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Mapping Transgender Narratives in a Digital Age

Megan Mabry

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MAPPING TRANSGENDER NARRATIVES IN A DIGITAL AGE

by

MEGAN MABRY

Under the Direction of Susan Talburt, PhD

ABSTRACT

Considering the rise of transgender representation and discussion across many media platforms (television, film, print, social networking, etc.), how does such burgeoning and diverse exposure affect transgender individuals and communities? This project explores the ways in which transgender communities have developed and investigated potential for alternative and community-created representations of transgender experiences. With a particular focus on the utility and versatility of digital spaces, this project investigates the potential of web comics in harnessing both digital space and graphic narrative in creating alternative representation and discourse. The ensuing work, *Maps*, follows the journey of a cast of queer and transgender characters on a journey through the American South in search of family and justice.

INDEX WORDS: Transgender, Queer, Graphic Narrative, Web Comic, Road Narrative

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DEDICATION

To all those queer and trans folks who like their cornbread sweet, and their tea sweeter.
And to all y'all who fought for this story when I was too weary to bear it alone. Thank you for
building it with me.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and Context

In a cultural moment branded as the “transgender tipping point” (*Time Magazine* 2014), the visibility and exposure of transgender lives and experiences continues to climb. Magazine covers, talk shows, and cable and online-network series featuring transgender icons such as Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner, and Chaz Bono center wildly successful narratives of transgender characters. *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix 2013) not only catalyzed the market for online-network series, but also catapulted Laverne Cox’s acting career following her portrayal as Sophia, a black transgender woman who is incarcerated for credit card fraud that funds her transition. Similarly, *Transparent* (Amazon Prime 2014) won two Golden Globes in 2014 for Best Television Series (Musical or Comedy), and Best Actor for Jeffrey Tambor’s (a cisgender man) portrayal of Maura, a transgender woman and mother of three. Alongside increased interest in transgender characters, media productions investigating “the transgender experience” continue to rise, including shows such as *I Am Cait* (2015), *I Am Jazz* (2015), and *Becoming Us* (2015), to name a few. Paradoxically, however, the increase in transgender representation in the media has not necessarily resulted in a wider array of narratives about transgender lives; rather, the same few narratives are replicated over and over. The result is that, despite the greater volume of transgender images and stories in the media, the variety among these remains limited and limiting.

While media interest and exposure of transgender individuals and lives continues to rise, so too follows publicity of anti-trans violence, murder, and suicide. While certain palatable and relatable trans stories and bodies are centered in popular media, other transgender people remain targets of transphobic violence. In particular, transgender women and trans feminine individuals

become victim to transmisogynist discourse and actions. In 2015, transgender women of color, who experience transmisogyny at the intersection of white supremacy, comprised 21 of the 23 known murders of transgender people in the United States. At the fourth INCITE: Color of Violence conference, trans activist Reina Gosset notes an apparent rise in trans visibility in both “pop culture and the gaze of the state,” and asks of her audience: “In this moment of violence and visibility, I feel it is urgent that we think about what we risk losing when the state, and pop culture, seem to be inviting us in. What do we open ourselves, and our communities, up to when we seek out visibility?” Building on Gosset’s work, Melinda Gira Grant considers how the rise in visibility necessarily invites new vulnerability. By reframing “visibility” as “exposure,” we are able to create a clearer context for the “thirty-five anti-trans laws introduced across 12 states since 2015” according to the National Transgender Law Center (Grant). Exposing transgender subjects and narratives certainly increases their visibility in cisnormative spaces, but does so at great (and dangerous) risk.

Representation of transgender individuals and characters has nudged us ever closer to the transgender tipping point, but it does so at the expense of dynamic or complicated narratives. Few roles exist for transgender actors, and diversity in experience or narrative is low. Representations of transgender people are most often reduced to the comedic (*The Hangover Part 2* [2011], *Zoolander 2* [2016]), murderous (*Silence of the Lambs* [1991], *Pretty Little Liars* [2015]) or tragic (*Dallas Buyers Club* [2013], *Boys Don’t Cry* [1999]). The most visible images of transgender people are also the most sanitized—celebrity darlings who are largely gender-conforming, articulate, educated, desirable, and highly marketable. The desire for sanitized subjects has contributed to the exclusion, erasure, and victimization of transgender communities broadly, with particular constriction of folks at the intersections of other marginalized identities,

particularly along lines of race, class, citizenship, and ability. The images of transgender people who are visible on our screens and in our publications reflect the popular imaginary; concurrently, a singular progress-oriented and cisnormative narrative of transition (a clear, predictable shift from one binary gender to another) dominates common discourse.

Drawing on a tradition of subversive and underground media, trans folks and communities have turned to alternative modes of production that allow them the space and freedom to tell their own stories in their own ways; these projects resist “exposure” in favor of community-created and controlled representations. Digital media such as graphic narratives, videos, blogs, forums, and hashtags have allowed trans folks to communicate narratives, images, and experiences to each other and to wider audiences that more accurately reflect the complexities of transgender lives.

By charting spaces of their own, transgender communities have created new ways of community building and innovated approaches to knowledge production and archiving. My project, *Maps*, a digital comic, draws on a tradition of transgender and queer graphic narratives that has persisted through fledgling liberation movements, academic hijacking, and our current “multicultural” moment. Transgender comics, at their best, reconcile the atrocity of the transgender body into new potential; they spit-shine the deceit of flattened transgender narratives into complex truth. In this project, I aim to showcase both the typical and the extraordinary narratives of transgender people living in the southern U.S. Along a journey, they encounter many foes: racist and homo/transphobic police, binary bathrooms on a hundred-mile stretch, and confederate flags in gas station windows. *Maps* traces the ways in which normativity defeats, omits, or erases the heroic potential of gender and gender transgression.

1.2 Artist's Statement

In a multicultural moment invested in tolerance rather than true liberation of all peoples, contemporary media have become invested in displaying, discussing, and investigating transgender individuals, communities, and narratives. Facing a troubling cis-anxiety, transgender subjects are routinely bound by cisnormative ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality; those characters, features, and narratives displayed to a larger audience are those who are already culturally legible. Those who are in excess of or opposition to dominant cultural ideas are sanitized so that they might be better articulated, sold, and consumed. As a result of the supposedly beneficent exposure of transgender subjects, politicians, corporations, universities, and other organizations have found new means of capitalizing on transgender lives. This is perhaps best evidenced by the continued evolution of transgender-specific cultural competency courses, trending hashtags by major political and mercantile campaigns, and a perpetual stream of articles, exposés, and features offering insight into “the transgender experience.” When only benign transgender subjects are invited into the conversation, the intricacy of those subjects and their experiences are simultaneously defined by and erased from larger conversation.

Only in recent years has transgender knowledge been readily and quickly amassed, shared, and documented. Predominantly defined by divergent, dynamic, and transitory ways of knowing and of accumulating knowledge, trans knowledges faced significant and violent barriers in previous decades and generations. Situated at the crux of violence, erasure, and medicalization, articulations of transgender identities were hypersexualized, hypermedicalized, and often institutionalized; the act of naming and identifying oneself or one's community, then, was increasingly troubled by the invasive threat of medical, legal, and punitive forces.

Legacies of major turns in articulating trans identities are now routinely archived in both

digital and traditional texts (e.g., Stryker 2006, Feinberg 1992) but were previously scattered by forces which sought not only to isolate and neutralize transgender individuals, but also to perpetuate the belief that transness, as a whole, was an outlier constructed by mental, physical, or moral defect. As communications and technology improved, gender-troubled folks began to share their stories with increased access, ease, and frequency; in this way, fledgling transgender communities formed first around mailing lists and subscriptions, and, over time, grew wider with the advent of listservs, community vlog channels, and blog sites.

Before the rise of internet accessibility and eventually digital cultures, transgender people looked to other alternative media to make sense of life in a gender normative world. Zines like *Gender Trash* (1993), *TransSisters* (1995), and *TNT: The Transsexual News Telegraph* (1991) (Stryker 5) built both community and discussion, while transgender artists and authors became interwoven in an expansive and sustained network of LGB underground comics (Hall, n.pag). With the emergence of a digital world, transgender, gender non-conforming, and folks of queer genders found new ways to disrupt the binary, code or otherwise.

Transgender people and communities have carved out space for evolution and self-definition. With the advent of the age of the Internet, transgender individuals have taken to cyber-space largely for the promise of the creation of a counter-public (Berlant and Warner 558) of sorts. Within the pixels, transgender people have managed not only to amass, create, and share a wealth of new and reconstructed knowledge, but also to create a unique pedagogical framework for the continued communication and construction of trans knowledges, experiences, and insights. Moderate media and inclusive products in the mainstream stifle trans voices, and redirect attention away from other community-created and -backed efforts. For example, hashtags such as #girlslikeus take hold of the dangerous space made out for trans girls (“girls like

them”) in mainstream media, and turns slim roles into burgeoning spaces of implosion, reinterpretation, and conversation. Still, transgender communities have invested in a wide range of efforts at community building and knowledge sharing in the web. Online forums, chat rooms, blogs, and newsletters create and sustain conversation around language, resources, and organizing beyond the pixels. Digital media such as web comics, video blogs and channels, and independent e-books offer space to center the stories, visualizations, and fantasies of transgender people that are otherwise precluded from cisnormative media. In this way, the digital sphere has uniquely allowed the compilation and distribution of a critical mass of transgender knowledge, one that escapes categorization due to its mercurial nature.

Transgender knowledges have virtually exploded into cyber space. The internet, transitory by nature, has proven highly amenable to transgender knowledge production that resists ready or easy documentation in traditional standard archives. Because contemporary trans knowledge creation remains cradled in the digital world, it is fundamentally “techno,” using new media (blogs, vlogs, websites, archives, ebooks, zines, podcasts/radio shows, web comics) that are able to provide more complete or holistic representation than that of other pop and/or dominant media. Facing a lesser burden of categorization and legibility, these e-creations present particular promise for the case of both challenging and broadening the deeply managed and constricted means of transgender representation in mainstream media. A concern of this project is to investigate how a digital/visual space might be uniquely situated or inclined to support further exploration and experimentation in creating transgender representation. This research is vital to furthering transgender liberation in that it aims to radically shift the current socio-cultural discourses (rooted primarily in mainstream media and distributed juridico-legal/medical processes) through augmented comprehension and expression of the complexities of

transgender lives.

My project, in its most basic form, holds two major aspirations. The first aspiration is to demonstrate transgender lives *in complexity* with attention to intersectional experience, and in the context of other movements and cultural moments. I take transgender subjects out of the current frame (which isolates them by gender identity and expression first and foremost), and place them into conversation with other contemporary social issues. In particular, how might transgender communities address and experience police brutality, unemployment, and homelessness? In this way, I investigate how digital media might recapture or express those extra-human resonances of transgender lives that are erased and fragmented by mainstream media. A second, long-term aspiration is to explore the ways in which diversified digital media can queer traditional or dominant narratives specifically by inviting in-process feedback and conversation. How are major cultural themes disrupted by such engaged and diverse (in both dominant and marginalized voices) discussion? How might they be further troubled by the constant creative chaos of a discussion board?

While many different avenues could be pursued for the interests of this project (YouTube videos, memes, blog posts, Twitter exchanges, trans archives and communal sites), I focus on web-based graphic narratives (web comics). I argue that web comics function as a vital resource in both shifting current public imagination (either in dominant or marginalized spheres) and creating new understanding of transgender identities, lives, and experiences. Web comics, a hybrid form, deny traditional genre, production method or technique, and audience; they are incessantly innovating the panel, the page, and the form. In this way, transgender subjects find unique space for resonance, communication, and expression.

Maps uses alternative techno means of creation and construction to queer one staple of American media and literature: the road narrative. Playing on the history and prominence of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, my creative project will follow the journey of three characters on their journey through the American South. Opening in a Virginia diner, the narrative details a road trip through the Carolinas and Tennessee as the cast journeys back to Atlanta in the hope of retrieving their friend who lies comatose following a violent incident with local police. This work will provide a diverse array of voices as the narrative is told by a new character in each section. Both Faulkner and *As I Lay Dying* held a prominently queer corner of the American media in 1930 as they were the product of the conceivably dark, backwards, and rickety South; a poor, white family struggling with depression, PTSD, death, and teenage pregnancy echoed discordantly with contemporary mainstream American literature. Building on a lineage of the gender-skewed, rowdy Southerners (Carson McCullers, Fannie Flagg, Dorothy Allison), *Maps* continues to trouble the line between the queer South and the Queer South. It seems, in fact, that you can neither take the Queer out of the South nor the South out of the Queer.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theorizing Transgender Identities, Lives, and Communities

Research on the transgender community in the last two decades has maintained a central focus on issues and questions of terminology, embodiment, medicine and medical intervention, and civil rights. The field of transgender research and/or transgender (“trans”) studies shared roots with the birth of queer theory in the early 1990s. According to Susan Stryker, both transgender theory and queer theory gained interest and popularity as result of the “universal progress of the post-modern condition” as these two movements “emerge from and bear witness to the epistemological rifts between gender signifiers and the signified” (147). Trans and queer lives can be uniquely articulated and conceived within a post-modern or post-structural framework, given their transitory and nebulous characteristics. Trans theory is delayed and incapacitated by continued frustration over language and expression; consequently, trans studies continues to exist on the margins of seemingly allied feminist and gender studies programs as a result of seemingly (or, at times, truly) opposed “interests, vocabularies, and epistemological foundations” (Enke 2). This tension hums as spheres of study are juxtaposed. Lexical debris in these orbiting fields continues to muddle the scope and promise of transgender studies. Yet, popular or non-academic discussion (found in significant amounts on message boards, blog sites, and other social networking platforms) of terminology concerns itself not with concretization or delineation, but instead the mercurial nature of language, and especially that of queer language.

The desire or necessity to concretize or isolate knowledge around transgender experiences or identity necessarily imposes hierarchies on transgender subjects. Elliot discusses the ways in which the resonance between queer and transgender has created an “insinuated hierarchy” in which transgender persons “consider themselves politically transgressive” while

simultaneously “relegating transsexuals to a politically conservative position”: such compartmentalizing of transgender identities and language has the further complication of “narrowing the realm of the political to a [certain] mode of gender expression” (12). What Elliot fails to discuss is the ways in which the desire to create “sticky” definitions (definitions that are easily tied together, put into order, or replicated) is both the source and the continuation of the need to create “legible” transgender identities. Continued insistence on a common vocabulary by which we can negotiate, define, and relate transgender (and their counter cisgender or “cis”) identities finds little relief in further linguistic acrobatics.

The continued and intentional exclusion of transgender perspectives and voices (with particular attention to the voices of transgender women and transfeminine individuals) from media must also consider other arenas such as medicine. Building on Elliot’s discussion of terminology, Bernice Hausman also begins a discussion around the politics and procedures of transgender healthcare. Today’s transgender identities grew from a scrutinizing medical history of the “transvestite” (a term coined in 1910 by Dr. Magnus Hirschfield) and “transsexual” (a term popularized in the 1950’s by Dr. Harry Benjamin), as well as the lineage of “transgender” individuals to Virginia Prince, a transgender woman who sought to bridge preceding medical terms for a variety of gender variant expressions and experiences.

While linguistic gatekeeping damages trans experience and knowledge through compulsory naming, medical gatekeeping (which relies heavily on linguistic gatekeeping and identity policing) prevents transgender individuals from receiving not only general and preventative healthcare, but also gender-affirming procedures such as reassignment surgeries, hormone replacement therapies, and mental health care. For transgender individuals seeking gender confirming therapies, surgeries, and other procedures, language often stands in as the

most verifiable “truth” for relaying their needs. Unsurprisingly, the language required for medical transition reflects the language and narratives disseminated through media, and vice versa. This echoes a deeply medicalized history of trans experiences, and also the culturally-imbued blueprint of medical opinion. Ideas of being “born in the wrong body” or of “always knowing” one’s “true” gender identity echo the clinical standards for medical transition. For transgender individuals who experience their gender outside of these keywords, medical transition is a distant or impossible dream. Outside of medical needs, transgender people use language that reflects their gendered experiences across identity; this is an act of resistance to the normalizing, white, and hegemonic language used in medical spheres.

In transgender communities, language, imagery, and performance are used in conflation, in compromise, and in collusion. For some, self-identification is best rendered in dissonance or chaos. Transgender, as a concept, movement, and community, exists in a state of transition and growth, creating connotative and contextual debris. In the early 1990s, Leslie Feinberg first used transgender to identify a growing and increasingly united movement of individuals who were marginalized or oppressed on the basis of their divergent gender expression or embodiment (Enke 4; Stryker 4). Moving away from subjects named for their deviant physicality or expression, transgender became an identifier an individual, group, or community could take up to name themselves or their politics (Stryker 4). Transgender as both term and concept has been exponentially explored and re-articulated in digital spaces. Indeed, web-space has hosted not only the creation of new terminology for trans and queer communities, but also an expansion and reinvestment in existing or incorporated terminology. Terms such as agender, genderqueer, and nonbinary have been assembled, discussed, and shared in digital spaces in ways that were previously precluded by isolation, ostracization, and binary gendering. Interestingly, a recent

attempt to better incorporate the variety of gender identities under the trans umbrella grew directly out of digital technology. Popularized in 2010, “trans*” was derived from the internet search structure wherein a user adds an asterisk at the end of a search term to direct the computer to search for that term as well as any characters after (Tompkins 26). Given the already blossoming utility of digital spaces, how much does a techno-visual means of communication emulate the affective and material realities of transgender lives?

When faced with the challenge of learning and/or interpreting language pertaining to transgender communities, bodies, and experiences, cisgender audiences most often disbelieve the necessity of such labyrinthine vocabulary. They are able to dismiss the importance or significance of trans language outside of transgender mouths; in short, the messy language is for the folks who need it, and ought to stay there. In Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Addie Bundren (the recently deceased matriarch), says: “I learned that words are no good; that words don’t ever even fit what they are trying to say at. When [my son] was born, I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who had never had pride” (172). Each word we use to describe our experiences, gendered or otherwise, is an attempt at communicating complicated truths—truths we perceive as disparate from those of others. The definitions, context, and stability that we perceive a word to have is the consequence of a long history of these individual attempts.

While transgender communities look to one another for community and connection, arguably the primary force behind the increasingly labyrinthine transgender vocabulary is the need of 1) cisgender folks to grasp transgender subjects and 2) for transgender subjects to find belonging, peace, or reconciliation within a cisnormative culture. A complex vocabulary, then, is

a reaction to the impossibly convoluted system of cis- and hetero-normativity, especially in conjunction with white supremacy, capitalism, and xenophobia.

In the next section, I first build some context around issues of language and space facing transgender subjects, and then discuss some of the ways in which queer and trans comics have evolved in a digital age. This framing will begin to outline the space that my project will occupy, and an argument for the unique promise of a web comic.

2.2 Space: Comics, Queers, and Technology

The act of “making space” by and for marginalized communities has historically taken form in actions such as consciousness raising, rallies, book/speech writing, affirmative action and other slow-moving government actions, and, more recently, blog/vlog creation in cyber spaces. In the context of transgender liberation struggles, grassroots work on the internet not only leads the effort for creation and distribution of transgender knowledge and information, but also creates an intentional bleeding out of cyberspace into real-time organizing action (protests/rallies, lobbying, organization creation, conferences, etc.). The creation of a “space” for transgender representation serves to establish moments that are conducive to constant assemblage and disassemblage of “transness”; such spaces call into question the constant (re)formation of static representations.

Transgender communities have turned to digital platforms to seek out, create, and share resources that might be otherwise unavailable to them. Laura Horak considers the magnitude of transgender-related videos, vlogs, and vloggers on YouTube: “On August 2, 2014, a search for the word transgender on YouTube yielded more than six hundred thousand hits. More specific search terms bring up videos that are almost exclusively made by trans people themselves. On

YouTube, there are more than 240,000 videos labeled “ftm,” more than 209,000 labeled “mtf,” and almost 21,000 labeled “genderqueer” (572). With an influx of digital space as well as the wide accessibility of digital recording devices (cell phones, digital cameras, webcams, video cameras), transgender individuals are able to share stories on topics of coming out, transition, and daily life. Community work in the digital space often also bears impact on the lives of transgender folks in real time. For example, transgender bloggers and internet darlings have recently shifted their notoriety (built on social networking sites such as Tumblr, YouTube, Instagram, etc.) to the development of community fundraising efforts. Groups such as “Ways To Raise” and “FLVNT Streetwear” organize campaigns benefitting social, legal, and medical transition-related efforts of community members. The real-time benefits of digital spaces are evidenced not only in vlogs and fundraising efforts, but also through the creation and distribution of digital art and memorials.

Digital spaces are characterized by a dynamic simultaneity in that they are at once stable (ever existing) and nebulous (ever changing). The emergence and rapid development of digital spaces advanced existing channels for queer discourse with dynamic (at times, *viral*) space for burgeoning conversation and LGBTQIA community building. In his introduction to *No Straight Lines*, Justin Hall writes:

Along with a more sophisticated and complex idea of queerness, the new millennium saw technology once again change the cultural landscape, with easily accessible computers and the Internet creating new possibilities of cheap publication, interactivity, and community. Printed zines and minicomics began an evolution, continuing to this day, into more handcrafted art objects, with blogs

and webcomics emerging as the preeminent means for fast, direct work. Queer cartoonists, along with the rest of the comics world, started producing work and connecting with fans online. (Hall n. pag.)

The continued evolution of the internet has created an increasing amount of space for the specific, the personalized, and the purchasable. As interest and investment in the internet grew, large retail stores and other small online shops found new ways to get comics into the hands of enthusiasts everywhere. Whether they were reprints or little-known independent works, the internet revolutionized the circulation of comics and presented renewed possibility for a generation of artists using the internet as “their sole means of production and distribution” (Fenty, Houpp, and Taylor).

The history of underground comix in both creation and circulation provides an important context for the current frame and potential of web comics. Underground comix were the products of liberal counterculture. As a medium with ever growing audiences, comics of the 1930s and 40s were met with deep suspicion concerning their “cultural value and social impact” and their supposed promotion of “juvenile delinquency” (Lopes x). In the 1950s, public outcry around the morality and cultural legitimacy of comics led to book burnings, governmental hearings, and eventually the creation of a Comics Code (Lopes x). The code implemented 41 provisions that “purged sex, violence, and any other content not in keeping with critics’ standards” and also stressed “respect for government,” “parental authority,” and proper grammar (eliminating slang and colloquialisms) (Nyberg). The code awarded acceptable work with a “stamp,” and led to the rise of underground comix, a form which “radically transformed comic books with adult material

from the most profane to the most political” (Lopes xi). The Comics Code Authority maintained major influence over the market until the late 1980s (Nyberg).

Comix were considered culturally derelict for both their subject matter (anti-war and anti-capitalist propaganda; promiscuity and sexual liberty), and their means of circulation (headshops, street vendors, etc.) (Spiggle 102). While the comix industry (like published comics) was known for its predominantly white, male artists, comix created space for both queer and feminist authors, subjects, and narratives. Feminist Comics such as *Wimmen’s Comix* (1972) and *Tits and Clits* (1972) featured feminist and openly lesbian artists, and appropriated a heavily misogynist comix industry (Galvan 204). Queer comix of the time featured gay erotica and unabashed queer cultures. As Hall notes, “LGBTQ comics have been an uncensored, internal conversation within queer communities” which “forged their aesthetics from underground comix, gay erotic art, punk zines, traditional illustration, camp humor, and the biting commentaries of bull dykes, nerdy fags, gender radicals, and other marginalized queers.” Underground comix demonstrate a tradition of community-funded, created, and distributed art for and by marginalized communities. The advent and rise of the internet catalyzed the movement, growth, and spread of these communities by virtue of access (in terms of space, capital, time, resources, etc.), and saw a new kind of community-based comic as a result.

A web comic, loosely defined for the purposes of this project, is a sequential or continuing narrative that is created for digital publication, and which is housed only on digital platforms (e.g., social networking sites, blogs, independent domains, web comic fan boards and communities). Often, web comics are independent, crowd-funded (or simply not funded) endeavors that circulate in community spaces by word of mouth, page sharing, or digital networking. There are two ways in which the internet has markedly changed accessibility; the

first is in content, and the second is in audience engagement.

Web comics, similar to other underground or independent projects, are characterized by content that is either marginalized or absent from mainstream or popular media: “Web comics have a very specific distribution and community that is intrinsic to underground movements but not to genre fiction” (Fenty, Houpp, Taylor). In their discussion of web comics, Fenty, Houpp, and Taylor detail the many similarities between current popularity and patterns in web comics and those of the Underground Comix movement of the 1960s. The internet provides a space similar to the “head shops used by the Underground” for the distribution of independent comics, and also acts as a host for subjects and content that would otherwise be foreign, inadmissible, or perverse to mainstream audiences. Access to content related to and/or created by marginalized and oppressed communities finds a foothold in web comics; such content refutes the current heteronormative position of “intimacy as private” (Berlant and Warner 559). Instead, web comics, like their preceding underground comix, deny the authority of codes, governing bodies, and publishers; they invest in making public those ideas, experiences, and realities relegated to private spheres. This footholds aids in the creation of a new index for a virtual world (Berlant and Warner 558) that is a vital form of queer counter culture, a nebulous party with a history steeped in opposition to the “official publics of opinion culture and the state” (Berlant and Warner 558). Thus, the queer culture’s inventive and fragile nature (Berlant and Warner 558) finds further strength in a form that “removes spatial constraints, theoretically allowing for infinite space” (Fenty, Houpp, and Taylor), and new capacity for unhindered content, formatting, and production that remains “unfettered by the rules of syndication and censorship” (Fenty, Houpp, and Taylor).

Interestingly, Fenty, Houp, and Taylor define web comics as comics that are “made first for the web by an independent creator” and as a “growing form” with a “very loose definition” that “will change with the form itself.” The web-comic, then, is potentially defined by its nebulous or transitory nature, one that is adaptive and inherently resistant to solid or static definition. The characteristics of web comics and queer counter publics find a mutual affinity. In the context of the basic structure of web comics as constituted by shifting frames, lines, gutters, and borders, Berlant and Warner’s claim takes on new meaning: “These border intimacies give people tremendous pleasure” (560). Instead of building new hierarchies, this attempt at intimacy through screens and wires reads as more intimate than that rigid, scripted intimacy presented in television and traditional print, similar to Berlant and Warner’s idealized queer project that “supports forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory and sustained through collective activity” (562).

Contrary to previous structures employed and popularized by print-for-purchase comics, web comics also allow a new form of intimacy in learning new patterns and structures, or in the relishing of a lack of coherent or easily delineated style or formatting. As Fenty notes, the ability of web comics to easily change shape alleviates the stress of ever-shrinking columns and newspaper or magazine space. Web comics stand out not only in their content, but also in their potential for wider accessibility across audiences.

In terms of audience engagement, web comics are unique in that they are available to anyone who has access to a computer and internet connection, and are often passed around diverse circles which are subject at any moment to viral interest. In their discussion of queer culture as a “world making project,” Berlant and Warner are interested in how the term world “necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped

beyond a few reference points” (558). A web comic, then, supports this queer culture project in that it inherently rejects traditional mapping as it has been defined by for-profit print companies and the larger literary canon. Topics of marginalization, re-centering, and representation are crucial to queer webcomics as they feature narrators and characters who are people of color, trans, queer, disabled, poor, and more. Webcomics, in particular, resist traditional categories in that their fluid potential in author, narrator, and audience blur authorial lines and negate the power inherent in the traditional literary notion of the (singular) “voice.” This act of toying with power, panel by panel, falls in line with Berlant and Warner’s “world-making.” Webcomics are not “realized” by a single community or identity (558), but instead exist as a space that speaks to experience and interest rather than to a rubric of identity. By centering multiple voices or perspectives in lieu of a single authorial voice, web comics actively invite a broader audience by way of more diverse representation. Accessibility to content and audience are radically queer in the web comic form. By deconstructing the “hegemonic national public around sex” and intimacy (Berlant and Warner 550), web comics attempt to fill or open new possibilities in cyber space with queer alternatives. “The institutions of heterosexuality that have come to oversaturate the social imaginary” (Berlant and Warner 557) are marginalized in this cyber space by alternative funding programs that enable the centralizing of oppressed or impoverished narratives.

3 Methodology and Methods

3.1 Methodology

“Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar.

(Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.) ” –Gloria Anzaldúa

In this project, I approach my work with what I have tentatively named a “trans-feminist” lens. The need for a liberatory practice and framework that focuses on a holistic and dynamic understanding of gender oppression *and* sex oppression as they relate particularly to transgender lives and experiences is paramount. Transfeminism is an articulation of the limits of feminism that refuses to interrogate cisnormativity, especially at the intersections of white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism. Transfeminist can be a call for “both ‘trans’ and ‘feminist’ to do more flexible work,” perhaps framing each as “potential prefixes and suffixes that may modify and be modified” (Enke 2). Enke posits that bringing “feminist studies and transgender studies into more explicit conversation pushes us toward better transliteration, greater transliteracy, and deeper collaboration” (2). In building stronger bridges between feminist studies and transgender studies, we encourage both fields to consider some of their parallel desires, approaches, and ideologies, and to move each of them out of a stagnated, underfunded, and isolated space into a more collaborative conversation. One conversation that these fields share surrounds the necessity of language to both the identification and liberation of gendered subjects.

Despite a short tradition, transfeminism has staked great claims and set high standards. First and foremost is the concern of language; trans folks are “demanding the right to choose [their] own self definitions” (Feinberg 6), and well aware that no standard lexicon exists, that “vocabularies and uses are invented and just as quickly challenged” as their “unintended

implications, exclusions, and limitations” are discovered (Enke 4). Transfeminist scholars often cite “the wonderful problem” (Feinberg 6) of language in trans communities, and aspire to nurture that “prolific and unruly” quality of language, as well as their ensuing grammatical disasters (Enke 4). Trans studies and feminist studies are less concerned with nailing down the subject and more with understanding the forces (linguistic, affective, medical, legal) which surface the subject; in my estimation, bringing these fields into conversation only strengthens the objective to challenge these forces rather than to solidify the subject.

Outside of language, transfeminism argues that transgender people should be able to live and express their gender identities without fear of violence or retribution (Feinberg 6, Koyami 2). Similarly, no one should be made to alter their expression or their physicality in order to be respected (Koyami 2). In short, folks should not be made to identify, present, or change their bodies/selves in order to feel safe, receive medical care, secure housing or employment, or obtain legal status or recognition.

My frame of reference is situated at the intersections of my experience as an assigned female at birth non-binary trans person, and especially within the context of a lineage of tomboy, dyke, and butch assemblages. In my experience, a fair share of feminist discourse fails to address the particular embodied experiences of trans people, and the unique ways in which they experience multiple counts of gender- and sex-based discrimination across an array of actual and perceived gender identities and expressions. Transfeminist is an early attempt at building a practice that addresses the needs of trans people to name, situate, and challenge these instances of discrimination and opportunity across varying modes, moments, and assemblages.

Transfeminism extends from histories of feminist and queer theory, and occupies the painful spaces where language, culture, and stigma have historically isolated and fragmented

trans identities in pursuit of a complete and “legitimate” argument or theory. Transfeminism, informed by trans lives, is acutely aware of space in, around, and beyond language. Trans folks are at times fragmented as Western tradition cannot imagine trans folks to exist, much in the same fashion that people of color, disabled folks, and poor folks exist only in fractions. Given the ability to understand the normative whole as well as the intricacies of those identitarian fault lines, transgender people garner particular knowledge and understanding of how to address issues through alternative means (visual, sonic, physical, etc.) to build new resonance that can persist in its sharing, instead of in its margins. In many ways, cisgender experiences are entirely different than cisgender people can conceive. Transfeminism understands knowledge as entirely contextual, subject to not only person or identity but also to moment, to affect, to location. Knowledge is assembled in a moment, and invoked to 1) satisfy the demands of the knower, 2) to compel the creation of new knowledge, and 3) to interact in some fashion (building, subtracting, fusing, eradicating) the knowledge of an other, or an outsider. Thus, an approach which fossilizes knowledge does a great disservice. Instead, a queer approach is necessary. Jasbir Puar’s reflection on a queer methodology is useful here: “Queerness irreverently challenges a linear mode of conduction and transmission: there is no exact recipe for a queer endeavor, no a priori system that taxonomizes the linkages, disruptions, and contradictions into a tiny vessel” (5). To undertake a project in a mode of assembling is “crucial to countering the platitudinous and journalistic rhetoric that plagues those public discourses most readily available for consumption” (Puar 5). This epistemological assumption, then, centers the ultimate goal of this project: to reconsider current prosaic representations of transness by instead exploring the ways in which transgender individuals (and, alternatively, the radio silence or feedback of their cisgender peers) assemble knowledge in digital spaces.

Because my web comic will live, quite literally, in a digital space, it is open and susceptible to rapid, dynamic conversation, interpretation, sharing, conflation, distortion, and much more. My understanding of placing such a text in a digital space is that to do so is to remove any sense of objectivity, of barrier or restriction on the potential of that piece to be abstracted or appropriated by audiences. This is intentional. “More like a membrane than a wall” (Conquergood 145), boundaries are necessary for building the context to negotiate and imagine liberation, but they do not *necessarily* need to exist in spaces where we do the imagining.

Surely, there are times when for safety and true bravery in imagination to blossom certain precautions are invited (e.g., identity-only spaces for healing, for imaging, for engaging and thriving), but, in my estimation, in order to forge and resolve our new foundations, collective voices are more resounding than an individual. Solidarity cannot be built without some space for connection. It is for this reason that I choose to host my work in a digital space, one that is bustling and busting at its binary seams, quite literally living in the collective breath of all audiences. Boundaries are products of mapping practices, and objects (defined by boundaries) do not pre-exist as such; “objects are boundary projects” (Haraway 595). What I hope to exploit is the notion that boundaries can, and do, shift from within; they are tricky things that contain generative and productive energies that can redefine meanings and bodies (Haraway 595). Given the infinite means and methods of the internet, it is my hope that investing such a project in an open, digital platform will yield discussion, investment, interpretation, expansion, and (re)appropriation by a host of Others.

It is also my personal hope that by using such a dynamic platform, I can minimize the wounding act of territorializing my own knowledge, and that of others. Ideally, this project will reclaim and recenter the knowledge that dominant culture “neglects, excludes, represses” and

erases simply because it is “illegible” to dominant people (Conquergood 146). Certainly, the knowledge I claim came from the hands of countless others and Others, and I do not aim to claim that miraculous collective as my own work. Thus, I hope to achieve what Conquergood describes as a “local context,” a space which encompasses historical, dynamic, and often traumatic “movements of people, ideas, images, commodities, and capital”(146); this will help me to reimagine location (social position) as an “itinerary instead of a fixed point” (Conquergood 146).

My work, at its core, is interested in a simple fundamental goal: re-imagining and building representation of queer and transgender Southern folks, especially those of color. My work as it stands will be my interpretation of what such a practice of world-building can and does look like; this is unique given my own knowledge base as a working class, Southern white queer and non-binary trans person. What my project hopes to do, however, is to invite those who are barred behind borders, deported across borders, defined against borders, and others to envision what it would look like to participate in imagining and building safe, productive, or healthy delineations for their own lives.

3.2 Methods

For the creative work of this project, I will employ an approach that hybridizes traditional sequential art creation and modern digital graphic design. The webcomic that I am creating will be laid out on A3 standard paper (11.69 inches by 16.53 inches). Work designed for digital hosting is best presented in RGB (red, green, blue) coloring, and can be converted to CMYK or Pantone processing for any printing or publishing efforts in the future. Using a method known as a plot script, I will create a short series of page layouts for each chapter using traditional methods, and then scan those into a digital format for further manipulation. Adobe Photoshop

CS6 is my digital design program of choice. I plan to use a distinct monochrome palette to help distinguish chapters as told by different characters; the exception to this is a chapter told by the character Aanya, whose narrative (told from a coma) will be portrayed in full color. Overall, the style deployed is neither entirely realistic nor abstract; instead, my scenes are best articulated through line, with some information conveyed through color and value.

In the section below, I will briefly lay out the narrative arc before discussing what portion of *Maps* will be completed and submitted to fulfill my thesis requirement. *Maps* begins, as many stories do, at a table. In Williamsburg, Virginia, three friends, Alysha, Kamal, and Shay, sit around a table in their local diner. Their food has just arrived when Shay gets a call from his older sister, Grace. Cramming a burger in his mouth, Shay puts the phone on speaker for the group to hear. Grace, living in Atlanta (the hometown of the diner crew), calmly walks the three through a conversation about a recent police protest Downtown following the shooting of a local woman. Protesters, gathered in Troy Davis Park, were demanding transparency from the Atlanta police following the incident, and asking why the officers involved were not wearing body cams. At the end of her story, Grace finally says: “Look, it’s Aanya. They’ve been shot.” Aanya, their friend from elementary school, was transported to Grady, and their status is unknown; Aanya’s parents are deeply uncomfortable with their child’s gender-mess, and simply disgusted with Aanya’s queer family and friends. Fearful, pained, and panicked, the three decide to take the eight-hour trip back to Atlanta in hopes of finding their friend alive.

In the first chapter, *Maps* details the experiences of two trans characters preparing for a trip. Shay, a white transmasculine kid who has recently started T, struggles into a chest binder, reaches across panels for a packer, and tries on a least three shirts. Meanwhile, Alysha, a transgender woman and Kamal’s identical twin, reapplies her liner, pops E, and smiles at herself

painfully in the mirror. Kamal sits patiently in the living room.

The following chapters detail the experiences of two trans kids and a queer black man on their trip through the South. In one chapter, Kamal is pulled over and viciously interrogated by a racist cop. In another, they are forced to stop at the only gas station for fifty miles—a dilapidated Chevron with a confederate flag covering the front window. In another, Shay is confronted with a choice of binary bathrooms—a harrowing problem for a kid with a cracking voice, and uncomfortably wispy chin hair. Throughout the chapters, the characters discuss police brutality, transgender language, gender expression beyond the binary, Aanya’s struggle as a non-binary child of immigrant parents, and the intersections of their identities with the landscape (political, physical, cultural) of the South. In Aanya’s chapter, the only full color chapter, we find Aanya traipsing through a hastily assembled world as they lie comatose. Through the frames, readers watch them try to make sense of their world. Connections are broken at best and the reader witnesses their decision to build a map out of experience rather than fact.

For the purposes of this work, I have included the first chapter detailing Shay and Lysha’s experiences prepping for the outside world. It is my hope that this chapter will help to trouble the static trans narrative that has become so popular as of late.

4 Conclusion

4.1

At its broadest, my project is interested in storytelling. Fairy tales of those queer folks south of the Mason Dixon who occupy our cultural imagination – virginal debutantes, kissing cousins, trailer park weddings, and the occasional brush with bestiality. The stories we tell about southern folks make them out to be queer in the most curious ways. While the South is painted out to be the queer cousin in an otherwise normative American family, it also tries endlessly to

shirk that queerness.

I'm interested in the stories we tell about ourselves, about each other; the stories we are telling to ourselves, to one another. In a region known for strange and uncomfortable sexuality (incest, sacred virginity, rampant teenage and unmarried pregnancy), people in LGBTQIA communities are simultaneously made out to be both impossible and certain. In my project, I looked specifically at some of the ways we're telling stories about queer folks, and especially those queer southerners, in digital media. Placed into a media landscape that is interested more in ventriloquism than conversation, transgender people and communities have found themselves strung up in the hands of dominant discourse and cisnormative narratives.

On the ground, these same communities have experienced a rash of discriminatory legislation and policy dripping with cis anxiety. From Georgia to Mississippi to North Carolina, transgender and LGBQA communities are finding themselves subjected to ever increasing exposure not only within the media, but also within their government, neighborhoods, and public restrooms.

In shadow of the stories of suicide, assault, and poverty facing queer and trans communities, LGBTQIA folks are stretching into the endless digital sphere. They're writing new stories. Through hash tags, vlogs, art, tweets, blogs, and viral vines, LGBTQIA people are reimagining fantasy, disrupting the grammar of gender, and shredding the script. With this project, I join an impressive and growing cohort of artists, activists, and storytellers who are reclaiming their own narratives. With *Maps*, I imbue some local color back into that stale imaginary of the Deep South, and invite the reader to consider what the queer South might say if only y'all would listen.

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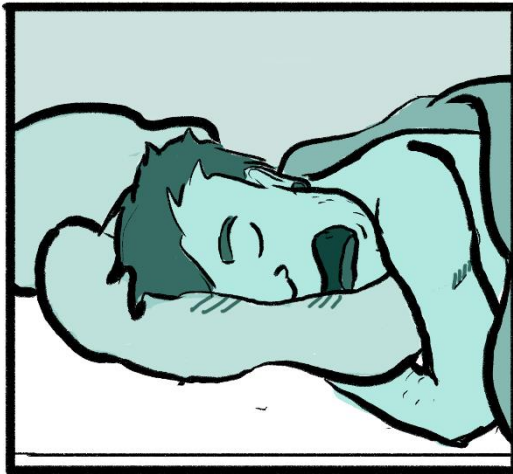
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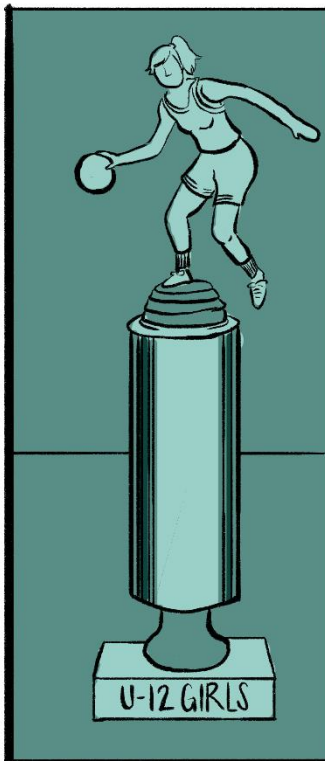
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Maps

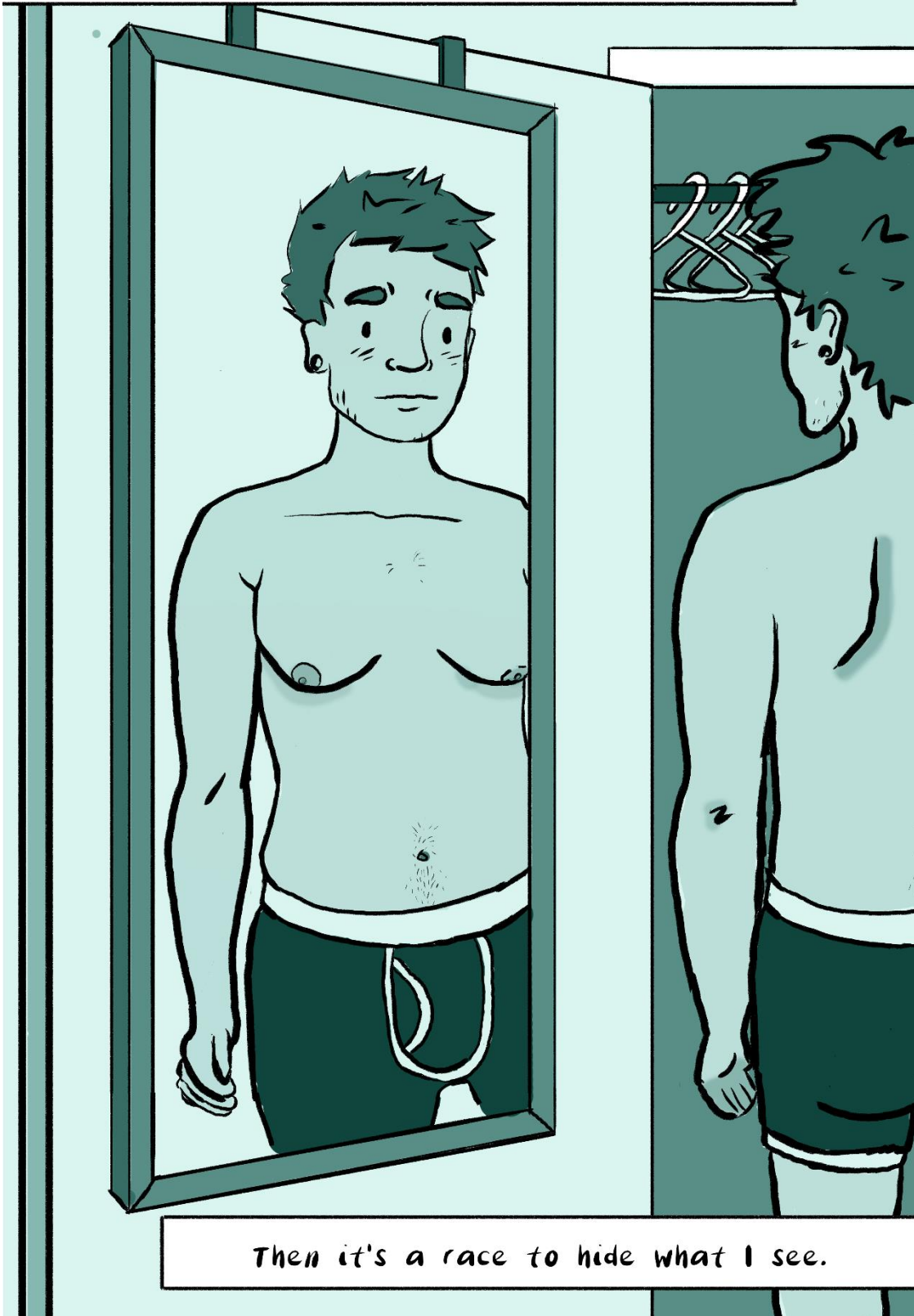








Mornings are fine until my reflection finds me.



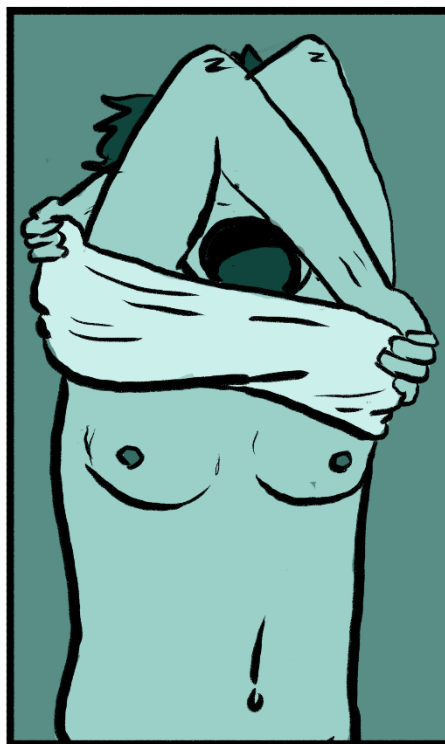
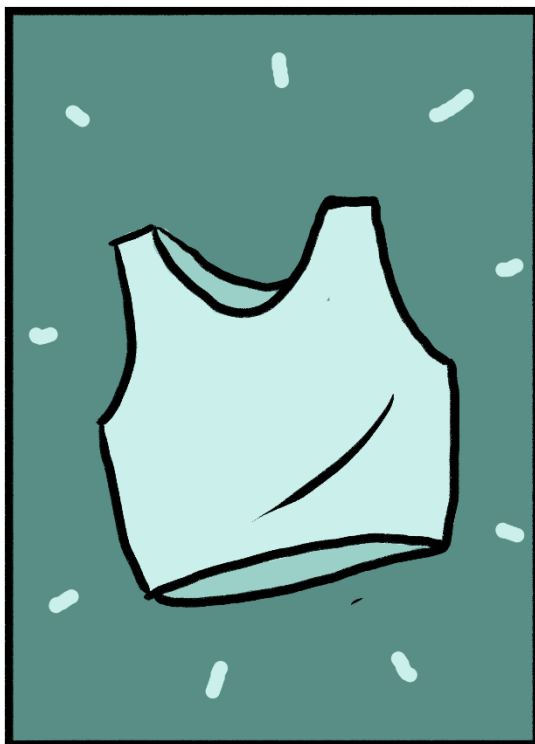
Then it's a race to hide what I see.

Things've gotten better since I started T, but finding ways to quiet the dysphoria is an endless battle.



Somedays, my best armor is just my binder and my favorite boxers.



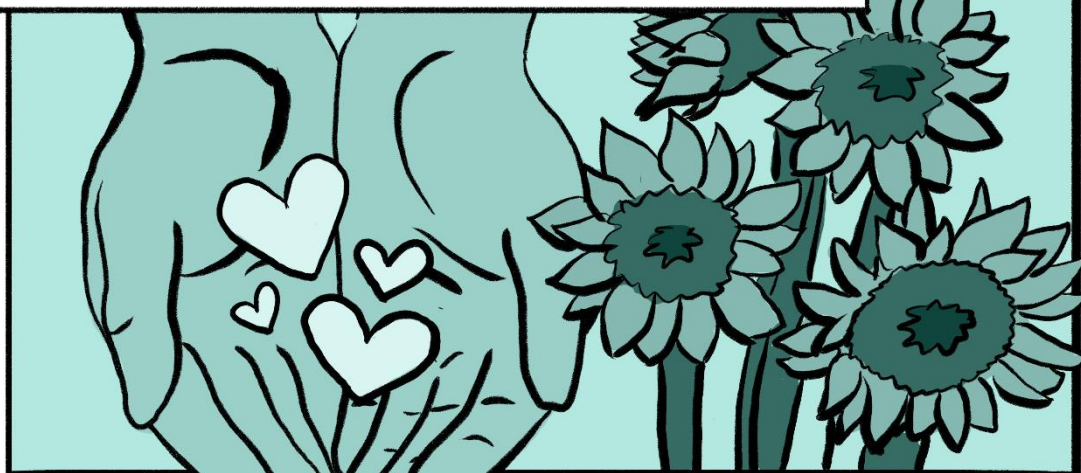


But even my favorite clothes aren't safe some mornings. Armor can't do a whole lot if the fight's knocking you out from the inside.

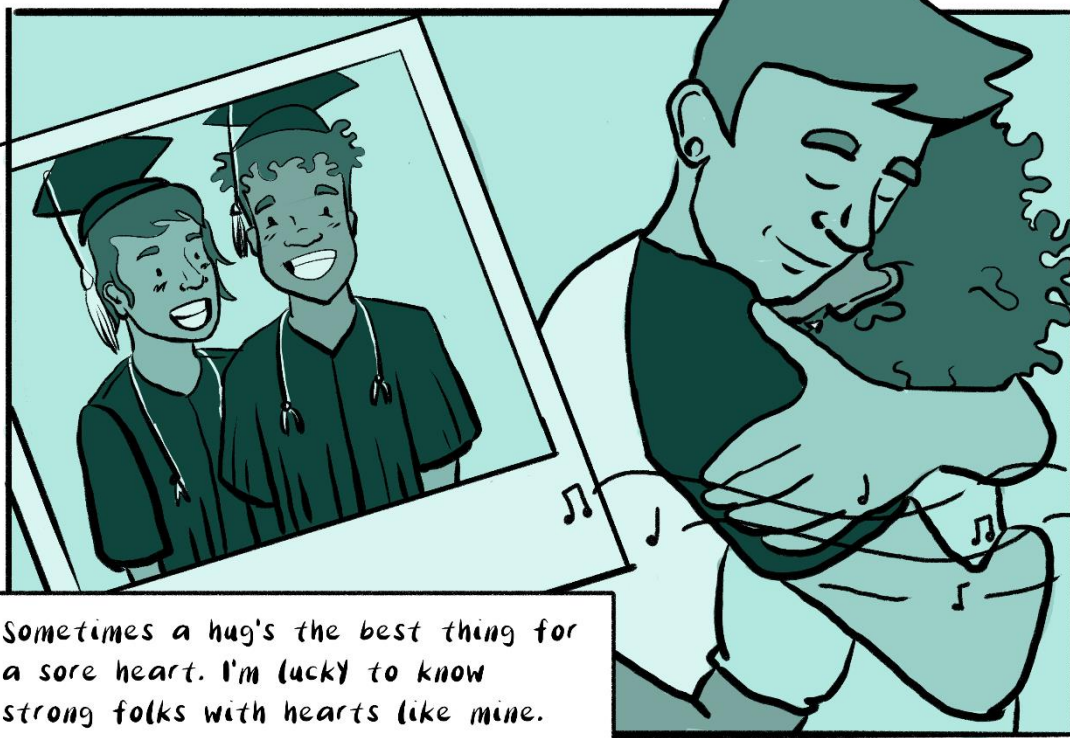




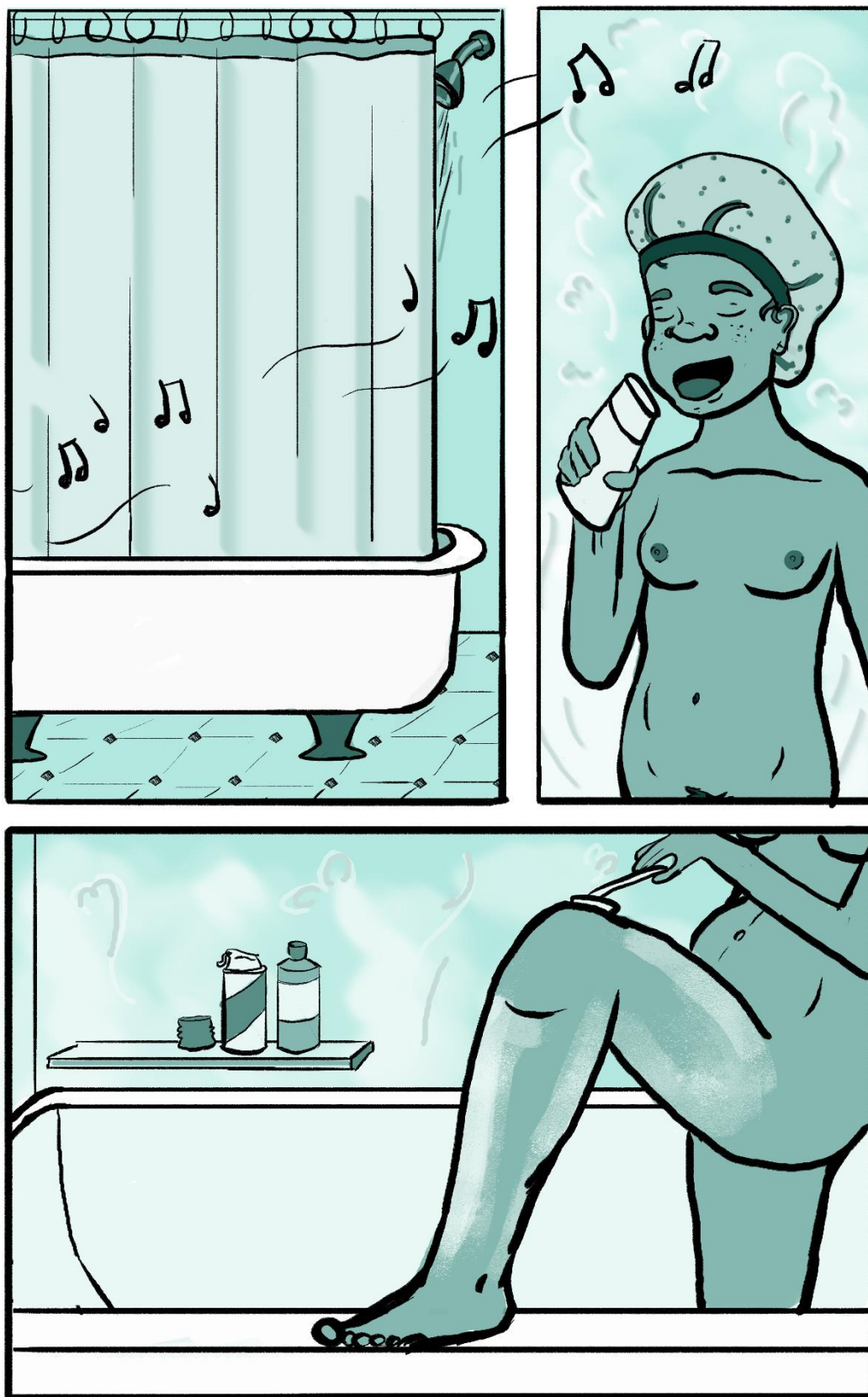
I'm learning to protect myself in new ways. On hard days, I find all of my favorite things.



And if that doesn't work, I find my friends.



Sometimes a hug's the best thing for a sore heart. I'm lucky to know strong folks with hearts like mine.





It took years to learn
to love my reflection-

Years of practice, self-love,
and patience.



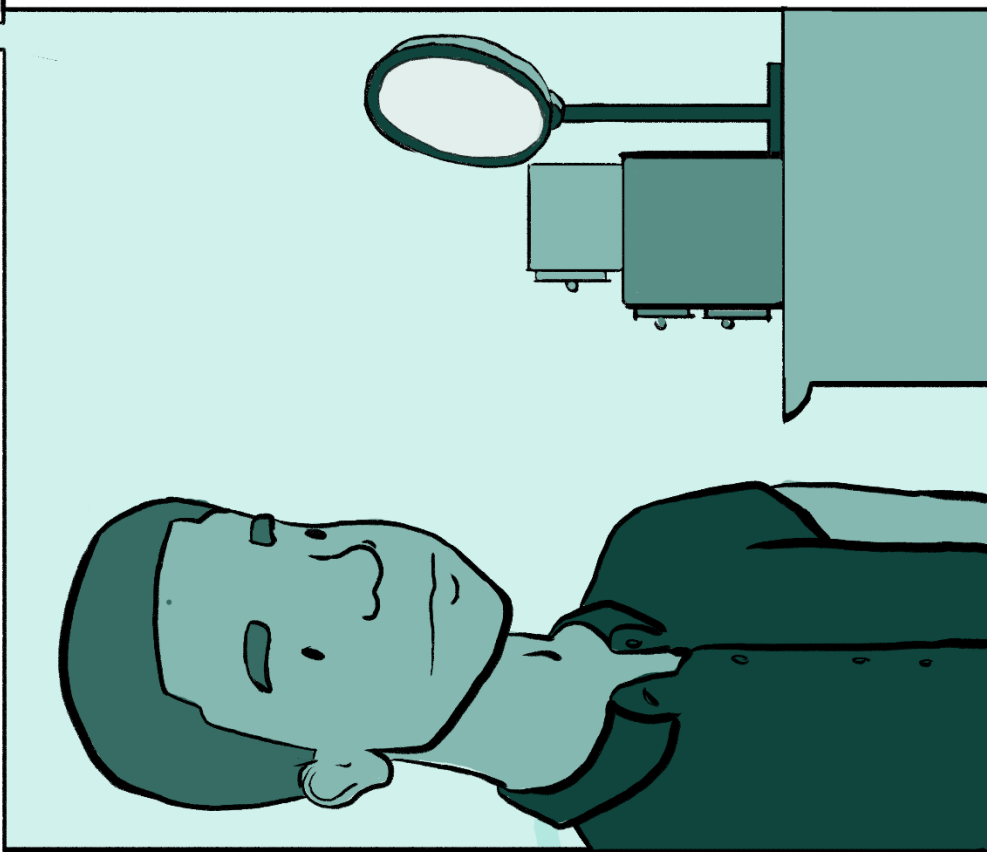
LYsha,
Hurry up!

i'm
coming!



I didn't think I'd get here, honestlly.

But I'm proud to carry MY Younger self with me.



Learning to love myself also means loving MY past,
loving those parts of me that are still scared and alone.





*I'm seeing my reflection in other places now,
finding other trans women of color fighting for the lives they want.*



VIOLENCE

More transgender people reported killed in 2015 than in any other year

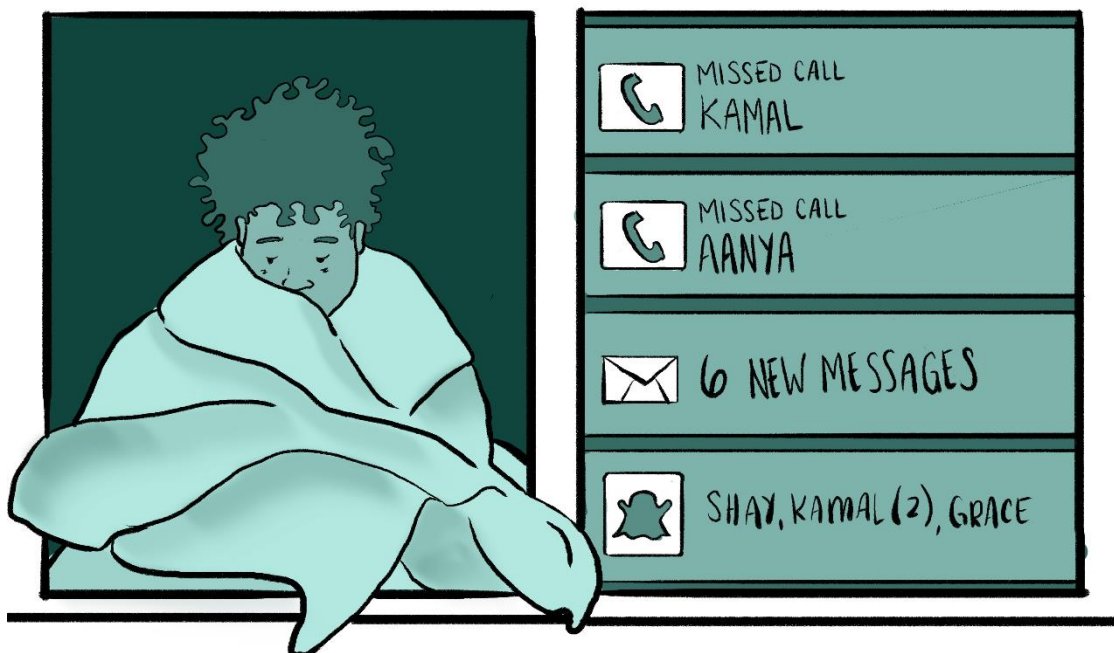
- KEISHA JENKINS
- ZELLA ZIONA
- MYA HALL
- ELISHA WALKER
- SHADE SCHULER
- PAPI EDWARDS
- LAMIA BEARD
- KANDIS CAPRI
- TY UNDERWOOD
- MICHELLE PAYNE
- TAJA GABRIELLE DE JESUS
- PENNY PROUD
- BRI GOLEC
- KRISTINA INFINITI
- TAMARA DOMINGUEZ
- KC HAGGARD
- LONDON CHANEL
- KEYSHIA BLIGE
- MERCEDES WILLIAMSON
- JASMINE COLLINS
- AMBER MONROE
- INDIA CLARKE
- ASHTON O'HARA

HEALTH

41% of transgender people report attempting suicide



But I also find myself in the headlines- women like me who lose their lives simply for being who they are. For loving who they are.



It's like carrying a constant weight on my chest, all those women. So I take the time to take care of myself, to find some love and grace.

