or doctors' office. Rather, the measures to eradicate or prevent particular kinds of gender variance and trans life seem to amount to a more wide-reaching cultural conversion therapy. Recently, World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH, previously known as the Harry Benjamin Gender Dysphoria Association) ruled that 'watchful waiting', a treatment approach that young trans people are often subjected to should be treated as conversion therapy.

It should be viewed as such because it prioritises a hope that children and young people's gender incongruence might be 'transient', in other words that they will grow out of being trans, over the positive impacts on mental health and well-being that socially transitioning and accessing puberty blockers can bring (Coleman et al. 2022). It ignores the fact that the rate of regret for gender-affirming medical treatment commencing in adolescence has been observed to be very low. Additionally, it also ignores that the benefits of treatment beginning in adolescence have been observed to be potentially greater than the benefits of gender-affirming treatment commenced in adulthood (Coleman et al. 2022). Any push, cultural and material, that aims to take preventative measures against the chance that trans people might continue to exist, against trans people's expression and a chance at a fulfilling life should be recognised for what it is: an attempt at eradication through conversion or 'correction'.

In some ways, cultural or symbolic attempts at conversion might hold power over trans lives that are more challenging to fight than a singular policy which can be rallied against and concretely abolished, because forms of symbolic or cultural conversion therapy can stretch across time in complex ways: think, for example, about the 'save the children rhetoric' that is sometimes used as a smokescreen for transphobia and to push back young people's self-determination and chances of being informed about the available support. The crux of this rhetorical move eerily harks back to the historical context mentioned in the beginning of this sub-chapter, where psychiatry deployed parents as governing authority figures whose role was to prevent gender non-conforming behaviour from carrying into adulthood in the hopes that as few children as possible would grow up transgender. Why should young people be "saved"

from the people that they wish to grow up into? WPATH states that young people need to be treated with respect to their agency and undue delays in accessing care are not neutral options but rather 'may cause significant harm to those accessing services' (Coleman et al. 2022: 5). Through these examples, we can see that cultural attempts at conversion therapy have a temporal quality: they aim to control which pasts are remembered and which futures are allowed to exist. They aim to govern the timelines of gender diverse life and trans life in ways that crack down on even the possibility of a certain kind of past, present or future.

In this chapter, I have tried to remember the contributions of Harry Benjamin and other medical professionals involved in setting up early trans health care differently, not only through the canon of enabling trans health care (Baker 2016) but also through that which transnormativity within medicine has tried to prevent. So, if accessing the pre-academic clinics in Casablanca and Europe came with the barriers of having dispensable income and an ability to travel, the academic gender dysphoria clinics in the US restricted access according to incredibly strict, societally normative criteria that was drawn on oppressive demarcations. Benjamin (1967) described those whose experiences did not fit medical categorisations as 'tragic'. What should be considered tragic instead are the conditions that prevented the happiness people may have been able to know through gender-affirming health care that was designed to be out of reach by medical standards that classed some experiences as not possessing 'normative' potential for happiness or life satisfaction. It is a lesson in teaching us 'how happiness is used to redescribe social norms as social goods' (Ahmed 2010: 2). In medicine's configuration, the social norm became the good of gender-affirming health care, as if its gender possibilities and potential for happiness for trans people should be conceived as nothing more than the supposed delivery of a socially normative life.

The ability to choose, to exercise agency and self-determination, and to explore and discover different options are integral in supporting the happiness and wellbeing of trans people, as supported by the findings of the previous chapter. However, the opportunities to find comfort, pleasure, and confidence in oneself through a process of experimentation come into tension with a society that does not uphold these possibilities and spaces for trans people. For example, Sky reflected:

> I think what's a bit difficult is that the medical field and the people around you are sort of wanting to make sure you're hundred percent sure that this is what you want, and that this is exactly what sort of, you know like when I was referred to the Gender Clinic by my doctor and they just asked me on the phone: 'do you currently dress and act as a man' and I was like 'what?' I was like 'what does that

even mean, and no I don't', but like I told them that I don't think that clothes really have a gender anyway, so there's so much pressure for that I feel like you can lose a little bit the joy in seeing the potential, because you start doubting yourself a little bit. You're like but I'm not 100 percent sure, like I don't know if I want to be seen as a cis guy, I don't know if I want to pass, like I'm not sure, because that's the entire point of being non-binary, but the system is so binary sometimes it takes away the joy a little bit.

These medical standards have left behind a legacy which still today bears many consequences both in the way trans lives are understood and in the way they are recognised in institutional contexts, as Sky summarises. Above we discussed how cultural or symbolic attempts at conversion therapy can stretch across time. The WPATH statement quoted in relation to this point was in fact a response to "new" NHS 'Specialist Service Specifications for Children and Young People with Gender Dysphoria' that were proposed in England in 2022. After investigating these service specifications, WPATH concluded that 'the document makes assumptions about transgender children and adolescents which are outdated and untrue, which then form the basis of harmful interventions (2022: 1-2). They also highlight that 'the document fails to state that gender diversity is a normal and healthy aspect of human diversity' (ibid.). In this sense, there is in fact nothing new about the policy suggestions NHG England made in said document, as they hark back to the developmental model we explored earlier where psychiatry's main preoccupation was figuring out how to stop gender exploration and prevent children from growing up trans.

There is a pervasive, unacknowledged assumption found in the medical model that it is preferable for one to not be trans. This is what I mean by cultural conversion therapy. Such assumption reaches into social life far beyond the medical context and creates social alienation. In tracking the development of the medical model, I found it to be one obsessed with arrested development: invested in severing transgender people's communal ties and kinship bonds, both with each other and with their loved ones. First, historically there was the fear as a young trans person that expressing your feelings to your parents might get you disowned and sectioned (Hill 2008), fuelled by the heavy blame placed on parents by the medical institution (Reaya 2014). In Sweden, there is still the requirement to be unmarried if one wishes to change one's legal gender marker. This includes requesting married trans people to divorce their partners before the administrative change can be approved; thus, necessitating trans people in love to legally disrupt that love in order to be recognised.

There is also a way to construct trans people's gender experiences as if they are wholly ontologically separate from everyone else's, creating a supposed social rift of relatability. Latham demonstrates how medical practice constructs a supposed difference in the motivations of people accessing trans procedures through the idea that trans people's suffering and medical motivations are gender-related, as opposed to "the general population" who are presumed not to suffer and not be motivated by gender in their search for body modification (2017: 49-50). Gender-based suffering, however, can also frequently be a motivation for cis people to seek body modification, such as when cis women seek breast-related surgical options because they feel their suffering is beyond what a woman should 'normally' have to endure (Latham 2017: 50). This in turn links to the idea discussed in Latham (2017) about how SRS is seen as a reconstructive to the gender identities of trans people and only trans people, assuming that other people do not go through such identity work and ignoring the possibility that surgery might simply affirm the already strong sense of identity a trans person has built and which is more likely to be the motivation for surgery rather than its effect (2017: 48).

Presenting body modification, specifically genital modification, as 'reconstructive' of identity only to trans people perpetuates the idea that assigning sex at birth, and thus deriving 'sex' from genitals, is what constructs somebody's gender in the first place. It gives the practice of assigning sex/gender at birth legitimacy and suggests that it is a functional, sound way of understanding people's gender development: that for most people, assigning gender at birth is enough to construct their gender and no further work is needed. Constructing only trans people's suffering and medical motivations as gender-related suggests that trans people's experiences are socially separate, and thus unrelatable, to gendered experiences as a whole. This desire to keep trans people 'separate' is also evident in Benjamin's correspondence with young people, where there is a clear pattern of choosing not to connect trans people with one another (Hill 2008). Whenever someone wrote to Benjamin asking if there were other people seeking health care in their area, Benjamin repeatedly refused to give out any such information, instead directing the people towards his own textbooks on the subject and in some cases, other medical leaflets. Hill notes that Benjamin 'schooled his patients in medical models' (Hill 2008: 162).

This reveals an investment within the medical model to direct understanding about trans lives squarely towards its own explanations, and to prevent trans sociality as a source of meaning-making for trans people. This impacts the options for sense-making that are available to trans

people themselves, as well as to other societal actors. It is about shaping access to cultural meaning-making, and it is an impetus to create a very specific kind of social world. In highlighting the scientific evidence for the violence of conversion therapy, such as 'increased levels of depression, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, as well as lower educational attainment and less weekly income', WPATH notes that despite the clear evidence to the contrary some advocates of conversion therapy maintain that 'it could potentially allow a person to fit better into their social world' (Coleman et al. 2022: 176). The suggestion that a social world which wishes trans people to stop being trans would in any way account for trans people's social world, would in any way resemble 'their social world' or a social world they want to be in, is erasure of the kind of social world that already where trans people live, love, grow up and grow old. This is why discussing the temporal aspect of cultural drives for conversion is important: in aiming to control which pasts are remembered and which futures are allowed to exist, they place trans people out of their own time and out of the social world they actually wish to live in.

Hill (2008), who has been previously cited in this section, is a great example in understanding the impacts of reading trans people as out of time. Hill (2008) presents archival material on trans life experience in the form of young people's letters to Harry Benjamin between 1963-1976, and in conjunction states that he is interested in the letters of these 'naïve adolescents' because they 'were just becoming aware of their emerging transsexual subjectivity *before* transsexual lives were documented in autobiographies, academic publications, television talk shows and the Internet' (2008: 151, emphasis in the original). The article wants to find out 'how transsexualism was being constructed in the 1960s and the 1970s' before 'the modern transgender movement' (ibid.). The article interprets these letters as providing that before.

Hill, in his own words, 'traced' three themes in the letters: 'those who discovered their transsexuality through their gender or through their sexuality', 'those who claimed they were born in the wrong body' and the many 'youth' who 'had very hard lives because of their desires' (2008: 153). The three aspects Hill lists as pointing to the young people's hardship were suffering inflicted on them from family and peers, being incarcerated by psychiatrists for their gender variance and 'their own internalised homophobia' (2008: 154). What is peculiar in this latter statement is that, whilst the suffering from family and peers and the experiences of incarceration or its threat are both aspects the young people directly report themselves, 'the internalised homophobia' is not. Yet, 'internalised homophobia' and 'anti-homosexual loathing' are themes that Hill (2008) repeatedly attaches to the young people's letters. They

become the lens that Hill reads onto the young people 'who discovered their transsexuality through their gender or through their sexuality' (ibid.), even though such assumption cannot be verified from the direct accounts of the young people themselves.

As a result, the article ends up implying that internalised homophobia was the main lens the young people interpreted the interaction between gender and sexuality through. For young people who share information about their sexual lives, Hill reads their experiences as 'same-sex desires' and 'same-sex relations' regardless of what the young people state their gender to be. For example, a young person with the initial of B writes: 'I was born with the body of a boy, and the mind of a girl, there's nothing homosexual about me' (Hill 2008: 155). Hill reads this as an example of how 'simple' and 'basic' the wrong body narrative had gotten at this point, and portrays B as conflicted in their sexuality simply for the fact that B has a boyfriend, and according to Hill is thus having 'same-sex sexual relations'. B writes of men, including their boyfriend: 'They also say when they close their eyes and kiss me, I feel exactly like a girl'. Hill (2008) concludes that B is 'being sweet-talked into kisses by boys' and that B's boyfriend is also suffering from 'denial of homosexuality'.

Hill does momentarily acknowledge the possibility that the young people were aware of the fact that if they 'presented themselves as simply homosexual, they would not be given treatment to change their sex' (2006: 167). This is because at the time clinical contexts did not recognise the possibility that one could be both gay and trans, and rather requested compulsory heterosexuality from all trans people seeking treatment. However, even the sentence structure of this statement seems to want to read homosexuality onto the young people: they might not be 'simply homosexual', but they are still homosexual. The article pursues this line of analysis throughout, and presents it as internalised homophobia because Hill (2008) speculates that gender transition could be 'a way out of homosexuality': 'I suspect that some of the youth during the period disliked the fact that they might be homosexual and saw changing their sex as a way out of homosexuality' (2008: 167).

So when B writes that she/they are a girl and views her romantic life as that of a girl's, Hill (2008) still writes of B as if B was a gay man. When C says: 'I do want to be a girl badly! You see, there is this boy whom I am simply crazy about', Hill regards this statement as C 'confusing sexuality and gender' or that C's position on the issue is being 'limited by his [sic] maturity'. (Hill 2008: 156). When H writes: 'every time I see a pretty girl, I wish I were her, even though I don't know what to do cause I want to be her, yet I don't know what her life is

like. It could be hell for all I know!!!', Hill interprets the statement as H imagining they 'would like to be a woman' whilst admitting that they 'didn't quite know what being a woman was actually like' (2008: 160). There is nothing in H's statement that definitively suggests she feels she does not 'know what being a woman is like' – given that the reflection arises in the context of H talking about the individual girls she sees going about their business, it could instead be read as H acknowledging that even though she wants to be a girl, she does not think being a girl determines the totality of how one's life is.

For Hill, the young people might be smart enough to realise that writing a letter to a clinician to seek treatment might necessitate them to 'articulate a commonsense understanding of their subjectivity' (2008: 167), which at the time was an either/or view on gender and sexual variance, and yet at the same time it is clear that Hill (2008) views the young people as most likely 'confused', 'naïve' or immature. Hill's analysis misgenders the young people in language and in thought through a stubborn gaze that views the young people only as their gender assigned at birth simply because they have not yet medically transitioned, rather than recognising them as the gender they state they are, a reading which unself-reflexively echoes the medical model's view on sex and gender. This is demonstrated by not accepting the possibility that their romantic and sexual lives might be best characterised as socially transitioning, rather than as 'same-sex relations'. The article cannot fully discount the young people's claims to their gender, but it allows the young people to exist as that gender only through the lens of homophobia. And after all this, the article concludes that unlike their contemporary peers, the young trans people from the letters are not 'willing to put both gender and sexuality into play' (2008: 169).

The young people are clearly engaging in reflections on the relationship between gender and sexuality, but in Hill's reading of their accounts the implication is that the young people are in fact uncomfortable about their sexuality, not their gender, a reading which does not afford gender the same analytic nuance it does to sexuality and instead seems to want to separate 'queer desires' from 'gender desires', a reading which again falls in line with the medical context of the time. Further, despite the consistent assertions by the young people themselves that they want to transition to live in their gender, somehow this desire too is tied to supposed discomfort with their sexuality. Hill interprets the accounts in this way, even though the article also notes that in the letters the young transfeminine people more commonly expressed desires to love men as women and that in general most of the young people 'vigorously asserted they were transsexual and not homosexual' (2008: 167). To interpret these statements

as 'a disavowal of homosexuality' at large is an analytic choice which cannot be gleaned from the source material, since the young people do discuss their personal experiences with gender and sexuality in varied ways. Would an analysis that seeks to remain proximal to the young people's self-expression not consider the above reflections as a theoretical opening to inquire about the ways in which discovering the quality of one's sexual desire (i.e.. wanting to love men as women) can help you discover something about the quality of your gender?

Additionally, the article atomises the young people and is suspicious of their certainty with their gender. I believe that part of the reason the article arrived at these judgments is because it wanted to read the trans youth's experience as out of time: as appearing '*before* transsexual lives were documented in autobiographies, academic publications, television talk shows and the Internet' (2008: 151, emphasis in the original). As a result, it struggles to take their subjectivities as whole, multi-faceted and serious, and fails to place them consistently in time. In contrast, the context of the medical correspondence and medicine's understanding of trans subjectivity gets seen in time: Hill takes 'the wrong body model' to have been 'a powerful and effective device' in articulating 'a commonsense understanding of their subjectivity' (2008: 167). Hill places Benjamin in his time too, acknowledging him as the 'one of the few' who were accepting of trans people 'in the day', and 'helped trans youth as best as he could, within legal and medical regulations' (2008: 169). But when it comes to the young people's discussions of sexuality, Hill (2008) treats those discussions as out of time by reading them through the temporal framing that they occurred before the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the gay rights movement. Instead of analysing the way in which medicine's theories of gender and sexuality historically interacted with each other and exploring the young people's interrogation of this interaction, Hill considers the young people's attitudes as disavowing homosexuality simply because they exist in this analytically applied before where homosexuality was not yet decriminalised.

Such is Hill's reading even when we also get to hear from R who explicitly wrote that they 'don't wanna be a man to love girls but to love men' (2008: 165). As a result of being open about seeing himself as a gay man, R was not offered transition related care by Benjamin and was instead 'encouraged to have sex with men and not change her sex' (ibid.), a life path recommendation which preserved R as heterosexual in clinical eyes by recommending they continue with 'girlhood'. This medical manoeuvre shows both the way in which the diagnostic criteria that emerged was engaged in preventing gay expression and in promoting trans expression only in so far as it could 'restore' people to heterosexuality as an integral part

of gender normativity. It was a form of prevention, or cultural conversion therapy, in so far as it was interested in selecting carefully which expressions of gender and sexuality to enable.

Meeting the young people through their writing, I had no sense that they were not 'willing to put both gender and sexuality into play', unlike 'contemporary teens' (2008: 169). I felt exhilaration at their boldness, directness and the energy their exclamation marks transferred onto the page. Hill might patronise B's account of romance and sex by reading it as B 'using the opinions of others either to inform his [sic] own sense of gender' (2007: 156), but B in fact writes how happy 'guys' made her by saying that her way of doing things was so much like that of a girl's. Following that line of happiness, one could instead say that B is so certain in her gender that even when she interacts with others, both B and her partners experience B's gender as that of a girl. B 'feels like a girl', and is felt by others to be a girl, because B is a girl. Reading B's identity formation as entirely separate from social relation is both bizarre, considering the article's focus on sexuality, and extremely atomising. It is also a reading that disrupts trans sociality: it suggests that social relationships are not a source of identity formation for trans people, without making any other theoretical ventures into the question of how social relation informs gender for people overall. In this way, it falls in line with other transnormative institutional and legal practices that aim to disrupt trans people's social life.

In the letters, the young people clearly and firmly state their gender, and are engaging with the popular explanations of the time which have provided them with at least partial tools to understand their gender.[15] If explanations of 'transsexuality' at the time centred on distinguishing it from homosexuality, is it any wonder that being able to draw these distinction between gender and sexuality within one's own experiences would function as a way of expressing gender? Whether or not the distinction was truly felt as such is impossible to explore in a medical context where the young people likely knew they had to share their experiences selectively or else be denied treatment. But one thing is certain. Whilst the medical professionals were busy with their idea of 'the tragic transgender' who 'weeps because happiness and satisfaction, according to transphobic narratives, is always just out of reach' (Halberstam 2005: 82), the actual trans people were both building fulfilling social relations *and* carefully considering what was going on with the fumbling clinicians, and what kind of assessment of the clinicians might help their cause along: 'You've got to keep him

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[15] And considering how fast language and nuance evolves in trans social settings, aren't the tools of our current moment always partial?

happy', 'One thing that I did learn in meeting all the doctors is that you have to give a little, any one of them can kill you physically or emotionally', 'Every doctor you see gives you a different explanation, and you just come to the point of knowing that they just don't know the hell they are talking about', 'Actually, he didn't know much about hormones and their effects. It is very tricky… I knew more about hormone and therapy treatment than he did. I kept an eye out that he didn't give me too much or too little' (Reya 2014: 1046).

As these quotes show, even if the institutional approach was based on structures of governance and discipline, it did not manage to negate the practices of agency the patients were engaged in as they navigated those institutional structures. Taking such a detailed look as we did above with Hill (2008) was precisely to show the importance of these gaps. Reading in time is a way to make space where trans people are not lost to time, whether that time is termed history, present or future. It requires identifying when mechanics of transnormativity have become the analytical choice for a given interpretation, and asking questions about this choice in order to open up the space where existing theories do not continue to be presented as the only possibility for people's expressions of gender and sexuality. This kind of work is best done when it transparently acknowledges and interrogates the reality that these existing narratives might have in some ways 'set the scene' for the claims trans people are 'able and unable to make' in specific contexts (Raun 2014: 23), but equally that the existing narratives never provide a total picture on the self-meaning making of trans people because trans people are subjects who critique, not objects of the critiques.

In this way, a space to exist more freely has been held open, by trans and gender-variant people for other trans people and gender-variant people, through time. I want to finish this section by honouring Eden Knight, 'funny, sharp, well-read, and concerned with making the world a better place', who wanted to hold that space open for others even when she was being forced to leave America for Saudi Arabia where she had her access to HRT repeatedly removed and was prevented from fleeing the country (Friends of Eden, 2023; Klee 2023). Eden's friends described how Eden 'helped plenty of trans people to pay for their medication out of pocket', how she brought the community hope and 'wanted to fight for a world where trans people could be happy', to be 'an advocate for trans Saudi youth' as well as 'a role model and leader for Saudi trans women' (Klee 2023). Eden wrote in her final message posted on Twitter in March 2023: 'I wanted to be a leader for people like me (…) I hope that the world gets better for us. I hope our people get old. I hope we get to see our kids grow up to fight for us. I hope for trans rights world wide' (ibid).

4.4 Medical model meets 'beyond-the-binary' model: how oppositional critiques construct gender-variant people in oppositional terms with one another

So far this chapter has covered an overview of transnormativity as presented by Johnson (2016), as well as the medical model of transnormativity and its history of pathologisation that places emphasis on suffering and the 'the wrong body narrative'. It bears noting, too, that Johnson's definition of transnormativity which we started with focuses most heavily on the medicalised side of transnormative narratives, with Johnson describing transnormativity as 'a regulatory ideology' that organises 'transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon medical standards' (2016: 465).

Bettcher (2014) explores a different kind of transnormativity in addition to the medical model covered by Johnson (2016). Bettcher (2014) states that we still have only two dominant narratives around trans life experience, both of which provide insufficient accounts of trans lives and should thus be contested. One of these is the 'wrong body', or the medical model, and the other is 'a beyond-the-binary model' that grew out of theorising within transgender studies in the early 1990s. Bettcher observes that this model is characterised by the claim that since 'transgender people do not neatly fit into the two dichotomous categories of man and woman, attempts are made to force them into this binary system' (2014: 384). Thus, under the beyond-the-binary model the medical regulation of transsexuality comes to be seen as one of the main ways in which society attempts to erase transgender people (ibid.).

Whilst Johnson notes that the binary, medical model on trans life experience eclipses lived realities where gender is felt to be 'fluid, emergent or processual' (2016: 469), Bettcher raises the point that the beyond-the-binary model provides 'a vision of politics that doesn't leave space for trans people who don't self-identify as beyond the binary' (2014: 385). Bettcher notes that the beyond-the-binary model is not wholly incorrect in its proposition which treats all trans people as being forced into a binary gender system: for as long as being transgender is seen as culturally gender non-normative, trans people could be said to be problematically positioned in relation to the gender binary simply for being transgender. However, Bettcher stresses that this argument does not account for the fact that for those trans people whose gender identity is in fact binary, being seen as 'beyond the binary' can be what feels problematic whereas being recognised as their binary gender is *precisely* what makes them *feel well* (2014: 384, emphasis mine). Bettcher states: 'For most of my life I'd felt

problematically positioned with respect to the binary. This was a horrible feeling: what made me feel well was being recognised as a woman' (ibid.).

We can remember from the previous sections that one of the justifications Benjamin provided for hormone replacement therapy as the appropriate treatment was that it made trans people happy. To argue that the medical regulation of transgender lives erases all transgender people's self-expression is thus too steep a generalisation, although it is correct to say that it erases certain possibilities and outcomes of transition for all trans people seeking medical care since the care is structured to be limited and to not centre trans people's agency.

It is clear, then, that we need theorisation that does not discount the experiences of either binary or non-binary trans people and that remains committed to 'a political vision sustaining the support for definite self-identities' (Bettcher 2014: 387). Neither 'beyond-the-binary' nor 'the wrong body model' are able to achieve this (ibid.). Namaste has critiqued the beyond-the-binary model for arguing that binary trans people disavow 'the resistant force of trans lives lived in opposition to the oppressive binary' (Namaste 2005: 7). Thus, beyond the binary model doesn't 'sustain the centrality of self-identity – or at least doesn't do so in a way that views such a move as at all politically laudable [for binary trans people], since the truly resistant position, in this model, is to make a challenge from a position beyond the binary (Bettcher 2014: 387).

When applied in the manner outlined by Bettcher, beyond-the-binary model portrays resistance as possible to only some trans lives by conceptualising resistance as an essentialist attribute inherent to only some identities. I would argue that the more important focus for any theory of resistance, but perhaps particularly one that touches on the ways trans lives have been narrated and understood, is one that aims to dismantle politics that organise social life into hierarchies of legitimacy or superiority of any kind. Theory which sees somebody's personal gender expression as an essentialist sign of them 'disavowing the resistant force of trans life' does not succeed in dismantling such power dynamics. In addition, it is important to not take something to be resistance simply because it is taken to be different or antinormative. As Jack Halberstam put it two decades ago: 'gender variance, like sexual variance, cannot be relied to produce a radical and oppositional politics simply by virtue of representing difference' (1993: 173). Butler continues: 'feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion' (1999: viii).

Being trans is simply one facet of anybody's life, and 'transgender' as a term is a large umbrella under which many different people fall. In light of such variety, dichotomous claims that generalise one group (binary trans people or non-binary trans people) as disavowing the potential of the other seem downright nonfactual.[16] It is essentialist because it holds a group of people as having a singular, homogenous view simply because they have a facet of experience in common, that of being binary gendered and trans. But it is more than that. It is also a specific approach to identity, which theorises resistance and social change by attempting to make one aspect of the self (being binary or non-binary trans) account for the entirety of someone's identity and their political action. In other words, it is a monistic view of identity that seeks to turn a single aspect of the self into the primary political position from which one organises.

In the case of non-binary and binary trans people such approaches have unfortunately been used to create research frames which analytically pit the two 'groups' against one another in attempts to argue which of them has better political potential to 'undo' gender. A recent example is Garrison who pursues such a framing, stating as the article's central conclusion: 'While non-binary individuals have been hailed as the primary arbiters of gender's undoing, the social and institutional constraints that inform how we account for gender suggest that binary-identified respondents may be better positioned to work towards this "undoing" than their non-binary counterparts' (2018: 613). Attempts to measure up trans people's identity potential is a peculiar framing particularly in an article that acknowledges trans people's existing anxieties around measuring up as 'trans enough' in a societal climate where only some types of gender identity narratives are taken to be readily intelligible or 'authentic'.

When the social world is hierarchically ranked, should we really be pursuing theories of social change and identity that reproduce such rankings, and in doing so also attempt to teach us that we experience our identities in this way, such as when the findings of Garrison (2018) then get later reported as 'power struggles between non-binary and binary trans people' (Garrison 2018 in shuster and Westbrook 2022:2)?

This is not to say that there does not exist power struggles within different marginalised communities, including within trans communities, but it is more a question of how we

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[16] Just to further break down dichotomy, it is worth pointing out that some non-binary people consider themselves trans as well as non-binary, whilst others do not feel an attachment to the label transgender and do not apply it to themselves.

approach these struggles. Koyama (2020) charts the decades of protests by women of colour and by feminists of colour against prioritising accounts of identity which are monistic rather than intersectional, because of the way in which such prioritisation ultimately leads to ranking of oppressions that is 'inherently oppressive to people who are marginalised due to multiple identities' (2020: 738). Audre Lorde (1982) recounts:

> Either I was denied or chose between various aspects of my identity, or my work and my Blackness would be unacceptable. As a Black lesbian mother in interracial marriage, there was usually some part of me guaranteed to offend everybody's comfortable prejudices of who I should be. That is how I learned that if I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.

Since joy about being trans can be a force that allows us to arrive in ourselves with wholeness, as we saw in the previous findings chapter, it can also alert us to the political urgency of intersectional theorisation in its capability to challenge political systems that present social change as only having two, interrelated possibilities: a unity that requests unanimity by approaching differences with a homogenising brush (Lorde 1982), and the ranking of aspects of identity in a hierarchy that forces people to choose and deny, thus placing us in competitive dynamics both with one another and our internal experiences when faced with demands to pinpoint which oppressive dynamic is supposedly the 'most pervasive, extreme and fundamental' and thus the primary political position or 'marked identity' from which to organise from (Koyama 2020: 739). Lorde (1982) observes the ways in which such competitive dynamics, which directly contribute to the history of oppressive hierarchies of difference, can propel marginalised communities to attack each other:

> As Black people, if there is one thing we can learn from the 60s, it is how infinitely complex any move for liberation must be. […] In the 1960s, the awakened anger of the Black community was often expressed, not vertically against the corruption of power and true sources of control over our lives, but horizontally toward the closest to us who mirrored our own impotence.

There are some further observations I would like to make to Bettcher's critique of the beyond-the-binary model inspired by the necessity for complexity and intersectionality when resisting systems of oppression as outlined by Lorde (1982) and Koyama (2020). The observations are concerned with the ways in which essentialist, homogenous notions of identities and their political possibilities impact our language and in doing so imbricate us in social dynamics which reflect the societal pressures to constitute specific marginalisations in opposition to one another.

First, Bettcher describes the beyond-the-binary model as emerging from transgender writing in the mid-1990s, when 'for the first-time transgender people were theorising themselves for themselves' (2014: 384). As examples, Bettcher cites Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (1994). During this time, the term 'transgender' was introduced as a broad umbrella term, one which signified a new political vision: to bring together 'different gender-variant people (including transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag queens and kings, and others)' in order to create 'a story that aimed for unity in the face of hostility towards those who were gender nonnormative' (Bettcher 2014: 384). This new vision, Bettcher says, subscribed to the 'beyond the binary' model (ibid.).

Bettcher goes on to place the umbrella term 'transgender' in tension with the transsexual separatism that she has seen voiced in the United States in the 2010s, mainly online on social networking sites and blogs (2014: 385). Bettcher points out that in the separatist political view, transsexuals 'see themselves as nonconsensually subsumed under the transgender umbrella and wrongly associated with gender nonnormative people such as cross-dressers' (ibid.). Bettcher then notes that new categories have emerged, such as 'genderqueer' to capture 'those who actually live in opposition to the binary, while 'trans*' is deployed to include not only those who identify as men and women but also those who do not' (ibid.). For Bettcher, 'the irony is obvious' (ibid.): she argues that 'transgender' as an umbrella term was originally deployed for those beyond the binary, and that the dominance of self-identified transgender men and women who do work under that term has required a new iteration of the beyond-the-binary vision (ibid.). The need for new terminological iterations such as 'genderqueer', Bettcher argues, demonstrates that there exists 'a serious disconnect between the theory cited and the actual practice' when it comes to the workings of the beyond-the-binary model (ibid.).

I think this argument is too simplified to capture the complicated way that different sections of the trans community negotiate language, and the political claims of belonging or non-belonging this negotiation entails. It is easy to see what could inspire transsexual separatism as a reaction against a vision of politics that views 'the medical regulation of transsexuality [as] one of the main ways that society attempts to erase transgender people' (2014: 384). After all, if you are someone who has gained wellness, joy or a sense of recognition, collective or personal, through gender-affirming medical operations, the idea that those operations are a form of erasure certainly does not resonate with your personal circumstances.

Moreover, a counter-critique directed at the critique of the medical model, when it involves trans people theorising themselves for themselves, can be a strategic move founded in a worry that critique of trans medicine could be politically co-opted by non-trans and non-allied actors who want to roll back access to the life-sustaining operations medicine offers to trans people. Bettcher's analysis attends to these political contexts with specificity that makes them accessible to the reader's imagination. This specificity, in part, is what allows Bettcher to observe the disconnect between the beyond-the-binary model's theoretical concerns and the language practices of transgender communities.

However, there is a deeper layer of analysis that is needed to understand how the very practice of dealing in models can create the dynamics discussed above, where singular aspect of identity becomes 'the marked identity' that gains primacy and political weight, which then allows for the political specificities of that identity to be understood and imagined.

In the case of Bettcher's analytic framework, the specificity is given to binary trans men and women, and transsexuals, which is analytically justified through the space not accounted for them under the beyond-the-binary model. But it seems that the move to correct reductionist aspects of a model can simultaneously perpetuate a dynamic where specificity of identity positions is not expanded but rather traded, as the language Bettcher uses to describe people who do not identify as either transsexuals or within the gender binary is not imagined with equal specificity. Those people are described only as people who 'live in opposition of the binary' (2014: 385). I would argue that such a phrase reduces the self-identities of non-binary people to nothing but resistance. Sometimes non-binary people, too, wish to simply exist, not live in opposition to something. Bo who identified as non-binary reflected:

> Over time I now notice that finding joy in adversity is getting harder because it feels less personal, like suddenly my joy is transformed into a warcry instead of being truly authentic, and it's easy to second-guess my choices; am I making these decisions for myself, or as a "fuck you" to the world? I see those who find joy despite adversity, living their truth and finding trans joy, and I feel envious. I want to be like them and embrace joy regardless of my circumstances. I don't want every moment of joy to be a howl of agony, every dance to be a rattle of chains. At the same time I must admit that those whose beauty and joy is a defiance, a resistance, have a beautiful warcry nonetheless.

If non-binary gender identities and expressions are discussed only in ways that place them in opposition to both the gender binary and to people whose gender happens to be binary, it renders non-binary people in a doubly tense political position. Firstly, their gender expressions are now only attended to oppositionally, painting them in adverse terms, and thus

intruding on the autonomy and freedom that 'non-binary' might otherwise have as a frame of reference: 'I wish I could simply say I'm nonbinary, but I'm tired of being in direct opposition to something I don't even believe in' (Roche 2018: 6). Secondly, as Bo reflects, the forceful frame of being 'in adversity', makes the joy about being trans feel less personal. It can render it 'a war cry', a battle in tension with the binary world, and this has significance for accessing the positive impacts that trans joy can provide people, such as increased self-connection and confidence. The self-connection and presence with the self is interrupted in ways that feel less 'truly authentic', because representing non-binary identities oppositionally places non-binary expressions in tension with a social frame that feels 'performative': 'I've tried relentlessly to find my place within binary gender structure. But it's not happening. It's just not happening. I want to live my life freely and weightless outside of a performed frame. I want – no, I need- to own every millimetre of my trans body, I want trans-ecstasy. I want to be trans and free' (Roche 2018: 2).

The sense of performativity in the framing, the sense of 'is this for me or as a fuck you to the world?', comes from the framing functioning only in ways that move away from, rather than towards, the specificity of non-binary expressions. Oppositional framings and their hierarchical power can be difficult to break because their rejection of certain expressions is a simultaneous bind of social distance and social proximity, a moving away that is also a moving against. By evoking opposition, they distance themselves from us but simultaneously demand that we stay centred on their terms, pushed against them, chafed and demanded to shave ourselves on their edges by concerning ourselves with the labour of understanding our experience in opposition to them.

What is it to be trans and free and in community? Theory, even disconnected theory, needs practitioners to even be called disconnected from practice. I am personally not of the opinion that terms shifting and new ones emerging is necessarily a sign that our existing theoretical endeavours have become disconnected from practice. Rather, when they arise from different trans subcultures, they could in fact be an example of the way in which the community practises theory: revising it and creating it anew to better capture nuances in self-expression and identity, and sometimes also using language in ways that adopt the oppositional hierarchies of power we are subjected to under systems of oppression and thus perpetuate the social idea that certain aspects of identity, and the people they belong to, should gain primacy over others. Looking at language in this way allows us to ask different questions, which hopefully grow into expansive specificity that allows us to 'move against not only those

forces which dehumanise us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves' (Lorde 1982).

We might for example ask: What are we claiming through language by rejecting certain terms and accepting others, what institutional terms might we be reclaiming, what kinds of arguments of social belonging are we claiming for ourselves and are we claiming them for exclusive possession and to disown others' attempts of self-ownership? Just as the linguistic non-attentiveness to non-binary identities distances the reader from the specificities of those identities in Bettcher (2017), so does the language of the transsexual separatists work as a distancing manoeuvre which rejects associations of belonging with different parts of the trans community through rejecting the term 'transgender' in order to not be 'wrongly associated with gender nonnormative people' (2017: 385).

 Or perhaps the anger is felt not only through a fear of proximity with non-normativity but because the language, the term itself, feels 'nonconsensual' in an economy of terms that says we can only achieve our rights by denying and choosing between different aspects of our identities, in ourselves and in each other? Does it feel nonconsensual and reductive because it arises from institutional contexts which use language as a tool of regulating social hierarchies between different gender-variant people? Can we remember those contexts, their interactions with our self-meanings, and also see the ways in which 'trans' can feel like a prefix to 'some change that is brilliantly underway but as yet unresolved and unrecognisable' (Roche 2018: 2)? Perhaps a change that allows us to more fully reject the ways in which difference made hierarchical can be used against people? A change, then, that allows us to be more trans, more free and more in community? For that effect, let us look at some history and a cautionary tale.

The term 'transgender' which became an umbrella category in the 1990s used to be far narrower in its meaning when it first emerged. Stryker summarises the ways in which the term transgender has meant contradictory things at different times: 'in the 1990s, when it entered widespread usage, it was used to encompass any and all kinds of variations from gender norms and expectations, similar to what genderqueer, gender-nonconforming and nonbinary are used to mean now'.[17] Contemporarily transgender is used to mean someone who does not

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[17] The language bears quizzing here too: If Bettcher (2014) only acknowledges non-binary identities as people 'who live in opposition to the binary', we could say that Stryker's definition paints with even broader a brush, as Stryker suggests that non-binary identities encompass variations from 'gender norms and expectations'. Being non-binary certainly departs from the normative assumption that gender is binary, but does it also imply a general departure from gender norms and expectations overall? I do not want this quizzing to come across as

identify with their gender assigned at birth and in some cases wants to transition, that is to move away from the unchosen and socially imposed starting place of their gender assigned at birth (2017: 5). In the 1950s, the emergence of the term transgender was tied to the medical terminology of the day, particularly the way that medicine treated the terms transvestite and transsexual, linking them to the different categorisations in the Sex Orientation Scale devised by Benjamin (1967) in order to hierarchically regulate them in this context, as covered in the transmedicalisation-section of this chapter.

So, the definition of the term transgender in the 1960s, 70s and 80s interacted with and was contingent on the medical context, as transgender was used to refer to someone who 'wanted not merely to temporarily change their clothing (like a transvestite) or to permanently change their genitals (like a transsexual) but rather to change their social gender in an ongoing way through a change of habitus and gender expression, which perhaps included the use of hormones, but usually not surgery' (Stryker 2017: 32). Thus, transgender was itself an emergent term with a specific context in its day, tied more to social transition within the medical context, and which has since them morphed into more of an umbrella term.

Similarly, whilst the 19th century German sexologist and transgender rights advocate Magnus Hirschfeld used 'transvestite' to mean people who wished to physically change their bodies, in 1950s Harry Benjamin popularised the term 'transsexual' as referring to someone who wished to pursue gender-motivated body modification precisely because he wanted a demarcation between people seeking surgery and people who wished to pursue gender transition solely through clothing. Moreover, in the 1800s Hirschfeld too had an umbrella term to capture the widest possible expression of gender variety: the concept of 'sexual intermediaries' which he used to express 'the idea that every human being represented a unique combination of sex characteristics, secondary sex-linked traits, erotic preferences, psychological inclinations, and culturally acquired habits and practises' (Stryker 2017: 49). Hirschfeld calculated that there were 'more than forty-three million different combinations of characteristics, and therefore more than forty-three million kinds (or genders) of humans' (ibid).

Tracing the shifting meaning of these terms makes me wonder whether the language changes are less to do with a gap between 'theory' and 'practice' and perhaps more to do with various

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pedantry. My point is rather to place care in language to question what frameworks of selfhood have been portrayed as possible through language to different gender-variant people in existing theories.

communities interrogating processes of social categorising involved in language categorisations, and consequently what the scope of language categorisations should be and why. It is all tied to what 'word' is and is not, and the way language in its content can and cannot capture expression: visually and auditorily, a word has clearly defined boundaries, it is a singular portion of content, delineated from others by a space bar or a pause in speech. But when it comes to using a word to facilitate expression of an experience, the boundaries begin to shift as they become socially relational, instruments bound by their context as we saw in the historically shifting meanings above. How expansive can the expression found in a given word be? Or rather how expansive are we allowed to be within our self-expression, whilst still inhabiting a word?

Asking this question and thinking back to how Bettcher (2014) places the umbrella term 'transgender' in tension with the transsexual separatism (2014: 385) allows us to ask questions about the way in which boundaries of language can point to boundaries between 'us' and 'others' drawn in different (trans) communities. Separatism, seeking distance from others and closeness with some, is a social and political move that can sharpen the borders of a word. What do language boundaries do: what are their functions and how do these functions govern what they can and cannot achieve? How do they tie in with transnormativity as regulatory structure that organises trans life into hierarchies of legitimacy?

Virginia Prince was 'a central yet divisive figure' in contemporary transgender political movements in the US context and 'would eventually found the first enduring organizations in the United States devoted to transgender concerns' (Stryker 2017: 57). Founded in 1961 by Prince, the Hose and Heels Club met regularly and was expanded into a nation-wide organisation called the Foundation for Personal Expression (FPE), later re-named The Society for the Second Self, or Tri-Ess (ibid.). Learning about Prince's organising efforts, my attention was drawn to just how much the wielding of a tightly bounded expression of 'transgender' informed Prince's community organising and enabled her to enforce a central social authority in the organisation. Stryker notes that FPE increasingly became a platform for Prince to promote her personal philosophy on gender.

Prince saw cross-dressing as an expression that allowed men to 'express their ''full personality'' in a world that required a strict division between the masculine and the feminine' (2017: 66). Prince personally controlled the membership base of these groups and the only members allowed were married heterosexual men. Thus, Prince excluded from

membership anybody else from the wider trans and queer community, including 'gays, male-to-female transsexuals, and individuals who had been assigned female at birth' (ibid.). Virginia Prince showed 'open disdain for gay people', 'frequently expressed negative opinion of transsexual surgeries' and held 'conservative stereotypes regarding masculinity and femininity' (Stryker 2017: 57), and all of this reflected itself in the content and methods she used in community organising. Prince drew together a circle of cross-dressing acquaintances from the wider trans social networks of her time, and in 1952 this group published 'arguably the first overtly political transgender publication in US history': Transvestia: The Journal of the American Society for Equality in Dress. The periodical made 'a plea for the social toleration of transvestisism, which it was careful to define as a practice of heterosexual men, distinct from homosexual drag' (Stryker 2017: 58). According to Stryker, 'Transvestia significantly shifted the political meaning of transvestisism, moving it away from an expression of a criminal sexual activity and toward being the common denominator of a new (and potentially political) identity-based minority community' (Stryker 2017: 55).

In a way, Prince led a very narrowly defined movement to depathologise something which had been left as pathologised under medicine when gender-affirming health care was introduced. She also took a term and re-drew its boundaries, removing any associations of queer sexuality, in order to bring the term closer to something that would preserve the respectability of her own social circle. The boundary drawings continued on a community level: from the 1950s onwards Prince took on 'a leading role in driving wedges between transvestite, transsexual, gay and lesbian, and feminist communities' (Stryker 2017: 58). She was not one to 'envision an inclusive, expansive, progressive and multifaceted transgender movement' (ibid.), although some facets of her political labour had the serendipitous potential of benefiting people more widely, for example her campaign to change gender designation on state-issued identity documents. Stryker (ibid.) observes of the Foundation of Personal Expression:

> The membership restrictions of FPE, and the form and content of its meetings, demonstrate a familiar pattern in minority identity politics in US history: it is often the most privileged elements of a population affected by a particular civil injustice or social oppression who have the opportunity to organize first. In organizing around the one thing that interferes with or complicates their privilege, their organizations tend to reproduce that very privilege. This was certainly true of FPE, which was explicitly geared toward protecting the privileges of predominantly white, middle-class men who used their money and access to private property to create a space in which they could express a stigmatized aspect of themselves in a way that didn't jeopardize their jobs or social standing.

What group or institution is allowed to draw the boundaries of a word and use it for self-expression is itself an expression of social authority. The above example is a great passageway into thinking about the ways in which specific language claims can function as powerful devices for staking political claims over the right of existence, your right or that of others. These claims and the sense of social authority they aim to evoke has both material and immaterial consequences. A structure which preserves ownership of a narrative can preserve ownership of resources, of access to services, to jobs and housing, but it can also preserve access to collective meaning-making which creates boundaries for our self-expression and agency: do we need 'an allowance', 'a permission' to relate to a particular term, to access it and to give ourselves a place for expression or sense-making?

In the transmedicalisation section we began the discussion of how transnormativity as a regulatory structure has also disrupted or deprioritised the social and romantic lives of trans people, prevented people from the chance of being in community as a trans person and of emotionally relating together, whether it is through love, tenderness, joy, anger or any other emotional expressions. Looking at the boundaries of terms, and specifically the practices of drawing social boundaries with terms, allows us to ask questions about how power moves between different settings, institutional or bureaucratical and communal. If our understandings of gender are at least partially informed by the narratives of meaningful others who came before us (Johnson 2016: 471), honouring the importance of intersectionality is also honouring trans sociality: it allows us to ask how we wish to be those meaningful others to each other.

This question gives people back their social power, because it looks directly at the dynamics of power that flow between these settings of institutional and communal, when we see the way in which iterations or re-iterations of terms can also be iterations or re-iterations of power. How, then, do we want to orient ourselves within social power? In making community, do we want to perpetuate dynamics which hinge on 'proving' belonging or 'authenticity' through the structure of specific terms? Tove Jansson writes in a letter to her partner Tuulikki Pietilä: 'But has it occurred to you how dangerous it is to constantly be obliged to repeat what one knows – it gets so threadbare! Inevitably the spontaneity goes – and in the end one is nothing but a repetition, a reproduction, a representation' (2019: 374). A sense of obligation points to a sense of structure which governs allowances or permissions to enter, passings in, out and through. To build communities who refuse the reproduction of privilege within structures of hierarchical governance, we must grow ourselves to become

more attuned in recognising how the social power always already in operation is not evenly distributed. Acorn and Ahmed (2016) demonstrate these kinds of conversations:

> Acorn: I'm more into process of exploring whiteness now, that is something that I've been concentrating on, when I look at the world and see what happens and, yeah, and how it limits me and how it bends the world in a certain way, how it makes me not see and how I want to see things that I'm blind for… so I would say that my resistance has probably moved a little bit to that… to whiteness part and privilege

> Ahmed: I write this contribution as a woman of color who finds that gender norms so often remain predicated on unremarkable whiteness: the evocation of a fragile female body who needs to be defended from various racialized and sexualized others. Intersectionality is *this*. It is about ups and downs, stopping and starting; how we pass through at one moment while being stopped at another, depending on who is receiving us, depending on what is being received through us. *An affinity of hammers does not assume we will automatically be attuned to others who are stopped by what allows us to pass through, even when we ourselves have the experience of being stopped.* We have to acquire that affinity. It is what we work toward' (2016: 23, second emphasis mine).

We will talk more about 'passing' in the following sections, but for now I would like to stop at the 'threadbare'. Since structures can govern the qualities of our social relating, what kind of quality do we wish to build? If we change the quality of relating, how might it in turn change the oppressive structures? Can we view new iterations of terms when they arise not as disconnect but as composite strata, layers that cross time and space and thus also remind us not to treat different generations of trans people as lost to time? Community disagreements about terms, through this kind of imagining, could be generative of community, rather than treating disagreements as breaks or ruptures from it. But such an approach requires us to orient our social power to honouring each other, rather than honouring structures that promote hierarchical, centralised forms of authority.

My dream is that we do not treat each other's experiences through language systems and theoretical models that reflect or incentivise power dynamics of hierarchy and dominance. That trans communities are able to cultivate a quality of relating where no-one has to feel that their relevance is contingent on whether their experience is common, or narrativised as such. That people can connect to the sense of residing in themselves with a wholeness and joy, knowing they are enough, without 'trans enough' entering the picture. That we do not need to reach for respectability politics or any other hierarchical tools which promote making our experience socially weighty by making someone else's wispy, threadbare. That we do not

need to compete for visibility through this axis of dominance. Because if we do, we forfeit so much of our promise and care, so much of our capability to change things for better.

My dream for Transgender Studies is for its academic contribution to not be regarded as a niche, sub-category of Queer Studies or Gender Studies, but rather that the more established academic fields take serious notice of the ways in which knowledge production within Trans Studies, and trans communities more widely, can contribute to existing theories on gender and queerness with incredible, challenging insight. In this vein, I would next like to turn to literature that has interrogated queer theory's treatment of trans people and connect this literature to the structures of transnormativity.

4.5 Queer theory's transnormativity: the reveal narrative, the 'traitor' vs. 'possibility model' dichotomy, and abstraction of trans life meanings

Butler reflects that in the beginning of queer theory, the term 'queer' was important, because it 'moved us away from strict identity categories' with its meanings of 'deviating', 'odd', 'awkward' and 'not following in a straight line' (2021: 1:12-1:57). Arlie reflected similarly on the openness and its felt promise in the word 'queer'. For them, trans was a term that called for more 'strategic' usage whereas queer had more open-endedness and with it, more joy:

> I know trans in the original meaning was not supposed to be a very rigid identity category, but I feel like it's used that way often and there's this entire normative narrative about suffering that is related to it, so for me it's more like a strategic word to use but I don't feel completely comfortable with it. But I find a lot of joy in being queer, in the sense that that can include everything that's a bit weird about me [laughs]

As queer theory has grown through the decades, the felt promise of queer as an autonomous and open term has unfortunately not been applied to the discussion of trans lives nearly often enough within queer theory. Instead, the approach of queer studies has remained quite prescriptive and narrow when accounting for ways in which one might deviate from social norms. For example, in the first issue of Transgender Studies Quarterly Love has this to say about the relationship between queer studies and transgender studies: 'While queer is associated primarily with nonnormative desires and sexual practices, and transgender is associated with nonnormative gender identifications and embodiments, it is both theoretically and practically difficult to draw a clear line between them' (2014: 172). Love adds that queer studies 'defines itself as a critical field that questions stable categories of identity' and that 'transgender studies also defines itself against identity' (ibid.). The idea that trans studies is

'against identity' is a curious statement considering what we have just learnt from Bettcher about the need to provide a political basis that secures the rights to expression and existence for trans people's self-identifications in a political and theoretical climate which cannot be relied to support trans people's definite self-identities (Bettcher 2014: 387). Queer studies, Love observes, is also a political endeavour in its anti-normative and anti-identity commitments: its aim is to 'transform the situation of gender and sexual outsiders' (2014: 172).

The interest in interrogating non-normativity coupled with the commitment to 'question stable categories of identity' has led queer studies to pursue methodological and analytical approaches that take only some identities to be capable of mobility and norm negotiation. This has created theorisation that portrays the influence of norms in trans lives in an objectifying, prescriptive manner. Already in 1994, Martin observed that many queer theorists have taken core gender identities to be 'effects of normalising, disciplinary mechanisms' and treated this idea as the analytical basis from which to conceive gender identities as 'only constraining', something to be 'overridden by the greater mobility of queer desires' (1994: 102). Such a view creates an essentialist hierarchy which takes queerness to be inherently more 'mobile' or 'flexible' than gender, and thus also implies that queerness pertains primarily to sexuality rather than gender. Stryker notes that 'queer' has all too often been used as a 'code word' for 'gay' or 'lesbian', resulting in analysis which privileges sexual orientation or identity over other ways of differing from heteronormativity (Stryker 2004: 214, 2006: 7).

So, when it comes to sexuality, queer theory has treated heteronormativity in specific as the 'disciplinary mechanism' whose power to constrain our lives should be dismantled, rather than suggesting that people's sense of sexuality as a whole should be dismantled. But in the case of gender, some queer theorists have generalised this approach of fighting normative stability to the entire existence of gender by suggesting that gender itself can be nothing but normatively constraining, 'an effect of normalising, disciplinary mechanisms' (Martin 1994:102). Queer, on the other hand, gets seen as the place of possibility and transformation. Analysing Love's statement that both queer and trans studies are 'against identity' from this angle, it more seems that through its potent critique of heteronormativity queer theory has been able to affirm non-heterosexual people's sense of identity but has failed to see that the same analytical methods won't necessarily lead to affirming trans experiences (also what about queer, gay, bi, pan and lesbian trans people?).

For trans people who are trying to make sense of their gender, and sometimes transform aspects of it, an epistemological approach that claims gender to never be anything more than a source of suffering or constraint sounds much more like the voice of transnormativity than the voice of affirmation. It runs the risk of portraying trans people in a permanent stasis of discomfort or dysphoria, perpetuating the associations of suffering attached to transness and neglecting the possibilities for meaning-making that trans people might be finding in 'queer', as exemplified by Arlie's reflection above. It also assumes that trans people want to do away with gender, an argument which can be weaponised against trans people, just as it simultaneously ignores the ways in which gender is felt to be meaningful and joyful by trans people. Zeo challenged these ideas when thon reflected:

> I think sometimes there's this discussion of 'doing away with gender' but I don't really think gender is the problem – gender can be such a meaningful thing and really important part of your identity – I think the problem is people not getting to exist comfortably in their gender and in their personhood because of oppressive structures. Just because gender has been used as an oppressive way of organising society doesn't make gender inherently oppressive.

Additionally, centring queer sexuality as mobile is an analytic approach which sets forth very specific suggestions about what is to be taken as 'resistance' in the face of social norms: If gender is always stable, read 'problematically normative', and queer is always mobile, read 'socially transformative', then it follows that the only truly resistant position is one of fluidity. This position forgets that whilst fluidity of gender can be a source of contentment for some trans and gender-variant people, stability can be that very same source for others. It also forgets that fluidity and stability do not need to be opposites in meaning. As the findings of the previous chapter suggest, gender transition is a way to feel 'confident', 'established' or 'at peace' and because of this, it can be conceived as a process of moving from a place of precarity to a place of stability: from not recognising yourself in your gender assigned at birth, and consequently not being recognised as yourself by others, to finding a gender position (or lack of) that reflects your selfhood and being recognised for it. The sense of stability and joy that understanding yourself better and being recognised as yourself can bring is something that can just as well be found in being fluid with one's gender as it can be found in the feeling that you are one, specific gender. Stability is a quality, not a specific expression.

There is clearly more nuance to the relationship between gender and queerness than equating fluidity to non-normativity and stability to normativity and then portraying them as mutually exclusive. Queer theory has tended to not always grapple with nuance when it comes to trans

people's experiences, and instead has been preoccupied with finding out which "side" of queer theory's normativity/anti-normativity binary they fall on. Rubin has highlighted the ways in which trans people have been judged to be either 'gender traitors' or 'gender revolutionaries' (Rubin 2003: 163). Rubin has also observed that such categorisations create dynamics where trans people have been, and are still, expected to carry 'the revolutionary burden of overthrowing gender or imagining what to replace it with' (Rubin 1998, 273), all the while navigating pressure from a gender system which likes to project the alternating categories of 'threat' or 'idolisation' onto trans existence.

What results is an analytic approach that is not interested in witnessing the worth of trans experience beyond moulding them into exemplar case studies or possibility models. Trans lives get turned into objects for arguments about social change, or in some cases pure theoretical abstractions. Chu and Harsin Drager (2019) provide some poignant examples. They point out that moral judgments about body modification have been considered acceptable within queer studies if they are being made in the name of anti-normativity politics: 'if your body modification looks too much like the original ''transsexual medical genre'', your queer cred is toast […] How can *the exact same procedures* sometimes symbolise, for queer theory, the Ghost of Genders Past and other times be the very foundations for new materialist theories of mutability, becoming, and enmeshment?' (2019: 111, emphasis mine). In this kind of framework, the meanings that body modifications hold for trans people become obscured, and the body modifications are externally evaluated based on how much symbolic possibility they offer for the existing framework they are being assimilated into. As Chu and Harsin Drager show, sometimes even recycling the same sentences and simply hyphenating 'queer' with 'trans' passes the bar for trans inclusion in queer theory (2019: 112-12). They quote Barad in 2012 saying:

> Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is. Polymorphous perversity raised to an infinite power: *talk about a queer intimacy!* (Barad 2012: 212-13, emphasis in original)

And again, in 2015, in a wholly separate article:

> Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is. Polymorphous perversity raised to an infinite power: *talk about a queer/trans* intimacy*! (Barad 2015: 399, emphasis in original).

Chu and Harsin Drager point out that 'trans' is doing zero analytical work when it gets subsumed into theoretical trends in this manner, and poignantly ask: 'Which one is it, is matter queer or is matter trans?' (2019: 2013). In addition, one could ask: Is matter matter? Namaste (2005) has noted that being trans involves 'the banality of buying some bread, of making photocopies, of getting your shoe fixed' and the obstacles involved in performing these everyday actions in societal contexts that are oppressive and marginalising in systematic, intersecting ways. Namaste has critiqued theory in which trans lives appear only as ''rhetorical figures'' where the ''voices, struggles, and joys of real transgendered [sic] people in the everyday social world are noticeably absent'' (2000: 16).

During our interview, Sky recounted a story where upon hearing of their transition, someone had asked: 'But if gender is a social construct, why do you need to transition?'. Sky countered the frustrating question with: 'Because I live in this society'. The idea that acknowledging gender as socially constructed would somehow lessen the need to transition shows the effect of abstracting the everyday struggles and joys of trans people, as the impacts of social and cultural ideas of gender do not get recognised in full. It creates situations where gender comfort, as socially constructed in interactions, is assumed to be a space that is in existence apriori: as already constructed, constructed at birth through a gender assignation not to be questioned. Instead, Sky's reflection points us to gender comfort as continuously socially constructing and sometimes in need of re-constructing: transition has the necessary role of facilitating a social space where trans people are offered that same gender comfort and recognition that is already given as a baseline to people whose gender aligns with their gender assigned at birth and thus with the social space as it was previously constructed.

Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin (2020) also analyse materiality, in particular the ways in which academia's material contexts can lead to the erasure of trans knowledge labourers and ask how the fields of queer studies and trans studies should be defined or constituted in relation to each other. They build from Chu and Harsin Drager's point that 'most cited texts about trans people have been the work of non-trans (i.e.. cis) scholars recycling the same citations, concepts and metaphors' (2019: 104). They note that the problem might not be that the authors are cis but that the texts do not in fact represent the field (ibid.). Where is the field of transgender studies? The current academic hiring decisions often treat the fields of queer studies and trans studies as interchangeable or synonymous, in queer studies' favour: in the 2018-19 cycle there were 13 tenure-track job ads that mentioned trans studies listed on the Women/Queer Studies wiki, but 7.5 of them either simply collapsed trans studies into

queer/sexuality studies or listed trans studies in a long list of useful et ceteras (2020: 312). In addition, many knowledge workers are lost due to hostile conditions, inadequate compensations, ideological pushback and emotional cost (2020: 312). It is not that queer theory cannot work to capture trans experiences and interests, it absolutely can, but to do so it needs to both 'address the specificity of trans as a field of study' (Raun 2014: 32) and recognise the real, lived and material contexts of trans people for both their joys and precarities (Namaste 2000; Namaste 2005; Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin 2020).

I am critical of the dynamics of social change promoted by queer theory's approaches towards trans people, if we are to take seriously queer theory's aim 'to transform the situation of gender and sexual outsiders' (Love 2014: 172). And I do believe such aim is worth taking seriously, because change for the better is clearly needed. Looking at both the theoretical and the material aspects covered above, they share in common the tendency to reduce trans experiences to a speculative possibility vessel. Different experiences of gender variety are denied a speaking position from which to creatively generate new wisdom or reconfigure existing knowledge through its own self-meanings, without first being forced to reflect on the meanings that already circulate around the category 'trans'. Raun asks: 'what hopes and fears ''stick'' to, or gets ''stuck'' in relation to trans as a category? What kind of promises are attached to trans – and what kind of ideologies of social change are invested in, and expected to be carried out by, trans identities?' (2014: 14).

Needless to say that ideological positions which promise trans people nothing but constraint and dysphoria, and those positions which promise to respect trans people's genders but only on the condition that trans people first 'overthrow' gender or morph into some kind of non-materialist, symbolic goop to be used in theories of gender do not necessarily sound very promising or secure to trans people as they perpetuate the very dynamics that already undermine the agency of trans people. Trans people become constructed as the dummies that queer theory, with its mobile queer desire, must 'save' from the claws of gender or in some cases, mould into possibilities for gender revolution and a better queer tomorrow which however forgets to take seriously the fact that trans people would also like to exist in that tomorrow.

The effects of this ignorance are deeply felt, and harmful, as demonstrated by Raun (2014). One of three articles that Raun uses to interrogate queer theory's dismissive and dehumanising treatment of trans people is Kaufmann (2010): 'Kaufmann precedes the article

with telling the story about how she made Jessie cry after she read Kaufmann's completed analysis of her narrative construction of gender. Jessie is quoted as saying:" You have taken away the identity I have worked all my life to build . . . Who am I if you take this away?" (Kaufmann 2010: 104). Raun argues that even though Kaufmann recognises that Jessie is staking a claim for her agency in this moment, and consequently tries to use the moment as a chance for self-reflection, the article nevertheless remains self-centred in its focus on what Kaufmann labels 'veiled ideologies and structures' (2010: 114). By insinuating that Jessie is 'veiling' something, Kaufmann (2010) misses the point of the speaking subject: what trans people decide to tell or not tell is an agential negotiation. Despite Jessie's challenge to the article's framing, Kaufmann continues to focus on 'detecting how Jessie's narrative is implicated in heteronormative scripts' in hopes of 'finding a representation [of Jessie] that contributes to a disruption of heteronormativity' (Raun 2014: 30).

 Kaufman sets out to 'save' Jessie from analytic erasure, but centres only herself as a living, breathing person and fails to consider the social and political issues that are present in Jessie's life as well as what Jessie herself makes of those issues (ibid.). Raun asks: who is being given agency and voice in these kinds of readings? And I might add, why does Kaufman assume Jessie must be 'saved', or wants to be saved? From whom/what? And why and how exactly should she be saved from the predicament of Kaufman's reading by the very same methods of detection that placed her there? Who wants to speak here and through what method?

I believe that in addition to addressing 'the specificity of trans as a field of study' (Raun 2014: 32) and recognising the real, lived and material contexts of trans people for both their joys and precarities (Namaste 2005; Namaste 2006; Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin 2020), queer theory must also start asking critical questions about the epistemological possibilities of its own popular methods of study. How does the kind of knowledge that so far has been produced about trans people within queer theory get produced in the first place? And why has it had such severe repercussions for trans people's agency?

Eve Sedgwick has argued that the method of deconstruction has often been taken as an automatic guarantee for the production of critically engaged research, or has retroactively been read as a sign that validates the research as critically engaged. 'Unveiling [has] become the common currency of cultural and historicist studies' (2003: 143), a 'tracing and exposure project' which is 'widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities' (2003: 124-5). In my opinion, queer theory has not paid enough

attention to the way in which this method of deconstruction, or 'unveiling', can in fact be a method which 'uncannily mirrors that of the policing clinician who has gone before: the critic catches us out in out in our duplicity' (Prosser 1998: 131). Raun (2014), in conversation with Prosser (1998), notes that these kinds of research dynamics cast the researcher 'as the knowledgeable subject' who 'outsmarts the subjects being researched', viewing them as 'misled' or 'caught up in their false consciousness' (Raun 2014: 26). Raun shows how trans identities 'seem to inhabit an ambivalent position and be a vulnerable point within a lot of queer theoretical research, constructed as both radically fluid and stagnant'. Whichever end of the spectrum trans identities are deemed to fall, however, much of the work to determine such conclusions is done through a method of 'detecting, mapping, and revealing': trans people's stories get mined for gaps and contradictions which undermines the agency of the storytellers and works to obscure 'the cisgender contexts that trans people […] must negotiate and maneuver' (2014: 23) in order to figure out what information is possible to share in which contexts.

Danielle Said observes of the 'reveal' narrative: 'at stake in reveals is the issue of agency. Inextricably bound to narrative, the reveal can be seized upon by a trans person as a moment to exert agency and reveal oneself, to determine the meaning of one's own life and body' (2014: 176). However, the situation is not so simple when it comes to being visible as yourself, as a trans person. Said continues: 'Unlike the act of coming out for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, which can have the effect of affirming an ''identity'', the reveal results in a predicament in which the meaning of the trans body is contested, and competing ''truths'' vie for dominance'. Thus, even in an act of asserting agency, 'of revealing instead of being revealed', trans people are frequently placed in a situation that demands them to 'continuously reassert and defend their truth' (ibid). Because of the risk of being socially placed 'in contention' simply for articulating something of your gender experience, the stakes of being 'out' and being visible as a non-heterosexual person are different from being 'out' and visible as a trans person (ibid.). Any queer theory which does not recognise this specificity and/or prioritises a 'tracing and exposure' method is unlikely to positively contribute to 'transforming the situation of gender and sexual outsiders' (Love 2014: 172). Sicardi (2018) writes:

> It's not that I'm afraid of ''coming out'' as genderqueer all the time either. I wouldn't describe my reluctance to have these conversations each time they're possible as cowardice, or surrender, because that would imply I would feel value added to who I was if they understood me on my own terms, and that isn't true.

> My privacy matters more to me than being seen ''correctly'' in a space inhospitable to empathy, where nonbinary people are already subject to abuse and violence on a daily basis.

Said does not explicitly discuss the existing, competing ''truths'' against which trans people have to defend their experiences as transnormativity, but I have found this connection useful and have aimed to bring literature together in this way. I believe it is useful because it brings together the two perspectives that characterise much research on transnormativity so far: transnormativity as particular narratives which structure certain meanings as the definitions of what it is to be trans, and transnormativity as a regulatory dynamic of social power that influences who is seen as a legitimate voice on trans experiences. The dynamic of having to 'reassert and defend' one's experiences described by Said fits the analysis of transnormativity as a form of regulatory power well, and additionally Said's arguments on representation used in film and literature can be connected to the narrative functions of transnormativity in new, interesting ways.

Said notes that representations of trans people in popular narrative fiction and film tend to follow a pattern where a character's 'trans status' is discovered by the audience in a manner that functions as a reveal (2014: 176). These reveals were often constructed in ways that are extremely sensationalised, dramatised, eroticised or played for comic effect (ibid.). This manner of 'reveal' has largely functioned as staging: it is a moment in which the audience can experience 'a denaturalisation of widespread assumptions about gender and sex- namely that one's gender must match one's sexed body' (ibid). The intended effect of 'the reveal' has rarely been to permanently destabilise these widespread assumptions, but rather to 'regulate and correct gender noncompliance, narratively reinscribing a binary gender system as ''natural'' and desirable' (ibid.).

Thus, 'the reveal' is set up to imagine an audience that agrees with the naturalisation of the existing, Western binary gender system, is invested in maintaining it and considers it to be the most 'desirable' manner of existing. In this way, the gaze that is cast upon the trans body sees 'cisness' as the natural, assumed state and one which the audience is viewing the trans character from. Said notes: 'structuring an audience's knowledge of a character's transgender status as a reveal can contribute to the perception that living a transgender life involves concealing 'the truth' of sexed bodies' (2014: 177). The idea that existing as a trans person is a form of 'concealment' suggests that it is, on some level, a form of secrecy which covers up some underlying truth to be unearthed.

Thus, we could say that 'discovery' or 'reveal' has functioned both as a transnormative narrative and as a method of representation which uses trans lives and bodies to reinforce existing, dominant narratives of sex and gender. This method of representation has far too often been utilised in a way where the trans person is portrayed as ''losing'' to the dominant discourses about trans lives (ibid.). Indeed, the implication of '"concealment" at best and '"deceit" at worst', as Sofie put it, is a power dynamic which already places the trans person in a losing position: it suggests that what is visible is somehow a lack compared to what is presumed hidden, and that what is visible is thus of less importance compared to 'the truth' that could be unveiled.

As we saw in the previous chapter, gender transitions in their varying forms are experienced as the opposite of lack: they lead people to a sense of fullness in themselves, as well as resulting in people experiencing life itself as both more possible and more fulfilling. 'Unveiling' signs of being trans in somebody does not 'reveal' the claims about gender and sex made in name of cisnormativity as true. It only reveals a tendency to harm, disregard or misunderstand trans people's self-expression.

In addition, it reveals a systemic attempt to portray trans bodies as imagined 'cis bodies': In the section on transmedicalisation I raised the idea that watchful waiting is a form of symbolic conversion therapy because it operates on a hope that people who want to transition simply grow out of that desire with time. Such a hope is rooted in a motivation to prioritise a future possibility of an imagined 'cis body' over an actionable wellbeing for trans people in the here and now. Let that sink in. The idea of an imagined 'cis body' existing in the future is given higher priority than the actual trans lives existing in the now whose gender non-congruence is hoped to be 'corrected' by time. Arguments about delaying transition often base themselves on the idea that transition forecloses future options of embodiment, but in doing so these arguments fail to see that delaying transitioning is already an act of foreclosure (Ashley 2019: 226). Trans joy also evidences that transitions are felt as the opposite of foreclosure: they open up future options of embodiment.

In cinema the imagined 'cis body' has been the body of a prospective audience who are meant to witness the 'revealed' trans embodiment as a lesson that 'corrects gender non-compliance, narratively reinscribing a binary gender system as ''natural'' and desirable' (Said 2014: 177). If trans people are portrayed as 'concealing' a presumed 'truth of sexed bodies', then what is being read as an underneath of the visible trans embodiment in such portrayals is a hope for a

cis skin that aligns with such views. This imagined cis skin gets cast as an interiority of trans existence, as the inner sense that is presumed to be 'underneath' a physical exteriority, rather than treating it as a cisnormative gaze that hangs its meanings and questions on top of trans bodies. Allen (2019) describes these moments of 'cisgender othering': 'Some who see me now are excited about my apparent difference. In a restaurant, a waitress ran over, grinning, nearly shouting, ''What are you?''.

When looking at the transnormative processes of 'revealing' and 'unveiling', the cisgender othering that gets cast onto trans embodiment should be understood as more than an inaccurate representation, as it concerns itself with more than what is visible: by trying to construct a specific kind of 'underneath', it tries to pass its own meanings of 'trans' as an interiority of trans experience. What does this kind of dynamic do to the visibility of trans self-meanings? It attempts to configure the conditions of trans visibility into a space where the cisgender gaze no longer appears as an intrusive, external mode of 'looking in' but rather that which was under the trans embodiment all along. The trans embodiment is now misnamed as 'a veil'. The cisgender gaze tries to pass itself off as 'the core' from which trans embodiment looks out into the world, as if trans embodiments oriented their senses and sense-making in line with cisnormative structures. Such a suggestion evicts trans people's voices from the centre of meaning-making both about transness and about gender, as if gender had nothing to do with transness and transness had nothing to contribute to gender. Acorn reflected on the fraught dynamic between invisibility and visibility, of finding your own sense but lacking a space where it is understood and recognised as part of our collective existence:

> the very ambigueness in me, which is in a sense it's not ambiguous, it's very clear, it's clear and to me, bright, balanced, powerful and joyful… […] I guess that the hardest part is being invisible all the time, okay maybe your closest friends and your family or whoever they are, that see you, but otherwise you're always invisible, that can be a bit sad, that actually they don't know who I am, especially as gender non-conforming with all those pronouns here and there, they still don't know who you are… and you cannot be seen, it's impossible to be, go out, into the street, into the city and be seen as who you are, there is no such space, it's still there, the fact that I'm invisible as my non-gender [chuckles] but that's like fighting windmills, it's useless

So, not only does the 'reveal' narrative subject trans people to an inspection of 'authenticity', it structures the criteria for authenticity around cisness as a given which is more readily, more desirably absorbed as 'truth'. Just as coming out can raise unique concerns for different trans people, and concerns unique from coming out as 'gay', so does the carrying around of this

'cis skin' that is hang upon you: 'Passing as cis, to me, means waking up every day knowing I'm never going to be read as who I am by most people, but also that I logically should be relieved of the burden of fighting for my specific personhood. It means asking the questions: Who gets to be seen as who they are? Who has to do ''the work'' of educating, and of becoming educated? What work must be done to prove me as real? And to who? Why? How?!' (Sicardi 2018)..

Q described a moment that could be seen as the reversal of this kind of project that reads 'a cis skin' with 'cis gaze' as the underneath of someone's transness. They compared the process of having been assigned a gender at birth to having received an unwanted giftbox that they had to carry around through life and did not know how to take back to the store. Q recounted how realising you were trans was like understanding for the first time that the box came with a receipt, a life-time returns policy, that you did not have to carry it 'but could just put it down'. Connecting this to trans joy was a way for Q to arrive at a feeling of 'a real you, sitting comfortably in your body rather than wearing it awkwardly, uncomfortable skin on top of your own'. How could a space for trans visibility be created that facilitates these kinds of opportunities for connection, where your skin no longer feels as if it is hang on you with uncomfortable gender imaginations and can instead be experienced for what it always was: yours all along?

4.6 'How to actually see the potential that exists' - Trans joy as dreaming new worlds of gender possibility

To engage in a trans studies-informed exposure project of our own, I suggest we should treat the 'detect and expose' method that queer studies, medicine and mainstream media have all engaged in by turning it around on itself and showing it the mirror, where it can be revealed *to itself* in all its self-exhibitionist glory: staring back at it will be its own 'truncated and instrumentalised readings of trans' (Raun 2014: 15) which, like a far too conservatively sized fig-leaf, can barely cover what is behind its strategic placing[18].

With the audience's gaze fixed firmly on the pithy leaf, its edges curl and an entirely different kind of concealment is revealed: What was being passed off as an interest in gender diversity

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[18] For any associations of biblical imagery this metaphor might bring up, I thank Ronin for inspiration in his critique of how Christianity as a colonial hungover, and more specifically Bible passages, are sometimes used in attempts to shame trans people in social media in the Philippines. For anyone who might find it useful, one faith resource demonstrating Bible's acceptance of transgender people can be found at: https://www.hrc.org/resources/what-does-the-bible-say-about-transgender-people

and trans experience was not about actual trans people at all, but more about how trans people's experiences can serve the particular claims about sex and gender that the speaker wishes to make (notice the double-implication that trans people are not the speakers). And since the 'reveal' narrative-method builds its claims upon the idea that different ways of being gendered can be classed into 'real/authentic' and 'fake/inauthentic', this classification should be our first clue in realising that such methods of depicting trans life were never made from a place of genuine, respectful interest for different trans experiences and human gender diversity more widely. They could not be, because their processes of classification into 'fake/real', 'healthy/pathological', 'normative/anti-normative', all hang on the presumption that a truthful criterion for normative classifications can be found. Next in line in our practice of resistant reading, we need to understand the fiction of norms: why norms are unable to capture variation and are thus impossible standards for lived human expression. We will then discard them for something else, or somewhere else:

> Sky: now I see the potential and the fact that actually there's plenty of people who I will still get to be friends with and be in a relationship with and we don't have to just feel like we won't belong, we actually belong somewhere else.

4.6.1 Norms: impossible fictions and inefficient tools for capturing lived human expression

Statistical norms, or regularities in statistical averages, have culturally transformed into evaluative thinking which treats norms as standards of human value. Adolphe Quételet, working in the 19th century, believed that the statistical average was not only proof of divine laws but that by measuring numeral averages one could capture the ideal essence of humanity, ' l'homme moyen' or 'the average man (Warner 2000:56-57). Treating statistical norms as an ideal expression of humanity meant that 'normal, conceived as average, emerged as an ideal type to be desired' (Kubergovic 2013). Through Quételet's work, statistical norms transformed into evaluative norms: criterions of value for full personhood. Quételet's work played a key role in the origin of eugenics and other racist pseudociences (ibid.), as well as being widely influential in popularising the use of statistical methods in both social sciences and medicine more widely (Warner 2006: 56-57).

When the notion of a statistical norm as a measurement for ideals in human expression came to be applied socially, it started to take on new connotations: 'normal came to mean right, proper, healthy. What most people are… is what most people should be' (Warner 2000: 53). Now, in the context of medicine's social authority, if 'normal' is healthy then a deviation

from an average becomes by contrast 'unhealthy', or 'pathological'. Here, Warner says, we can see the social pressure for the desire to be 'normal': who can blame a desire for normalcy if the only alternative presented is 'being abnormal, deviant, or not being one of the rest us? Put in those terms, there doesn't seem to be a choice at all' (Warner 2000: 53). By declaring that the only available options are 'to be saved or be damned' (Warner 2000: 59), normativity is able to appear as an aspirational force societally. There lies 'a deep sense of judgment' within normativity due to the ways in which it has been used as a tool of social evaluation: it offers to those who pass as representing a statistical majority a chance to feel superior to those who do not (Warner 2000: 56). The state of inhabiting 'a majority' becomes a place designed to garner respect and a sense of entitlement to a higher degree of authority.

These dynamics of normativity have been widely applied, as normativity has grown to be an institutionally, culturally and socially enforced concept that places people into hierarchical categories based on social definitions of ''normal'' (Vipond 2015:23). Examples of such categories include, but are not limited to: race, class, (mental and physical) ability, sexual orientation, gender and sex (ibid.). Vipond further notes that to be truly normative is to meet all of the criteria of a strictly applied classification: 'white, middle class, mentally and physically able, heterosexual, cisgender, and, typically, male', and anyone who deviates from this strict classification is in one or more senses nonnormative (ibid.). Similarly, Warner (2000) argues that a truthful analysis of a statistical average does not represent it as a fixed point, because when it comes to our experiences and behaviours the human average is in fact variation: 'Everyone deviates from the norm in some way. Even if one belongs to the statistical majority in age group, race, height, weight, frequency of orgasm, gender and sexual partners, and annual income, *then simply by virtue of this unlikely combination of normalcies one's profile would already depart from the norm.*' (2000: 54-55, emphasis mine).

So even though normativity was influenced by the idea of capturing a statistical average of something, the social classification of normativity outlines an ideal that does not represent the average of most people's experiences. Normativity itself is an idealisation, and I argue that it is necessary for it to function as an idealisation in order to be able to uphold social hierarchies. Since statistical norms were used as evaluative norms from the outset, their evaluative and statistical functions became mutually constitutive. They were never designed to capture a generalisable human experience, which is variation, but rather to make specific social classes appear as the generalisable ideal to legitimate their position of power and authority within colonial, racist, ableist, capitalist, cisnormative and heteronormative social

structures, or otherwise to legitimate the idea of hierarchy itself by suggesting that an ideal majority can be found, thus necessitating the division of people into majorities and minorities and also justifying the oppression of those placed socially lower in the hierarchy by conceiving their personhood as lesser.

Taking this further, because of the dual nature built into normativity, the 'be saved or be damned' (Warner 2000: 59), normal has no meaning by itself but needs a reference point (Hacking 1996 in Wolbring 2013). This means that as well as normativity being an idealisation, it is also a social device of othering. These facets work in tandem when it comes to normativity. Above we saw that norms as idealisations do not capture social reality in its variation (Warner 2000; Vipond 2015). And yet, norms get presented as standards and averages supposedly applicable to all, thus making social positions that are unattainable by design to most people appear as aspirational pathways to power and respect for all.

The effects of normativity's power in framing knowledge have been manifold. In medicine, it has resulted in blindness to the ways in which biological norms are socially and culturally inferred. For medicine, the statistical and evaluative functions of a norm were entwined from the outset: medicine adopted Quételet's idea that an ideal measure for human value could be found, with the exception that medicine believed the source of this measure to be 'natural' rather than 'divine'. As a result, medicine's idea of 'natural' grew to be filtered through specific social ideals about what distinguishes a healthy state from a pathological state. Medicine has failed to recognise how the idea of a biological norm is in fact an expression of social norms (Canguilhem 1991: 158 in Warner 2000: 57; for social norms pertaining to sex assignation see Lugones 2007: 194-195). This has resulted in practices which recognise and distribute the need for health and safety inherent to all human life unevenly.

For example, the research into skin cancer has focused on white skin, creating diagnostic tools which are not as perceptive in how skin cancer manifests on brown and black skin, which in turn results in worse prognosis of skin cancer for people of colour (Buster and Ezenwa 2019). All lives are not evaluated as equally deserving of care, love and health under medicine's microscope. The ramifications of this are wide-reaching in how medicine teaches us to think about human life: the use of statistical norms as evaluative norms in medicine has resulted in ongoing practices where divisions of health and disease are informed by ideas about socially defined categories of people, instead of actually being informed by physiological phenomena.

This is an epistemological framing that encourages us to treat socially defined categories as if they were reliable presentations of what it is to be human.

In 2016, Hoffman et al. documented ongoing racist misconceptions held by medical students and staff: participants were asked to determine whether statements such as 'Blacks' skin is thicker than Whites' were true or false; in this example 58 % of lay public and 25-42 % of medical students and staff responded with ''true''. Overall, the study showed that multiple false beliefs such as this were shared by both the public and medical trainees, and the study received widespread acclaim for bringing attention to this problem. However, Deyrup and Graves (2022) critique the article for still discussing the terms ''Black'' and ''White'' as if they referred to 'true biologic entities, not the socially defined groups these terms actually identify'. As a result, the article fails to convey the fact that in actuality, any physiological or anatomical traits do not map onto socially defined racial categories (ibid). In doing so, it perpetuates rather than challenges the conditions which maintain medical misconceptions about racialisation of disease: when up to date science on human biological variation is not emphasised in the training and research, disease entities end up being described in terms of socially defined categories such as 'the gender ratio among affected patients, the typical age onset, and often associations with socially defined races' (Deyrup and Graves 2022).

Deyrup and Graves conclude that given the long history of racialisation of health and disease, generations of misinformation need to be corrected through ongoing training focused on biological variation and biological diversity (ibid). Such a move would ensure that the misconceptions which organise biological variation as if it mapped onto socially defined categories no longer get perpetuated. By changing the methodological tools through which information on physiology gets represented, the effects of this information change as well, as it no longer produces the idea that socially defined categories are a reliable way of representing human experiences in their variety.

In queer theory and activism, the social authority of medicine has been questioned in an attempt to transform the power of social norms. Warner writes: 'One of the reasons why so many people have started using the word ''queer'' is that it is a way of saying: 'We're not pathological, but don't think for that reason we want to be normal'' (2000: 59). This has at times been both a response to the wider societal status quo that takes heteronormativity for granted, and thus codes queerness out of it, and an intra-community response by gay, lesbian, bi and queer communities that aims to prevent an assimilationist gay-rights model which

accepts the baggage of 'normal' instead of recognising norms for what they are: exclusionary expressions of social and moral evaluation that advocate preferences for certain ways of living (ibid.)

Wrestling with the reality that 'norms structure our desires' (Chu and Harsin Drager 2019: 107), one important facet of queer writing and living has thus been exploring the potential for cultural subversion in sexualities that are seen as societally non-normative (of course, they are only 'non-normative' in relation to a given norm). If the prevailing norms do not represent or accept your desires, erase them or label them 'immoral', challenging normativity can be a necessary tool that makes space for you to connect with your desires. But can an approach that takes desires termed non-normative and argues that they are preferable ways of living truly get away from centring the idea of a norm? Or does it, too, involve a division of desires and behaviours into non-normative and normative ones, and thus risk perpetuating the idea that a reliable criteria for hierarchy can be found?

Perhaps fluidity has been so conceptually appealing to queer theory, because it can provide us with analytic imagery that resists being pinned down to either side of the 'reinforcing vs. resisting' dichotomy that queer theory has applied to people's enmeshment with social norms. When we remember that 'normal' has no meaning by itself but needs a reference point (Hacking 1996 in Wolbring 2013), fluidity seems to offer an option that escapes the duality that is built into normativity as a tool of social othering: whereas anti-normativity needs normativity to exist in order to be a resistant reference point to it, fluidity needs neither normativity nor anti-normativity. In fact, the interest in fluidity as a concept seems to mirror the bigger picture queer theory has had of itself, as queer theory has on the whole wanted to resist strict definitions of what it is: 'Queer theory remains difficult to define, largely by design' (Denton 2014: 28). Nicolazzo adds that the 'inability to find a stable, recognised definition of queer theory' is possibly the by-product of the project 'at the heart of much queer theoretical research: the challenging of what are presumed to be the rigid, seemingly solid categories of identity' (2016: 1176). Thus, queer theory has imagined both itself and 'fluidity' as something that is removed or mobile in relation to a presumed rigidity of identity categories. Pairing fluidity with mobility has seemed to be the promise of freedom from normative constraints that queer theory has on some level become invested in.

However, I would argue that the analysis that much queer theory has applied to fluidity so far has in fact tied it back to normativity. The logic has seemed to be as follows: since social

norms have been created that are clearly exclusionary and since being labelled as 'abject or deviant [in relation to the norm] has real effects on one's life chances' (Nicolazzo 2016: 1173), and since these norms in some way manage to influence how we constitute our identities and how we feel about ourselves and our desires, the identity choice left is one of 'anti-normativity' as 'anti-identity': we are something, despite the norms not being made in our image, and perhaps precisely because they were not made in our image. This position is one way to understand Love's previously cited proposition that queer theory is anti-normative and anti-identity (2015: 172): it is anti-identity in so far as it wants to contest the influence of norms in identity construction.

Such a move clearly allows for a possibility of undoing something, but does it also allow for a possibility of arriving somewhere else, somewhere that is not simply 'anti' in the face of life-destroying circumstances but offers a space to thrive, a space that is not forever 'exiting' and 'coming out' of normativity but is also about arriving and living life, perhaps even resting? A space where stability with identity is not presumed to equal rigid, constrained normativity, and thus trans people's desire to develop a strong sense of self in a gendered world is not shunned? Does escaping definition into fluidity, or escaping the practice of defining fluidity, truly exit norms anyway? Can it take us to a place outside of norms, undoing the power of norms as forms of social hierarchy? What if, analysed for its lived contexts, fluidity has been used as an 'anti-identity' force which is not an entry into full personhood but rather a denial of it?

C. Riley Snorton calls us to consider 'what cultural apparatuses arrange [the meeting] between instrument and body' (2017: 54) in medical and scientific evaluation. Snorton studies the archive of the physician James Marion Sims whose medical career is seen as foundational for American gynaecology but was simultaneously reliant on the existence of chattel slavery. Snorton connects the international acclaim Sims received for his treatment of vesicovaginal fistula (VVF), a breach in the vaginal wall which often occurs in obstructed childbirth, to the 'life of flesh that resides in the series of instruments and procedures, including Sims's speculum, catheter and sutures', and also to 'what VVF and its cure reveal about the relationship between sex and ungendered flesh' (2017: 20).

Thus, Snorton (2017) connects the way in which racialisation of disease (Deyrup and Graves 2022) is entwined with racialisation of gender, and in particular the un-gendering that people of colour have historically had to face when 'gender' has been culturally constructed as a

human characteristic pertaining to whiteness (Lugones 2007; Lugones 2010). Snorton demonstrates how Sims invoked national pride and cultural notions of gender that are deeply embedded in America's racist and settler-colonialist nation-state project as way of providing a 'theopolitical justification for mechanisms of pain and control' (2017: 18). Sims justified the value of his work by suggesting that it had the ability to restore women to 'feminine normalcy' (2017: 24, 36). Yet both Sims and his biographer erase the reality that the institution of chattel slavery, and the cultural meanings of gender and race it both rested on and perpetuated, made the category of 'feminine normalcy' socially inaccessible to the enslaved women Sims required for his work (Snorton 2017: 24-36).

For all Sims' invocations of God, country and feminine normalcy, Snorton reads the archive for its gaps and shows how there are also slippages in Sims' language which reveal what lay behind the cultural apparatuses used to justify Sim's work: that in the founding of American gynaecology the restorative effects of the treatment were preserved for an 'imagined constituency of suffering white womanhood' whilst the cases of VVF among chattel persons were treated by the medical establishment as further evidence of an imagined 'black inferiority', 'insistent as the 19th medical establishment was to find bodily ''proof'' for racial hierarchies' (Snorton 2017: 20). Here again we can witness as unabashedly exposed both the evaluative function of norms in medical science and the drive to group physiological phenomena according to socially defined groups discussed earlier.

We also see the effect of these choices clearly, as they result not only in valuing the worth of some lives above others, but also in not recognising some lives as lives. Snorton draws our attention to how Sims repeatedly treats the names of the women as interchangeable, and links this to the way that their collective status as slaves allowed their bodies to be encountered by clinicians as 'test subjects that were immanently analgesic or congenitally impervious to pain, and, by the very condition of slavery, inexhaustibly available in their interchangeability (2017: 24). VVF was a disabling condition that made one unfit to work in the plantations but fit for work in 'hospital as the laboratory', as Sims' dependence on disabled captives became another mode for putting their bodies to work as flesh' (Snorton 2017: 27). Thus, in the 'medical plantation', whole beings were made into 'bodies' which were further made into 'flesh' that could be put to work according to 'a model of medical knowledge in which life and death were to be managed according to the wishes of slaveholders' (Schwartz 2010: 287 in Snorton 2017: 23). This unethical chain of cultural and material signification produced an onto-epistemological framework where captive bodies were recognised as if they were 'a

disarticulation of human form from its anatomical features' and as a result 'their claims to humanity were controverted in favour of the production and perpetuation of cultural institutions' (Snorton 2017: 18). Snorton further notes that chattel slavery was constitutive to the way in which sex and gender came to be expressed as effects of racial science and that racialisation of sex and gender were key in these processes of dehumanisation (2017: 41).

Race, like other social groupings designed to divide people, is 'a fake, made-up thing with material, crushingly real consequences' (Patel 2015 in Nicolazzo 2016: 1177). There are ruptures in queer theory particularly when it comes to race and class (Nicolazzo 2016: 1176) and most often white queer theorists 'fail to acknowledge and address racial privilege' (Johnson 2001: 5 in Nicolazzo 2016: 1177). The struggles with intersectionality that queer theory has had and the anti-black racism embedded in queer theory (Johnson 2001 in Nicolazzo 2016: 1176) have resulted in essentialist understanding of normativity and anti-normativity. These understandings perpetuate the dynamics of othering built into 'normalcy' as a form of hierarchy that always requires a reference point to realise its meaning. The idealisation of fluidity and mobility as inherently norm-resisting can be seen as another reading of 'a cis skin' onto a trans experience in so far as it ignores key contexts about the racialisation of gender: that ideas about fluidity of gender have been used to code whiteness as the fully human gender position (Snorton 2017; Lugones 2007); that whilst a focus on suffering is indeed a one-sided portrayal of trans life within that focus only some gendered suffering has been broadly recognised and cared for; and that histories of colonial violence are also histories of cisgender violence since the mutilation of trans and Indigenous flesh was what made possible the integration of [cis]People of Colour into the gender-sex binary, even if primarily as failures (Brooklyn 2020: 454).

Brooklyn argues that the oppositional distinction of cis and trans was a tool of colonialism that was used to 'demarcate the bodies that coloniality found salvageable if assimilated into identity categories, and the flesh that coloniality must abject in order to maintain its monopoly on the conditions for gender possibility' (2020: 455). Under the settler-colonialist state of US, this involved violent practices enacted by the colonisers which deeply disrupted the social relations within Indigenous communities, such as the practice of feeding Two-Spirit people to dogs as a form 'disciplining Indigenous communities into submission, until eventually [cis]people of color enacted this violence on their own communities' (Brooklyn 2020: 465). Thus, 'the gender binary actively maintains the opposition of cis and trans in order to even

make distinctions of ''man'' and ''woman'' or ''human'' and ''nonhuman'' viable'. (Brooklyn 2020: 456).

The possibility of 'living otherwise' that both queer theory and medicine have envisioned has not been uniformly applied but have rather tended to favour upholding normative hierarchies of suffering and comfort. In doing so, they have perpetuated the dynamic that is essential to hierarchy where certain bodies and their livelihoods are treated as interchangeable to secure the comfort of those placed higher on the hierarchy. Radi has summarised queer theory as reluctant to be affected by 'trans* approaches', because it has 'functioned as a label that both guarantees the inclusion of trans* people as objects of inquiry and hinders their very participation in these same academic spaces' (2019: 44). What does it mean to be primarily seen as an object of inquiry? As well as norms being purposeful failures of capturing lived human variation, the dehumanising hierarchy that strikes through the core of normativity seems to be that of animacy: to be made an object places you lower in the hierarchy of animacy, your life no longer fully humanly animated but rather witnessed primarily as an extractable resource (Chen 2012: 49 in Brooklyn 2020: 456-457).

In reflecting upon this, we can also remember back to the prior example in this chapter, where Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin discussed the labour of a 'lost trans scholar' who is disappeared by hostile conditions, inadequate compensation, ideological pushback, and emotional cost (2020: 312). As Sims' tools were patented to be proprietary, so has privatised academia as the proprietor of information adopted the colonial and capitalist logic where the labour of some people is incorporated into a structure as interchangeable to secure the prospering of other careers. To first be made labour and then to have your labour make you visible only as an object: what option for genuine intimacy is there in such terms? And how could we get to a space where we can talk about the material of our bodies as something more than labour? Where the closeness of our bodies to each other is not labour, and we can desire intimacy with each other in a different way? Where norms, with their impossibly dehumanising fictions and standards unfit for variation, no longer compel us to relate socially as if our lives could be made reference points to them?

4.6.2 Trans joy: a space of radical possibility

> This is about some of the ways we are attempting to dream ways to access care deeply, in a way where we are in control, joyful, building community, loved, giving, and receiving, that doesn't burn anyone out or abuse or underpay anyone in the process. This is for us and by us, and it is also for everyone who thinks of

themselves as able-bodied and normatively minded, who may not be, who will not always be, who the ghost of the need for care still dances with as the deepest fate-worse-than-death fear, as what you want the most but can't even let yourself speak.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018:1)

I hear you whisper honey don't run from desire for so long it will turn you into stone. You'll only end up angry and breaking whatever you can.

Kae Tempest (2023: 52)

A desire for a norm may be a complicated thing, but it should not be used as a rod against our backs to punish ourselves and each other with, because that is precisely how norms already bear down punitively on the lives of so many people. Trans joy reads that desire differently, for its lived content: It starts from that place which recognises that norms are failures in capturing lived human expression whilst at the same time recognising that norms have been coded and enforced as measurements for the value of people's humanity. In this kind of social dynamic, a desire for a norm can be understood as a desire to be valued. To have your way of life valued, or to enter a way of life that is valued. To pass can be a desire for safe recognition and a loss of intimacy at the same time. Or as Sofie put it:

> The idea of trans joy that I desire is a kind of joy that is not possible – where I am able to be completely honest about my transgender status without impacting my standing as a woman. It is a rub that Sandy Stone so eloquently surmised already in 1987, that I find myself constantly returning to and unable to satisfactorily (or indeed joyously) negotiate—the simultaneous acknowledgement that "[t]he essence of transsexualism is the act of passing," while also noting that "by creating totalized, monistic identities, forgoing physical and subjective intertextuality, [transsexuals who pass] have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships.

Ahmed draws on feminist, black and queer critiques of happiness to draw out 'the unhappy effects of happiness': how happiness has been made to work through the promise that happiness is what you get by having the right associations (2010: 2). Maybe the issue is precisely that happiness can be so strongly associated with norms (ibid). That norms have been designed to appear as the promise towards social goods regardless of whether those social goods are systematically made accessible to your demographic. This association is what made the question of how far norms can truly take us so important to this piece about trans joy, because trans joy was a space of possibility in my data: what can it do for us, what can't it (yet) do? Since 'happiness shapes what coheres as a world' (ibid.), how might trans joy be a form of happiness that coheres the world differently?

As a result of trans joy being a space of possibility, I have come at you with a lot of questions; we have been adding them like pearls to a chain throughout this chapter:

A structure which preserves ownership of a narrative can preserve ownership of resources, of access to services, to jobs and housing, but it can also preserve access to collective meaning-making which creates boundaries for our self-expression and agency: do we need 'an allowance', 'a permission' to relate to a particular term, to access it to give a place for expression or sense-making?

How, then, do we want to orient ourselves within social power? In making community, do we want to perpetuate dynamics which hinge on 'proving' belonging through specific terms?

But can an approach that takes desires termed non-normative and argues that they are preferable ways of living truly get away from centring the idea of a norm? Or does it, too, involve a division of desires and behaviours into non-normative and normative and thus risk perpetuating the idea that a truthful norm can be found? Such a move clearly allows for a possibility of undoing something, but does it also allow for a possibility of arriving somewhere else, somewhere that is not simply 'anti' in the face of life-destroying circumstances but offers a space to thrive, a space that is not forever 'exiting' and 'coming out' of normativity but is also about arriving and living life, perhaps even resting?

What is it to be trans and free and in community?

How could a space for trans visibility be created that facilitates these kinds of opportunities for connection, where your skin no longer feels as if it is hang on you with uncomfortable gender imaginations and can instead be experienced directly for what it always was: yours all along?

How could we get to a space where we can talk about the material of our bodies as something more than labour? Where the closeness of our bodies to each other is not labour, and we can desire intimacy with each other in a different way? Where norms, with their impossible fictions and standards unfit for variation, no longer compel us to relate socially as if our lives could be made reference points to them?

These questions have grown out of the way in which my participants challenged transnormativity and thus also redrew the possibilities for safe, joyous recognition. Asking

them opens up spaces for possibility and imagination. bell hooks (1989: 20) writes about the impact of racist segregation:

> Across those tracks (in a small, segregated Kentucky town) was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the of town. Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as on the margin. We understood both.

Emery said that trans joy is not about coping, because it does not only provide protection or survival; rather it is resistance because it is 'what we make space for ourselves with, in a society that doesn't necessarily make space for us'. The space people made for themselves with trans joy showed up in my data concretely as moments which allowed people to distance themselves from transnormativity, to make space to exist outside of it and when it came too close, to look at it in the eye and turn inside out that which first came from the outside in:

> Arlie: when I walked into that space (trans community space) and suddenly nobody cared, it was just, nobody questioned my right to be there or my right to define myself as I am, and I realised okay these pressures are coming from somewhere completely different, these are coming from the cisnormative society

This mode of seeing was an aspect of trans joy which transformed it into a place of gender possibility, where structures of oppression no longer maintained monopoly or control over people's stories. This mode of seeing showed up when Acorn gleefully reflected on how someone they knew had remained calm and blasé in the face of heteronormativity, shrugging it off by saying nonchalantly 'you can bring your heteronormativity to me'. In that interaction there lived a joyful 'Yep I already know, what of it?'. It showed up when Emery talked about living in their body in their own terms, witnessing the assumptions of others who 'assume that they can have power over me within their framework' even when 'I'm successfully opting out of it', and how confounding that could be for people, just as it was confidence-giving and centring for Emery:

> you probably won't understand my gender and you might be confused by it, but you'll still be even more confused because you'll still find me attractive and that's gonna fuck with your head and I love it

It showed up too when Q reflected on how acceptance, care and respect should not be bounded to normative standards of beauty and health, drawing together parallels between

fatness, transness and disability, and discussed how even in a world organised in such oppressively bounded ways it is possible to find beauty in your sense of self:

> going back to body positivity, that has made some kinds of fatness a bit more acceptable, maybe. But it's very much like it's very bounded, like only if you are only this fat, not beyond that much, or often 'you can be fat but only if you're still beautiful', it's like meh, you don't decide people's value based on whether they're pretty, and it's very 'oh fat is fine but I just worry about the health things', or 'oh as long as you're healthy, it's fine you can be fat', well you know disabled people still deserve to be treated with humanity (…) it [oppression] very much focuses around us [trans people] as these broken things, as these tragic characters who, then seeing parallels with like how disabilities are often portrayed as these sad things who exist to teach lessons to other people I think there's absolutely something powerful around being like 'I'm trans, but that doesn't make me broken, that doesn't make me sad, capitalism is what makes me sad' (…) yeah embracing and loving parts of yourself which society tells should not be seen as a positive thing is something I think absolutely connects to defiance

Q's reflection ties in with how the critique showed up in my data overall: it was often about more than taking apart specific transnormative narratives, it was also about critiquing the mechanics of the whole system: the way it gives different trans people visibility not in their own right but only in service capacity, only to teach lessons in service to specific claims or stories, often not told by trans people themselves.

hooks writes about marginality as not a site of deprivation but a site of radical possibility: within it, there exists a mode of seeing which impresses a sense of wholeness on your consciousness, born out of 'an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole' (1989: 20). The world view created in the space of marginality as radical possibility is 'a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggles to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and solidarity' (ibid.). It is a space of resistance found in ways of being that give people the possibility of 'a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds' (ibid.). This perspective resists the hopelessness and collective despair that is created when oppressed people are made to know marginality primarily as a site of deprivation. It questions why people are more often silenced when speaking about marginality as a space that nourishes one's capacity to resist and struggles for freedom of expression (ibid.).

Trans joy was both freedom of expression and a struggle for it simultaneously. Everyone who participated in this research did the work of managing 'public awareness' and 'private

acknowledgment' organically, as if it was part of the course of discussing transness. There existed a clear awareness that there are stakes involved when discussing trans lives and as a result emotion was not individualised, but also reflected upon from a community or collective perspective. My participants would reflect on their position within trans communities and wider society, for example in terms of what kinds of passing, if any, were available to them and what the implications of that were. They also repeatedly said things like 'to me', and 'I don't think this is the case for every trans person'. Multiple people raised the point that the discussion of emotions needs to remain diverse, where joy has a significant place but other emotions also have an importance, so as to avoid creating another monistic and totalised emotional experience of transness. In these moments, it was like the community that was not physically there was still kept in company. These acknowledgments were a way to exist in full, combining autonomy and connection. A full self who knows itself as full, as integral, and as carrying the integrity that says: I will not be integral in this system in any which way, it is also in my terms. Zeo wrote:

> I think there is something there about the potential of trans joy to free us from that which we have been shamed for by society and from norms that we have not been able to fit in. But I also want to make a point that my gender transition is not about freeing myself of feminine socialisation, it's not some escapist act. I feel like that's a very cisnormative reading of it and also one that TERFS use.

So, it was not that the necessity to navigate the separation between the margin and centre was removed by trans joy, at least not initially, but the emotional expectation of needing to comment on 'existing' forms of recognition was changed. When themes of difficulty came up they could be transformed by the shared understanding that transness is not inherently about difficulty and consequently that discussing transness through other emotional perspectives does not make it any less essential and it most definitely does not make it disappear. The topic of trans joy allowed for a space where the careful labour Sky had to spend explaining why medical transition did not make them any less non-binary all of a sudden seemed ridiculous when the response to that labour was: 'But if gender is a construct, then why do you even need to transition?'. Sky laughed and huffed in frustration: 'I told them, because I still live in this society!', and added: 'So you know, I'd still like to have better time of it'. Transness is a better time, and remains so when people are allowed to know that difficulty alone does not define them.

Why would transness be understood primarily as escaping when it is about arriving in the wholeness of your being? If someone wishes you to escape your transness, the answer might

in fact be a completely different escape route: one which allows you to escape other people's, institutions' or media's overdetermination of yourself. Having joy at the centre of the discussion did not take determination for granted in any way. It could lead to a space where the framing of transness as a resistance was also questioned, such as when Bo asked about why and when finding joy in adversity feels less personal: when does it become 'transformed into a war cry instead of being truly authentic', 'are the choices I make for me or as a fuck you to the world?' Bo also asked why marginalised people are not often afforded the kind of rest and carefreeness of simply existing as themselves. Discarding assumed framings for questions and for exploration could lead to imagining different worlds, joyful futures and the meanings that these worlds bring people:

> Layah: Oh gosh, what a world! I think it would be a world where there was less pressure or less a sense of commitment when it came to gender. People could be born and figure themselves out from there. People could change their mind, try things out, and explore the frankly wonderful spectrum of gender identity and gender expression, without fear of being judged or pigeon-holed or anything like that. Or people could stay the same! That would be fine too - I genuinely think everyone, cis or trans alike, would feel happier and under less pressure equally, in a world that was accepting and joyful towards trans and gender-variant folks. I also think fashion and clothes would be WAY cooler and more varied!! And TV and film characters would be way more interesting!!!

> Zeo: Not being policed about gender expression or presentation in any away, being able to explore your gender without having to justify yourself, being affirmed by other people (especially other trans people) in the new things you discover about your gender and your self. Trans joy is the opposite of policing. A world where there are no trans stock-characters. No-one is reduced to their transness.

> Ivy: Discovering more about your gender identity is celebrated for the increased self-knowledge, rather than seen as shameful or a sign that there is 'something wrong with you'. Everyone is free to experiment with pronouns, presentation etc. in whatever way they choose. Trans people are able to access gender-affirming healthcare if and when they want/need to, and people are glad they're making steps to feel more comfortable with themselves. Trusting someone's autonomy, ie. That they are the one who knows their own thoughts best and that they can make decisions (including children).

> Bo: One where gender does not exist – or rather is not prescribed or assumed; where it is understood as personal before social; where it is normal to ask and receive others' pronouns in introductions, and where all pronouns are common and used easily, without it seeming like a burden, some big request like I must think I'm so special; a utopia without the patriarchy, with no preconceptions about what my actions/likes/dislikes/clothing/hair/body/voice mean about my gender; a place where I am taken at face value; where people see me and think "them" rather than "girl/woman/femme"; a place where I don't have to come out, or

always be the one to start a conversation about transness; a place where gender isn't even considered, for anyone – rather they are treated as an individual first and gender is brought up when it is relevant.

Ronin: There is health care, free health care for transitioning. It won't be so hard to change your name, and your parents would be like 'oh you wanted to be a boy? Oh let's rename you quick!', I would emphasise the amount of parent support for this, I'm kind of jealous of those parents who are like 'oh let's go and let's have your hormone replacement therapy'

In a world that tries to disappear gender non-conformity and the vitality of trans lives, it can be a difficult and scary process to find spaces and relational moments that not only recognise us for who we know ourselves to be, but also go a step further and affirm our exploration, witness our transness and celebrate it. For there is a difference between not being outright excluded and being actively included and embraced. It can become hard to see that we are allowed joy, and this is something that my participants also navigated in their reflections. For example, Sky reflected on how they struggled to envision joy in thinking about transitional moments due to external pressures. They wrote to me after our interview with a picture of their new name badge and said:

I was given this new name badge with my new name at work today and definitely experienced trans joy! I was thinking about what we talked about and I think that all the anxiety and stress of coming out at work sometimes makes it difficult to let yourself feel joy. But this did! It's like I was so nervous about having to come out and then navigating questions from colleagues etc that I hadn't even envisioned that there might also be some joy and some positive stuff in the process

Bo raised a similar point to Sky, saying that trans joy can be hard to find, because

it feels like something that can't exist independently in the wider context of society right now, and which feels all too dependent on the people around me. I know I am theoretically responsible for my own feelings, but to me joy depends on a certain carefreeness that is not often afforded to many marginalised individuals, including trans people.

This idea of emotional responsibility brushed up with the ways in which emotions are experienced relationally across people's responses. When mentioning aspects that brought them joy, such a getting a new idea about presentation, Ivy added: 'It feels like I ought not to say that there is anything good about being trans, because as a group trans people face such marginalisation'.

On the flipside of the coin, when reflecting on the worry and sadness that thon felt when thon first came to trans identity, Zeo wrote:

> I felt something akin to despair or disappointment that there was yet another way in which I did not fit, because I'm also neuroatypical and queer. And all of my life I've felt like I haven't fitted in (until I found lots of lovely queer friends and a partner!). So I felt like adding trans to that was yet another thing I had to worry about in terms of how I'm perceived. And I also felt guilty about these emotions, because I had been part of campaigning for trans rights before even realising I was trans myself. So I felt like feeling sadness over being trans was like a betrayal of my values and the community.

4.6.3 From strategic personhood to complex personhood

Imagining new worlds was in some ways also inhabiting them, because of what the act of imagining can allow us to do. In the case of trans joy, it allowed people to travel in spaces where the collective and the personal could be brought together in new ways. This bringing together of the collective and the personal through the topic of trans joy changed how personhood could be envisioned or experienced as a trans, non-binary or gender-diverse person. Firstly, it allowed people to acknowledge the pressure created when trans people's emotional lives and individual claims of identity get continuously externally assessed, as demonstrated above by the emotional responsibility towards the community as a whole felt by Zeo or the consideration over a strategic voicing of visibility that Ivy engages in. Love poet Alok Vaid-Menon (2022) says:

> It's exhausting to have to continually justify your existence, to witness your precious and complex life reduced to a talking point, a metaphor, a debate. It shouldn't have to be every nonbinary person's job to explain that we've always been here, to answer everyone's invasive questions.

Whilst the critical literature on transnormativity within and beyond trans studies cited so far in this chapter has worked to demonstrate trans people's agency by highlighting the ways that various (cis)normative contexts which trans people must navigate have become obscured, trans joy allows us to go beyond the realisation that trans people's disclosure of their trans experiences is an agential negotiation. It goes beyond it by creating a space in which trans people can critique and transform the demand to 'speak strategically', and in this way it offers a space that does away with the idea that discussing your transness should be interpreted as a form of disclosure at all: 'It's not that I'm afraid of ''coming out'' as genderqueer all the time either. I wouldn't describe my reluctance to have these conversations each time they're possible as cowardice, or surrender, because that would imply I would feel value added to who I was if they understood me on my own terms, and that isn't true' (Sicardi 2018). If

people were never forced to hide or expected to 'do away' with their transness or gender diversity, transness would not be a disclosure or surrender. It would just be.

Trans joy as resistance, as my participants queried it, changes the scope of agency accessible to people: it acts as a space to both critique and depart from the idea of personhood conceived primarily as a strategic entity, in service (for or against) to the unequal social world that already exists. It asks why marginalised people are expected to perform the labour of making their personhood strategic in the face of dominant narratives in the first place. In this way, trans joy has the possibility to break 'the closed circuit' common to social change theories, where social change gets described through an 'irreconcilable binary': 'it is often believed that people are bound to reproduce or replicate social inequality or, on the flip side, that they can resist unequal social conditions' (Tuck 2009: 419). This binary view creates a 'closed circuit' understanding of both social change and of people's personhood, because it produces only two options: on one side, portraying the power of uneven social structures as wholly in possession of us and our actions and on the other, portraying the radical power of the human spirit as completely unyielding (ibid.).

I would argue that the mapping of people's behaviours into 'normative' and 'anti-normative' to measure their 'social change potential', which different trans people continue to be subjected to, has been another way that this 'reproduction' and 'resistance' binary has been put to use in academia and beyond. Practices of social change which create such closed circuits render resistance as the end goal of political struggle. Making a closed circuit out of social change empties it of its possibility to create new worlds because it imagines nothing beyond an end point in time where people are continuously either resisting or reproducing unequal social power, thus condemning us into an infinite time loop of resistance and oppression. In doing so, it instrumentalises personhood and renders it nothing more than a strategic sign to be externally measured and categorised into the binary. It also reduces the possibilities of social change theorising to questions based around 'whether individual claims of identity are normative/subversive or not' (Raun 2014: 23), and thus whether they can be classed as reproducing or resisting inequality.

This ties trans people into another closed circuit when it comes to the question of authenticity leveraged against them: by suggesting that human beings can be divided into ways of inauthentically or authentically resisting the process of being gendered, these theories also suggest that truthful criteria for such categorisation can be found, thus looping back into the

oppressive normative classifications which turn individual different into social hierarchies. Solidarity is lost, intimacy is lost, what is left is a recognition where visibility is also consumption: Let me determine whether you determine yourself appropriately, and ensure you comply with this judgment. 'It is not just important what we speak about but how and why we speak. Often this speech about the ''other'' is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were there' (hooks 1989: 22).

Such dynamics demands that to have your experience represented, it must first be externally grasped: 'from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons, and perhaps judgments' (Glissant 1997: 190 in Stanley 2017: 618). The aim of this kind of transparency is to reduce us into a generality that is already 'unequally distributed and mandated' (Stanley 2017: 618), as covered in the previous section. Writing on the anti-black, anti-trans violence engrained into visibility politics that demand transparency, Stanley (2017) asks us to consider how representation and recognition could 'offer a trans politics that resides on the side of flourishing': 'how can we be seen without being known and how can we be known without being hunted?' (2017: 616, 618). Q reflected:

> I write about my experiences and put that out to the public, and I just accept that it means I'm gonna get some death threats and I think that – trying to link that back to trans joy I think having that trauma, I think it's all the more important to try and have, like find the joy to balance it out, umm, because being trans, being openly trans I think is a very intense way of living, whether you want it or not, because society makes it that way

Marginalised people are expected to carry the labour of making their personhood strategic as a condition for their recognition, to leverage visibility with the fear of retaliation, precisely because their personhood appears complex to the eyes of oppressive categorisation. In being complex, it is not qualifiable in an easily consumable way, unless pressure is exerted which makes people feel disconnected from marginality as something more than a site of deprivation. By making deprivation the definitional experience, oppression can justify its coercive force: 'look they chose to leave marginality behind, what a success story!' But is something a choice when it is presented as the only choice you will survive? 'Sounds and scenes which cannot be appropriated are often the sign everyone questions, wants to erase, to ''wipe out''' (hooks 1989: 23).

Q spoke about how gender, being chaotic with it and being trans with it, was likely going to be an important part of their identity for a long time, perhaps 'for the rest of my life'. Emery spoke of wanting to hijack all the billboards in major metropoles around the world to blast scenes of trans joy for a day, to 'just blast cis people with this, and just blast them with this experience of joy and happiness and liberation that they don't experience and that they often don't get, like you know, this is a huge part of what being trans is'.

Trans joy can give people a space to refuse the pressure to be visible in ways that expect assimilation or that consume, and to gain distance from the idea that to be known and not hunted means hiding or rejecting integral parts of your personhood. It can be a space that understands the vulnerability involved in passing and why sometimes it is necessary to not be fully known in order to be partially seen. It does not wipe away questions like the one Sofie asks: if I am visible in being trans, will that impact my standing as a woman, if my gendered joy is centred on being a woman first, will that mean I lose out on aspects of authentic connection? At the same time, it does not give up the hope that there are better terms to be imagined, that there is a chance to be fully seen and to see yourself fully. Trans joy, and other experiences that understand marginality not as a site of deprivation but a site of radical possibility, have the power to lead us to an understanding of resistance which honours people's complex personhood instead of perpetuating social pressures to create 'totalised, monistic identities' (Stone 1987: 232). It does so because of its focus on lived lives, which ultimately cannot be easily pinned down.

Complex personhood 'draws on Indigenous understandings of collectivity and the interdependence of the collective and the person rather than the Western focus on the individual' (Tuck 2009: 420). It contains the recognition that people are continuously aware of the spaces that exist between themselves and unjust structures: that on the same day we might openly critique global corporate capitalism and queue in a line to get a brand of shoes which represents some of the worst elements of it (ibid.). And that everyone lives in/side this irony: at different points in a single day we might 'reproduce, resist, be complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fists/towels and withdraw and participate' in these uneven social structures (ibid.) Tuck grounds this recognition in desire: we can 'desire to be critically conscious and desire the new Jordans at the same time'. (ibid.) Poet, rapper and author Kae Tempest writes:

> My creativity enables me to access other worlds that exist parallel to this one. But
> even with those tools, sometimes the other worlds are inaccessible, the sound is

down. And I am trapped in two dimensions. Flattened by routine and the desire to live a routine life. I crave what society tells me will complete me. I crave a femme for my butch, a house of our own, a union of two children who resemble us, enough money to protect us from hardship. *Despite the fact that this white-picket dream is a product of the popular imagination and is actually completely at odds with my core beliefs, I still feel myself crave it!* I still try to force it out of myself. (2022: 107-108, emphasis mine).

Complex personhood tries to attest to the ways in which we both get stuck in our troubles and transform them and ourselves, and how ultimately the stories we tell about these spaces contain both that 'which is immediately available as a story and what [our] imaginations are reaching toward' (Gordon 1997: 4 in Tuck 2009: 420). It takes both paths, and thus allows us to try and figure out life with an openness, not flattened out by two dimensions, not worried that our agency is ultimately already bound. In doing so, it directs our attention towards our abilities for awareness: 'conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that our lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning' (Gordon 1997: 5 in Tuck 2009: 420).

Since everyone lives in/side the space between personhood and unjust structures, the expectation on marginalised people to do away with that space appears as nothing more than bolstering injustice as a means to unrealise the agency and vitality found in that space. Holding onto this space allows us to see how impossibly uninformed the ideal scale is: Desire for the norm consists, in terms of its lived content, in nonnormative attempts at normativity (Chu and Harsin Drager 2019: 107). In living life, queer and trans communities have been negotiating the consequences of normalcy, 'making do in the gap between what [we] wanted and what wanting it got [us]' (Chu and Harsin Drager 2019: 107). Lisowski writes how this vitality is not dependent on having to get tied up in the work of 'changing the narratives' when that threatens to exhaust us, but that instead you can leave them oblivious in their own framings whilst you change space and create community:

> I'm inspired by all the small dominions we, the disabled, have made, by how much has been shared already. Money. GoFundMes. Personal care assistants. Lists of accessible events spaces. Virtual dance parties. Knowledge, shared openly online and in group texts and over encrypted chats and through webs of in-person and digitized gossip. Disabled people have created a whole wellspring of culture and activism and vitality— and that buried truth is part of what makes us scary to the abled mainstream (2022: 56).

Similar aliveness buzzed through the space when people shared with me the culture they had been building: Pitching in on friends' surgeries, sharing voice pitch analyser apps, make -up

tips and teaching each other to shave. Finding community in online spaces and as a result 'internally soaring, and going further than ever before', as Layah exclaimed. Bringing what they learnt in one community space into another community space, such as when finding other queer people on a long-distance hiking trail changed the 'macho culture' of the trail enough for it to not feel crushing and led to Sky setting up a queer and trans hiking group in their own city, making the city feel 'like it had a focus on trans joy'. Or when Arlie and a new friend went against academic conventions and held a academic seminar with visiting queer speakers who, whilst feeling awkward in the presence of permanent departmental staff and their preconceptions about prestige, emboldened the students who faced these same preconceptions on the daily: 'there was a student of colour who gave a long speech about how racist and shit anthropology is and she's just so tired of it, and there was a trans student who also spoke about how anthropology has no idea how life is like as a trans person, actually it limits a lot of where they are able to go and do their research and be safe'. The joy and openness was felt also in moments when you got to witness something which once was a necessity for you as it made another person glow, when they learnt a skill or reached an embodiment they always desired, or in dreaming of telepathic abilities to simply transport aspects of your body to others who might want them more:

> 'What certainly feels like an act of resistance to me is when I see trans people being confidently themselves and being happy. This doesn't need to be in the 'out, proud and loud about it' way (although that's also cool!), because it is about so much more than gender or sexuality: it is moments when queer and trans people showcase their interests, skills and different life experiences in general and are happy.'

> 'There's this little anecdote a friend of mine shared, she's transfeminine and one of her closer friends is non-binary person who is on T and when they started T a year ago and then when they started growing facial hair, she was the one who taught them how to shave […] And it's really cool to see somebody to be happy about the things that I hated, I think that's lovely, I think that's wonderful. Like I'm so happy for you, finally somebody who wants it [chuckles]'

> 'I realised I was trans when I started talking about like 'oh wouldn't it be cool if we could just shapeshift and give other people our bodily elements and I just thought this was something that everyone thought about.'

The marginal space as a radical possibility is 'not a one size fits all solution' but open for ingenuity and vibrancy that fits 'our unique community/ personal situations' (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018: 8). By refusing the expectation that you must leave parts of yourself behind, you can find a space where your difference is not already spoken for you. Perhaps this

understanding could be a way to be free and trans and in community? Perhaps it could be a way to change the structure of visibility as consumable disappearance and to change the qualifier for passing from 'an unwanted or undesired practice that makes us go unseen in our own communities' (Nicolazzo 2017: 1175) into something else? What if the choice to be opaque might no longer be a loss of intimacy in the ability to form authentic connections, but a bridge to maintain intimacy with yourself, refusing to be consumed, refusing to choose: 'it does not disturb to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it' (Glissant 1997: 192).

Complex personhood in the context of trans joy allows for knowledge building which starts from the place the understanding that trans communities are diverse, that people's identities have multiple dimensions and that no transition experience will be exactly the same, since relationships to gender and to transness are personal and varied. Reflecting this back to visibility, affirming visibility has the quality of making space for the personal to exist in the social for trans people. And where such space is difficult to find, recognising complex personhood can also be about maintaining self-visibility within, as Acorn put it: 'the very ambigueness in me, which is in a sense it's not ambiguous, it's very clear, it's clear and to me, bright, balanced, powerful and joyful.'

Since trans joy teaches us about complex personhood, about what it is to confer ourselves and each other the respect for both straightforward stories and enormously subtle meaning, perhaps with it we could also lay a bridge to a social world where we can be in solidarity with each other without grasping, where we do not attempt to externally qualify, measure or judge another person's belonging in our communities and we do not other by making each other reference points to some internal or external standard: 'To feel in solidarity with him [sic] or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (become other) nor to "make" him in my image' (Glissant 1997: 193).

This kind of connection was described by people when they spoke about the love, friendship, attraction and care they felt as trans people towards other trans people, also known as T4T.

> I love being with other trans people — men, women, and non-binary people — for a multitude of reasons. (…) I love the strength that trans people have. I love the power and beauty and courage that we have, things that cisgender people will never understand, even if they are aware of them. I love seeing the signs I have of my trans status — my patchy facial hair, the two scars across my chest, the arm

> scar I will eventually have from a surgery graft — not as signs of imperfections or things that make me clockable, but as parts of a whole. I love seeing other trans people the same way, as every part of them is part of a handsome, beautiful, gorgeous whole (Sparks 2019).

Getting to be in spaces where you can feel secure in the knowledge that you will be witnessed and connected with for the whole person that you are, and that someone intimately knows how to be human with you in that way, was a powerful source of joy and peace in being trans and in community. It was also something which gave transition as a process the recognition and celebration it deserves, where people are celebrated for their increased self-knowledge and for taking steps to be comfortable in themselves, as Ivy aptly summarised. Emery described transition in this vain:

> I love people in the community because of that, because they're doing that, because they're defying expectations and they're finding ways to be happy and to celebrate what we're always told we shouldn't be happy about and that is bad and needs to be fixed and needs to be hidden and needs to be prevented basically and that's really fucking powerful [laughs] And inspiring, and something that has been helping me a lot. And what I like most about it is the amount of people I know who are incredibly strong but have kept their softness and their vulnerability, so not strength in the way of 'I put on my armour, I am gonna be hard and strong and shut down' but strength in the way of 'I am open, and I am vulnerable and I am soft and I am so strong that I can be soft and vulnerable as a trans person

T4T allows transition to be recognised for its power: transition is to take on the social process of connecting with who you are, whilst navigating the possibility that even with changes some people or structures might only ever be able to recognise you 'in approximates', as Sofie put it, and despite this reality, and the reality that transition is disincentivised to a point where some people and structures wish to prevent it, you still negotiated the thorns of wider social recognition and remained connected enough to arrive in your transition, remained connected to who you felt yourself becoming or who you knew yourself to be, to arrive in changes which further cultivate this connection with yourself. It is an incredible feat, and one which might make your ability to connect with others that much stronger too. It can give you a kind of vulnerability you can hold onto, as Emery describes.

This vulnerability opens up new visions: for example, the idea that passing means foregoing authentic relationships becomes experienced differently through the joy found in T4T. T4T challenges the disruption of sociality and community that happens when trans people are defined primarily through their relationship with cisness: through the assumption that the value in being trans is primarily found in how it connects trans people to cisness, such as

when trans people who pass as cis face social notions which suggest that dating other trans people is 'settling' (Sparks 2019). The pressure of cisness assumes that once you pass as cis, bringing up life experiences from the perspective of being trans and choosing to connect with people through being trans should result in a disruption in authentic relationships. Authenticity takes vulnerability, but defining transness in relation to cisness or through it makes the vulnerability feel at times impossible: it makes any moment of giving up passing a moment of possibly giving up gender authenticity when passing as cis is taken to be the effort that deserves congratulation. But what does it mean to be visible only in passing? Only in the terms set by passing? Under scenarios where human value is given through terms set by normative evaluation, passing will always be the assumed goal. It brings you into the ideal average of the norm, but simultaneously it brings you away from the human vulnerability of lived lives not being captured by standards of a norm.

This to me feels like the tension of authentic social connection that expectation to pass brings us under. The tension is only worsened by the idea, however, that our social connection would be determined by our ability or inability to pass. That idea takes what has been used as the arbiter of gender authenticity and applies it as the measure of authenticity for social life. That is the fear and anxiety that runs ahead and forecloses doors before we arrive at them. The joy is that all this is happening, and yet loving social connections are also happening. The joy is the ability to feel that tension, and know it can be a desire for something else, a sign that we know of other options than to be 'saved of damned' (Warner 2000:59), that we feel the pull and the relief of a kind of relating where we are not forcing ourselves or each other to choose only certain parts of ourselves, to become visible in only othering or idealised ways.

Trans joy can allow people to live in the gaps between themselves and unjust structures with their agency and personhood intact, with autonomy and in connection, to widen the gaps even, make them irresistibly inviting: hey, why are you over there in the dead end of strategic personhood? So what if you think of yourself as normatively-minded, able-bodied, straight or cis but 'you may not be, you might not always be' (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018: 1), and even if you are, you still feel that desire for human value, it is undeniable, and maybe you try to feel it through normativity and even there the ghost of the need for authentic, unconditional care and connection dances, yearning for intimacy you might not dare to speak out loud? Trans joy is a space where the weight of it all begs for tenderness:

> But you? You are the strongest ones among us. Daring as you do to live. Wholly
> as you are. While the rest of us go straight to pieces for what we can't bear to

admit we carry. The whole grim world restrained or restraining (Tempest 2023: 52).

Come over here, where Acorn is inviting you to share in on 'rebellious gender joy' by asking: 'who are the cis? If I would have to draw a line where I would have been called cis to where I would have been called trans, I don't know where that line would be, that's why I find it sometimes unfair to push people into the cis box because they could have easily pushed me there too 15 years ago and thank god they didn't'. Come over here where Eli says:

> When describing our community, I always say LGBTQIAA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, ally, plus). The most important of these symbols is the plus sign. The plus sign opens the door for everyone. Perhaps you do not identify with any of these letters. Perhaps how you feel or how you are has not been verbalised to the world yet. You are loved, and you are welcome here. […] We do not qualify, deny, or question a person's belonging to the queer community. (2020: 12, 47).

Come over here where gender is recognised as 'the fuzzy, messy thing' (Williams 2017) it sometimes is, where the question of why you belong or don't belong to a particular category can be 'space out there'. Come over here even if your desire has turned you to stone, because you might find its cracks. Come over here where we can 'walk [and wheel] as slow as the slowest person and refuse to abandon each other' (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018: 11). Come over here where happiness and care are being cohered differently, not inhumanely by giving scarcity to some and abundance to others, but in a more fully life-giving way. Come over here where there is more than survival, there is a radical chance to build powerful communities that refuse terms that divide our lives into oppressive hierarchies. Come over here where 'I'm moving through a space that some can't see, I know this space exists, so do you if your heart beats the oldest groove' (Tempest 2014: 0:40-0:50). Come over here where Ronin is sharing about babaylan, pre-colonial folk healers who crossed genders and are important figures in the Philippine LGBTQIA+ movement to this day. Come over here where gender diversity as a source of realising personhood, healing, joy and connection has already and always existed:

> [I]t would be a mistake to think that [Two-Spirit identity] is a recently developed fiction used to resituate individuals into tribal communities that sometimes reject them on the grounds that homosexuality is a malady "brought by the white man." What is happening, actually, is that we are remembering again who we are and that our identities can no longer be used as a weapon against us. It is once again a source of our healing. (LaFortune 1997: 222 in Brooklyn 2020: 470)

> Ronin: Yeah actually right now I'm getting that euphoria since I'm remembering all those things that made me happy in the past few years! It was nice to talk about this, that's another euphoric thing

Come over here where people are

4.6.4 In community: making a trans and gender diverse world

> My people. My beautiful people. My beautiful trans people,
>
> natural as life.
>
> I'm so sorry I was not in your love sooner.
>
> I have been so cold without you. I wish I'd spent all these years in
>
> your arms and close to you.
>
> and had you shave my head and slap my back and take me under
>
> your soft wing and fight with me each time I had to fight and
>
> teach me things I had to learn alone.
>
> Tempest (2023: 54)

Trans joy has the power to animate the lived content related to norms without damning people to their oppressive power. In doing so, it can make the emotional possibilities of being trans more open and more freely felt. This opening breaks apart the closed circuit of social change where transforming unequal social conditions gets interpreted as an individual's responsibility with the binary effect of either resisting or reinforcing these conditions. Through the resource sharing, collective knowledge building and emotional intimacy that people found in trans joy, as well as its power to change spaces and culture, 'ideas about access and care (whether it's disability, childcare, economic access, or many more)' were no longer 'an individual chore, unfortunate cost of having an unfortunate body' (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018:1), but a deeply felt collective experience that is desired and thus also inspires collective visions of caretaking, such as when Emery asked:

> How can we when somebody is happy, how can we celebrate them and how can we celebrate their joy without turning it onto ourselves, without centring ourselves, without it hurting us? How can I celebrate somebody's transition step that I've been desperately wanting to get for five years and couldn't get? How can I celebrate somebody else without hurting them? How can we get to a place where trans people once they're done transitioning want to stay in the trans community instead of just leaving, how can we get to a point where we have this generational building of knowledge?

Through joy, the potential for finding belonging as a trans person gets to be felt, as Sky reflected:

now I see the potential and the fact that actually there's plenty of people who I will still get to be friends with and be in a relationship with and we don't have to just feel like we won't belong, we actually belong somewhere else

This 'somewhere else' kept popping up in my interviews and written narratives, sometimes even when people were reflecting on the struggles of accessing feelings of joy. Zeo's written response came with such a moment amid them reflecting on a sense of non-belonging due to intersecting marginalities:

And all of my life I've felt like I haven't fitted in (until I found lots of lovely queer friends and a partner!). So I felt like adding trans to that was yet another thing I had to worry about in terms of how I'm perceived

The community Zeo found in 'lots of lovely queer friends and a partner' form a literal space on the page, which they have bracketed off from the reflection over a sense of non-belonging. There was a similarly beautiful moment in mine and Sky's discussion on belonging as we took a moment to sit with the fact that in being part of the new queer community Sky had helped to initiate in their city, they were now living in that place of belonging that they once were not sure how to find. What once felt like an inaccessible or unlikely future had become a lived-in present. Layah listed multiple affirming experiences in their written response that they summarised under the umbrella of 'feeling a part of community'. These included moments with people being affirming, such as coming out to their first friend and being called by their new name, as well as being invited into a trans online community group and interacting with more people there. Bo also spoke of the sense of belonging that being in company of other non-binary and LGBTQIA+ people gave them. They said that when they see someone 'open the same door I have, I feel less alone'. They built on this topic of being in community by saying that trans joy is

being surrounded by fellow LGBTQIA+ people who **get** it, who can serve as a microcosm of the society I'd like to exist in; one where people don't make assumptions about my gender based on my body, clothes, hair, makeup (or lack thereof), or voice; a place out with the binary and the patriarchy, where I can be who I am without scrutiny or judgment; a place where my actions and presentation are taken at face value and not prescribed external meaning or ownership.

Similarly, Ronin reflected on how it had been difficult for him to navigate cultural stereotypes about LGBT+ people in the Philippines that he did not feel he fitted in, for example a stereotype of LGBT+ people being expressive. He said that these stereotypes had put pressure

on his self-expression, and he has also had to fear judgment. Finding an online, global community group for trans people gave him 'a fresh start':

> When I got to this online community group, I felt I knew a kind of freedom. (…) It's like a fresh breeze where I can really mould my identity there. And everyone's trying to be unproblematic and learn, so I'm like surrounded by a lot of me's [laughs]. And I've been very insecure about a lot of things and then I found myself posting selfies like 'here you go! Have my selfie!', I posted the selfie two or three days after I joined that's how cool the group is for me, it's like an instant safe space.

Finding a space where the dominant cultural narratives about gender, queerness and transness, and the ways in which these beliefs shape our social perceptions and interactions, are surpassed so they no longer stake claim to your existence. A space like this fosters an environment in which trans joy can exist without the 'but' that butts in when joy for marginalised people is conceptualised as resistance to suffering or in opposition to it, the 'I'm happy, but I must fight', or I'm happy but I'm not sure I'm meant to be, because society does not cohere for my happiness'. In these kinds of spaces, in these kinds of communal moments, trans joy can simply exist, breathe, be. It is a space to rest in joy, not agitate through it. Both spaces might be necessary at different times, but it is notable that in my interviews and written responses the former seemed to be the one more yearned for and less provided by society at large.

Acorn spoke of the power of experiencing such 'a microcosm' on a large scale, when Acorn went to an international gender studies conference with a friend. It was a space in which

> you couldn't even start guessing the gender of anybody there, it was just impossible so you could just drop it. So that was really like [lets out a big sigh of pleasure], entering those kinds of rooms, those kinds of settings with this utopic element that they have, you can actually live it for those days in that setting, that was really euphoric and joyful and trans, and there your transness is not an issue, but it still is (…) it becomes like an overwhelmingly present-day, it's all over the place.

Acorn also spoke of the power and awe of having this space extend over a large group of people, hundreds:

> now I don't know if there are those kinds of settings in my home city, probably groups like with an LGBTQ NGOs, but this was a big event, it was like hundreds of people there, so it was bigger than just a group somewhere in a room, so that was joy, recognition, somehow, or it's recognition but it's also becoming visible in a way, because you're still, I mean people can't tell, but you're still visible as non-conforming, there's something strange in that visibility (…) that's probably

what happened at the conference that there was this atmosphere of visibility, and also I'm thinking about the conference that 'I recognise and I embrace this world, I share it with you', that kind of community, it's not even community, it's bigger yeah

The conference was a space where you could be visible as yourself and opaque at the same time, where gender diversity was celebrated without anyone having to be made an ambassador for it, it is 'visible' without 'being an issue'. In my interview with Acorn, we could not quite find the word for the experience being 'bigger' than 'community', but here as I ponder Acorn's example in conversation with the other examples about building spaces that allow for joy to exist in new ways, in ways that profoundly serve the communities involved and in ways that do not make joy a struggling thing caged in by the wider societal context, I think an apt expression would be world-making. It is 'all over the place', a world that is no longer 'in relation to' or 'in opposition to', but in its own right, whole in and of itself. In being in each other's company with a presence and an openness that leaves society's normative assumptions at the door, we are bringing into existence a world where people can be more fully and more freely ourselves. Or as Ronin puts it: 'When I'm seeing another LGBTQ+ person being themselves it really makes me happy. And then when I'm in their community, it makes me feel safe, it makes me euphoric.'

It is about being seen, being visible in your whole self and being a witness for others to be themselves as well. Layah rejoiced:

I didn't realise you could be transgender as long as you didn't fully identify as cis. I didn't realise how welcoming and widespread a community this could be. I also didn't realise how awesome it would be just to feel like that side of yourself is out there to someone you're speaking to? (…) They're seeing me, all of me.

Zeo added that when you find people who get it or experiences you relate to, 'you feel so seen' and start 'feeling secure'. Affirming moments of being seen were not always limited to queer and trans spaces. My participants also recalled situations of finding relational spaces with loved ones that surpassed the cultural narratives around how it feels to be trans more broadly. When listening to people describe moments in which loved ones provided support, insight, or joy, I could not help feeling hopeful about the fact that the cultural emphasis on cis grief in the face of a loved one's transition could be replaced by a situation where transition is a space for trans joy instead. Sky recalled a TV that had pushed this move of centring a loved one's grief:

there's a bit of a polemic at the moment in France because there's like this documentary that has been made by a cis guy about a little girl who is trans, I watched it and I thought it was horrible, like literally it's been praised so much, the guy has like, he won some prize (…),. it's all like emotional and pathos, there's like this sad music all along and it's mostly filming the parents or the mum of the little girl, whose like 'it's so hard [imitates crying], but I want my child to be happy', and you know in a way it's about the mum accepting the child and stuff but it's made in such a depressing way, I think a lot of people are focusing on these stories and they find it sad and they find it emotional and they find it sort of very, like my mum watched it and was like 'it was so beautiful' and I was like 'mum it was so crap', it was just so stupid, it's just about suffering and bullshit

Sky questioned why they only chose to show the parents and their difficulties instead of directing empathy and attention towards the trans girl, who was arguably meant to be the protagonist of the documentary. Contrasting this centring of a loved one's hardship, examples from my participants that were affirming or joyful included Ronin's recollection of when his sister had come out to their parent as pansexual:

it's just a normal thing that we were talking about, girlfriends and stuff and my mum wasn't weirded out at all, yeah my sister was the one that was brave enough to tell our mom she was gay, well pansexual actually. Then my mum gave her a cake that said 'I accept you, we are very happy for you'

Both Q and Emery also recalled situations of finding relational spaces with loved ones that surpassed the cultural narratives around how it feels to be trans and made them feel seen. Q told me about a meeting with a friend that helped them gain new insight into their gender:

I knew I was having weird gender feels, but I was just like I'm just gonna put that in a little box and not touch it, but the thing that actually brought it up was I was having lunch with a very dear friend of mine who's a cis woman, I was talking about how like 'it's really interesting like how trans people go through so much to transition to their gender, like they really know their gender and identify with it really strongly, and us cis people we just don't have that. We're just given a gender and it doesn't feel right but it doesn't feel particularly wrong so you just sort of carry it around and are like okay, well like I'm definitely not not this so I'll just keep pretending' and my friend just turns to me and is like 'no,I know I'm a woman', like 'oh, okay!' It was like someone gave me a present which I had been carrying around my whole life, being like 'I don't really like it but I don't really want to take it back to the shop, that seems like a whole thing, I don't know what I'd want instead'. And it was like 'you can just put the box down' and I was like 'cool!'

Similarly, Emery and Acorn both recalled moments of encouragement from their partners that helped them to see that they had options for the first time and that they could start taking steps towards a more joyful, comfortable connection with their gendered self. Emery said:

> I went home and cried for a couple of hours with my partner and in the end of it, I was like 'I'm so sick of this, I hate that everybody's treating me like a dude', and they had to say 'you know, you don't have to be a dude', and I needed their permission in that moment to allow myself that, but it was never about 'I hate that I look this way', it was always 'I hate that others treat me this way'

Acorn recalled:

> I've had the luck to have a partner that already from before was somehow familiar with the gay lesbian queer scene, being there from the beginning as an activist , I mean she was very supportive and actually pushed me also, encouraged [laughter], like 'perhaps you should do something about that [discomfort with gender].

Finding the people who see you, appreciate you and encourage you to forge a path towards feeling more comfortable in yourself as you move through the world were an integral part of how joy manifested in my participants' lives. Emery recalled an enormous moment of trans joy in the company of friends who made ey feel thoroughly accepted:

> the first like enormous moment of trans joy was about two months before I started any kind of medical steps, when I went on a holiday with a bunch of our friends, 8 or 9 friends went on this holiday for a week, and they all happened to be girls, that was not necessarily planned but just accidentally this year, and I was just one of the girls there, I was just one of them and they all treated me accordingly and they all were 100% good about pronouns, names, about just treating me as one of them, as being part of that group, like we were swimming around in the pool naked and I felt comfortable swimming around naked in my pre-transition body with all of these people because of how much they made me feel accepted in who I was and in how I wanted to be seen, and that was an incredible experience

There was also a two-way relationship between affirming connections and joy, where affirming connections did not only lead to joy but the dynamic worked the other way too: finding trans joy and consequently joy in one's gender lead to more affirming connections and had a positive impact on people's interpersonal relationships overall. Firstly, many of my participants reflected on the ways in which transness was something that allowed them to connect with many different people, sometimes people they would otherwise never cross paths with. For example, Emery described trans communities as providing 'a starting point' to meet with 'people who are radically different from you, live very different lives and have very different experiences', and that this experience has been incredibly enriching. Xe talked about how it is 'incredibly powerful' to meet people who

> you can talk these things through with, who can reflect these things back at you and who can actually see you the way you are, sometimes see you in a way that you are that you don't even realise yet

Emery said that xe saw T for T playing a big part in this, and not only in romantic or sexual sense, but in a broad community sense of having people around you who understand you. Similarly, Sky reflected on how having transness in common 'opens doors' and can lead to the connection growing deeper. They said: 'I do feel like there is like this mutual understanding of like 'okay, this is great!', just a shared understanding without having to even necessarily talk about it'. Sky also talked about how it has enriched their romantic relationship, where they got to discover transness together and what it meant for their relationship.

Acorn talked about how before transition, feeling imbalanced in oneself led Acorn to being 'quite a harsh and hard person', and as a result in Acorn's previous romantic relationships it was always 'no feelings included'. To share intimacy in another way felt 'impossible'. Transition had a huge positive impact on Acorn's relationships. Acorn talked about 'the mutual dialogic' that Acorn and Acorn's current partner have:

> I guess it's the love, and the fact that the person already sees you as the one you are becoming all the time so being seen continuously, and then also navigating the visual space where you move and being able to support you there, in the visuality actually, like commenting or giving feedback at the right moment, this happens because love and because the other person sees you the way you are

Ronin shared a similar experience of dialogue, feedback and support from a friend who invited them to a trans community group. Ronin's friend helped him to choose a photo that showcased his masculine features more and that he could use in his gaming community:

> I posted it everywhere and people didn't doubt it, and I felt really good since everyone in the gaming community is referring to me as he, him. Then I kept asking him what they saw, they described the jawline, it made me feel euphoric.

Receiving feedback and sharing community resources allowed Ronin to build himself a space where he became recognised as himself also in his other, non-trans specific community settings. Ronin had also himself passed on resources to his local trans friends that he had found in the global, online community group he was part of. Ronin reflected on just how much confidence he had gained through these interpersonal exchanges:

> joining the trans online community groups is like, that would have been a huge step out of my comfort zone for younger me, but now since I've been feeling more confident I'm so happy, I have little to no hesitation joining there.

Ronin also said that since gaining confidence in himself, he has started actively reaching out to others who are grappling with self-confidence the way he had been. Ronin described the change as such:

> now I'm more aware of what kind of person I am, what my gender is, I'm more confident. (…) if I'm going to compare myself right now to the person I am in high school, it's very very different. (…) when I am in the realm of the unknown back in high school, unknown as in I don't know who I really am, I tend to feel scared all the time, like I'm not sure how people are gonna read me, then when I started to find out who I really am, I then start to reach out into the world.

Trans joy clears way for people to connect to themselves and others in a fulfilling way. It exists despite the noise of a society that tries to tell you otherwise. It rings with a promise of choice, exploration and self-determination. It is an opening through which you can reach out into the world and find the places and people who will reach back.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Looking back: aims, research questions and findings

This thesis has been an explorative study that gives an overview of different dimensions of trans joy and its significance in the lived, everyday lives of trans people. Academic literature on trans joy has begun to be emerge only in the last three years. This thesis is among the first extensive pieces of academic research into the topic and it contributes to efforts of addressing the severe gap in literature which has resulted from research that has systematically not considered the ways in which being transgender can be a source of joy and pleasure in people's lives. It contributes to a cultural shift of creating more environments that are life-affirming for trans and non-binary people, where aspects of being trans and of transitioning can be celebrated and supported for the profound meanings they bring people.

Going in, I was interested in what kind of emotional expression trans joy was: what different qualities did it have, how did it relate to experiences of gender euphoria for example, what brought people trans joy and what didn't, and how did finding trans joy impact people's lives. I knew the conversations were already happening within trans communities, and it was important for me to keep the research open-ended for this reason. It was a way of changing the research space to be more community-driven: a space where people can talk about their different lived experiences and emotions in their own terms, directing the conversations to what feels meaningful and powerful to them.

One of the key findings of this research is just how important and meaningful finding spaces to talk about trans joy is; this was something that the people who took part in this research voiced on multiple occasions. Other key findings in relation to the overarching research question 'what is trans joy' include the finding that trans joy allows people to grow connected and visible to themselves in a variety of ways. This can include, but is not limited to, finding language that describes your experiences, being comfortably embodied and at peace in your body, and developing an encompassing awareness of your experiences with gender and transness that is deeply meaningful. Trans joy was felt as a chance for exploration and discovery, an opportunity to feel free, to find confidence and exercise agency over one's life. It was also sometimes felt as a yearning, a kind of joy that is not culturally possible in societal contexts that do not make space for trans people to be fully themselves.

Additionally, this thesis found that trans joy and its interaction with gender euphoria also had a temporal quality. Gender euphoria was more often described as tied to transitional steps, to special happenings and first discoveries, or other moments that stand out in time and bring on 'a surge' or 'a burst' of euphoria. Trans joy and gender euphoria were interconnected, but trans joy was also sometimes described as a long-lasting presence, something that became integrated into your everyday existence as you grew more able to enjoy yourself, go about your day and reside in yourself with a wholeness. Both gender euphoria and trans joy guided people with their gendered journeys over time, allowing people to come into the present moment and through that experience to also see themselves in the future and envision a more hopeful and fulfilling life for themselves long-term.

People also observed that it was joy rather than suffering which guided them to the realisation that they were trans and thus also to an understanding of what an affirming relationship with gender could look like for them. This finding has implications for contexts where the influence of gender dysphoria has been conceptualised as a prerequisite or the primary catalyst for beginning transition. It highlights that a vision for joy and contentment can be equally significant motivation and can likewise facilitate the path to embracing one's gendered self. Further, the impacts of trans joy and of embracing one's gender brought newfound confidence and self-understanding, increased quality of life, a firm sense of agency and a greater ability to support others.

Upon starting this research, I was also inspired by the fact that trans joy was already, or was growing to be, a significant topic discussed in collective community settings. As a result, I was interested in how trans joy might work in collective terms: could trans joy act as a form of resistance against systems of oppression and is it meaningful to conceptualise it in this way? What might trans joy have to say to the narratives of suffering which have previously been associated with trans lives?

As well as fuelling connection to the self, this thesis found that trans joy was felt in connection with others. A final theme which emerged was the importance of being in community and of dreaming up collective joy. A key finding related to this theme was that trans joy was felt to have the power to resist systems of oppression and to challenge the narratives about transness which disempower trans communities, which in this thesis have been discussed through the theoretical framework of transnormativity. However, trans joy was

not felt to be a coping mechanism, as it existed in its own right and not in a compensatory relationship to oppression.

Other key findings for this research question included the finding that trans joy has significant theoretical contributions to make in how social change and marginalised people's personhood has been theorised. Trans joy had the potential to act as a form of resistance on multiple levels: resistance that comments on, rejects or reframes existing transnormative understandings; resistance which highlights contexts where trans people's personhood gets recognised primarily in service capacity in relation to existing structures of oppression, necessitating trans people to voice their visibility strategically, and resistance which defends trans people's right to exist carefree, restfully and with complexity. Consequently, trans joy has the potential to change the terms of agency and imagination, where their scope was no longer governed by conditions of discrimination. Instead, trans joy facilitated spaces and ways of being in community where trans people's personhoods could exist in their own right and with a wholeness.

Overall, trans joy can be described as a vitality and a profound desire to live, which opens up life possibilities for trans people and non-binary people, supports self-realisation and guides people to more fulfilled, flourishing lives.

5.2   Looking forward: limitations and suggestions for further research

This thesis has asked more questions than would be possible to fully address. In part, this has been intentional work to embody the explorative nature of the thesis as a contribution to an emerging field of research on trans joy. In part, it has been impacted by the limitations in scope and available resources inherent in a Master's thesis project. Given more time, I would have especially liked to develop social theory from the perspective of trans joy further, specifically the way in which it frees up possibilities for fulfilled personhood and more varied, self-determined identity claims. This was an important way in which people made resistance from the point of view of trans joy and it also testifies to the depth of significance of trans joy in everyday lives. In general, people had tremendous amounts of insight to share on trans joy, and as a result I was able to not cover every avenue of interpretation that this richness provided. Next, I would like to make some suggestions for further research based on this limitation.

Because this has been an explorative study into an emerging research topic, there exists multiple possible avenues for further research. Empirically, the finding that trans joy was felt to have the potential to resist systems of oppression could be further explored, for example by applying it specifically to trans activist contexts. There also exists opportunities to make different decisions when it comes to sampling or research design: for example, using focus groups instead of one-to-one interviews might generate different kinds of insight into trans joy by incorporating the finding on the importance of being in community into the research design itself, or selecting narrower criteria for sampling or research setting in order to focus on a particular intersection, such as the way in which trans joy might interact with disability justice or how it is experienced by trans women of colour for example, could develop the understanding of trans joy's personal meanings and aspects of collective resistance further. . Considering the finding that trans joy had positive impact for people's interpersonal relationships overall, another avenue for further research could be the impact of trans joy in the lives of trans people's loved ones. Media representations could be analysed through the lens of trans joy, how trans joy is showing up in online community spaces could be explored, or archival work to discover historical accounts of trans joy could be conducted.

Additionally, the moments in my data collection where people dreamed joyful futures for trans and gender-variant people were particularly charged with energy. Full exploration of the question 'what more joyful futures could look like for trans and gender-variant people' has been outside the scope of this thesis but would make an excellent research project in its own right. Overall, temporality was a theme which appeared often in the data. It has been part of the discussion in this thesis and indicates that joy as a topic has a lot of theoretical potential to contribute to research on trans temporality.

This research has shown that trans joy has a multifaceted significance both in trans people's personal lives and in the cultural contributions it can make for understanding gender transitions and the value of gender diversity. It calls for further research across different settings, and for practical applications of trans joy where the provision of transition-related health care is protected and gender-affirming spaces are created across society. I would like to close on a poem which is a collage of people's responses, in their words. It takes us to a space of trans joy once more and demonstrates our key findings: trans joy's life-giving power in people's personal lives and the spaces it allows people to create.

Don't have to do any more work to prove that you are

Real, you have always been real, you have always been here

Bright, balanced, powerful and joyful

Finding your name

Don't you love what makes you feel comfortable in your body

It's a relief to be

Seen, true to how I feel

Alive

Soaring

Trying to get somewhere where I could take a break and rest

I felt I knew a kind of freedom

like a fresh breeze where I can really mould my identity there

like I finally understood myself

It changed stuff inside me

and my universe opened up

Nobody questioned my right to be there, my right to define myself as I am

when queer and trans people showcase their interests, skills and different life experiences, and are happy

We create space for ourselves

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