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# On Being Trans: Narrative, Identity, Performance, and Community

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ON BEING TRANS:  
NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, PERFORMANCE, AND COMMUNITY

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
Chloe Jo Brown


May 2018

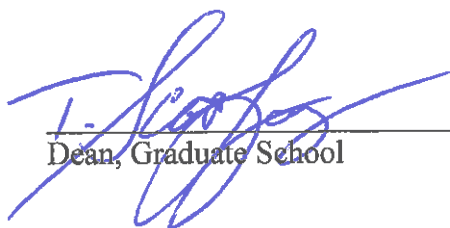
ON BEING TRANS:  
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Date Recommended 4/13/2018

  
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For the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, for Layne, and for all my  
queer siblings.

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175 Pages

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This thesis focuses on various topics related to transgender identity and culture. Through a combination of ethnographic and secondary research, I studied transgender coming out narratives, trans media representation, transgender performance and identity, and conceptualizations of group and chosen family in a community of trans students, the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group.

The three chapters of my thesis address some of the traditional milestones of a trans person's acculturation: coming out, constructing one's newly discovered trans identity, and finding community. Chapter 1 explores coming out as transgender, and the way in which coming out is valued and discussed within trans communities. Chapter 2 discusses transgender representation, and how gender presentation is contested and complicated by transfolk. Chapter 2 also addresses trans media representation, and the way in which transfolk create their own media representation in the absence of adequate and accurate trans representation in popular culture. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth analysis of the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, discusses how the group functions as a chosen family, and explores the way in which group membership helps group members mitigate stigma and deal with trauma.



## Introduction

### Background

In some ways, this thesis began on October 11, 2016. It was National Coming Out Day, and I had spent the morning interviewing many young LGBTQIA+ students who were participating in the Queer Student Union's tabling event. Home Depot had donated a free-standing door and doorframe; the group hung a rainbow flag over the door, and it was forever opening, giving each person the opportunity to "come out of the closet." The group played catchy pop music and handed out buttons and candy to passersby; they talked, danced, and engaged anxious loiterers in conversation, creating a welcoming space for questions and exploration. I marveled at the confidence and enthusiasm of this young group, comparing their experience with my own. Among the QSU students, coming out was treated as a positive and seemingly minor experience, while in 2009, my freshman year at Western Kentucky University, National Coming Out Day had been a much more ambivalent event. Many of the students I interviewed at the QSU's 2016 event had had mostly positive coming out experiences, which contrasted greatly with the experiences of myself, friends, and acquaintances in 2009. I found myself wondering, "if coming out is no longer that big of a deal, is this event still necessary?"

In the early afternoon, I interviewed Kanyon McKee, and my perspective shifted dramatically. McKee shared their coming out narrative with me, and I realized that, although coming out had perhaps gotten easier for some, it remained dangerous or difficult for others – especially transfolk. When McKee came out to their<sup>1</sup> mother as trans, she became emotionally abusive and accused them of being mentally ill. Kanyon's story was short, painful, and unresolved. As we were walking back to rejoin the group,

McKee explained that they were frustrated with National Coming Out Day because it puts undue pressure on transfolk to come out, and that upon coming out, trans people often experience heightened rates of discrimination, familial ostracization, and violence. McKee's comments demonstrated significant differences between the coming out experience of transgender individuals and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. I decided that the coming out narratives themselves needed closer attention. Although I was not able to fully address transgender coming out narratives at that time, the encounter sparked an interest that continued to develop over the next year. Eventually, I realized that my many questions would require an extended research project, and this project was born.

My thesis will explore various elements of transgender identity and culture. I will discuss the coming out process, issues of media representation and expectations for transgender and non-binary gender presentation, and the ways in which groups of transgender and non-binary individuals form and maintain community. Through fieldwork and secondary research, I hope to contribute to the young, yet rapidly growing field of transgender studies, and to add whatever insights I yield to the study of queer folklore – a subject that is sorely underrepresented in folklore research.

## Literature Review

### *[Trans]gender Studies*

An early precursor to transgender studies can be found in Harold Garfinkle's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). Garfinkle presents the case of his patient, Agnes, a transsexual woman who began taking estrogen at a young age in order to maintain feminine characteristics. Although Garfinkle's language and discussion of gender identity

are dated, his discussion of Agnes' case demonstrates the many complexities of being transgender in a society that has strict gender prescriptions. Garfinkle discusses the stigmatized nature of trans bodies and the personal and societal reasons that a trans person would attempt to pass as cis. Garfinkle states that society only allows individuals to subvert traditional roles in highly ceremonialized occasions, and that, in this manner, "societies exercise close controls over the ways in which the sex composition of their own populations is constituted and changed" (1967:116).

In the 1970s, a significant subsection of second wave feminism was highly critical of trans identities. In 1979, Janice Raymond published *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which was considered an attack on transgender individuals. In *Empire*, Raymond personally attacked recording engineer Sandy Stone. Stone published her rebuttal, "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in 1991. "The *Empire* Strikes Back" is now considered a foundational text in transgender studies. In terms of my own research, the most important section of the essay concerns the need for the transgender community<sup>2</sup> to propose a "counterdiscourse" to the discourses that currently existed within the feminist and scientific communities. Stone says:

. . . a counterdiscourse is critical. But it is difficult to generate a counterdiscourse if one is programmed to disappear. The highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase h/erself, to fade into the 'normal' population as soon as possible. Part of this process is known as constructing a plausible history – learning to lie effectively about one's past. What is gained is acceptability in society. What is lost is the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience . . . instead, authentic experience is replaced by a particular kind of story, one that supports the old constructed positions . . . Transsexuals do not possess the same history as genetic 'naturals,' and do not share common oppression prior to gender reassignment. I am not suggesting a shared discourse. I am suggesting that in the transsexual's erased history we can find a story disruptive to the accepted discourse of gender, which originates from

within the gender minority itself and which can make common cause with other oppositional discourses (1991:11).

Stone acknowledges that since the goal of many transgender people is to “pass” as cisgender, the history and experiences of many transgender people are erased or go unacknowledged. Stone argues that in order for the transgender community to become a strong minority voice, they must talk about their histories and experiences. Through the sharing of personal experience narratives, the transgender community attempts to present a counternarrative that more accurately represents trans experiences, and presents the concerns and beliefs of transfolk to society.

Transgender studies began to gain popularity in the early 1990s. It is often mentioned alongside queer theory, but the field attempts to challenge many of the dominant narratives and cultural hierarchies that queer theory maintains. In “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” (2004), Susan Stryker states, “If queer theory was born of the union of sexuality studies and feminism, transgender studies can be considered queer theory’s evil twin: it has the same parentage but willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like man and woman) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim . . . Gender’s absence renders sexuality largely incoherent, yet gender refuses to be the stable foundation on which a system of sexuality can be theorized” (2004:212). In *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution* (2008), Susan Stryker attributes the rise of transgender studies to the increased interest in the role of representation in a technologically advanced world along with a post-Cold War desire to question previously held assumptions. The queer movement in the 1990s also saw a newfound push to unite the many sexual identity groups, which led to the incorporation

of the transgender community (2008:26). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, queer and trans scholarship began to be more widely disseminated. The first journal dedicated to the study of transgender issues, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, began publication in 2014. The personal writing of important trans individuals has also influenced public discourse and opinion. In their memoirs and personal writing, Leslie Feinberg and Kate Bornstein respond to cultural assumptions and misconceptions regarding trans identities, comment on their own experiences, and provide powerful arguments for the equal treatment of transfolk.

In my consideration of gender, it is also necessary to discuss Judith Butler, and the idea of gender as performance. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler argues that “the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this ‘action’ is a public action . . . the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame” (1990:178-9). Butler continues, “gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (179). According to Butler, gender is a “public action” through which the entire society participates in

constructing and maintaining the gender binary (178). There are no stable qualities of “man” or “woman”; rather, these characteristics are socially constructed, and they are maintained through our *stylized repetition* of them. Butler’s work on gender as performance is generally useful when discussing an individual’s trans identity and the way that they choose to dress, act, and present themselves to the world.

### *Queer Folklore Research*

Queer folklore research seems to extend only thirty years in the past, in particular to the work of folklorist Joseph Goodwin. Goodwin was one of the first folklorists to extensively research gay folklore, publishing *More Man Than You’ll Ever Be!: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America* in 1989. In Goodwin’s work on the folklore of gay men he argues that gay men, stigmatized in the public sphere and often abandoned by their families, form strong communities in order to find support and acceptance. Goodwin calls this search for community “cohesion.” Goodwin states, “cohesion is a very strong need felt by many people; it is a desire for a sense of belonging, a means of relating to others based on a sense of commonality that results in a sense of group identity. Before cohesion can develop, one must be able to identify those with whom one has something in common and to communicate with them to ensure that there is indeed a basis for some sort of relationship to proceed. Homosexuality provides an instant basis of interaction” (1989:28). Although Goodwin’s theory no longer effectively applies to many members of the gay male community (the group is much less stigmatized now than in the 80s), it seems to be clearly applicable to trans/non-binary communities, groups that are still very stigmatized. In “My First Ex-Lover-in-Law: You

*Can Choose Your Family*,” Goodwin explains the significance of the “gay family” and alternative family groups. Facing persecution and rejection from biological family members, many members of the LGBT community form their own “chosen” or “gay” families, which contain close friends with whom they have strong emotional bonds (1994). Goodwin’s discussion of chosen families applies directly to the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group (TNB), with whom I conducted fieldwork for this project. The leader of TNB compared the group’s dynamic to the family structure emulated by drag performers in *Paris is Burning* (1990), in which drag queens formed “chosen families” to replace familial support systems they had lost.

In 1993, *New York Folklore* published a special issue entitled *Prejudice and Pride: Lesbian and Gay Traditions in America*. The issue includes a broad survey of gay and lesbian folklore. Two articles about lesbian coding, “Body Rhetoric: A Study in Lesbian Coding” by Jan Laude and “Lesbian Code: Dyke Spotting in Heteropatriarchyland” by Alix Dobkin provide valuable insights into group expectations of identity and performance. The articles written by Laude and Dobkin demonstrate that there are emic expectations about the performance of lesbian identity, and that specific types of presentation and behavior are privileged and favored.

Although folklorists have historically been hesitant to study the LGBTQIA+ community, the field seems to be trending towards an increase in scholarship on queer folklore. *Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag* (2014), edited by Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye, explores different cultural beliefs related to gender and sexuality. Although none of the chapters concern contemporary transgender/non-binary communities in the United States, they provide a valuable foundation for further research.

*Unsettling Assumptions* also demonstrates the unique perspective that folklorists can bring to queer studies, which is important to keep in mind when discussing things like coming out and performance, topics which have received attention from scholars in other disciplines.

### *Narrative*

My previous research has demonstrated that the dominant narratives of LGBTQIA+ identity are often specifically about lesbian and gay identity, and generally do not reflect the complicated realities of trans experience; to compensate for this lack of representation, trans individuals turn to personal narrative, the media, and other sources. In *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (2005), Amy Shuman states, "Personal narratives can confirm, subvert, appropriate, or otherwise disrupt or assert the power of collective narratives and vice versa" (2005:54). Shuman's discussion of counternarratives, or those narratives that are meant to subvert the collective or dominant narrative of a group, has been highly influential in my research of transgender coming out narratives and other trans experience narratives. Shuman states, "Redemptive, subversive, or other liberatory claims made for narrative are based on the possibility of counternarratives" (19), in which "tellers challenge available narratives as not accurately portraying their experiences" (14). Personal narratives of transgender experiences often function as counternarratives, wherein transfolk demonstrate that their experiences do not align with the dominant narrative, and propose an alternate narrative that is more representative of the trans experience.



When studying narratives of transgender experience, it is also important to consider tellability and available narrative. In *The Stigmatized Vernacular: Where Reflexivity Meets Untellability* (2016) Goldstein and Shuman define tellability by saying, “Tellability addresses audience expectations, newsworthiness, uniqueness, relevance, importance, and humor but also—and perhaps just as centrally—appropriateness, contextualization, negotiation, mediation, and entitlement” (2016:7). Later, Goldstein and Shuman explain, “stories become untellable because the content defies articulation, the rules of appropriateness outweigh the import of content, the narrator is constrained by issues of entitlement and storytelling rights, or the space the narratives would normally inhabit is understood by the narrator as somehow unsafe” (7). Narratives of trans experiences occasionally become untellable; this could be because the narrator feels unsafe, the content seems too serious for the situation, or individuals may not feel as though they are entitled to speak about the experiences of themselves or others. Sometimes, a narrative may be untellable because it does not conform to the available narrative. In *Other People’s Stories* (2005), Shuman explains, “the tellability of stories is in part tied to the categories attributed to experience” (2005:17). These “categories attributed to experience” shape the development of narratives. In some situations, categories are not recognized by a narrator’s audience (19). Shuman states that “the untellability [of some narratives] involves a lack of recognition of the category, a ‘this kind of thing doesn’t happen’ response” (19). Dominant and available narratives of LGBTQIA+ experience are usually determined by the most populous and powerful subgroup, lesbians and gays. Because many transgender experience narratives do not

conform to the available narrative, they become untellable. When an individual attempts to tell an untellable narrative, the result may be a chaotic narrative (2016:74).

In “Rethinking Ventriloquism: Untellability, Chaotic Narratives, Social Justice, and the Choice to Speak For, About, and Without,” Diane Goldstein defines chaotic narratives as “those narratives that lack an apparent order or organization and that are unpredictable and confusing” (2016:74). Goldstein acknowledges that there are certain conventions that govern narrative coherence, which include expectations for structure, order, form and content. Goldstein argues that reaching a deeper understanding of chaotic narrative and traumatic untellability will lead to a more empathetic understanding of narratives of complex and traumatic experience (75). Transgender coming out narratives are often untellable because the individual has not yet completed their social or physical transition. Because of this, trans coming out narratives do not conform to the available narrative and lack recognizable narrative form, structure, order, and content.

### *Trauma & Support Groups*

In “. . . like Ann’s gynecologist or the time I was almost raped’: Personal Narrative in Women’s Rap Groups,” Susan Kalčík explores the function of personal narrative in women’s consciousness-raising rap groups, or groups that meet to discuss various issues related to the shared experiences of women. Kalčík explains that the women use politeness, humor, and support to maintain group cohesion (1975:5). Kalčík discusses Jeanne Watson and Robert J. Potter’s idea of conversational resource, which is a method of creating and sustaining discourse within groups. According to Kalčík, Watson and Potter “point out that the nominal topic of a conversation is a resource the

group may draw upon in various ways and, hence, ‘sociable interaction consists of the elaboration of conversational resource’” (as cited in Kalčík 1975:8). The strategies used in these groups are similar to the strategies that group leader Jeremy McFarland used in early group meetings to encourage discussion and improve the general cohesion of the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group.

Cathy Caruth’s research on trauma demonstrates that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (1996:4). Folklorists have long been interested in the way in which individuals negotiate issues of trauma and stigma. For example, *Diagnosing Folklore, Perspectives on Disability, Health, and Trauma* (2015), edited by Trevor Blank and Andrea Kitta, is a collection of folkloristic perspectives on the topics of disability, health, and trauma, focusing specifically on the role of narrative, folk knowledge, community (specifically stigmatized communities), and performance. Sharing personal narratives of traumatic experience is an essential means of “making meaning out of disruption” (Shuman and Bohmer 2004:406). One purpose of the transgender/non-binary student group is to create a safe space in which individual members can share concerns and narratives of personal experience. The sharing of personal experience narratives is a means of forming and maintaining community.

### *Stigma*

Erving Goffman’s study of stigma has been influential in folklore studies. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Goffman defines “stigma” as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (1963:3). Goffman explains that stigmatized

individuals, or those with spoiled identities, are cut off from and not accepted into society due to one or more attributes of their identities (19). Goffman includes the gay community in his list of the most highly stigmatized individuals, but the argument can be made that the LGB community is becoming less stigmatized. Despite the growing acceptance of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in the United States, the transgender community still constitutes one of the most stigmatized and “spoiled” identity groups.

In *The Stigmatized Vernacular: Where Reflexivity Meets Untellability* (2016), Goldstein and Shuman explore the stigmatized vernacular, or the “emic experience of stigmatization” and the “contagion of stigma—the way it spills over beyond the topic into the means of articulation” (2016:4). This work is an extension of Goffman’s work on stigma, and provides a folkloristic perspective on the lived experience of those affected by stigma (3). Goldstein and Shuman discuss the fact that contemporary sociological research tends to overlook the lived experience of stigmatized individuals. They encourage folklorists to “concentrate on the vernacular experience of the stigmatized” and to analyze “the performance of stigma, the process of stigmatization, and the political representation of stigmatized populations” (4). Goldstein and Shuman explain that “stigma often depends on discourses that explicitly promote difference and implicitly contain hierarchies of value” (9); furthermore, those who are stigmatized may find that their stories are untellable or chaotic, drawing a clear connection between stigma and tellability.

Jason Whitesel focuses on a doubly marginalized group in *Fat Gay Men, Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma* (2014). Whitesel’s research is centered on a group specifically for fat, gay men called Girth and Mirth. Whitesel is interested in how the

marginalized members of this group form and maintain community. Whitesel's research can be directly applied to the transgender community, a group that is marginalized within the LGBTQIA+ community *and* in broader society. Members of Girth and Mirth create safe spaces within which they can enjoy the company of others like themselves and have a momentary respite from social scrutiny and discrimination, which seems quite similar to the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group.

In “‘It’s Really Hard to Tell the True Story of Tobacco’: Stigma, Tellability, and Reflexive Scholarship,” Ann Ferrell discusses the ways in which tellable narratives shape and silence “untellable” narratives about tobacco farmers. Ferrell explains that, in public discourse, the dominant narratives about tobacco are that the tobacco industry is harmful, was built on exploitation and slavery, and is becoming increasingly part of the past (2012:132-3). Modern tobacco farmers who come from generations of tobacco farming and rely on the tobacco crop to support their families feel silenced by these narratives. In order to resist the stigma placed upon them by the dominant, tellable narratives, many of the farmers actively tell subversive stories during private interviews that contradict the dominant narrative (138-9). Just as modern tobacco farmers feel compelled to tell their side of the story in order to counter the dominant narrative about tobacco, some transgender individuals feel compelled to provide a counter to the dominant narrative that coming out is a positive and necessary experience.

### *Media Representation and Online Communities*

A significant amount of folklore research has been completed on online communities and the sharing of folklore in online formats. In the mid-1970s and 80s,

folklorists began discussing the implications of the technological age. In Dell Hymes' 1975 address to the American Folklore Society, titled "Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth," he states, "Our present world may see increasingly a world of technology and mongrelization of culture in which the traditional has less and less a place" (1975:353). In 1977, Alan Dundes provided an alternative perspective, stating: "Technology, especially as it impinged upon communication techniques, was thought to be a factor contributing to the demise of folklore. Not true! The technology of the telephone, radio, television, xerox machine, etc. has increased the speed of the transmission of folklore . . . Moreover, the technology itself has become the subject of folklore. (1977:32 as cited in Baym 1993:143). Similar discussions naturally occurred after the invention of the internet, but folklorists such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and John Dorst were early proponents of a folkloristic study of the internet. In his 1990 article, "Tags and Banners, Cycles and Networks: Folklore in the Telectronic Age," Dorst explores the way that folklore is transmitted online, ultimately determining that technology complicates distinctions between the vernacular and the mainstream (1990:189). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's 1996 article, "The Electronic Vernacular" looks at various types of online communication and community, ultimately concluding: "close to home, but oh so far away, new worlds are under construction. What kind of life will be lived there and what repercussions it will have remains to be seen. Now is the time to study it in formation, before its protocols have hardened, and to consider its implications for life offline" (1996:60).

More recently, folklorists like Trevor Blank and Robert Howard have made a strong case for the importance of studying online communities and folklore that is

disseminated online. According to Howard in “Why Digital Network Hybridity is the New Normal (Hey! Check this Stuff Out),” Nancy Baym’s 1993 article about online communities formed around TV shows was the first article published in the *Journal of Folklore Research* about folklore and the internet (2015:247). However, according to Howard, the study of folklore and the internet gained momentum in 2009, when editor Trevor Blank published *Folklore and the Internet* (248).

Robert Howard argues that “our digital networks are not fundamentally separate from our everyday lives. Nor do we live our daily lives entirely online” (248). In *Folklore and the Internet* (2009), Trevor Blank makes the case that the internet is simply another way for individuals to communicate, and that folklore, of course, exists online. I am particularly interested in how communities are formed and maintained online. In “Digitizing and Virtualizing Folklore,” published in *Folklore and the Internet*, Simon Bronner discusses online communities: “unlike communities in which one resides and consequently interacts with others, networks are broadly expandable and transcend time and space” (2009:40). Bronner complicates the idea that folk groups *must* have face-to-face interaction. Instead, communities can exist entirely online due to the internet’s ability to connect people across time and space. The internet is particularly important to the LGBTQIA+ community. The relationship between the internet and the LGBTQIA+ community has attracted attention from a variety of disciplines; books such as Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper’s *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* (2010) examine online queer communities and seek to determine how the internet influences the creation of an individual’s LGBTQIA+ identity. Because the transgender community is quite small and highly stigmatized, many trans individuals may not be able to find an

accepting community. The internet becomes a valuable alternative, allowing transgender individuals to form online communities that include people from all over the world. In online communities, transgender individuals share information, seek and provide support, and build friendships and relationships. Many of the trans individuals that I interviewed cited the internet as an essential element in their process of learning about the trans identity and constructing their trans identities.

Socially accepted ideas of what it means to be trans are shaped by popular media representations of trans identity. According to Mary L. Gray in “Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming-Out Story,” the media is an essential source of information regarding queer identities:

If visibility is imagined to be the road to acceptance for LGBTQ-identifying people, much of that recognition circulates through representations in the media. Film, television characters . . . and the internet are where most stories of queer desires transpire. These representations translate queer desires into LGBTQ-specific identities and give them a proper locale . . . As such, media are the primary site of production for social knowledge of LGBTQ identities. It is where most people, including those who will come to identify as LGBTQ, first see or get to know LGBTQ people. In other words, media circulate the social grammar, appearance, and sites of LGBTQ-ness (2009:1165).

If media representations of transfolk provide us with a “social grammar” that we will apply to subsequent encounters of transgender identity, it is important to look closely at *how* the media represents trans identities, and to investigate how these representations affect transfolk.

### Ethics and Methodologies

My research includes both scholarly and ethnographic sources. Unfortunately, queer folklore has received minimal attention among folklorists, so it is difficult to write



a largely intra-disciplinary thesis. Because of this, my secondary sources include the work of folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, feminist theorists, media scholars, and queer and trans theorists. I also reference the memoirs and personal essays of important figures within the transgender community.

Much of my ethnographic research stemmed from interviews conducted with Western Kentucky University's Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group (TNB). The group is the focus of my research, and the majority of my interviews were with members of the group. Though I conducted interviews with some individuals outside of the group, the group was my primary source of contact because, through my already-established relationships with other members, I was able to be introduced to new interviewees. I conducted thirteen interviews for this project. Ten of the interviews were with members of the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, and the other three were conducted with individuals outside of WKU. I interviewed six members of the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Group, and conducted multiple follow-up interviews with two members, Kanyon McKee and Jeremy McFarland. My consultants range in age from 18 to 24; all of my consultants are white, and most are middle class. Most of my consultants attended or currently attend university, and two have graduate degrees. The interviews that I conducted ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, with most lasting over an hour. I was introduced to most of my consultants by Jeremy, the leader of TNB. I had initially planned on completing more interviews and conducting one or two group interviews. I was unable to conduct more interviews due to time constraints and difficulty of finding new consultants. I also decided against conducting a group interview because TNB is a trans-only space for a reason, and I wanted to respect that; many group members value

the anonymity provided by the group, and I did not want to make any group members feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Because trans identities are highly stigmatized, some individuals wished to remain anonymous. I was primarily concerned with the comfort and safety of my consultants, and worked with them to find a solution that preserved their anonymity without erasing their voice. This ultimately meant referring to the individual as a source who wished to remain anonymous. I realize that, by choosing to discuss their experiences with me, my consultants may be placing themselves in danger; therefore, throughout the course of this project I endeavored to think through the implications of my work, and was particularly concerned with the “do no harm” tenet of fieldwork.

I began conducting interviews for this project in August 2017, and conducted my final interview in April 2018. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I attempted to build and maintain relationships with various group members, and with Jeremy McFarland and Kanyon McKee in particular. I discussed my research and observations with these individuals during informal conversations before and immediately after our interviews. I also discussed my research with consultants during the interview, and through email and social media (Facebook, Instagram) between interviews. Due to time constraints and the inability to find interested and available group members, I was not able to practice true reciprocal ethnography. I compensated for this by discussing areas of concern with consultants and by ensuring that I could support all of my observations and conclusions with information gathered during fieldwork.

It is also important to discuss the implications of my own queer identity, specifically the manner in which my experience influenced my research. I believe that my queer identity and my own experiences with coming out contributed to a unique

perspective on the experience of transgender individuals. My familiarity with queer culture also enabled me to enter my research with a thorough understanding of *some* aspects of the group and its experiences. For example, I was already familiar with the vocabulary, aesthetics, and coding practices of the queer community. This knowledge allowed me to better understand my interviewees, and helped me better differentiate instances in which a person's language, behavior, or opinion differs from the norm. My identity also enabled me to interview individuals who might not consent to interviews with straight, cis people. Transfolk are often wary of straight, cis people, and I found that my queer identity helped my consultants feel more comfortable with me. Though my consultants and I all belong to the LGBTQIA+ community, our experiences varied greatly. The experiences of transfolk are quite different than the experiences of cis queer folk. Throughout the course of this project, I was consistently learning about and researching new topics related to trans experiences, and, by discussing these topics with my consultants, I learned more about transfolk than I ever could have on my own.

I also recognize that my identity and experience created bias and a specific set of assumptions and expectations that another folklorist might not have. To combat this, I tried to consistently think reflexively, and to question my perspective and assumptions while writing fieldnotes, interviewing consultants, and writing my final research product. I also realized that I may take for granted things that another folklorist would find incredibly important; to counter this, I tried to find a way to defamiliarize the information that I gathered, to see it from another, more objective perspective. I also relied on the knowledge and opinions of my thesis committee, who helped me view my research from many angles and provided a valuable outsider perspective.

## Research Questions and Organization of Chapters

The three chapters of my thesis include an examination of the coming out process, trans media representation and expectations for the performance of trans identity, and a case study of the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group (TNB). Although I conduct a thorough analysis of TNB in Chapter 3, I reference the group in each chapter. The conclusion summarizes my main arguments and observations, and suggests areas for further study.

Chapter 1 examines the process of coming out as transgender, and discusses how trans coming out narratives are similar to or different from lesbian, gay, and bisexual coming out narratives. I have conducted previous research on the coming out process more broadly, but there are significant differences between coming out as trans and coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual as a cisgender individual that I explore more deeply. I noticed that the transgender individuals that I interviewed often did not have a cohesive coming out narrative like the coming out narratives of LGB people, which often follow a recognizable pattern and concern coming out to one's parents or closest relatives/guardians, and I explored this lack of narrative cohesion. I was also interested in how the coming out experience and coming out narratives are differently valued between the transgender/non-binary and lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities. For example, in the LGB community, coming out is sometimes referred to as a rite of passage. A lesbian, gay, or bisexual person becomes fully integrated into the queer community after publicly coming out. For many transgender individuals, however, the goal is not to live openly as trans, but to go "stealth," or pass as cisgender. If the goal is to eventually go stealth, I asked, is coming out still a rite of passage? If not, is there a different rite of passage for

the trans community? I studied the purpose of telling transgender coming out narratives. For the LGB community, telling your coming out story is a way to demonstrate that you have completed the requisite steps needed in order to be incorporated into the group; transfolk, on the other hand, do not regard coming out as a prerequisite for group membership. Many transgender individuals that I interviewed are frustrated with the importance placed on coming out, arguing that coming out is often dangerous and emotionally traumatic. If this is the dominant view of the trans community, I asked, why do transgender individuals tell coming out narratives? What other purposes do they serve? I argue that transgender coming out narratives often constitute a counternarrative, explicitly contradicting the implicit claim that coming out is a necessary, one-time action that is a generally positive experience. I also realized that transfolk attempt to counter *multiple* dominant narratives of trans experience; I discuss Amy Shuman's research on counternarrative and investigate the role and impact of trans counternarratives.

Chapter 2 concerns issues of trans media representation and the performance of trans identities. In this chapter, I explore whether or not the trans community accepts an expansive range of trans/non-binary gender performance, and how expectations for performance are communicated. Transgender individuals experience a significant amount of identity policing both within the trans community and in the broader cisgender society. If trans individuals do not perform a specific type of trans identity, they experience skepticism and discrimination from fellow trans folk and those outside of the group. There is a specific way that a transperson is supposed to "be trans"; for both trans men and trans women, the expectation is to appear as cis as possible. This creates significant problems for individuals who have not fully transitioned, do not plan on transitioning, or

who perform gender in a way that defies the binary. Some trans individuals that I interviewed have their identities questioned because they do not “look trans.” The strict enforcement of binary gender performance on trans individuals can be frustrating and emotionally damaging to transfolk whose gender presentation does not fit neatly within binary expectations for gender performance.

Chapter 2 also addresses my research questions for transgender presentation and trans media representation: How does media representation of transgender individuals determine the expectation for trans/non-binary gender performance? What other sources do trans people look to for models of identity? How does the media influence identity and gender performance? How do transfolk compensate for their limited representation in the media? Some of the most recognizable trans individuals in America are Caitlyn Jenner, Janet Mock, and Laverne Cox. While these women (with the exception of Jenner) are admirable as role models, they are all hyper-feminine and portray a singular, transnormative interpretation of trans identity. In Chapter 2, I further explore representations of trans identity in the media, including film, television, politics, and online trans communities. I focus particularly on how trans media representation is received by the trans community, and the way in which transfolk compensate for inaccurate and inadequate trans media representation. Some of my consultants discussed how the transgender community creates its own media in the absence of trans representation in popular culture. This includes robust trans communities on Tumblr and YouTube, as well as the creation of trans characters and queer-friendly relationships in various fandom communities. Some transgender individuals are also avid cosplayers; the cosplay community is described as welcoming and accepting, and some trans individuals

use cosplay as a way to try on different means of presentation and gender performance. As a case study, I explore the way in which one TNB member, Kanyon McKee, engages with the *Homestuck* fandom in order to create trans media representation that they identify with.

Chapter 3 focuses on the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group. The group is open only to trans and non-binary students, and provides a space in which its members can discuss issues related to their gender identity or find community with individuals who have shared experiences. I was interested in how group identity is formed and maintained, and if the members are bound together by something greater than their shared trans/non-binary identities. I asked: What does it mean to belong to the trans/non-binary student group? Do group members share any interests or experiences that are unrelated to their trans identities? I describe group leadership, group activities, and the resources that the group provides for its members. In an early interview, Jeremy McFarland said that the relationships between group members mirror a family dynamic. He jokingly said that he is the “dad” or “big brother” of the group. He also specifically referenced the family theme in *Paris is Burning*, which features a community of gay and trans individuals. Because of this, I asked how the group functions as a chosen family, and how this family dynamic is created and maintained; I incorporated folklorist Joseph Goodwin and anthropologist Kath Weston’s previous work on chosen family in order to better inform my observations. Finally, I discussed the way in which participating in TNB helped improve the mental health of some group members by encouraging open and honest discussion of mental health, connecting group members with mental health professionals, providing a space in which an individual’s trans identity is affirmed and

respected, helping group members deal with trauma by creating a safe environment for them to discuss their experiences, and by helping group members mitigate stigma by associating with other members of the stigmatized trans community.



## Chapter 1: Coming Out as Transgender:

### Counternarrative and Community Valuation

*“Gay brothers and sisters . . . You must come out . . . Come out . . . to your parents . . . I know that it is hard and will hurt them but think about how they will hurt you in the voting booth! Come out to your relatives... come out to your friends... if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors... to your fellow workers... to the people who work where you eat and shop... come out only to the people you know, and who know you. Not to anyone else. But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake.”*

- Harvey Milk, *“That’s What America Is,”* 06/25/1978

The act of coming out is one of the most recognizable markers of queer experience. An individual “comes out” when they tell friends, family, and/or the general public that they are LGBTQIA+.<sup>3</sup> Coming out is encouraged by many LGBTQIA+ political organizations, who began to emphasize the importance of queer visibility in the late 1960s as a strategy of the Gay Liberation Movement. The Gay Liberation Movement was heavily influenced by Second-Wave Feminism’s idea that “the personal is political,” and members of the LGBTQIA+ community were encouraged to come out to counter homophobia and dismantle harmful stereotypes. In *A Queer History of the United States*, Michael Bronski states that coming out was “the single most important directive of gay liberation” (2011:209). To gay rights activists, coming out was a form of individual activism and personal revolution.

Bronski explains that prior to the Gay Liberation Movement, LGBTQIA+ individuals found freedom and safety in secrecy, and most chose to conceal their queer identities:

For gay liberationists, coming out was not simply a matter of self-identification. It was a radical, public act that would impact every aspect of a person’s life. Whereas homophile groups argued that homosexuals could find safety by promoting privacy, gay liberation argued that safety

and liberation were found only by living in, challenging, and changing the public sphere (209).

The coming out movement gained even more momentum during the AIDS epidemic, and the coming out movement was institutionalized in the establishment of National Coming Out Day in 1988. Every year on October 11<sup>th</sup>, organizations like the Human Rights Campaign encourage LGBT individuals to come out, framing coming out as a conscious speech act meant to increase acceptance and normalize LGBT people. Given the rapid strides made by the LGBTQIA+ community since the early days of the Gay Liberation Movement, the push to come out seems to have led to an increase in public acceptance of LGBTQIA+ folks, and the queer community has experienced various political victories, including the national legalization of same-sex marriage and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell.<sup>4</sup>

Coming out is central to the experience of queer people, and a majority of people in both the LGBTQIA+ community and in heterosexual society expect queer people to come out. Coming out is the focus of many films and television programs that feature queer characters, and major LGBTQIA+ organizations heavily publicize National Coming Out Day and feature positive coming out stories throughout the year. As a result of these factors, the dominant narrative of queer experience portrays coming out as a positive and essential action that all queer people should take. However, while the queer community's focus on coming out may benefit the majority of group members, it can be difficult or dangerous for others. Transfolk, in particular, often feel as though the dominant narrative does not accurately represent their experiences. For trans people, coming out is generally more difficult, dangerous, and prolonged than the coming out experiences of most cisgender individuals with non-hegemonic sexualities.

## Coming Out as Transgender vs. Coming Out as LGB: Differences and Commonalities

While there is a social expectation for all individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ to come out, the coming out process differs greatly between those of non-hegemonic gender identities and those with non-hegemonic sexualities. The coming out process for transgender individuals is often much different from the coming out experiences portrayed by the dominant narrative. These differences, all too often ignored in scholarly discourse related to coming out, should be identified before further discussion of the coming out process.

During each of the initial interviews that I conducted for this project, all of my consultants stated that they believed coming out as trans was generally more difficult and dangerous than coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Many transgender individuals place themselves in significant mental and physical harm when coming out—situations that, today, are often much more serious and dangerous than those faced by LGB individuals. For example, Bennett Couch said, “Depending on where you [live], I mean you don’t want to, but obviously you fear the worst. You fear physical harm” (Interview, 14 August 2017). Other individuals explained that trans people in rural areas are particularly at risk when coming out, due to the potential for hostility in conservative areas. Leeran Dublin explained that they make it a point to come out now because they want closeted queer individuals to understand that they will one day be able to openly embrace their sexuality/gender identity:

I think it’s very powerful. At least, I think for me it would have been, to see a non-binary person come out. That’s a lot of why I come out. Sometimes I come out periodically on Facebook when I’m feeling really invalidated or really misgendered. I will post: “I’m a non-binary person. My name is Leeran.” These things are important to me. Because I am from an area where you can’t come out or you will be kicked out of your home,

and you can't come out as gay or non-binary or trans or anything under the whole umbrella. And so even though they may not hold the same identity as me, at least seeing that they know there will be a time where you can come out and it will be okay (Interview, 14 August 2017).

Leeran acknowledges that, in many rural areas, it may be dangerous for both LGB *and* transgender individuals to come out, but current research indicates that transgender individuals are more likely to be ostracized or discriminated against upon coming out. For example, a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center indicates that 54% of Americans believe that whether a person is a man or a woman is determined by sex at birth, while only 44% believe that a person's gender identity can be different from sex at birth ("Republicans, Democrats Have Starkly Different Views on Transgender Issues"). When a majority of Americans do not even believe that trans identities exist, it is likely that trans people will face higher rates of discrimination; a 2014 Pew Research Center report indicates that 62% of Americans believe homosexuality should be accepted ("Views about Homosexuality"). Presumably, the increased acceptance of LGB people will lead to lower rates of discrimination and ostracization.

This is not to say that LGB individuals do not have negative coming out experiences or experience discrimination. The work of folklorist Joseph Goodwin (1989), which focused on the folklore of gay men, demonstrates that in the 80s, gay men formed strong communities and "chosen families" in order to counter the discrimination and rejection of the outside world. Although LGB individuals frequently still face discrimination upon coming out, the experience of LGB people—particularly those in the age range that I interviewed—today is often much more positive than it was at the time of Goodwin's writing due to increased societal acceptance of LGB people. While lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are experiencing increased support and acceptance across

America, trans communities currently experience high rates of hate crimes, homelessness, bullying, housing and workplace discrimination, suicide, police violence, and discriminatory local, federal, and state policies.

One of the most obvious but often unacknowledged differences between coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and coming out as transgender is that coming out as LGB involves revealing one's sexuality while coming out as trans involves revealing one's gender identity. Often, a trans person's friends and family do not fully understand the difference between sexuality and gender identity, and often mistakenly believe that coming out as transgender is another way of coming out as gay. Levi Hanson explains that he encountered a similar problem when coming out to his mother, who was not familiar with trans identities:

A lot of people get gender and sexuality confused. I remember one of the first questions my mom asked me was like "So, are you . . . ?" She was about to say lesbian. And I'm like no, I'm still gay. I still identify as not straight. But sexuality, sexual identity and gender identity are completely different, and I think that's really hard for people to wrap their head around (Interview, 10 January 2018).

Although Levi's mother was accepting and has since made efforts to better understand his transgender identity, Levi still encountered complications with coming out that a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual would likely not experience. While many Americans are familiar with the concept of homosexuality and same-sex relationships, transgender issues are newer to our national discourse, and thus Americans are often not familiar with the concerns of transfolk.

While sexual orientation is an inherently social identity (indicating which individuals you are interested in forming relationships with), gender identity is often described as an internal/personal identity. A source who wished to remain anonymous

explains that, when coming out as LGB, the emphasis is generally on a person's partner, while coming out as trans is entirely about how the individual feels and identifies:

With sexuality, it's shifting someone's thought process of who they're going to end up with in the future, right, their future partner, because that's what it affects, the family that you will inevitably build for yourself and whether or not there will be children involved, how that process will work, who you're going to be with. Will you be accepted by the family? Will you be accepted by the extended family? So it's a lot more about the other person in terms of sexuality. I think in terms of trans and non-binary people and for me being queer, it's more about me and my gender and my expression and who I am to the world and how the world sees me. And so for a lot of trans people, it means having to undergo different types of therapy and surgery and lots of medical and social aspects that are often very difficult [ . . . ]<sup>5</sup> And so there's a lot more, I think, involved in coming out as trans, and even still there's so much less understanding about what it means to be trans, and even further about non-binary, including queer people, that people in general have a hard time wrapping their heads around it (Interview, 3 August 2017).

According to them, coming out as trans is more difficult and complicated because it is a much more personal and individual experience, and it generally entails a range of other complicated and time-consuming experiences.

Another differentiating factor between coming out as LGB and coming out as trans is that a trans person cannot successfully exist as trans—to have their gender identity respected and to be referred to by their chosen name and pronouns—until they come out. Several of my consultants stated that they decided to come out because they had to come out before they could successfully live as their chosen gender. These individuals wanted to change their name, preferred pronouns, and the way they dressed, and they stated that it would be difficult to do so without informing their friends and family of the change. Many of the trans individuals that I interviewed, including Kanyon McKee, said coming out was often a necessary step trans people must take in order to change their gender presentation:

Your parents have to know. Your grandparents have to know. Your aunts and uncles have to know because eventually you're going to show up to a family meeting or something. You're going to show up at Christmas, and you're going to look like a completely different person. And they're going to ask. They're going to be like, "Who are you?" And you're going to have to explain. There's no, "I'm so and so's son" because "so and so doesn't have a son." That's the situation that shows up eventually (Interview, 18 August 2017).

To McKee, coming out to family and friends is a step one must take before making significant personal and public changes. Many individuals that I interviewed noted that, for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, coming out is not required before one can "be" LGB, and that LGB people can have same-sex relationships while concealing their sexual orientation. Bennett Couch, referencing the work of Judith Butler, explains that while LGB individuals are not always performing their sexual orientation, trans individuals are constantly performing their gender:

No matter what, a lesbian's a lesbian. But if she's single, she doesn't have a girlfriend. So she's a lesbian, but, like, she's not... I guess, maybe to go back to Judith Butler, "performing" that identity as much as lesbians who are in relationships, I guess? But when you're trans, it's never conditional. Either you lie, and you're still trans, or you're out, and you're still trans (Interview, 14 August 2017).

Couch recognizes that trans people can lie about or conceal their gender identities, but by concealing their trans identity they must necessarily stop *performing* the identity. Because gender *presentation* is inherently public, coming out as transgender/non-binary becomes a much more pressing matter. A trans person does not have to come out to identify as trans, but performing a particular gender identity often reveals one's trans status, which often necessitates an individual's coming out.

As a result of a widespread unfamiliarity with trans issues, trans individuals are often tasked with educating their family members on a wide range of transgender issues,

including the concept of preferred pronouns, non-binary gender identities, and the individual's options and desires related to hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery. Generally, transfolk do not want to be asked questions about their body or physical appearance, but some are willing to help educate well-meaning friends and family members. Madi Withrow, for example, explains that she is “completely open” and “completely visible” as a trans woman, and is willing to educate anyone who asks her questions about her trans identity. She said, “I will talk to anyone who has any questions. I’m working on educating one of my coworkers who is really inquisitive and really open and he’s wonderful, but he’s still ignorant of the community. So he makes flubs, but he’s trying” (Interview, 9 January 2018). While LGB individuals are sometimes asked uncomfortable questions about their relationships or sexual behaviors, transgender individuals face difficult questions at a greater scale. A source who wished to remain anonymous argues that because most Americans are heavily socialized to think of gender as a binary identity, trans people are obligated to be more understanding of the misconceptions and negative reactions of family members:

I think coming out as cis gay is more about the individual to say, “I’m gay. Deal with it.” Whereas when you’re coming out as trans or non-binary, I think that you have—there’s this almost expectation that you have to be a little more understanding of the other person because we are all so socialized in this binary world that is generally and has been historically unaccepting of anyone that transcends the binary. And so being able to understand and say, “Okay, I’m telling my mother that I’m no longer her daughter, but now I’m her son.” And realizing that your parent has to go through that mourning process of considering the person that they wanted you to be and who they envisioned you to be. I think that shifts with coming out as trans (Interview, 3 August 2017).

While coming out as LGB does not frequently require much explanation, coming out as transgender is a process that often involves consistent discussion and communication.



LGBTQIA+ individuals have frequently argued that one problem with the dominant narrative about coming out is that it portrays coming out as something that an individual must only do one time. In a heteronormative society, coming out as LGBTQIA+ is frequently a life-long process, and a queer person comes out multiple times throughout their life. This is especially true for trans people – particularly those who cannot pass as cis. If a trans person does not pass as cis and would like to be referred to using their preferred pronouns or otherwise have their gender identity recognized by society, they must inform others of their trans identity, coming out over and over again as they meet new friends and interact with strangers. Jeremy McFarland explains that, for many trans people, coming out is a lifelong process:

They think that you come out and you're done. But when you're transgender, I imagine it's true for cis, gay people too, but when you're transgender you're constantly having to come out. You never have this—coming out is never one moment. Coming out is this constant, continual thing. I will be forced to come out my entire life. I have to come out all the time. I've had conversations where I've had to come out, maybe not today, but last week I had to come out. It's constant, you know? And it changes as you transition. So now instead of coming out as a man, I'm coming out as a transgender man. I have to do all of that and it's a little different. It's a different kind of coming out. It just doesn't stop (Interview, 17 August 2017).

McFarland conceptualizes coming out as a continual process, but also as something that changes over time. As an individual transitions or as their gender identity/sexuality evolves, the coming out process will change as well. McFarland also highlights different possibilities for coming out as “a man” or “a transgender man,” which are considerably different experiences. When McFarland came out as a man, he informed friends and family that he was transgender. At this time, McFarland did not pass as cis, and he had to come out in order to have his gender identity recognized and respected. However, after

McFarland had transitioned and could pass as cis, his coming out process became a more voluntary admission. In “‘The Other Kind of Coming Out’: Transgender People and the Coming Out Narrative Genre,” Lal Zimman discusses two different types of coming out: declaration and disclosure. Zimman states that while the act of coming out for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals involves declaring their sexual orientation, coming out as trans involves disclosing a gender identity, and transgender individuals can come out prior to or after transition. When a trans person comes out *prior* to transition, they are *declaring* their gender identity, while individuals who come out *after* their transition have the option of *disclosing* their trans history. Zimman says, “for these people, whose gender identity may very well align with how they are perceived by others, coming out does not mean revealing a gender *identity*, but rather a particular kind of gender *history* characterized by the movement from one gender category to another” (2009:54). While trans individuals must initially declare their trans identity in order for others to respect their gender identity, cis-passing trans people have the option of disclosing their trans status or keeping it to themselves.

A further concern with the portrayal of coming out as a one-time, positive experience is that a significant number of trans individuals have previously come out as LGB to varying degrees of acceptance. According to A. Carter Sickels, who interviewed seven trans men in North Carolina, there is a significant relationship between coming out as queer and coming out as trans:

My consultants understand sexuality as separate from gender (for many of us, this concept was earth-shattering and freeing). Yet all of my consultants referenced some aspect of coming out as queer in relation to their trans-narratives. For some, claiming their sexual identity figured heavily into understanding their gender identity. Some began to question their gender identity and their sexual identity at the same time. Many

began to understand their sexuality before they had the “language” to express their gender identity. Some of my consultants lived much of their lives identifying as a lesbian, while for others, the experience was more short-lived; for all of my consultants, however, coming out as queer connected in some way to coming into their trans-identities (2010:41-42).

Sickels’ findings mirror findings in my own research. Many of my consultants stated that they had previously come out as LGB. Often, when an individual comes out as trans, they still also identify as LGB. According to Madi Withrow, trans individuals often retain their LGB identities, but these identities may also change and evolve over time:

A lot of people, I’ve noticed, that come out as trans end up having to come out as gay also. Because a lot of us still maintain our [sexual] preference. And I’ve not met very many straight trans people or non-binary people. And even then, after coming out, if someone still identifies as straight, their preference may change over time—coming to terms and being able to accept the big changes that have happened already. When I came out, I was like “I’m still attracted to women.” But a year down the line, I identify as queer because I’m not attracted necessarily to gender, but more the presentation of masculinity and femininity. And it’s a spectrum and androgyny lies in between. So there’s not a good descriptor for that, and I just go with queer (Interview, 9 January 2018).

For some, an LGB identity seemed to function as a transitional identity, and an individual would identify as LGB before learning about trans identities or realizing they were trans.

A source who wished to remain anonymous strongly identified as a butch lesbian before identifying as non-binary:

I’ve only recently, within the last couple years, identified as queer. And so, you know, as identity is, I’ve grown and it’s changed and it’s morphed in all sorts of ways, like wearing nail polish used to be something that I did as a kid all the time, and then when I got to college—it was like, “Oh, I’m a butch lesbian. I have to be very masculine. I can’t do that anymore.” [ . . . ] When I got to college, I chopped all my hair off. The typical thing that people do, and I started dating all these women [ . . . ] And so presentation—it was at a college party. It was a gender-bending party. So all the guys dressed up, I think it was bros and hoes or something. And so all the guys dressed as women, and all the women dressed as guys. And it was in the queer community [ . . . ] And so we went, and a friend of mine took me shopping at Walmart to get men’s jeans, men’s shoes, boxers,

right? And male clothing. So that was the first time I ever shopped in the male aisle and I was like, “This is allowed? I can do this?” And so from then on I started to shift my closet from female clothing to male clothing. And it’s just way more comfortable. It’s not built for me, but it’s way more comfortable. And so since college, I’ve had short hair [ . . . ] And what really shifted my identity most was when I was in college, I dated a transguy who is one of my bestest friends now. And you know, at that time I was identifying as a lesbian, and, when he hit on me, I was really confused because it’s like, “You know I’m a lesbian, right?” And he was like, “Yeah, sure. We’ll see about that.” And I’m like, “What? I don’t understand. This guy is hitting on me.” And so I had an identity crisis when that happened, you know. What does this mean? How are people going to perceive this if we’re out and about because he very much appears male and I very much appear a lesbian? And so it’s like, “Are people going to think I’m straight now? Or like are they going to think we’re friends?” And then it was like: “What does this mean for me being a lesbian? Like I’m attracted to this male presenting person, but he has a vagina. So what does that mean?” So I really had a hard time with that [ . . . ] But having to think through that process was really what helped me come to a queer identity, and seeing that even still, right, in order to be a lesbian I don’t have to subscribe to the norms of lesbian culture, even though that was really pressured. And so because of that, I started to—once “queer” became more of a term that was acceptable, that was when I kind of latched onto it, and was like, “You know, this is a nice little blanket term that I feel most comfortable with because it doesn’t leave a whole lot of room for questions, and yet there are so many questions.” So it’s kind of like you can’t refute it, in a way (Interview, 3 August 2017).

For this individual, their identity as a butch lesbian was useful and comfortable until they learned more about transgender identities and had a variety of life experiences that led them to identify as queer. It was through their experience as a butch lesbian that they experimented with gender presentation and ultimately developed relationships that led them to instead identify as queer.

Other individuals stated that they initially identified as LGB because it was more acceptable than coming out as trans. Levi Hanson explains that he ignored his trans identity because he felt as though his mother would not accept him, and instead identified as a lesbian and became part of the queer community:

[At first] I identified as just being gay. And I would say lesbian, but I really thought that was a weird term for me. When I first came out, like about my sexuality, I was 16, and I remember, before I even came out, I just found a new group of friends and I was like “okay, this fits.” That group of friends being a lot of people who were gay or bisexual or pansexual [ . . . ] before I came out as just being gay, I asked my mom if she thought I would ever grow up to come out as transgender, and she just thought about it and was like “no, I just thought you were a tomboy.” And I’m like “oh yeah, you’re right. You know me better than myself.” So I just kind of put that thought away because I thought that would—I know being transgender—what I knew back then would be difficult. Because I am. And I just didn’t really acknowledge that. I didn’t want to acknowledge it (Interview, 10 January 2018).

For Hanson, coming out as a lesbian was a way to indicate that he was a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, even though the lesbian identity did not adequately represent him. Hanson’s narrative also indicates that, although LGB identities are stigmatized, trans identities are even more stigmatized. While having already come out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual might make it easier or less intimidating to come out as trans, there is also the added potential for being doubly discriminated against and doubly stigmatized for having both a non-hegemonic sexuality and a non-hegemonic gender identity.

#### Coming Out vs. Coming In: Reflections on a Rite of Passage

Coming out has often been considered a rite of passage for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Upon coming out, an individual separates themselves from straight, heteronormative society, and aligns themselves with the LGBT community. According to Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1908), each person’s life includes a process of social and personal changes, including changes in age, occupation, and identity. Naturally, a person will join and leave several groups throughout the course of their life, and van Gennep states that “progression from one group to the next is accompanied by

special acts” (1908:2-3), a set of rituals, experiences, and ceremonies that mark one’s transition from one group to another. For LGBTQIA+ individuals, coming out involves separating themselves from heteronormative society, declaring an LGBTQIA+ identity, and becoming a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, for transfolk, coming out does not seem to serve the same function.

While lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals usually expect other LGB people to come out, transfolk understand the dangers and difficulties inherent in coming out, and generally do not require trans individuals to be out in order to become part of a community. Levi Hanson argues that, though coming out functions as a rite of passage for lesbians and gays, transfolk do not emphasize coming out or consider it a rite of passage:

I think it’s the opposite [of a rite of passage] actually [ . . . ] Maybe it’s that we know how dangerous it is to come out. I think it really is a dangerous thing to come out. Not that it’s not dangerous to come out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or any other sexuality. It’s just—I think it’s more taboo than sexuality, and it’s seen more as a mental illness than—I don’t believe [being] transgender is a mental illness, other trans people may say something different, but I don’t feel like it is [ . . . ] whereas other sexualities aren’t seen as a mental illness anymore. And other people are like “oh, yeah, okay that’s normal. That’s normal” [ . . . ] it’s dangerous, and it’s scary, and your closest friends may not accept you the way they would if it was just a sexuality (Interview, 10 January 2018).

Instead of coming out, Levi Hanson and Madi Withrow stated that the trans equivalent of a rite of passage is when an individual accepts their own gender identity; for example, Levi Hanson, explaining what the trans rite of passage would be, said “I think maybe it’s just realizing when you are trans. Just accepting yourself. I think that’s a really nice and comforting feeling, and that—a lot of people experience that at different ages”

(Interview, 10 January 2018). Madi Withrow also argued that coming out to oneself can be considered a rite of passage for trans individuals:

I don't think [coming out] is [necessary] at all. I know people who still haven't come out to nearly anybody, and I'm part of a random support group on Facebook and so many people aren't out on there. It's more that, when you come to accept yourself, you can identify yourself as trans or non-binary. And then you're welcomed in to the community because you've come to terms with this life-changing revelation, and all of us have been there. And there's a lot of push for helping people understand that there's no set template for being trans or being non-binary. Everyone's different. So I think the closest thing to a rite of passage would just be coming to terms with it and admitting [to yourself] you aren't cis (Interview, 9 January 2017).

The significance placed on coming out to oneself reflects the conceptualization of trans identities as predominantly personal/internal identities. LGB individuals generally have to come out before forming same-sex relationships because finding a partner usually requires disclosing one's LGB identity. However, trans people do not have to come out in order to be transgender, as identifying as trans occurs internally. Given these attitudes towards coming out as transgender, one might be compelled to ask: If coming out is not essential for being considered part of a trans community,<sup>6</sup> what purpose does it serve?

One potential function is that coming out is a form of creating cohesion and community within the LGBT population. According to Joseph Goodwin, "cohesion is a very strong need felt by many people; it is a desire for a sense of belonging, a means of relating to others based on a sense of commonality that results in a sense of group identity" (1989:28). Goodwin states that, in order for cohesion to develop, and in order to a basis of interaction to be established, individuals must be able to identify things they have in common. Goodwin lists homosexuality as a basis of interaction amongst LGBT individuals, and transgender identities can be considered a similar basis of interaction

among transfolk. Transgender individuals constitute a relatively small percent of the American population, with only an estimated 0.6% identifying as transgender (“How Many Adults Identity as Transgender in the United States?”).<sup>7</sup> Individuals identifying as a member of such a small and marginalized community may naturally seek out relationships with other trans people. According to Michael Bronski, “the term ‘coming out’ had not been in common use before; previously the metaphor had been about *coming into* the homosexual world” (2011:209). In some ways, the concept of coming out within trans communities mirrors the pre-Gay Liberation Movement’s preference for privacy, personal choice, and community. For transgender individuals, coming out is really about finding a trans community.

Because the transgender population is relatively small, the act of coming out may serve as a form of *coming in* to a trans community – of revealing your trans identity to another trans person in order to find support and form community. In *Trans\* in College: Transgender Students’ Strategies for Navigating Campus Life and the Institutional Politics of Inclusion* (2017), Z Nicolazzo states that ze<sup>8</sup> decided to come out to hir friend Chase, who is a trans man, “as a form of coming into a trans\*<sup>9</sup> community” (2017:2). After coming out to Chase, Chase helped Z find helpful trans memoirs and other resources that helped Z begin to develop hir trans identity. After becoming more comfortable with hir identity, Z was able to come out to more and more people. In the same way, the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group at WKU, which is a space designated for only trans/non-binary individuals, requires a person to *come out* in order to *come in* to a trans and non-binary community, even if the coming out is tacit. According to Levi Hanson, he began attending meetings with the Transgender and Non-Binary



Student Group before coming out as trans and before being entirely comfortable and sure of his identity: “I started going before I identified as trans. I think the bigger thing about me going was that I was afraid that I wouldn’t—I shouldn’t go if I’m not out yet or wasn’t sure” (Interview, 10 January 2018). When he first began attending meetings, Hanson knew he was something other than cisgender, but did not feel entirely comfortable identifying as trans. By attending a TNB meeting, Hanson tacitly signaled that he was something other than cis. After he began attending group meetings and found a supportive community of other trans individuals, he became more comfortable identifying as trans, and ultimately came out to his family and friends.

Importantly, coming out is also a form of coming *in* to a new identity. When coming *out*, transgender individuals are also coming *in* to a trans community and to a new gender. Coming in to a new gender identity is a long, difficult, and, for many, rewarding process. For transgender individuals, coming out is the first step of coming in to a new gender identity. For example, Jeremy McFarland describes deciding to come out so that he could formally begin dressing and styling his hair in a way that feels most comfortable to him:

I don’t think, for me at least, I ever felt pressured to come out. I felt a *need* to come out. Even then, I didn’t really come out voluntarily to my parents. I came out to my parents because of my mom starting—she decided after a haircut that she was gonna make me grow my hair out and [she said] I had to start wearing denim clothes again. I wasn’t able to—I couldn’t do that. So that’s why I came out to my parents (Interview, 17 August 2017).

According to McFarland, coming out was a necessary step that he had to take in order to change his gender expression. After coming out, Jeremy was able to change his name, preferred pronouns, and personal style. The formation of his gender identity was facilitated by the coming out process.

## Stealth, Passing, and the Responsibility of Coming Out

Because transfolk do not view coming out as an obligatory action one must take before joining the group, some transgender individuals may wait for long periods before coming out, and some choose to not come out at all. When cis-passing trans individuals choose to conceal their trans history, this is described as living or going “stealth.”

“Stealth” is an emic term, used in trans communities to describe trans people who live as their gender identity without revealing that they are trans. Transgender individuals who can successfully pass as cis often have had hormone therapy and/or gender reassignment surgery. Often, these individuals, successfully passing as cis in a heterosexist society, choose to not disclose their trans identity due to personal preference or fear of repercussion. The close friends and family members of the “stealth” individual may be aware of their trans history, but they choose not to come out to the broader public. The idea of going stealth is similar to Goffman’s discussion of passing and discredited/discreditable identities. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Goffman distinguishes between visible and invisible stigma; individuals with a visible stigma (such as a physical disability) are described as *discredited* persons, while individuals with invisible stigma (such as a non-hegemonic sexuality) are described as *discreditable* persons. Goffman’s idea of passing refers to those who can successfully conceal their stigma. Transgender individuals who can successfully be read as cis are considered cis-passing, and have *discreditable* rather than *discredited* identities (1963:41-2). The question of whether or not cis-passing trans people are obligated to disclose their trans history is frequently debated among transfolk.

The majority of my consultants believed that, while it is good for the individual, trans communities, and society to come out, coming out is not required because it is inherently dangerous. Some individuals that I interviewed argued that coming out is important because increased visibility generally leads to increased social acceptance for trans people. When asked whether or not trans people should be expected to come out as a political statement, Jeremy McFarland gave both an official answer (as the leader of the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group) and a more personal response:

There is never an instance that a transgender is obligated to do anything. They are never obligated to come out in any circumstance if they don't want to. That's my official answer. My personal answer is that I think if you are far enough along in this political climate and if you're in a position that's safe for you, to a degree, (I'm willing to sacrifice a little bit of that personally, but it's my business.) I think that you should feel obligated to stand up and say something for your community, especially if you're near an area like this where people need that. And seeing the impact that it makes on these younger students and stuff who are very obviously impacted by the fact of having an openly trans person who's transitioned and turning around and supporting them. That makes a huge difference to them. And knowing that and knowing what I've been able to do since coming back out, I do feel like—I feel like I have a moral obligation. I don't think that anyone else—I don't think it's fair to put that obligation on anyone else because there are so many factors and not everyone can handle that. It's a lot of stress. It's a lot of emotional stress, and yeah. So no, I don't think anyone should ever feel obligated to do it, but I do. [ . . . ] Politically, I think it is essential (Interview, 17 August 2017).

Kanyon McKee expanded on Jeremy's argument, explaining that those with passing privilege should be vocal about their identities and the rights of transfolk because they have more social capital:

I think it's important for people who pass, especially, to use the privilege they have as passing trans people to stand up for people that don't [pass]. Someone who looks completely masculine is less likely than someone like me to be assaulted for standing up for someone. If someone who looks like a man corrects someone on my pronouns, they're going to listen to you.<sup>10</sup> If I correct you, I'm going to get some looks. Depending on who it is, I

could get hurt. You never know what could happen. People are crazy (Interview, 30 January 2018).

The statements of Kanyon and Jeremy demonstrate the belief that transfolk should advocate for each other, even if that means sacrificing personal safety and risking discomfort to do so. To these individuals, the ultimate objective should be equality for *all* transfolk, and all members of the community should feel responsible for working towards that goal.

Many of my consultants also believed that coming out was important for trans people because hiding an identity creates shame and discomfort. According to Jeremy McFarland, the decision to go stealth can be isolating and emotionally harmful:

There are some trans guys who go through a whole medical transition, and then they try to say they're not transgender anymore. They try to say they're cisgender after that. That's their prerogative, I guess. But it's just not, for me, not true [ . . . ] when you're stealth, that's your option. You're either quietly miserable because you can't talk about your feelings or you just deny you're transgender entirely so you can deal with it. It's—I feel bad for those people (Interview, 17 August 2017).

To McFarland, the decision to go stealth involves some element of suffering in silence. Others expressed that going stealth was a form of dishonesty or self-denial. For example, Levi Hanson said, “Being stealth, to me, is just living like you weren't born differently than you identify, and, to me, I think it's harmful to myself. I don't know—I feel like it's lying to myself” (Interview, 10 January 2018). While going stealth may enable an individual to avoid incurring negative social consequences, some of my consultants believe that going stealth has equally damaging emotional consequences.

Some of my consultants are not currently receiving hormone therapy and have not undergone gender reassignment surgery, and thus cannot pass as cis. In order for their gender identities to be accepted, they must come out to their friends and family. Jeremy

McFarland chose to go “stealth” for a short period of time, before coming out as a trans man and forming the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group:

Being openly transgender fucking sucks. A lot of times—I was openly transgender when I was at community college, because it was my only way to be respected as a man. And—I guess there are two reasons. So there’s that, and, because I had to do that, there were so many people, particularly people in the non-trans, queer community because they feel like they get a pass. They feel like they can say more stuff, which straight, cis people are a little afraid to cross some boundaries, but the non-trans, queer people did not have that boundary concern so the only thing they would talk to me about was my body and about me being transgender. They would touch me. They would—it was bad. It sucked, and it felt horrible. And people don’t see you when you’re openly transgender, a lot of times, people don’t see you as a person. They see you as either—they see you as a resource. They just want to learn about what transgender people are or they don’t see you as a person at all. They see you as a body, or they see you as information. And that sucks. That’s a really shitty way to feel. And it was really overwhelming, especially after I had my top surgery because I started to pass and stuff. I wanted to have this experience of being allowed to exist for once in my life because, up to that point, being transgender, that’s the biggest challenge, being allowed to be a human being that exists. And so I went stealth so I could have that experience of just being allowed to be a person [ . . . ] I don’t think I could do it now because it’s so—with things going on right now, politically, it was such a heavy weight to be stealth because there were all these problems that I was having that I couldn’t tell anyone [ . . . ] At first, I was kind of reluctant to do that [live openly as trans]. I kind of wanted to maintain a “being able to be stealth,” not telling people I was transgender. But as the group kind of grew, I kind of felt a responsibility to be more open and more visible. So at this point, I don’t always put it—at Fairness [Campaign] things and maybe political things, I’ll wear a pin or something. I have a bumper magnet now with the trans flag. I don’t just tell people randomly and I try not to bring it up at work, but it’s come up a couple of times now. I’d say I’m open. If it’s relevant, I’ll bring it up, I guess (Interview, 17 August 2017).

Jeremy, who decided to come out after the 2016 presidential election, felt as though the cultural climate necessitated his presentation as an openly trans man. As leader of the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, he felt as though it was his responsibility to be more vocal about his gender identity. Though Jeremy eventually chose to come out,

the many negative experiences that he had when he was first beginning to transition would likely be considered a good reason to choose to go stealth. Although transfolk generally prefer for transgender people to be open about their identities, they also recognize that being openly trans is inherently dangerous and could lead to emotional and physical harm, and thus would likely respect Jeremy's decision to go stealth during that time.

According to Jeremy, although trans identities are not inherently political, trans bodies are heavily politicized, especially in the current political environment:

Well I'd say I'm just transgender. I'm just—that just happened. I'm just trans. A lot of people fight over reasons that people are trans and whether it's biological versus social versus whatever. It doesn't matter. I'm fucking trans. I'm here. It doesn't matter why. I don't have an answer. I don't think anyone has an answer. So my actual existence as a trans person is apolitical, but I think that the tragedy of being transgender is that you aren't allowed that. You aren't allowed to just be a person that exists. Just by existing, you are political. Your mere existence in this world is a political issue, and that's tragic. I hate seeing that with these younger members. We have like 15-year-olds who are having to deal with suddenly being political statements. Everything you do becomes a political statement, and I think that's horrible. I think that it's shameful, and I think that it's embarrassing that we live in a world that's not—that you don't have the option to just be a person anywhere in the world. There's not a single country that adequately handles and addresses transgender issues and allows transgender people to merely be a person, not a single country in this world. America's a pretty big shithole on that front, but it's by no means the worst. And there is no number one best. So my identity as a trans person being political is inherent. I think that I'm a little more invested in it than others, but I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that—I don't think that everyone realizes—I think now it's unavoidable, but for a long time I felt like people didn't realize to what degree they were subconsciously being affected emotionally by their political situation and their legal situation. Now I think it is undeniable. I think people are very open about the fact that their mental health and their general well-being is suffering because of a political situation. But, yeah. It's just inherent. I don't have an option to not be political. Just like I said, if Donald Trump was president when I was 16, I would have killed myself. And that's automatically political (Interview, 17 August 2017).

The 2016 presidential election was a pivotal time for trans people across the country. During the election, there was an increase in anti-LGBT rhetoric among many Republican politicians, and LGBT people feared that the election, along with the naming of Vice President Mike Pence, might lead to increased federal discrimination against them. Donald Trump's proposed transgender military ban, along with a reversal of the Obama-era policy on the ability of transgender students to access school bathrooms, has demonstrated that these concerns were well founded.<sup>11</sup> Although trans people across the United States have long been engaged in a campaign to secure more social and political rights, the election led to renewed vigor in these pursuits. After the election of Donald Trump, many trans people have become politically transgender, attempting to draw trans issues into our national discourse and organizing to elect trans candidates and allies to public office. These trans people openly embrace their trans identities, and come out for political purposes. Jeremy's decision to live as an openly transgender individual, as well as his decision to form the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, served both personal and political purposes.

### Coming Out as Transgender: Countering the Dominant Narrative

As previously stated, the dominant narrative of coming out is that coming out is a positive, essential experience that all LGBTQIA+ individuals must have. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, my consultants often expressed frustration that this dominant narrative does not adequately represent their experience. Dominant narratives are the stories told by dominant cultures, which construct a particular type of reality and historical perspective. Because we are surrounded by them, it is difficult to define, locate,

and understand the origins and implications of dominant narratives; however, they nevertheless construct social realities and influence behavior. Although dominant narratives claim to represent all people, they cannot wholly represent anyone. Marginalized peoples, specifically, often feel as though their experiences are not represented by the dominant narrative, and rely on personal stories as a means of attempting to challenge these dominant cultural narratives. In *Other People's Stories*, Shuman states, "In many twentieth-century critiques of dominant culture, local or personal narratives have been proposed as an emancipatory alternative. Often, the alternative offered to dominant culture and its dominant discourses, is multiple, competing, local discourses" (2005:122). Shuman states that the emancipatory power of the use of local discourses "lies in their ongoing dialogue with and ability to undermine dominant culture" (122). One way in which members of marginalized communities attempt to complicate dominant narratives is through the use of personal stories – of counternarratives.

Although local, personal narratives have been proposed as a strategy of deconstructing and countering dominant narratives, Shuman complicates the privileging of the local and the redemptive promise of personal stories; Shuman argues that, when narratives are appropriated for political purposes, personal stories are often essentialized and narrators may be erased or obscured:

The person whose story is told is no longer just a person but a representative of his or her culture or circumstance. By making the individual a representative of the larger cause, the person as individual with a right to his or her own story, can be obliterated . . . By erasing what might be conflicting interpretations or even slight differences between local meaning and global cause, the appropriated narratives can serve to reinforce the ideology of the cause (126).



Shuman states that co-opting personal narratives for political purposes “decontextualizes [a person’s voice] by removing the person being represented from the cultural context in which an event occurred and recontextualizing the personal situation within a larger social drama” (131). Shuman states that personal narratives concern “the most local of categories, the person, and claim to be the most local of genres, a genre of everyday life” (132). In “Dismantling Local Culture” (1993), Shuman explains that traditionally, scholars, and folklorists in particular, have privileged the local over the global. Citing Jean Francois Lyotard and Clifford Geertz, Shuman notes that the local is seen as a “necessary corrective to ethnocentric bias and offered as a means for attempting value-free inquiry” (1993:350). There are several issues with this privileging of the local. Shuman states that the local is viewed as an essential, natural category, though we know that groups and localities are not homogenous; this hides the constructed, political nature in which “the local” is categorized, and leads to complicated claims of authenticity (357). Privileging the local also prevents some scholars from studying larger-than-local categories (360-1). According to Shuman, the local is often presented as a site of resistance to dominant culture (2005:139), but conceptualizations of the local often conflate differences between diverse groups and communities:

We know that local cultures are not homogenous entities, not unified structures represented by worldviews, but the concept of diverse localities, and even diversity within locality, only serves to preserve a conception of locals as bounded wholes. For the most part, conceptions of the local, as much as they argue for the recognition of diversity, focus more on consensus and the reproduction of the local than they do on dissent and appropriation (140).

As Shuman demonstrates, the local is an imperfect corrective to the global, and personal narratives are imperfect correctives to totalizing dominant narratives. Counternarratives

are useful for those who are telling them, and my consultants seem to hope that their personal narratives will ultimately supplant dominant narratives of trans experience, but they may or may not. At some point, these counternarratives may become the dominant narrative (after all, coming out narratives were once counternarratives).

The dominant narrative of the queer experience—that it is necessary and good to come out—has unclear and perhaps unknowable origins, but its existence can be located in celebrations like National Coming Out Day, the structural similarities of coming out narratives, initiatives by the Human Rights Campaign, and other portrayals of queer life in popular culture. While the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) is not the only source of the dominant coming out narrative, many of the individuals that I interviewed specifically referenced their coming out initiative, as the HRC is the most powerful and recognizable queer rights organization and, thus, wields more control over the way that queer experience is framed and discussed in the United States, particularly outside of LGBT communities.

Coming out narratives often align with Labov and Waletzky's structure of narratives, which identifies a traditional structure of personal experience narratives, consisting of an abstract, orientation, complication, resolution, evaluation, and coda.<sup>12</sup> Before examining transgender coming out narratives that deviate from the dominant narrative, I will first examine a typical LGB coming out narrative. The traditional structure of coming out narratives consists of four parts: an explanation of how the individual realized they were LGB, an explanation of when and why they decided to come out, a description of the process of telling their friends and family, and a discussion

of the consequences of coming out. The story of how Ariel Hiraldo came out to her mother is an example of a typical coming out narrative:

So I knew—it kind of struck me in fifth grade, like I’ve always known that I liked girls and such. But like I guess I just put it off until fifth grade, when it actually just hit me [ . . . ] My mom and I usually sit under the stars, and like we’ll just stare up at them. So one day, we were just sitting there, and I was like “mom, I think I’m gay. I think I’m bisexual.” And she just goes “I know.” And I’m like “What?” And she goes “I’ve already known this. Like I’m your mother, I know this.” And I was like “Oh. I would’ve appreciated if you would’ve told me this sooner and let me know.” And she goes, “Congratulations, that’s nice.” And that was it . . . my mom’s pretty accepting . . . so that was it (Interview, October 11, 2016).

Hiraldo’s narrative easily aligns with Labov and Waletzky’s narrative structure:

1. Orientation: “So I knew—it kind of struck me in fifth grade, like I’ve always known that I liked girls and such. But like I guess I just put it off until fifth grade, when it actually just hit me.”
2. Complication and Resolution: Ariel’s narrative technically contains three different coming out experiences: coming out to her teacher, her uncle, and her mother. However, the narrative is framed around the reaction of her mother. The complication and result form the main body of her coming out narrative, including the experience of realizing she was queer and telling various adults.
3. Evaluation: “So my mom’s pretty accepting.” Ariel addresses the underlying question of coming out narratives: *how did your parents/loved ones take the news?*
4. Coda: “So that was it.” By ending the narrative this way, Ariel implies that the experience was not as emotionally taxing as she anticipated.

Generally, lesbian, gay, and bisexual coming out narratives, like Hiraldo’s, have concrete orientations and resolutions, and there is often no lingering uncertainty. Trans coming out narratives, on the other hand, often end without a clear resolution and do not have a reliable narrative structure. This is not to say that LGB people do not have to come out repeatedly or face discrimination when coming out, but the dominant narrative portrays a singular type of coming out experience.

The coming out narratives of trans individuals often conclude by explaining that their parents, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances are still coming to terms with their trans identities, and many acknowledge that they will have to come out again in the future. Also, because most of the transgender individuals that I interviewed are in a process of social and physical transition, their coming out narratives necessarily remain unresolved. Kanyon McKee, for example, was accused of being mentally ill after coming out to their mother:

Alright, well, a few weeks ago, I came out to my mother through a letter. I called her and told her there was a letter hidden in the bottom drawer of my—in my room. . . about an hour later, she calls me back. And it's obvious she's been crying. And she's very angry. And she tells me not to tell anyone else in my family, that it would break their hearts like it broke hers, that she feels like she's lost a part of her soul. And, basically, she calls me mentally ill. She says that I shouldn't lie like that, that I'm just making it up. She doesn't believe I felt that way since third grade, as I described in the letter . . . So it's kind of been an ongoing process. She wants me to get therapy and stuff to try to figure out what's *wrong* with me. So, that's my story (Interview, August 18, 2017).

McKee's narrative mirrors LGB coming out narratives in some ways, but lacks a cohesive resolution:

1. Orientation: "Alright, well, a few weeks ago, I came out to my mother through a letter."
2. Complication and Resolution: "I called her and told her there was a letter hidden in the bottom drawer of my—in my room."
3. Evaluation: "So it's kind of been an ongoing process. She wants me to get therapy and stuff to try to figure out what's *wrong* with me."
4. Coda: "So, that's my story." Although McKee's narrative concludes by saying "so that's my story," they also states that his coming out experience is an "ongoing process," signaling that the experience is not truly resolved.

While lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals may have experiences similar to McKee's, the dominant narrative does not acknowledge the possibility of a negative or traumatic coming out experience.

Another example of a trans coming out narrative that lacks a clear resolution is Leeran Dublin's story of coming out as non-binary to friends, coworkers, and, finally, their immediate family:

1. Orientation: "So I, in grad school, had decided that there were things that I didn't have time to think about, and they were gender and religion. They are just like stressful things for me to think about. So I knew I didn't identify as a woman, but I didn't know what options there were for identity, and I, also, didn't feel I had the time to think about it. And, also, I think I was afraid of what I might figure out if I really reflected."
2. Complication and Resolution: "So then I'm part of a—I help run a student group at [Washington University] called Connections, and part of Connections is bringing in speakers to talk about different marginalized and hard hit communities. So we brought someone in to talk about identifying as transgender and what that means and how to be respectful and compassionate with that community. So he was speaking as a transman speaking, and he said that trans is defined as not identifying with the gender you were assigned at birth. Then I was like, "Wait. You can not identify with it, but not necessarily identify with the "opposite"? Then he started talking about non-binary people and how they even had a support group for non-binary people. And I was like, "Whaaat? What is this?" and it was just very much like a, "Wait, that's probably what I am." And so then, that was in like November. So that got me thinking about it more, and it's just like thinking about how I never really like my name and wondering why that was and what the options were [ . . . ] So then in January, I came out on Facebook and stuff, and I really—so I'm friends with like-minded people and then I'm also friends with a lot of people from Kentucky of a more traditional mindset and older generations who may not be aware of what non-binary is, so in my post I made it a point to find resources for people, like not a lot but a few that they can click on and read a little bit about [ . . . ] And so I spent a lot of time writing my post and figuring out what to say because I was really afraid I'd get people saying, "This isn't a real thing. You're crazy. This is dumb." But everyone was really supportive [ . . . ] I went home, and my family does Christmas in like February, which is a whole other thing but that's when we do it, and so I went home after I came out and I felt very irrelevant to my family, to my extended family. My parents were just fine. My brother and his wife are pretty religious, and my aunt and uncle are pretty religious, and then my grandparents I just didn't tell. So they have no idea. And so I told my family they can call me by initials, which are LB, and I kept the same initials even with my new name so that they can call me by initials and for

me it would mean Leeran Blythe and for them it could mean my birth name, but it doesn't—I couldn't say that it doesn't to myself, I guess.”

3. Evaluation: “But like when I came out as gay, my family still interacted with me and talked about things with me, and when I came out as non-binary that was like the straw that broke the camel's back. So my parents acted like nothing was wrong, and my grandparents act like nothing is wrong because they don't know, but like my brother and his wife and aunt and uncle don't talk to me very much. And just—I feel very much irrelevant, which is almost worse than knowing that they're uncomfortable but still like having conversations with me.”

4. Coda: “So, yeah.” Dublin's narrative concludes in a way that is weak and uncertain. By saying, “so, yeah,” Dublin is unsuccessfully attempting to assign a conclusion to an ongoing experience.

Dublin's narrative ends in a way that is quite similar to McKee's: both individuals experienced a negative or lackluster response from their immediate families, and both feel as though their situations are unresolved and still developing. Dublin explains that when they initially came out as gay, their family was positive and accepting; however, when they came out as non-binary, their family became distant and unresponsive. Like McKee, Dublin is still interacting with their parents, but the interactions are forced and uncomfortable. In order for either situation to be resolved, further discussions of trans/non-binary identities must occur. For Dublin and McKee, coming out is a *process*, not a single event. Neither McKee nor Dublin's coming out narratives have clear resolutions, and, according to the narrative structure proposed by Labov and Waletzky, can be labeled failed narratives. Failed narratives are unresolved, incoherent, and lack reportability (a “so what,” or reason for telling).

Transgender coming out narratives are often untellable, which means that their narratives do not fit within existing categories for interpreting their experience (Shuman 2005:7). Because transfolk must frequently come out multiple times to the same person, and because transgender individuals are often in a literal state of transition, their coming

out narratives remain unresolved. Trans coming out narratives often do not conform to the available narrative and lack recognizable narrative form, structure, order, and content, and thus can be considered chaotic, untellable narratives. This complicates an individual's ability to share traumatic and chaotic coming out narratives, which is, for some of my consultants, an important part of dealing with trauma.<sup>13</sup>

The dominant coming out narrative frames coming out as a necessary step that one must take in order to be a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. In "The Trouble with Coming Out" (2004), Mary Rasmussen discusses what she calls "the coming out imperative," which implies that coming out is necessary and is "a valuable—if sometimes difficult task, and that the act of coming out is likely to benefit the individual and their peers" (2004:145). LGBTQIA+ rights activists rely on the coming out imperative to increase their political success, but they often promote this narrative to the detriment of trans people. Rasmussen argues that the coming out imperative "situates the closet as a zone of shame and exclusion" (144), which places significant pressure on closeted individuals, and leads them to become even more marginalized within their communities. According to Lal Zimman in "'The other kind of coming out': Transgender People and the Coming Out Narrative Genre" (2009), the Human Rights Campaign pressures trans people to come out, but does not recognize the dangers inherent in coming out as trans:

The HRC promotes coming out as a necessary step in eliminating homophobia and transphobia, and maintains at the time of this writing no fewer than seven distinct web articles dealing specifically with coming out as transgender. Yet none of these discussions acknowledge the special issues facing transpeople after transition, nor even the notion that coming out as transgender might involve something other than revealing one's gender identity. The HRC equates being out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual with being out as transgender, and the coming out imperative is applied with the same force to all transgender people, pre- and post-transition (2009:69-70).

The Human Rights Campaign, clearly interested in encouraging trans people to come out, does not adequately recognize that coming out as trans is essentially different, more difficult, and more dangerous than coming out as LGB.

It is important to note that for as long as the coming out movement has existed, members of the queer community have pushed back against it. Although major LGBTQIA+ organizations encourage queer people to come out, there is significant pushback against the “coming out imperative” within trans communities. For example, on National Coming Out Day, transgender activists and allies took to Twitter to remind trans people that they should not feel as though they should come out until they were absolutely ready:



On Twitter, responses ranged from empathy and understanding to open hostility against the dominant narrative. Throughout National Coming Out Day, trans activists attempted to remind closeted individuals that coming out was not an imperative. Instead of visibility



for the LGBTQIA+ community, many transgender individuals prioritize individual safety on the emotional, physical, and social level. Based on conversations that I tracked on Twitter during National Coming Out Day, the pushback against the dominant narrative was certainly well-represented. Unfortunately, Tweets critiquing the coming out imperative were significantly outnumbered by Tweets reinforcing the dominant narrative. The coming out imperative continues to be a dominant, widespread force.

In these contexts, the dominant coming out narrative becomes dangerously misleading. McKee previously expressed the opinion that the pressure to come out—imposed on closeted queer individuals by the dominant coming out narrative and major LGBTQIA+ organizations—can have dangerous consequences for transgender individuals. Coming out, for McKee, was an overwhelmingly negative experience. They were rejected and emotionally harmed by their mother, feared physical violence throughout the experience, and were kicked out of their home. It is only in the telling of narratives like Dublin's and McKee's that alternative outcomes are presented. By sharing narratives like Dublin's and McKee's, transgender individuals can begin to counter the dominant coming out narrative, providing the alternative perspective that coming out can be a long-term, physically dangerous, and emotionally harmful activity.

Counternarratives can give a voice to those whose stories typically go unacknowledged by the dominant narrative—they may not necessarily contradict the dominant narrative, but they can provide an alternative narrative. These stories can be considered subversive because they deviate from the dominant narrative. According to Amy Shuman, “Redemptive, subversive, or other liberatory claims made for narrative are based on the possibility of counternarratives” (2005:19), in which “tellers challenge available

narratives as not accurately portraying their experiences” (14). Transgender coming out narratives frequently critique the dominant narrative by demonstrating that not *all* coming out stories end positively, and that the transgender coming out experience is often much more elaborate, dangerous, and emotionally damaging than the dominant narrative of lesbian, gay, and bisexual coming out suggests. The telling of transgender coming out narratives functions to differentiate the trans coming out experience from the lesbian, gay, and bisexual coming out narrative, establishing an alternative narrative that better represents transfolk.

Sometimes, through the telling of personal experience narratives, transfolk attempt to deconstruct *multiple* dominant narratives. Within trans communities, there are also a set of assumptions about what constitutes the transgender experience. Because the transgender population is a diverse group containing a variety of life experiences, dominant narratives of trans experience do not accurately represent some trans people. There are two dominant narratives of transgender experience that often motivate counternarratives: the “linear transition” narrative and the “realized at a young age” narrative.

According to A. Carter Sickles in “What Does Masculinity Mean to You: Trans Males Creating Identities of Possibilities” (2010), “In the dominant trans-narrative, one grows up as a tomboy, identifies as a butch dyke, and then transitions into a man, yielding a neat hierarchal continuum of masculinity. Several of my consultants’ lives followed a similar trajectory, though they also enriched this narrative with their own personal challenges and realizations. This is not true, however, for everyone” (2010:43). This “linear transition” narrative, in which one transitions neatly from one gender to

another, is certainly true for some transfolk, but many have had entirely different experiences. Some trans people may not identify as *any* gender; others may not have a stable gender identity and instead may frequently shift between gender identities. For example, a consultant who wished to remain anonymous stated, “We don’t all have the same narrative, and we don’t always know that we were trans from birth. There are a lot of us who come out later in life. There are a lot of us that don’t fit the gender norms of our gender” (Interview, 30 January 2017).

Another dominant narrative of trans experience is the idea that a trans person “realized at a young age” that they were trans. Individuals who have come out later in life often feel as though their experiences are not respected or taken seriously. Kanyon McKee, for example, explained this dominant narrative’s effect on trans people:

There is kind of that situation where there are some people who think that if you didn’t realize as a child, then you’re not really trans. And that’s not true, obviously. You can be trans and realize when you’re 34, 35, 40, if you want to or if that’s what happens. Some people just don’t have the same access to that information. You can’t physically make yourself have that information as a kid (Interview, 18 August 2017).

Trans individuals who have not had these experiences often seek to counter this dominant narrative of trans experience in their own coming out narratives. Ben Couch’s experience can be considered one that does not align with the dominant narrative. Couch explained that he did not realize he was trans until he was in college, which is much later than the experience represented in the dominant narrative:

There’s obviously that idea that, like, some trans people do know, like, from childhood that they’re not comfortable with their body or their identity or their name or something, and there’s that narrative. And it’s great, and I’m glad that they figured themselves out, but I also have, like, really chronic anxiety and depression. And so I just feel uncomfortable all the time. And I attributed it to that (Interview, 14 August 2017).

Through the telling of counternarratives like Ben's, trans individuals with diverse life experiences can become better represented in the discourse. A consultant who wished to remain anonymous explained that she wished transfolk would promote these counternarratives:

I think what needs to happen is that folks who are cis need to start amplifying the narratives of transfolk who don't fit that traditional narrative of "I knew since birth," "I played with Barbies when I was younger," "I prefer dresses over pants," "I enjoyed wearing makeup when I was young." That's the narrative that keeps coming up, and that never fit me. Granted, in hindsight, I knew a lot earlier that I really consciously knew. Looking back on my life, I can point to signs for certain things (Interview, 31 July 2017).

Through encouraging the telling of personal experience narratives and through promoting and highlighting these counternarratives of trans experience, the trans community can help make itself more understanding and welcoming to individuals with diverse experiences.

### Conclusion

LGBTQIA+ people have been encouraged and expected to come out since the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1960s. Although coming out is valued and highly encouraged in lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities, trans communities have a more complicated relationship with coming out. In many ways, coming out as trans is much different from coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The dominant narrative of the LGBTQIA+ community is that coming out is a positive, essential experience that all queer people must have. However, many transgender individuals feel as though the dominant narrative does not reflect their experiences. Coming out as trans is often much more complicated, dangerous, and time-consuming than coming out as LGB. Coming out

as trans often serves different functions than coming out as LGB; in the trans community, coming out is not always expected of others, and therefore coming out cannot be considered a rite of passage. Through the telling of counternarratives, transgender people can produce narratives that better reflect their experiences. They can also counter some of the dominant narratives of transgender experience that do not represent them. Although coming out means something very different to transfolk, it is still an experience that most transgender people have, enabling them to find community with other trans people and come in to their trans identities. For these reasons, coming out remains a significant part of trans experience.

## Chapter 2: Trans (Re)Presentation

There are myriad, often conflicting, ideas about what it means to be transgender. These ideas range from expectations of traditional gender performance to assumptions about sexuality. Expectations for transgender identities appear in a variety of discursive sites, including pop culture, politics, social media, and fandom communities. Some expectations for transgender performance, including the concept of transnormativity,<sup>14</sup> which reinforces traditional gendered behavior and compulsory heterosexuality, are harmful for those trans people who cannot or do not pass as cis. Transfolk often counter narrow and constricting expectations of transness in both online and offline contexts. Online, individuals seek out broader interpretations and models of trans identities, and trans people often use social media platforms to educate others about their own identities and the daily frustrations and victories they experience while living openly as trans. Offline, members of queer and trans safe spaces, like the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group (TNB) at WKU, intentionally celebrate broad interpretations of trans identities, and promote the idea that all gender identities are valid and worthy of respect. Although transnormative expectations for gender performance are damaging and harmful to some trans people, many of the transgender individuals that I interviewed seek to change and broaden expectations for transgender performance, both on and offline.

### What Does “Trans” Look Like? Contested Expectations for Gender Performance

In order to understand the manner in which trans identities are constructed, it is important first to discuss gender more broadly. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the*

*Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler argues that gender is a social construction, constituted through the repetition of conceptually gendered behaviors:

The action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation . . . gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts* (1990:178-9).

Prior to coming out and embracing one's trans identity, trans individuals, like cis individuals, have been socialized into a specific binary gender category. Upon coming out, trans people reject the gender category they have been socialized into and embrace another gender identity or reject gender categorization entirely. Some transfolk seek to successfully perform a binary gender, aligning themselves with a transnormative performance of trans identity (effectively passing and behaving as cisgender, embracing traditional notions of masculinity and femininity); others seek to perform a specific notion of transness that destabilizes traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, queering gendered expectations and existing somewhere between and outside of traditional gendered behavior. Regardless of how an individual is comfortable existing in a gendered body, embracing a trans identity necessitates some level of creative identity construction in which an individual transitions from performing one gender to another.

According to Judith Butler in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1990), gender performance is individually constructed but also contingent upon a culturally-restrictive, pre-existing set of behaviors:

As a public action and performative act, gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subjects would contend. The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural

conventions which essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives (1990:277).

When trans individuals reject the gender they have been assigned, they must find a new “script” within which to interpret their individual performance of transness. But where can this trans script be found? As previously discussed, many trans people do not identify with transnormative representations of trans identities that are disseminated by popular culture. Instead, transfolk often turn to the internet to seek out representations that they identify with and can use as models with which to construct their own interpretation of transness.

It is important to note that Judith Butler’s work has been used to argue against the existence of trans people, which is a damaging and irresponsible application of Butler’s ideas. In an interview with *The TransAdvocate* (2014), Butler states that Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond use the theory of gender as a social construction to support their anti-trans viewpoints. Butler calls this a “feminist policing of trans lives and trans choices,” and likens it to “feminist tyranny.” Butler states that this interpretation of social construction theory is incorrect:

One problem with that view of social construction is that it suggests that what trans people feel about what their gender is, and should be, is itself “constructed” and, therefore, not real. And then the feminist police comes along to expose the construction and dispute a trans person’s sense of their lived reality. I oppose this use of social construction absolutely, and consider it to be a false, misleading, and oppressive use of the theory (2014).

Trans people have been accused of both destroying gender and reifying it, and regardless of how a trans person performs gender (by aligning themselves with a particular binary



gender category or by “queering” their performance of gender), they are criticized for their behavior. Trans people often find themselves in a no-win situation, and I do not wish to perpetuate that problem here. I use Butler’s work because it is an effective tool with which to understand how ideas about gender and trans identities, disseminated through our national discourse, popular culture, and the internet, influence the performance of transness. The understanding of gender as performative should in no way invalidate trans identities; all gender identities are performative, and all are valid. Our societal inability to think outside of the gender binary requires gender identification, and those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth must engage in some level of self-identification, education, and discussion in order to receive validation for their gender identity and exist comfortably in society. The ability of transfolk to identify and deconstruct the performative nature of gender—to reject gender socialization and artistically construct a trans identity that feels more comfortably inhabitable to them—defeats and exposes compulsory gender, improving the situation of anyone who does not fit comfortably within the binary and traditional gender roles. In an interview with Liz Kotz for *Artforum* (1992), Butler specifically addresses these mischaracterizations of her work:

There is a bad reading [of *Gender Trouble*], which unfortunately is the most popular one. The bad reading goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism (1992:83).

According to Butler, it is erroneous to regard the gender presentation of trans people as more performative than the gender presentation of cis people. Butler highlights the

difference between gender performance and consumerism, but in contemporary American society there is often a fine line between one's aesthetic choices and consumption under capitalism. Trans individuals, for example, often must purchase a variety of consumer goods in order to achieve their desired aesthetic. Pravina Shukla (2008) addresses the intersection of consumerism and adornment in a discussion of the ornamentation aesthetics of Indian women:

The goal of ornamentation is to achieve beauty through an assemblage of clothes and jewelry. The availability of raw materials plays a crucial role in the realization of this artistic endeavor. In order to engage in the creative act of self-adornment, a woman needs first to assess what is available —what she owns —and then decide on how to configure her stock into a personal presence (2008:234).

Similarly, transfolk make aesthetic choices based on preference, comfort, and availability of materials. Clothing and ornamentation are often heavily gendered, and many trans people think deeply about dress and personal style. Upon coming out and changing their gender presentation, trans people often must purchase new clothing, accessories, and jewelry; transfolk also often creatively reimagine their current wardrobes, and co-opt existing items to help them more comfortably present as a specific gender. WKU's Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group collects clothing donations, and provides clothing for newly transitioning members for exactly this reason.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, my consultants discussed the contested nature of what it means to "look" and "be" trans. Some trans people privilege cis-passing transfolk, while others emphasize the importance of individual gender expression. Expectations for transgender presentation among trans people are communicated in both on- and offline trans communities. Often, these expectations are competing and are challenged by other trans people. These conflicting ideas about what it means to "look"

and “be” trans can occasionally cause issues for transfolk, as their gender performance is sometimes criticized by other trans people or by cis individuals.

A consistent issue raised throughout the course of my fieldwork was the pressure placed on trans individuals to pass, or the ability to be socially read as another gender. According to Harold Garfinkel in *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), “passing” refers to “the work of achieving and making secure the rights to live in the elected sex status while providing for the possibility of detection and ruin carried out within socially structured conditions” (1967:118). Garfinkel’s discussion of passing focuses on an intersex subject, but his definition of passing can be extended to encompass living in another elected gender. Garfinkel describes passing as a psychological and social necessity for many individuals; the intersex woman that Garfinkel studied had to pass in order to avoid experiencing psychological discomfort, but also had to pass to avoid social stigmatization (137). Transgender individuals are expected to look and pass as cisgender, and those who do not pass are often portrayed as failed trans bodies. Kanyon McKee discusses the pressure to pass and how it can create difficult situations for trans people:

Trans women are expected to know their shit about makeup, be extremely feminine, dress feminine, look feminine, talk feminine, act feminine. For trans men, you’re supposed to walk like a man, talk like a man, be assertive like a man, when that’s stereotypical masculinity. That’s kind of just reinforcing it, pounding it in to us. But also like, as much as you want to break that, you can’t and also be respected. So it’s kind of like a constant struggle of do I reinforce this masculinity—painful, painful masculinity—or do I get misgendered constantly? (Interview, 18 August 2017).

For McKee, our culture’s restrictive notions of what constitutes “masculine” and “feminine” behavior leads to serious issues for some trans people, many of whom do not want to reinforce binary notions of gender but who may need to perform traditional

gendered behavior in order for people to respect their gender identities. Jeremy McFarland explains that, based on his experience, being trans means negotiating between one's desire to perform gender in a way that feels natural and comfortable to oneself while also performing gender in a way that validates one's gender identity to the rest of the world:

There's always this stereotype of the hyper-masculine transguy. I've yet to meet him, this hyper-masculine transguy who isn't just doing it because he doesn't want to kill himself. Haven't met that one yet, but apparently there are many of them. And I fully believe it because we all go through kind of a phase of trying to be that. It's unsustainable, but I think that's just until the patriarchy falls and doesn't exist that that's going to be a thing [ . . . ] And I still have things that I do because it makes me feel like I'm validating myself in some way or reaffirming my masculinity or whatever. But, yeah, I think that will always exist. I think it has more to do with internal feeling of not being masculine or feminine enough, and then also, of course, there's an outside force of being told that if you're a man, then why do you do this? If you're a woman, why do you do this? (Interview, 17 August 2017).

Our social construction of gender centers on the notion of gender as binary, which pressures individuals to fit neatly into specific gendered categories. Trans people, often existing outside of and between gender binary categories, may feel as though they need to change their gender performance or physical body in order to receive validation for their gender identities.

The cultural tendency towards binary thinking can also seriously complicate the lives of non-binary individuals, who often feel as though their identities are not respected, recognized, or understood. Kanyon McKee, who identifies as non-binary, stated that they often feel as though they are not "trans enough":

A lot of non-binary people especially really struggle with not being trans enough. I know we discussed that earlier where we were talking about the stereotypical [expectations for transgender performance]. You have to look so masculine to be trans or you have to look so feminine and so a lot

of people, especially non-binary people, feel like they have to look a certain way to a degree towards masculine or towards feminine in order to be respected in the trans community. When really, you should be able to be however you want, to have your pronouns respected. So there's a lot of pressure to be trans enough. Yeah, within the community and outside of it, mainly within though (Interview, 18 August 2017).

Because Kanyon does not fit neatly into gendered categories, they often feel pressured to “choose” between masculine and feminine identities. They are often misgendered, and feel as though their non-binary identity is not taken seriously by other trans people. A source who wished to remain anonymous made similar comments about the difficulties of being non-binary, stating, “There's no one way to be non-binary. I mean, you line up ten non-binary people and they're not going to look the same because that's the point of [being] non-binary—[there's] the conception, much like in the bisexual community, that they can't choose a gender because everyone should be male/masculine or female/feminine which is, as we know, false” (Interview, 3 August 2017). The source stated that they believe there is minimal representation for non-binary people in popular culture because the non-binary identity is so diverse. However, this lack of adequate representation, along with a singular type of transnormative portrayal of trans characters, may lead to more misunderstandings of the non-binary identity.

The pressure to pass also includes the further expectation that trans people will have gender reassignment surgery; however, many trans people believe that their gender is based on much more than their physical body, and emphasize the idea that being trans does not necessarily entail having gender reassignment surgery. Kanyon McKee discusses the erroneous assumption that all trans people must have gender reassignment surgery:

For a lot of people, they think unless you plan on having top and bottom surgery and hormones and change your name, unless you do all that, you're not trans. Some people, they think surgery is the only way to fully be a trans person, and I fully disagree with that because your genitals don't matter. I don't think they do. I think if you don't want top surgery, you don't want hormones, good for you. You should be respected (Interview, 18 August 2017).

While cis society and a significant number of trans people privilege a transnormative performance of transness that often includes gender reassignment surgery, many trans people are not interested in physically transitioning, or do not plan on transitioning immediately. The emphasis on surgery and the state of the physical trans body is often a source of anxiety and frustration for trans people who have not surgically transitioned.

Even if an individual chooses to undergo some form of gender reassignment surgery, it does not necessarily mean that they are having surgery in order to pass. For example, Leeran Dublin explained that after they had top surgery, they were encouraged to use scar-removal gel on their scars, in order to better pass as cis; Leeran said, "I don't care that I have these scars. I'm fine with people knowing that I had breasts before. And because I'm just like, 'This is part of who I am. This is part of my journey, and I'm happy to show that I've done drastic things to feel right in my body' (Interview, 14 August 2017). They expressed frustration with the emphasis on passing:

I think there is a huge push to pass, and I think there's a misunderstanding to the public, that they think the goal is to pass. For some people it absolutely is, but for some people it's not [ . . . ] I feel like there's a lot of pressure to feel trans enough and I don't sometimes feel trans enough to be "trans" [ . . . ] I don't think that there should be so much pressure to pass or to do certain prescribed steps to be trans enough or non-binary enough (Interview, 14 August 2017).

For Leeran, the emphasis placed on passing contradicts their desire to embrace their gender history. Leeran believes that their decision to have top surgery was a radical step

towards feeling more comfortable in their body, and Leeran is proud of their experience. Passing often requires an individual to conceal information about their trans history, and some trans people are not interested in erasing the difficult and rewarding struggle they endured in order to embrace their trans identities. Dominant narratives of trans experience assume that trans people want to fully transition and then conceal their trans history, but many younger transfolk are actively combatting this expectation and opt to live openly as trans. Jeremy McFarland explains the power of embracing a trans identity, and emphasizes how proud he is to be trans:

There is something about being transgender that I think is a lot of times overlooked [ . . . ] what it is inherently, is identifying, in spite of what everything tells you, what you grew up believing about the most basic ideas of biology . . . culturally, to your parents, to your interaction with people every single day, to have that kind of self-awareness to say “that’s wrong” is a really powerful thing. And then even more powerful to me is a transgender person who’s transitioned medically and stuff to be able to not only reshape what being a man is, but to also reshape my body into what I want it to be. That’s an empowering—that’s a really powerful thing to reclaim and reshape your identity and your physical form. It’s an artistic thing. It’s a really beautiful thing. Why wouldn’t I want to be proud about that? Why would I want to be something—why would I want to deny myself of that pride of all the things that I did leading up to this? And all the ways that I reclaimed my identity? So I think that’s a powerful thing. I would never want to be just cis (Interview, 17 August 2017).

As demonstrated by Jeremy’s statement, expecting trans people to pass as cis, which includes embracing traditional gender norms and concealing one’s trans history, is inconceivable to those trans people who place great value on their trans journey. For individuals like Jeremy and Leeran, their trans history is an inseparable part of their identity, and they believe it should be celebrated rather than ignored or hidden.

While there is significant pressure to pass imposed from both within and outside of trans communities, there is a conflicting conceptualization of trans identity that

deemphasizes one's physical body and instead celebrates trans people who do not pass or who are comfortable living between or outside of gender binary categories. Many trans people have made a concerted effort to counter the notion that, in order to be trans, an individual must undergo gender reassignment surgery. Some trans people vocally and intentionally support those whose gender performances do not align with the transnormative ideal and who have not had gender reassignment surgery. This seems to be especially common among younger transfolk, many of whom have not yet had gender reassignment surgery or are not interested in undergoing the transition<sup>15</sup> process. According to Madi Withrow, the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group tries to emphasize an open interpretation of what it means to be trans and ignores constrictive, transnormative notions of transness:

I think within certain demographics, there are certain people who think [transgender performance] should be one way, but as a whole, a lot of us feel there is no specific way to be trans, to be non-binary, to be queer. It's just—you are being yourself. There's always been this—there's this stigma among most cis people, like when you're going through your transition, you have to have surgery, you have to have this, this, and this, and a lot of us don't really care about certain things. And so many cis people seem to be hung up on genitals [ . . . ] people ask "when are you going for the surgery?" There's no set standard for when you're becoming trans. There's no, in my opinion, "end point" for a transition because you're constantly having to battle something that was assigned to you at birth that is almost impossible to change for most people. So there is a stigma sometimes for even, for trans women to wear makeup all the time, and do this and that [ . . . ] you can only be considered a trans woman if you're super feminine. If you have any hint of masculine preference for clothing or activities, you can be shunned by different people. But that's just the toxic section of the community, and a lot of us try to ignore those people (Interview, 9 January 2018).

According to Madi, the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group celebrates the range of trans expression, which is especially important given the range of transgender performance within the group itself and the fact that many group members do not



currently have access to gender reassignment surgery. In “My Masculinity is a Little Love Poem to Myself”: Trans\* Masculine College Students’ Conceptualizations of Masculinities” (2016), T.J. Jourian explains that there are various issues that, even if a college-aged trans person *wanted* to undergo gender reassignment surgery, might make transitioning difficult for them, including: “(i) the high costs associated with hormones and surgery,<sup>16</sup> (ii) potential dependence on and lack of parents’ and/or guardians’ emotional and financial support, (iii) unwillingness or inability to take time during their academic career to undergo and then recover from surgery, and (iv) lack of knowledgeable or accessible medical and counseling staff on or around campus” (2016:71). The majority of the individuals that I interviewed are in college or are college-aged, and about half of my consultants have not undergone any type of hormone therapy or gender reassignment surgery. The pressure to pass, along with the assumption that trans people will have gender reassignment surgery, is especially difficult for many of my consultants, who either do not or cannot pass as cis.<sup>17</sup> None of the consultants that I interviewed explicitly endorsed transnormative expectations for transgender performance, but all of them stated that there is no one way to “look” or “be” trans. Despite transnormative stereotypes that are frequently disseminated through popular culture, my interviewees, who know other young transfolk and who have lived experience as trans people, understand that transnormative notions of transgender performance are unfair and unrealistic.

My interviewees have often discussed the way in which transnormative ideas of transgender expression made coming out or existing as trans difficult for them. For example, an informant who wished to remain anonymous stated that she was initially

unsure about whether or not she could claim a trans identity because she did not perform gender in a way that aligned with the transnormative, hyper-feminine ideal. She said that she continues to have to defend her non-transnormative feminine identity:

There are a lot of us that don't fit the gender norms of our gender. If you look at me and you look at what my hobbies are and you look at what I do for work, I fit more of the gender stereotype of someone who is male [ . . . ] I don't enjoy clothes shopping. I don't enjoy makeup. I don't wear makeup. I don't wear dresses, but I'm still a woman. I'm still a trans woman. None of those traditionally masculine hobbies and experiences define who I am in terms of gender. Those are—I am a trans woman and I enjoy those things and those are not in conflict. I had to point out that even cis girls are tomboys, and that's okay. That's not abnormal. What's to say a trans girl who is a tomboy is abnormal? (Interview, 31 July 2017).

Because this individual does not perform hyper-femininity, her trans identity has often been questioned and criticized. Madi Withrow stated that when she first came out, her former partner bought her very feminine clothes (Interview, 8 January 2018), demonstrating that the transnormative trans identity is often taken for granted. Similarly, Ben Couch explained that his therapist encourages him to perform a more transnormative masculinity so that he does not get misgendered, and stated that the pressure to conform to traditional notions of masculinity is frustrating and emotionally taxing:

When you're trans, there's so much more emphasis on how you're dressing, how you're living your everyday life. Like if you're a transwoman and you get up late for class, and you just throw on, like, a t-shirt and shorts, people might feel the need to question you because "oh, you're not being feminine enough." Like I just came from my therapist's office, and one of the things we're talking about is like, practical ways to look more masculine so I don't get as many, you know, "ma'ams." But it also means a lot of attention is on my physical person, and it can get really uncomfortable. Especially for people who have a lot of physical dysphoria [ . . . ] I mean, I'm a guy, but I wear makeup? And sometimes I wear dresses? Because right now, I look really good in them. But like, you know, it's an issue for some people, and I'm just like "calm down." It's frustrating. It's frustrating being in this, like, place where I'm not stealth yet, but also knowing that I'm not a girl, and being reacted to like one (Interview, 14 August 2017).

For those who cannot or do not want to pass as cis, the Transgender and Non-Binary Group serves as a space of refuge and affirmation. The group celebrates all types of transgender performance and attempts to be a welcoming space for all group members. Although there are still disagreements related to gender performance among transfolk, younger trans people are working to expand notions of what it means to be trans.

The extent to which the media influences the construction of LGBTQIA+ identities has not been conclusively demonstrated by scholars; however, given the interviews that I have conducted as well as various studies published regarding the relationship between the media and queer identities,<sup>18</sup> it is clear that the media has *some* influence on the construction of queer identities. Because LGBTQIA+ individuals have non-hegemonic gender identities or sexualities, they often seek out portrayals of queer identity in popular culture and online. Media portrayals of transness, created predominantly by cis people, communicate various expectations for transgender performance. Through the media and other hegemonic discursive forms, expectations for transgender performance are extrinsically imposed on trans people by cis society; however, there are also contested expectations among trans communities. In “Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming-Out Story” (2009), Mary Gray examines the role of the internet on the formation of rural LGBT identities (focusing predominantly on rural LGB identities). Gray’s work with rural LGBT youth can potentially be applied to members of the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, many of whom are from rural areas and whose trans identities are more heavily stigmatized than the lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth that constituted the majority of Gray’s survey. Gray demonstrates that online narratives of

queer people give rural queer youth the grammar with which to claim and develop their own queer identities (2009:1163). Gray's concept of a gender "grammar" is similar to Butler's gender "script." Gray evaluates the experiences of a group of rural queer youth, and ultimately determines that, in the creation of their queer identities, the youths drew upon portrayals of LGBTQIA+ people on film and television, conversations with friends, and narratives of queer experiences that they accessed online. Popular media portrayals of queerness generally center around urban areas and overemphasize coming out, which did not resonate with the rural youth Gray studied; the youths instead turned to the internet for a broader interpretation of queerness. Gray explains the potential significance and application of this internet-disseminated queer grammar, and states, "Performances of identities require tools. What tools are out there for rural youth to pick up if they seek to express a sense of self that doesn't square up with the heteronormative expectations around them?" (1167). According to Gray, rural queer youth rely on queer narratives published on the internet to provide them with information related to LGBTQIA+ identities and models of queerness. Queer youth draw upon a variety of internal and contextual factors to construct their queer identities, and the internet allows them a broader variety of models to draw inspiration from. In much the same way that the rural queer youth Gray studied turned to the internet to seek out more relatable portrayals of queer experiences, many trans and non-binary people turn to social media platforms like YouTube, Tumblr, and Instagram in order to locate models of transgender and non-binary identity that resonate with them.

## Transgender Representation in Popular Culture

There has been a significant increase in transgender media representation in the past 10 years, with trans characters seeing significant screen time on television shows like *Glee*, *Degrassi*, *Orange is the New Black*, *The Fosters*, and *Transparent*. While transgender individuals have been featured on television since the 70s, these contemporary shows include three-dimensional, fully developed trans characters, which is a sharp contrast from earlier productions that used trans characters for plot twists, comic relief, and shock value. Despite this increase in representation, most of the trans individuals that I interviewed have expressed dissatisfaction with trans representation in popular media, arguing that it often does not accurately portray trans experiences, does not represent the diversity of trans identities and of trans lives, does not adequately feature trans actors, and ultimately reinforces a concept of transnormativity that harms some transfolk.

Some of my consultants explained that, prior to coming out, they had had negative and emotionally scarring experiences with transgender characters on tabloid and true crime shows. On shows like *Jerry Springer* and *Maury*, transgender individuals are often portrayed as dishonest, mentally ill, and sexually deviant, and are often framed as sex workers or victims of violence on true crime shows. For some of my consultants, these television portrayals were their first encounters with the concept of transness. Jeremy McFarland, for example, explains that he first learned about transgender people by watching *Jerry Springer*, describing his situation as “tragic.” Jeremy implied that early exposure to these shows negatively impacted him during his own process of coming out and constructing his trans identity. Another consultant, Sophia, explained that her

prior exposure to *Jerry Springer* and similar shows made her hesitant to accept her trans identity; she said, “Whenever my therapist first diagnosed me [with gender dysphoria] I thought, I don’t want to be like those weirdos on *Jerry Springer* or something like that. Because that’s the only sort of trans people in the media I had ever seen in my life. I didn’t want to be like them” (Interview, 15 January 2018). Because some of my consultants have had negative experiences with transgender representation in the past, they might continue to be cautious of contemporary trans media representation.

While many consultants have agreed that the contemporary portrayal of trans individuals is better than its 1990s tabloid and true crime counterpart, there are still issues of representation and accuracy that are often cited as problematic by transfolk. A recurring issue for trans people is that cisgender actors are often cast as trans characters. For example, Madi Withrow explained that this is an issue with the television show *Transparent*, which has received much critical acclaim for its portrayal of trans character Maura Pfefferman:

One of the biggest shows that I can think of that represents trans people is *Transparent*, and that’s a cis male playing a trans woman. And it pushes the stigma of all trans women are basically just a “dude in a dress” [ . . . ] And that then sets peoples’ opinion to be trans women are a dude in a dress and trans men are probably chicks that want to grow facial hair. And that doesn’t really help (Interview, 9 January 2018).

According to Withrow, the fact that the transgender character in *Transparent* is played by a cis male negates the show’s in-depth portrayal of trans life.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Withrow praised Laverne Cox’s portrayal of the trans character Sophia Buset in *Orange is the New Black*. While both shows feature complex, fully developed trans characters, the individuals that I interviewed favored *Orange is the New Black* because it casts a trans actor in a trans role. Kanyon McKee also spoke of the need for trans actors in trans roles:

There are cis people playing trans people in popular movies. That is 100% not okay. It's like if you have a physically non-disabled person playing a physically disabled person's role when they could be playing that role. If you have people that are not actually trans playing trans' peoples roles, it's not going to be accurate, and it's not going to be adequate because it's not real (Interview, 18 August 2017).

Although representation of trans identities has increased on television and film in recent years, the majority of actors playing trans characters are cisgender. According to many transfolk, this is problematic because it leads to inaccurate portrayals of trans experiences, and it withholds acting jobs from trans actors.

The portrayal of trans characters and celebrities presents trans identities as homogenous, and because our cultural discourse on gender reinforces the idea of gender as binary, these portrayals lead to the essentializing and homogenizing of trans experiences. In "Redefining Realness?: On Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, TS Madison, and the Representation of Transgender Women of Color in Media" (2016), Julian Kevon Glover explains the concept of transnormativity:

Mock and Cox's appeal produces a definition of transnormativity in which transgender people are led to believe that they too can achieve successful inculcation into dominant society by situating their gender embodiment, grooming practices, physical appearance, sexual practices, and sexuality (heterosexual preferably) alongside heteronormative standards and respectable behaviors. Transnormativity also produces particular class-related implications, as a significant amount of material resources and capital are often required in order to achieve an appearance that enables transgender people to achieve gender congruity in the eyes of dominant society (2016:344).

While *some* representation is arguably better than *no* representation, the type of trans representation in popular media overwhelmingly reinforces transnormativity by focusing on cis-passing trans people. Glover argues that in popular media, Janet Mock and Laverne Cox<sup>20</sup> are presented as representative of *all* trans women (339), which leads to

misunderstandings of trans identities. Cis culture often assumes that passing as cis is the ultimate end goal of trans people, when many trans individuals have no desire to look cis or pass as cis. Several of the individuals that I interviewed emphasized the idea that there is no one way to “look” or “be” trans, and the homogenized portrayal of transgender presentation can lead to the erasure of trans identities that are not transnormative. Kanyon McKee expressed that transnormativity in media representations of trans identities can be harmful:

They pick the most cis-looking person possible and use that to represent the whole community. It's like using Caitlyn Jenner, who is not a good person to represent the whole trans community. She has so much money, so it's super easy for her to be trans. It's not easy for the rest of us. So that kind of hurts the community as well because people think that you can just change it like that, like with the snap of a finger, when you can't. It's real hard. It really—it gets us less support. People think, “Well, if it's that easy, then why isn't every trans person our expectation? Why isn't every trans woman perfectly transitioned like Caitlyn Jenner? Why isn't every trans man super manly and tough?” People seem to think less of trans people who aren't fully transitioned and who don't want to be (Interview, 18 August 2017).

According to McKee, transnormativity in popular media is not only inaccurate and inadequate, it can lead to the marginalization of trans individuals whose gender identity and presentation do not align with the transnormative dominant narrative. Because trans individuals do not feel adequately represented in popular media, they often turn to the internet to find other models of transgender experience, or to create and share their alternative models with others. Social media is essential for the formation of online communities and the sharing of resources relevant to trans individuals; websites like YouTube and Tumblr, in particular, host large trans communities that share advice, exchange information, and offer support. Trans people also turn to the internet to create their own trans media representation, and utilize cosplay, fanfiction, and fan art to



represent trans and non-binary characters in a way they think more accurately portrays trans experiences. By creating and sharing these alternative portrayals of trans identities, transgender individuals push back against what they perceive as incorrect or harmful narratives of trans existence, and present alternative models of trans identities.

### Finding Alternative Trans Representation Online

Because many transgender individuals are dissatisfied with popular media portrayals of transgender identities, they often seek out alternative sources of information and representation. The internet has become an important resource for transgender individuals, allowing them a space in which to express themselves, ask questions related to trans identities, and connect with other transfolk. Social media platforms like Tumblr, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram are particularly popular among transfolk. According to a source who wished to remain anonymous, “there are a ton of resources [online] for trans people. I mean a number of websites with a quick Google search will come up, and so there are a lot of resources out there, and I will say what I do know from my research is that the online presence of trans communities is enormous. That’s where most people get their research and find information about how to be who they are and how to gain access to the things that they need in order to better be themselves” (Interview, 3 August 2017).

Many of the individuals that I interviewed mentioned the importance of YouTube when they were first coming to understand their transgender identities. Trans vloggers<sup>21</sup> on YouTube helped provide information and validation for transgender youth. Jeremy

McFarland, for example, explains that watching YouTube was important to him when he was first coming out as trans:

I realized I was transgender when I was 14. I was on YouTube and I was just watching videos and I don't know how I got there, but there was this one YouTuber, at the time [ . . . ] and all the guys were naming themselves after him. And I found his videos and I was like, "Oh shit. That's an option. Oh man, that's a thing that exists. Oh, dang." I was like, "Well, whoop. Maybe that's me." And then I kind of—I knew I wanted to start testosterone and go through physical transition before I knew I identified as a man because I felt more—I don't know. I was 14 [ . . . ] After that, it was a couple more years when I found skylarkeleven on YouTube and I was like, "Oh shit." And I bet there are a ton of transguys who can directly trace realizing that they were transgender from skylarkeleven. And now uppercaseCHASE is the guy, but I don't watch him because I'm past that point. But there are so many—I bet if you met trans guys who were coming out in—what year was that? 2010? Probably like half of them watched skylarkeleven. He was huge (Interview, 17 August 2017).

For Jeremy, hearing the stories of other trans men on YouTube helped him realize identifying as trans was an option for him. As I have described, Jeremy initially learned about the concept of transness by watching tabloid and true crime television shows, which often portrayed trans people negatively. On YouTube, young trans individuals have the opportunity to watch their peers narrate their experiences. YouTubers generally also engage in conversations with their followers, answering followers' questions and creating videos on topics requested by fans.

For many, understanding that their experience is shared by others can be encouraging and validating. For example, Levi Hanson discussed watching YouTuber Jayden Well's videos when he was first learning about transgender people; he said, "[Jayden] talking about what transgender was just—I thought it was the coolest thing. And it's not that I thought it was cool and I was like 'yeah, I want to be that,' it was 'hey, I relate to you,' and I didn't know how to relate to anybody before that" (Interview, 10 January 2018).

According to Richard Bauman, “[w]hen one looks to the social practices by which social life is accomplished, one finds—with surprising frequency—people telling stories to each other, as a means of giving cognitive and emotional coherence to experience, constructing and negotiating social identity” (1986:113). Trans YouTubers often document all aspects of their transition, and engage in frank discussions regarding their gender identities. For trans people, YouTube can be viewed as a social space in which transfolk share narratives and information that enable them to construct their trans identities and give coherence to their experiences.

Jeremy explained that YouTubers like skylarkeleven filled gaps in trans media representation and functioned as role models for younger trans individuals:

[Skylarkeleven] was just—he was really handsome and so that automatically makes it easier to watch. And he was—I don’t know. That was when the YouTube trans scene was getting started. It’s huge now, I think, or maybe it’s gotten oversaturated now and now it’s smaller. I don’t know. I don’t keep up with it anymore. But I think it was because there is no visibility for trans men, specifically. I think there is shit visibility for trans people in general, but no visibility for trans men, virtually. I think there were two characters on two TV shows played by the same actor right now. And so these YouTubers are your only access, a lot of times, to what a real transgender person is, a real trans guy specifically. So, like, for me, they were (other than people I was friends with online, and I had a lot of trans friends online) that was like my only—that was the closest thing I had to an adult transgender role model, at that point. And he was really nice and stuff. He was younger and he documented his whole transition and he would explain things. I don’t know. He like sang songs and stuff. He was like really artsy. I don’t know. I guess he just really appealed to a lot of people. There were a couple others that were huge at the time. There was like this guy named Aiden—that was when all the trans guys were named Aiden, Cayden, Jayden, or Hayden. I don’t know. So he was really big too. There were a couple. Those were the big two (Interview, 17 August 2017).

Transgender YouTubers provide real-time updates of their trans experiences. They share stories, share information, and provide visual documentation of their physical transition.

For transgender people who are coming out and beginning to form their transgender identities, these narratives and insights are vital. Watching trans and non-binary YouTubers helps trans youth learn about trans identities and view various models of transgender presentation, and it provides a space in which they can explore and begin to develop their own identities. Transgender YouTubers are not just social media personalities; they are teachers, friends, and role models.<sup>22</sup> The fact that numerous trans people named themselves after an important trans YouTuber is testament to the function and significance of YouTubers within transgender communities. Jeremy explained that many trans individuals view these YouTubers as important role models, but also pointed out that there is a serious lack of representation for trans men in American society:

We kept on trying to watch movies and stuff in my group because I wanted to show them other trans adults and stuff, but the only stuff that's available that I can find was [about] trans women. So I went to Reddit to an FTM Board and I was like, "Hey, who are some trans role models? I want to provide some more resources to my group." And the only people they could name were a couple athletes and then YouTubers. It was only YouTubers. It was like a trans man actor, Chaz Bono, but he kind of sucks in the same Caitlyn Jenner type of way. I think he's gotten better, but I don't really keep up with him very well. We don't even have very many academics. Like academia have a lot of transgender women, but not nearly as many trans men. I've even seen, just personally, I've seen way more non-binary academics, very few trans men. And there was this like Chase Strangio or however you say his last name, Dean Spade. They're lawyers, they're good, but not everyone—it's a really limited pool. YouTube is where people get their trans guy role models. And that's bad! I don't know why I have to explain to people that that's fucking bad, but I do. I have to explain to people on the fucking internet that that's bad. We should have like a little bit more than that. I shouldn't be made to feel bad for pointing out that that's bad. They kind of guilt you into saying, "Oh well, trans guys aren't murdered as much as trans women." And it's like I'm not disputing that trans women have a terrible time. I'm not trying to compare the experiences. I can just say separate from that, it is also bad that trans men have no visibility (Interview, 17 August 2017).

Although trans YouTubers play an important role in the absence of sufficient trans media representation, some believe that trans representation in the media can and should be improved.

Tumblr, a microblogging social media platform, was cited by many consultants as a useful source of information and home to vibrant trans communities. In “Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement” (2017), Allison McCracken stated, “Tumblr, in particular, provides youth access to a cross-generational, diverse liberal public sphere for commiseration, shared pleasures, education and mentoring, political activism, identity development, and other kinds of socialization. For marginalized or at-risk youth especially (e.g., LGBTQ teens), access to an online public for information, acculturation, and support has been vital to their survival since the 1990s” (2017:153). McCracken explains that Tumblr enables the formation of “counterpublic spaces for marginalized millennial communities” (151). The strong social justice community on Tumblr has created a safe space in which trans people can interact with other LGBTQIA+ people. For example, Kanyon McKee explained that Tumblr helped them learn about trans identities, and has since been an important source of information:

Tumblr is a great source of information, not always factual, but that kind of environment introduced me to those terms, and I realized that you could be that. You could be trans. Trans is a real thing, and so I was kind of like, “Oh, shit. That’s me.” On Tumblr, there’s basically a lot of trans help blogs and stuff where people can share their experiences with going to see doctors, what hormone therapy does to you, how to get it, how to get name changes in different states, how to go through the legal process, and a lot of people just telling their story (Interview 18 August 2017).

Just as trans YouTubers introduced Jeremy to trans identities, Tumblr helped Kanyon realize that identifying as trans was an option. It also provided them with valuable information about living as transgender and what to expect during the transition process.

Similar to how YouTube allows viewers to watch an individual transition, Tumblr provides a space in which users can read about the thoughts and experiences of other transfolk. Tumblr allows users to post sexually explicit content and personal information, and users are able to discuss and describe their experiences in a way that might be censored on other platforms. Many Tumblr users post photos and videos of themselves, and there is also an “ask” function on the pages of most Tumblr users which allows them to interact with their followers. Tumblr provides a space in which individuals at the beginning of their trans journey can access a wide variety of information and resources, and can connect with other transgender individuals who have had similar experiences.

Tumblr also enables queer members of fandom communities to post fanfiction and fan art that features queer characters and queer relationships. Mccracken argues that Tumblr allows for the creation of politically meaningful fan art and fanfiction:

When media texts do not directly offer developed minority representation, Tumblr users create it. They develop queer readings of texts in character art, GIF sets, or through fanfiction; thus, Captain America Steve Rogers of the *Marvel* universe is considered bisexual because that’s how Tumblr users largely read and portray him. Users also frequently reconceptualize well-known white characters as people of color by “race bending,” and “fan casting,” in which famous roles played by white actors are recast with famous actors of color . . . Tumblr fans also frequently post photos of themselves engaging in cosplay that queers otherwise straight characters or, if the cosplayers are people of color, depicts canonically white characters as nonwhite. They encourage one another to diversify representation in their fiction and fanfiction writing, and many blogs offer advice and resources about how to responsibly write characters of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexualities, genders, and nationalities, as well as those who are disabled or neurodivergent (2017:160).

Mccracken argues that many of Tumblr’s members of fandoms—participatory cultures—are socially critical individuals. She states that members of fandom communities are

“often self-identified as both progressives *and* fans, speaking from their own lived experience and through shared popular discourses of feminism, antiracism, queer or gender studies, and postcolonialism” (152). She continues, “For many youth, Tumblr has become an alternative, tuition-free classroom, a powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness that often reproduces cultural studies methods of media analysis” (152). According to Mccracken, much of the fan art, fanfiction, and cosplay that is shared on Tumblr is intentionally political, creating fictional worlds that are more representative of the fandom’s diverse community. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how one consultant, Kanyon McKee, uses fanfiction and fan art to reimagine popular *Homestuck* characters as queer, trans, and non-binary. Kanyon frequently posts their art on Tumblr. Tumblr provides a space in which queer and trans individuals can share fanfiction and fan art that features queer and trans characters. On Tumblr, diversity is celebrated, cultural hierarchies are dismantled, and fans encourage fan art and fanfiction that increases representation of LGBTQIA+ folks, people of color, and those with physical or mental disabilities. Understandably, some trans people turn to Tumblr for entertainment, representation, and information.

Instagram is a social media platform that allows users to share photos and short videos. The site is also a popular platform for transgender individuals, which is likely attributable to the platform’s emphasis on photo sharing. Levi Hanson explained that one of his most important possibility models, Ajay Holbrook, posts regularly on Instagram:

There’s one person I still like—I think I would look up to him a lot before I came out as trans [ . . . ] his name’s Ajay Holbrooke. He’s younger than me, but I think I look up to him because, just the way he is, I feel like I identify really well with him—and his body type. I try not to compare myself, being trans, because everyone transitions differently. Everyone’s different. But his body type, I’ve always had a problem being small. I

haven't liked being small. And he seemed really small pre-T. And recently he was telling people how he wants to go for Mr. Olympia. It's something—like the biggest bodybuilding thing, and he wants to compete in that. And he hasn't had like top surgery or anything. And I don't know what other surgeries he's had—He's cool (Interview, 10 January 2018).

Ajay Holbrook is a 20-year-old amateur bodybuilder and popular Instagram personality; on Instagram, Ajay is openly trans, and has a substantial following. Ajay posts regularly about his interests and daily life, and often posts photos of his bodybuilding progress along with inspirational quotes. Ajay regularly discusses issues facing transgender people, and is perceived to be open and honest about his own struggles with his transition process and occasional dysphoria. For Levi, Ajay is a role model because he has achieved a level of physical fitness and body aesthetic that Levi aspires to himself. Because trans men are minimally represented in popular media, social media platforms like Instagram allow trans people to connect with their peers. Instagram facilitates connection between trans people of different ages, backgrounds, and transitional status. For Levi, the ability to follow Ajay's transition has been both encouraging and motivating, validating his trans identity and giving him physical goals to work towards.

Online transgender and non-binary support groups are also sources of support and comfort to some transgender individuals. Leeran Dublin explained their experience with one particular trans support group on Facebook, stating that it helps them feel supported and comforted on particularly difficult days:

I am in—so the group I was talking about that came to speak about being transgender. They have that support group; it's called, I think, The Spectrum Group or something. So I go to that support group, and also there's like a Facebook group online for it, and so I'm in that group. So within that, we can post things, and a lot of people will be like trans masculine people saying what binders are good or trans femme people saying what's the best way to tuck or whatever. Or it'll be like: "today is a really shitty day." I've been—and you don't have to explain, you don't



have to ask anything from people, but just seeing—just being able to write, “I’ve been misgendered five times today,” and other people are able to say, “I get you. Your identity is valid, and I hold a very similar identity.” It’s really powerful. So I’m in that community, but I’m not really in any others, I would say. But being in that one is enough for me to be supported when I feel particularly alone (Interview, 14 August 2017).

Facebook support groups can be used to share information and ask for/offer support.

Facebook is particularly good at enabling the formation of intentional online communities because it can facilitate communication between private groups, while platforms like Tumblr and YouTube generally broadcast content to everyone. Additionally, these private groups often have moderators, who ensure that those entering and posting in the group have positive intentions. Because of these factors, conversations in Facebook support groups are often more sincere and serious, allowing trans people to discuss difficult issues without being criticized or regulated by cis people.

According to my consultants and my own observations of online trans spaces, it appears that many trans people, especially those who live in rural/conservative areas and those who are not supported by their families and communities, find support and comfort online. Online interactions can range from sharing funny memes about trans experiences to seeking advice and encouragement on Facebook support groups, and online trans communities often supplement an individual’s participation in face-to-face queer communities. For some, online trans communities are the only available source of help and information. Online trans communities were vital to WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group members during the early stages of their coming out and establishing their trans identities. According to the individuals that I interviewed, their participation in online communities generally declined after they became involved with WKU’s Trans and Non-Binary Student Group. Although online trans communities are still

important to many of my consultants, they are no longer their only point of interaction with other trans people. Given the statements of my consultants, though, access to online trans communities for young transfolk is essential and formative.

### Cosplay, Fanfiction, and Fandoms: DIY Representation in Transgender Communities

Transgender people often create their own media in the absence of trans representation in popular culture, creating trans characters and queer-friendly relationships in various fandom communities. Fandoms have historically been spaces in which fans appropriate a particular film or television show to create situations and characterizations they identify with. In “What Bronies See When They Brohoof: Queering Animation on the Dark and Evil Internet” (2015), Bill Ellis explains that male fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* form online fan communities to share folklore related to *My Little Pony*, “queer” various aspects of the show’s characterization/plot, and find a space in which it is safe to express their appreciation for *My Little Pony* (male fans of the show are often stigmatized because the show’s intended audience is young girls). Ellis’ work explores the importance of fandom communities in bringing together stigmatized individuals and facilitating queer readings of popular culture.

Ellis cites Henry Jenkins, who explored the way in which fandom communities appropriate pop culture texts, in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992). According to Jenkins, “Fandom is a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups (women, the young, gays, and so on) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; fandom is a way of appropriating media texts and

rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests, a way of transforming mass culture into popular culture” (1992:40). Jenkins states that fans “poach” characters, motifs, and situations from popular media in order to create their own works of fiction and reimagine pop culture texts (45). The extent to which fans appropriate original texts and reimagine a text’s characters and events depends on the fan and community values. Jenkins discusses slash fiction, or fanfiction that depicts same-sex relationships, arguing that it allows fans of popular television show *Star Trek* the ability to envision gay *Star Trek* characters, appropriating elements from the text to imagine queer relationships not explicitly endorsed by the original show (57-9). Jenkins states, “All fan writing necessarily involves an appropriation of series characters and a reworking of program concepts as the text is forced to respond to the fan’s own social agenda and interpretive strategies” (58).

Similar to the way in which gay fans create slash fiction, transgender fans often write fanfiction about their favorite characters, and reveal that the character is transgender/non-binary or is in a relationship with a transgender person(s); others create artwork that presents their favorite characters as trans. Some transgender individuals are also avid cosplayers; cosplay communities have been described as welcoming and accepting, and some trans individuals use cosplay as a way to try on different means of presentation and gender performance and to “queer” various fictional characters. “Queering” characters in cosplay often involves textual transformation. According to Matthew Hale, textual transformation occurs when “a cosplayer maximizes the intertextual gap generated when a source text is adapted and (re)animated” (2014:19). Hale states that when cosplayers transform original texts, they “introduce aberrations and

embellishments to existing characters, create intertextual hybrids, and prototype their own original characters” (20). One way trans and non-binary cosplayers transform original texts is through crossplay, which occurs when a cosplayer reimagines a character as another gender or dresses as a character of another gender. Matthew Hale states, “crossplay is a creative strategy that provides [cosplayers] with the opportunity to dress as [strong or admirable characters of a particular gender] or sometimes genderless characters with which they identify and through which they can express themselves and their fandom” (23).

To demonstrate the significance of cosplay, fanfiction, and fan art for trans individuals, I will use one consultant, Kanyon McKee, as a case study of DIY media representation. Kanyon McKee is a 20-year-old artist and architecture major at Western Kentucky University. Kanyon identifies as non-binary, and is a big fan of cosplay and the webcomic *Homestuck*. They are an avid cosplayer, and they also create *Homestuck* fan art. Kanyon engages with the *Homestuck* fandom both online and in person, discussing the comic with friends and fellow fans. They mentioned that many fans also meet and cosplay at conventions, but Kanyon does not currently have enough money to attend. They often post their fan art online, on spaces like Tumblr, Instagram, and the app Amino.

Kanyon explained that *Homestuck* is “extremely queer,” and that the creator of the webcomic encourages fans to read whatever they want into characters’ gender identities and sexualities:

My main fandom right now is the *Homestuck/Hiveswap* fandom, which is a webcomic that turns 10 next year. It’s extremely popular. Four kids play a game that might destroy the world and [they] also create a whole other world. It’s extremely queer. The creator, himself, said that everyone’s gay.

He was just like, “They’re all gay; everyone is gay.” And basically, he’s like, “Anything that you want to ship,<sup>23</sup> any characters, you can do that. I don’t care, any headcanons you have, they’re right. You’re right. Just go for it.” Because the characters are just all kind of these blank palates. You can make them any race, sexuality, whatever you want. There are some that are distinctly like these characters are lesbians. These characters are gay, but that’s about it. The rest of them, they’re like, “It’s your world” (Interview, 30 January 2018).

While content creators usually have clear ideas of the gender identity, sexuality, and appearance of their characters, *Homestuck* allows room for fan interpretation, and the creator of the webcomic encourages fans to read whatever they want into characters’ gender identities and sexualities. For this reason, along with its inherent queerness, *Homestuck* has become quite popular among trans and non-binary folks. These fans create fan art, write fanfiction, and cosplay their favorite characters. Kanyon said, “there’s a lot of people who will say ‘these characters are trans’ and they like draw them with their trans headcanon<sup>24</sup> and write stories with them and kind of give themselves their own media to consume” (Interview, 18 August 2017). Because *Homestuck* is queer-friendly in terms of its fan community, openness to interpretation, and content, fans often use *Homestuck* as the foundation upon which to create their own trans media representation. Films and television shows that are open to interpretation are often the focus of lively fan communities. The television shows discussed by Ellis (2015), *My Little Pony* and *Star Trek*, feature characters whose gender or sexuality are open to interpretation. *Star Trek* has what many fans believe to be homoerotic overtones, and often features inter-racial or polygamous relationships. As explained by Ellis, fans of *My Little Pony* recognize that animated characters have no biological gender, which gives fans freedom to imagine characters of various gender identities:

In a graceful transgressive twist, the lack of biologically defined gender in the series effectively “queers it” in the eyes of the brony fanbase, since all six [main characters] could reasonably embody any imaginable sexual orientation. [Queering *My Little Pony* characters] thus parallels the academic cultural studies approach known as “queer studies.” This theoretical approach examines how works of art, elite or popular, challenge institutional definitions of gender identity by encouraging fans to re-imagine their content creatively (2015:306).

Because *Homestuck* also features characters that are sexually-, racially-, and gender-ambiguous, fans “queer” various characters, creatively interpreting the original content of the comic in a way that is meaningful to them.

Kanyon is both a producer and consumer of *Homestuck* fan art and fanfiction. They explained that many *Homestuck* characters are often drawn as trans, and said that the portrayal of *Homestuck* character, Dave, as a trans man was particularly moving:

I saw one really good comic with [ . . . ] Dave where they’re talking about how [ . . . ] when you die in the game, you come back as what they call God Tier. And there’s this headcanon that when you come back it lets you fully transition to who you want to be. It kind of makes you your best self. So they [Dave] were talking about how it was just such a wonderful thing for them, how they were like, “I never thought it would happen for me, and the game saved me,” by allowing them to transition (Interview, 30 January 2018).

Kanyon explained that they identified strongly with the fan art portrayal of Dave:

When I read it, I cried because it was such a powerful comic and it spoke to me so well that it had me in tears when I finished reading it. And I think there’s a lot of emotion that goes into creating that because I’m sure the creator themselves, assuming they’re trans, I’m sure that they’re putting their hopes and dreams, their wishes into that. So there’s a whole lot of emotion that goes into it, kind of creating your own ideal world [ . . . ] I think that’s why people love it so much because that’s like so many people’s goals and ideals. What trans person doesn’t wish that they could just come back as what they want to be? At the snap of your fingers be able to fully transition with no push back from society, just happens. That’s just the goal. We all wish it was that easy in real life. So having a comic where it can happen just so easily really speaks to a lot of people, I think. (Interview, 30 January 2018).

By creating and sharing fan art and fanfiction, LGBTQIA+ *Homestuck* fans create content that celebrates queer love and trans identities, while also implicitly critiquing dominant portrayals of transgender and queer experiences that they deem inadequate and inaccurate.

Kanyon often creates fan art of *Homestuck* characters that they identify with, or they intentionally draw characters as trans in order to make them more relatable. Kanyon described this as “making your headcanons reflect who you are” (Interview, 18 August 2017). Kanyon said that they are currently focused on drawing two queer characters in the comic, Kanaya and Rose. According to Kanyon, the character Kanaya is often portrayed as a trans woman, while Rose is often portrayed as non-binary. Of their art, they said, “I’m not the most skilled at portraying different scenes and stuff yet [ . . . ] So I just draw the characters as I imagine them and whatever sounds fun. I like to do lots of minor changes, like giving one of the characters freckles or making them a different race or styling their hair a little different, just minor things. I don’t do anything too drastic right now. I’m working on it” (Interview, 30 January 2018). For Kanyon, creating fan art allows them to hone their creative abilities and to create trans and non-binary characters that more accurately represents them. They said, “You have to create your own trans characters. In that way, other trans people can read your writings and see your art [ . . . ] and you can be your own creator [ . . . ] You can’t see yourself in the role of a cis person. They don’t experience the same problems you do. So it’s easier to write a trans character and be like, ‘Man, I relate’” (Interview, August 18, 2017). Kanyon describes fan art and fanfiction as alternatives to popular media:

There's so much media that has zero representation for trans people, especially, and so being able to draw the characters however you want or write them as whatever you want, is really freeing, and then being able to share them with other people and people enjoy them, that is wonderful. Because you get so much acceptance from the communities that you wouldn't find in real life sometimes, especially if you live in rural Kentucky. A lot of media likes to demonize LGBT characters, the good ol' predatory lesbian trope or the evil gay character. There's a whole lot of that in media. It's just not necessary (Interview, 30 January 2018).

In these contexts, fan art and fanfiction function as DIY representation that attempts to compensate for and push back against inaccurate and homogenizing portrayals of transfolk in popular culture.

In addition to creating fan art and fanfiction, Kanyon also cosplays *Homestuck* characters. Kanyon said they like to cosplay characters that could easily be seen as androgynous or non-binary, and Kanyon often uses cosplay to explore and experiment with gender. Kanyon explains that cosplaying female characters gives them a space in which to embrace their femininity, while cosplaying male characters allows them to experience being read as male:

[One reason I'm drawn to cosplay is] just being able to dress up and be whoever you want without having to be like, "Well I'm non-binary so I have to dress and present non-binary." I can cosplay a female character or cosplay a male character and just get to act and be whoever I want for a moment. Male to female cosplay is especially kind of freeing because I push myself away from femininity so hard that being able to embrace it every once in a while is really comforting and freeing. Just being able to have my natural body used [ . . . ] On a normal day, I wouldn't want to go out looking super feminine because it would cause dysmorphia, but when you're being someone who isn't you, it's kind of like an excuse. This isn't me; so I'm comfortable [ . . . ] and [cosplaying male characters] is also a lot of fun because I already have a binder and I already know how to present masculine. So being able to dress up masculine and have people be like, "He's real cool!" in public and stuff is really cool because it's not how people would normally see you sometimes (Interview, 30 January 2018).



Kanyon explained that when they were younger, they used cosplay to try out different forms of gender presentation, often cosplaying male characters. They said, “When I was really young, I always wanted to cosplay male characters. My first thing ever was a Naruto character, Itachi, and as I first started expressing being trans and wanting to not be seen as female [ . . . ] So it was definitely a way to express myself and be seen as something else” (Interview 18 August 2017). Kanyon believes that cosplay provides a safe way to experiment with different gender identities. They said, “It’s definitely a way to be your preferred gender without outing yourself as trans. So you can dress up as this male character and be a trans man and people will call you those pronouns without you having to out yourself, because sometimes people don’t pass. So being able to dress up as a male character is a way to do that better” (Interview, 30 January 2018). For Kanyon, cosplay is a hobby, a form of entertainment, a means of celebrating *Homestuck*, and a way to engage with the *Homestuck* fandom, but it also plays an important role in the construction of their gender identity. Through cosplay, Kanyon uses the act of embodying fictional characters to create a safe space in which to experiment with and try on different appearances and gender identities. Trans and non-binary individuals can use cosplay to safely experiment with gender presentation, and to receive validation of their gender identities.

Kanyon also uses their original art to explore issues related to their trans identity.

They explained that they are currently interested in drawing monsters because they adequately represent the difficulty of being mentally ill and transgender:

The ability to create whatever you want is so fun, and I express a lot of stuff about mental illness and struggles being trans through the characters that I draw, and I feel like it’s easier to make those kind of struggles into monsters that you can take it out on. Especially with one of my recent

characters, who I posted some stuff on Instagram about. I definitely draw them going through the ringer sometimes, just to vent about how hard things are sometimes and how things feel, being able to draw that without taking it out somehow negatively. The character I was just speaking of is non-binary. They are more agender, genderless. They don't express any kind of gendered norms, I guess. It's just very fun to be able to express things through a character that you can kind of distance yourself from, but shovel all your issues into. I don't know how you feel about gore and violence, but that's how things feel sometimes. You just draw it out and it helps you feel better, I guess, being able to express how bad things feel sometimes, being mentally ill and trans. A lot of that is expressed in my original art (Interview, 30 January 2018).

For Kanyon, both their fan art and original art are ways to imagine transgender characters, work through issues related to being trans, and create characters that more accurately reflect their own identity. Kanyon's work on *Homestuck* fan art helps improve their original art, and they share and discuss all of their art online and with friends.

Another way in which transgender individuals create their own representation is in the form of trans-inclusive erotica; although Kanyon does not create erotic content, other members of the TNB group do, and they also seek it out online. Many TNB group members that I interviewed have expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of information and material related to having sex as a trans person or with a transgender partner. There are few examples of trans erotica that celebrate trans identities without fetishizing them, and many trans people are hesitant to discuss sex, especially because discussing one's genitalia and transition status can be difficult or triggering for some transfolk. Due to this lack of resources, some trans people turn to the internet for information about having sex with or as a trans person. One of my consultants (who wished to not be identified) explained that sex is rarely discussed by WKU's Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group:

[Sex is] not [discussed] enough. A lot of us aren't comfortable with it. I'm wanting to gather resources and try to write something and try to pitch it to some kind of blog site or website. I'm probably going to just end up making my own website and writing it from there. My ultimate goal is to [ . . . ] write either erotic fiction part time or just do my freelance writing that I would like to do because there are certain things that, as a community, we just don't talk about. And even then, I feel like cis people would benefit from seeing our perspective on sex [ . . . ] and even a lot of us aren't able to come to terms and understand how we feel, specifically, about something. And then seeing all of these resources and stories about people, it would be a good way to show, like, if you don't absolutely hate what you have, that's fine. It doesn't make you any less trans. My view on it is it just gets in the way for clothes right now [ . . . ] I just felt like there's not enough accurate descriptions [of sex]. And it's a good way to put out how we react to intimate situations. Like different people have different reactions for that kind of behavior. Some people are very reserved and don't want to be touched in certain ways or anything like that [ . . . ] a lot of people assume that just because trans women, some of us have a penis, and some trans men still have a vagina, that we absolutely hate it and don't want to use it. Some of us are fine with it, some of us aren't. It depends on the person (Interview, January 2018).

The consultant explained that, because the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group does not frequently discuss sex, they often create their own trans-inclusive erotica or seek out information online. According to the consultant, "I do write, but it's not always appropriate, to put it at that. Because I did research on a particular subset of fiction and found little to no representation of trans identities. [Publishing fanfiction] can be an interesting way to put things out there. But it's such a weird thing to talk about" (Interview, January 2018). The consultant did not feel comfortable discussing the specifics of their erotic fanfiction, but said, "it's pretty much erotica. It features trans and non-binary people. It's different to write, and I've not written a lot of it. I don't post it anywhere because my writing skills are rather subpar" (Interview, January 2018). Although the consultant is not currently publishing their erotic fanfiction, writing it allows them to see and imagine transgender characters in sexual situations. In the long

term, they plan to improve their writing, create more examples of trans-inclusive erotic fanfiction, and share it with others because they recognize the importance of trans representation in erotic content.

Because discussing sex is difficult or uncomfortable for many transfolk, discussions frequently occur in anonymous spaces online. Tumblr has become a popular space in which to discuss sex and view sexual content. Allison Mccracken explains that Tumblr allows queer people to explore and discuss sexuality:

Tumblr's lack of censorship regarding sexual content is also a key aspect of its appeal for adolescents and young adults and another important way it differs from other mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. On Tumblr, young people can create erotic material and engage in discussions of sex and sexuality that have become formative for many. As a result, Tumblr has become a center for a variety of pornographic material (visual, aural, written, alterative), as well as for the kinds of non-normative sexual or queer expression, identity formation, education, and support that are otherwise publicly unavailable for youth and/or can put them at risk. Tumblr is the platform of choice, for example, for queer and non-binary youth, which has resulted not only in a tremendous amount of LGBTQ community support but also in the opportunity for these youth to create very specific sexual or gender identities for themselves beyond and between these categories (2017:155-6).

Tumblr, which allows users to remain anonymous, share sexual content, and engage in frank and sexually explicit discussions, is an important resource for trans people who have questions about sex and sexuality that they do not feel comfortable discussing with friends and authority figures. Tumblr also plays an important role in the formation of a trans person's sexuality, allowing them a safe space in which to learn about various types of sexual activity. For some trans people, Tumblr allows users to create their own form of grassroots sexual education.

When I first began my research on trans communities, Jeremy told me, “When you’re transgender, you learn very quickly that nothing is going to be done for you unless you do it yourself” (Interview, 17 August 2017), and that statement has continued to ring true throughout my research. Transgender identities are underrepresented in the media, our national discourse, and most types of academic research, and trans people often come together, in person and online, to share stories, information, and resources that are not readily available to them. Many feel as though trans people are not adequately or accurately represented in popular media, and turn to cosplay, fanfiction, and fan art in order to create media that more effectively represents trans experiences. In fanfiction and fan art, fans are able to write narratives and create characters that they identify with. Through cosplay, fans are able to celebrate their favorite characters and interact with other fans, but some fans are also able to experiment with gender in a safe, distanced way that is comfortable to them. Through the celebration and re-presentation of trans characters in popular works like *Homestuck*, trans and non-binary fans can create identities and narratives that more accurately represent them and their community, providing alternative narratives of trans experiences that counter dominant portrayals of trans characters in mass media.

### Conclusion

Discussions of transgender media representation and transgender presentation are complex and are often sources of disagreement and frustration for transfolk. Many of my consultants believe that trans media representation is not realistic or sufficient, and turn to a variety of sources in order to find alternative representation, including internet message

boards, social media sites, and cosplay, fanfiction, and fan art. All of these sources of representation and information factor to some degree into the construction of an individual's trans identity. One's trans identity is, ultimately, an individual, artistic construction; however, there are varying opinions about what it means to "be trans" within trans communities and within cis society in general. Narrow expectations related to the performance of trans identities can be damaging and inhibiting to those whose gender performances do not align with the transnormative ideal. Younger trans people, particularly those within the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, often endorse a more expansive notion of what it means to be trans, and, instead of expecting trans people to behave or present in certain ways, celebrate individual expression and the personal revelation of embracing one's true self.

### **Chapter 3: The WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group: A Chosen Family**

The WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group (TNB) has only been part of WKU's queer community for a year and a half, but it has made a significant impact on transgender and non-binary WKU students. TNB is a peer group of trans and non-binary students, and, by providing emotional support, information and advice, and financial resources, the group ensures that the mental, physical, and financial needs of members are met. TNB is a strong community, and many members consider themselves a chosen family. Additionally, members stated that participating in group meetings can effectively mitigate stigma and help members manage trans-specific trauma. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group. I will discuss group leadership, outline group activities, and describe the various resources that TNB provides for its members. I will also explore how TNB functions as a chosen family, and the way that group identity is discussed and imagined. Finally, I will look at mental health and stigma, and demonstrate the way in which participating in TNB helps mitigate stigma and improve the mental health of members.

#### Introduction to the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group

The WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group was formed in November, 2016 to serve WKU's trans student population. The group was created by Jeremy McFarland, who said that he recognized the need for a trans and non-binary community in the wake of the 2016 election:

The group started November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, two days after the horrible, tragic election [ . . . ] When I was growing up, there were no other transgender people around me. I didn't know another transgender person. I didn't

know any gay people. I didn't know any gay adults [ . . . ] I was so isolated, and there were no resources. I had to go through everything by myself . . . And that sucked, and I thought about what it would have been like for me—for how hard it was for me to see the election happen and how afraid I was despite having my name legally changed, my birth certificate changed, all my documentation changed [ . . . ] so I felt really personally motivated because I needed support, I needed to be around other trans people, but also because I knew they needed something desperately. When you're transgender, you learn very quickly that nothing is going to be done for you unless you do it yourself [ . . . ] So two days after the election, I met with [a trans WKU faculty member] at Spencer's [Coffee] and we kind of started after that. We started off with a core group of four people [ . . . ] We put up flyers all over, and we just—trans people know each other so we brought in people we knew. We now have—we just added someone new today. We have, I think, 26 members in the group, and each of our meetings last semester had 18 people, the same people who are all really close, really tight knit. We go out and do stuff a lot. What's been really valuable to me is seeing them be able to know other trans people, have friends who are going through the same things, but also to have someone who's older and done it and can help them with resources (Interview, 17 August 2017).

According to group members, as of March 2018, there are approximately 40 members in the group, with an average of 15-20 attending each meeting. The group has grown dramatically since its founding, and has changed meeting spaces three times in order to accommodate growing group membership. During interviews, group members frequently commented on this rapid rise in membership; for example, Madi Withrow stated “The semester when I showed up [Spring 2017], we still had maybe six people showing up to a meeting. And now we've had to go from being in the Pride Center with about six people to being in DSU [Downing Student Union] with at least ten people a meeting, and that's just one semester's difference” (Interview, 9 January 2018). The group's membership growth has been entirely intentional. In the early days, group members posted flyers around campus to spread awareness of the group and invite trans friends and acquaintances to join TNB. One of the early members of the group, Kanyon McKee, was



encouraged to join TNB by the leader of the other LGBTQIA+ student group on campus, the Queer Student Union. The group has grown more visible as it has made a concerted effort to increase group membership. In an effort to gain new members, TNB members regularly table on campus and at queer events like National Coming Out Day and the first annual Bowling Green Pride; group members have become more active on campus, taking leadership roles in the Student Government Association and Queer Student Union; and the group and various members have been featured in local and student publications including the *Bowling Green Daily News*, *WKU Herald*, and WKU's *Talisman*.

As a result of the dramatic increase in membership, the group has shifted its focus and concerns. Jeremy stated that many of the newer group members have more drastic financial and emotional needs, causing changes within the group:

It's been a pretty constant evolution, really rapid [ . . . ] I think the needs have really changed, as more people come in, and depending on the people who come in. So early on, it was people who, you know, their basic needs were being met. We—even if we all weren't from the same [social] class or anything like that, we were all, you know, able to go to school, able to afford food. I mean, some of us dealt with family rejection and stuff, but as the group's gotten bigger and brought in different people, the need has really changed and become, I think, a lot more severe. And that's really changed the nature of the group I think. And, yeah, so that's been an adjustment for people. You know, we're not—it's hard, sometimes it's harder to have the same kind of like friendship level of relationship when we're simultaneously dealing with those sorts of things and dealing with like, you know, homelessness and food insecurity [ . . . ] We've always dealt with suicidality, but I think that that's become even more pressing [ . . . ] recurring fears of homelessness and food insecurity, issues with people with jobs, trying to find jobs, that's become—you know, how like in Bowling Green we don't have a Fairness Ordinance. That's become an increasing issue, with just new people who are coming in who are experiencing issues that the original, like, couple of people in the group just didn't have to deal with at that point. Just having trouble finding work, or losing jobs because of issues with mental health [ . . . ] it's been a lot (Interview, 9 March 2018).

When the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Group was initially established, it was intended to serve as a safe space in which trans people could interact and be themselves, but the group also proactively tried to improve the lives of its members and trans people on campus by providing resources and taking on a variety of projects. As the needs of members have grown more severe, the group has focused more of its attention on providing resources to struggling group members. Jeremy added that the more pressing needs of group members (housing, mental health care, food stability, etc.) must be met in order for the group's social function to occur and be effective. Until the basic needs of group members are met, they will not be comfortable enough to spend time at TNB group meetings and socialize with other group members. It is likely that the focus of the group will continue to evolve as membership changes and as the basic needs of current group members are met; throughout its history, the group has demonstrated a willingness to adjust the focus, activities, and structure of the group to meet the needs of its members. Given the group's enthusiasm for TNB activities, it is likely that the group will continue to emphasize adaptability. Given their shared interests and frequent interaction, the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group can be considered a folk group. The term "folk group" has been frequently debated and defined by folklorists. Folklorist Alan Dundes defined a folk group as "any group whatsoever who share at least one common factor" (1965:2). Dundes' definition serves as a useful starting point, but in *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*, Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens further define folk groups:

Folk groups form out of proximity; necessity; obligation, or circumstance; regular interaction; and shared interests or skills . . . Certainly groups may share characteristics related to culture, class, gender, ethnicity, or age, and certainly they may come together because these characteristics exist. But

the factors that make a group of people a folk group are regular contact (proximity) and shared experience (interaction). People who interact tend to create folklore (2011:38).

Another characteristic of folk groups is the existence and creation of shared folklore.

According to Sims and Stephens, “If a group has folklore, it’s a folk group. Folk groups express and share folklore that conveys to themselves and to others their understanding of the group’s values, interests, and sense of identity” (38). A final defining factor of folk groups is knowledge: “informal or unofficial shared knowledge is a defining feature of a folk group” (30). This “informal or unofficial shared knowledge” could be knowledge of language, culture, history, group values, or group rules. Sims and Stephens acknowledge that individuals of the same race, gender, ethnicity, age, and culture are frequently considered folk groups, but stipulate that groups must additionally be formed through proximity and interaction.

The Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group was borne of both obligation and circumstance; McFarland stated that he formed the group after the election because Donald Trump’s ascendance to the presidency created a need within trans communities. Because the group prioritizes face-to-face contact and was created for and by WKU students, proximity factors heavily into the creation and maintenance of the group; the group necessarily requires members to be residents of Bowling Green or the surrounding area and (usually) enrolled students at WKU.<sup>25</sup> Members of TNB also share various demographic and experiential similarities. All members of the group identify as transgender or non-binary, most group members are white and middle class, and most group members fall between the ages of 18 and 25. While the group may share several other interests and commonalities, the single most important characteristic of the group is

that the gender identities of all group members fall under the trans umbrella. Group cohesion and membership is founded primarily on the fact that group members share non-hegemonic sexualities and gender identities and tend to experience similar stigmatization and marginalization as a result of these identities. There are clearly defined group boundaries, and the group shares much informal knowledge regarding how to speak to and treat each other and how to speak about trans experiences. The group also shares folklore; there are recurring jokes about certain group members, the group uses trans-related terms, and members of TNB regularly shares trans-specific jokes and memes with each other.

Folklorist Dorothy Noyes introduces the concept of social networks into our understanding of folk group, distinguishing between *network* and the more idealized *group*. Noyes states, “The community of the social imaginary coexists in a dialectical tension with the empirical world of day-to-day network contacts. The imagined community offers a focus for comparison and desire, and at the same time, is itself subject to re-visionings in the light of everyday experience. This productive tension is the complex object we denote with the word *group*” (2003:33). Applying Noyes’ discussion of group to TNB, *network* refers to the social relationships of each TNB group member. TNB arose from a network of trans WKU students, friends, and allies. TNB is labeled a group because it is conceptualized as a group by its members; it is a cognitive product of the social imaginary, and is reinforced through performance. Noyes says, “The community exists as the project of a network or of some of its members. Networks exist insofar as their ties are continually recreated and revitalized in interaction” (33). Noyes, following Victor Turner and Margaret Mills, states, “Community is a felt reality” (27),

which emphasizes the felt and imagined nature of group identity. While TNB members may have been part of each other's networks prior to the creation of the group, TNB did not begin to exist as a group until members imagined the existence of a group, created a group structure, and met and interacted regularly to reinforce group ties.

Folklorist Joseph Goodwin explored gay male subculture in *More Man Than You'll Ever Be: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America* (1989), and many of Goodwin's observations of gay men in the 80s can be applied to trans communities today. Goodwin explains that members of the gay community often experience a need for cohesion, and find that the gay identity can serve as a unifying factor. According to Goodwin, cohesion is built upon a sense of commonality and belonging (1989:xiv). Throughout the course of my fieldwork, members of TNB have described the stigmatization and marginalization they experience as transgender individuals. They value a trans-only community because they believe that only other trans people can truly understand their experience. Jeremy said, "there's an inherent value to having a space just for trans people" (Interview, 9 March 2018). Based on the statements of TNB group members, it is clear that their shared transgender identities provide sufficient basis for interaction and group cohesion. Similar to the gay men Goodwin interviewed, many group members are not living openly as trans, and those that are openly trans experience the difficulty inherent in inhabiting a stigmatized identity. TNB is thus a strong folk group as a result of their shared identities, proximity, and frequency of interaction.

Dorothy Noyes states, "that groups are not homogenous is the first realization of any scholar doing fieldwork" (2003:13). Based on my interviews with individuals in the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, this is absolutely the case. While

most members of the group are white, middle class, and roughly the same age, their opinions and experiences vary widely. Group members vary in terms of group participation, gender identity and presentation, level of interest in trans issues, openness of sexuality and identity, and level of authority and responsibility within the group. While I may draw some conclusions about TNB, they are based solely on my analysis of information conducted throughout the course of my fieldwork, and these conclusions do not and cannot apply to all group members.

### *Group Leadership*

Because McFarland started the group, he has become the group's de facto leader; because Jeremy has always held this leadership role, there is no strongly defined group hierarchy. Generally, group members, led by McFarland, will determine which activities the group is interested in planning, and which goals they want to work towards. Responsibilities are then delegated or assigned to volunteers depending on who wants to help, useful personal connections group members may have, and whether or not the job requires a specific set of skills. Positions that require more responsibilities or may incur financial liability are generally voted upon; Kanyon stated, "We voted if we were comfortable with this person being in charge of our banking, and who we trusted to do different jobs. That's kind of how it's been, people doing the jobs they've been entrusted to do" (Interview, 30 January 2018).

McFarland will be graduating in May of 2018, and has established a leadership team as a contingency plan. After McFarland graduates, the leadership team will be responsible for organizing group meetings and determining which projects the group will

undertake. In order to ease the transition, Jeremy said that during his last semester (Spring 2018), he has been slowly stepping out of his leadership role and placing more responsibilities on other group members.<sup>26</sup> Levi Hanson said that as Jeremy has begun to slowly pull back from his leadership role, other members have stepped in to contribute: “Since he’s delegated some responsibilities, the majority of the people who are active in [TNB] really like—they want to help out, they want to be a part of it and they want to be a leader in it” (Interview, 10 January 2018). Members of TNB seem to view taking on group responsibilities as another part of group membership rather than an obligation or chore.

#### *Weekly Meetings and Special Events*

The group meets weekly, hosts occasional themed events, and sometimes partners with other groups to put on trans-related events and activities. According to McFarland, the weekly meetings are the most important activity of the group:

The primary goal is to have meetings. As long as we are having meetings, then we’re doing our job. And last semester we met every week at alternating times. So one week, we would meet on, say, a Monday, and the next week we would meet on, say, a Thursday or something. That way people will be able to come because that’s the purpose: to give people, at the very least, they have an hour, two hours where they’re around other trans people. No one is going to question your identity. They are going to respect your pronouns. They are going to respect your name. You’re not going to be challenged. You’re just allowed to exist. You’re allowed to be around other people who understand you without you having to sit there and explain it and break it down like you’re teaching elementary school class. (Interview, 17 August 2017).

For group members, the ability to have a space in which their identities are affirmed and respected becomes more important than the content of the meetings themselves.

In the previous chapter, I explained that, due to a variety of factors, many members of TNB cannot successfully “pass” as cisgender. Because of this, group members are often misgendered<sup>27</sup> or mistakenly referred to by their dead name.<sup>28</sup> During TNB meetings, group members know that they will not be misgendered, and their chosen names will be respected; this is essential for the mental health and wellbeing of many members. Jeremy stated that TNB meetings are important to group members because it is one of the only spaces in which their identities will be completely acknowledged and respected:

For a lot of our group members, it’s—I think about it like if you don’t have anyone else in your life who is appreciating your identity and respecting your identity, they have that place [ . . . ] we still have like all of our original members. And it’s because [TNB meetings are a place] where their identity isn’t questioned. They’re just kind of able to be beyond their transgender identity while also knowing that they’re having their identity respected—like people are using their correct name and pronouns, not only using them to placate them or anything, but because they really, truly see them for who they are. And I think that, you know, whether or not we always get along or anything, even if we don’t all like each other all the time, there is something intrinsically valuable about having that same spot where you are able to just exist. Especially when, outside, you don’t have that at all. You know, for a lot of our members, it’s the first time—the only other transgender people they know are from the group [ . . . ] it’s a little spot in a little, you know, group, where you’re around people that are like you. And being transgender, that’s huge. Because you can go years without meeting another trans person (Interview, 9 March 2018).

In a society in which transgender individuals are often attacked and stigmatized, identity affirmation can be an important factor in the mental health and overall wellbeing of transgender individuals. It is difficult to quantify how the gender affirmation that TNB provides benefits group members, but Jeremy argues that group members continue to remain active in TNB as a result of the support and understanding that they receive from fellow group members.



According to group members, the group generally spends the first part of the meeting talking about the group's current goals and projects, and the rest of the meeting is spent socializing. The group initially tried to center discussion around particular topics or themes, but eventually transitioned into a more open format. The open structure of group meetings allows members to discuss topics and problems that are currently relevant to them, allowing group members to encourage each other and respond to each other's needs in real time. Many of the group members that I interviewed have stated that this format is beneficial to them and they find the open discussion helpful and welcoming.

TNB is neither the first nor the only group dedicated to serving WKU's LGBTQIA+ population; WKU currently has a Queer Student Union and has had previous iterations of LGBTQIA+ student groups. The Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group is unique, though, because it is a private group intended only for transgender and non-binary individuals. In order to join the group, you must either be invited by another group member or email the group website; group meeting dates and locations are not easily available to the public to ensure the safety of group members and preserve anonymity. Some individuals who attend TNB meetings are not openly trans/non-binary, and others cite the possibility of violence as reasons for the exclusive nature of the group. According to McFarland, the TNB group is essential because trans and non-binary individuals have very different experiences than cisgender lesbian, gay, or bisexual people, and trans people often do not feel welcome in broader queer spaces. He said, "a lot of these [group members] wouldn't have gone to [the Queer Student Union] because there's a lot of—being transgender, you're marginalized from the straight world and you're marginalized from the queer world. And so being an exclusive group helps with

that” (Interview, 17 August 2017). Kanyon attended Queer Student Union meetings before joining TNB, but has since stopped participating in QSU; they said, “I don’t go to QSU anymore. Just because all of my friends are in TNB. [QSU wasn’t] really meeting much and there weren’t many people that were showing up to QSU, but TNB was extremely active. So that’s where I ended up migrating to” (Interview, 30 January 2018). Kanyon stated that they believe the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group is more active and successful than the Queer Student Union because there is more of a need for TNB and because TNB is actively attempting to help trans students on campus:

I think there was more of a need for it on campus. There were a lot of minor issues that were going on that were causing people discomfort, with dead names being on IDs and emails, professors not using preferred names or [recognizing a student’s] gender identity. Just those little minor things we were working on and actually making progress really drew people to the group. That really drew people together and trans people really need support groups because of the issues that we face (Interview, 30 January 2018).

While QSU also meets weekly, their meetings primarily function as safe spaces, and the group’s “special” activities are generally social and entertainment-based. The fact that TNB meetings are focused on improving the living conditions of group members and trans students on campus helps members feel as though they are “doing something,” and creates an incentive for members to keep coming to meetings.

Some members stated that they joined the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group in order to make trans friends and have the opportunity to socialize with other transfolk. Both Kanyon and Levi Hanson stated that their favorite part of TNB is the unstructured meeting time in which they can relax and informally interact with other group members. Kanyon said, “I think my favorite thing to do with the group is just getting together and talking. I love just hanging out with the group and hearing people

share their stories and being able to hang out and talk to each other and just be friends” (Interview, 30 January 2018). Levi said that he prefers “random get togethers, when it’s not just business, it’s more like just hanging out” (Interview, 10 January 2018). While informal hangout sessions may seem trivial or unimportant, group members place a significant amount of value on this group activity. Although the group provides resources and does important work for trans individuals on campus, it also helps facilitate friendships and community building through this informal, unstructured social time. Madi Withrow stated that she joined the group because she wanted “a sense of community” and “a sense of understanding”; she said, “Making friends is really awesome because I suck at making friends. But just seeing that there is a group of people who have this core aspect of their personality that’s exactly like mine gives me a foot in the door to find more reasons to talk to them, hangout with them” (Interview, 9 January 2018). After Madi met fellow group members, she made friendships based around other shared interests. Although these friendships are based on much more than a shared gender identity, joining a group for trans individuals helped Madi meet and begin developing relationships with other group members. Group friendships and a shared sense of community may help increase the resilience of TNB members in an environment that often alienates and marginalizes them.

Group members consistently stated that the ability to meet with other trans people face-to-face was one of the best things about being part of TNB. Many group members stated that they value a face-to-face trans community. Members seem to believe that in-person interaction among transfolk is different and more valuable than interaction in online communities, and group members often become less involved with online

communities after joining TNB. Some group members spoke often about how, prior to joining the group, they experienced severe feelings of isolation that were emotionally damaging for them. The community involvement and interpersonal connection provided by TNB could lessen the isolation and loneliness TNB members experience, improving their physical and emotional well-being. Increased interaction among transfolk and between trans communities and the broader public can also encourage closeted trans people to come out and increase the visibility and acceptance of transfolk. As discussed in Chapter 1, the coming out movement was predicated on the belief that the more visible the LGBTQIA+ community is, the more likely it is that it will be accepted by mainstream society.<sup>29</sup> Through tabling on campus, helping to organize at Bowling Green Pride, giving informational talks to different organizations, and interacting with other groups on campus, the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group seeks to improve community opinions of trans people by improving education and increasing visibility. TNB also actively recruits new members, and the visibility of the group may embolden others to accept their own trans identities. Madi described TNB as a beacon for trans people who might not be as comfortable coming out. She stated that many group members intentionally live openly as trans, hoping to inspire and encourage others who may not feel completely comfortable doing so.

The group occasionally hosts special events or co-hosts events with other groups. Jeremy described some of the events that the group hosted during the Fall 2017 semester, and stated that a majority of group members did not want to attend or help out with events that could be considered political:

Last semester we did some [events] and people weren't really into it. But we did like an event with HOLAS [Hilltopper Organization of Latin

American Students], where we watched a movie about an undocumented trans woman, and that was really good. We've done a couple of things with SCRR—Student Coalition for Renter's Rights—with them coming to our meetings and teaching us about our renting rights as renters. And then they did some movie screenings, so we did those. We try to turn out for queer-relevant SGA [Student Government Association] bills and stuff. And then we had Transgiving, of course, last Thanksgiving. Which was just a blast. It was really fun. But we haven't really done any events—we haven't done any events this semester, just because—people didn't seem super into—like they wanted to do like the fun ones, like Transgiving and stuff, but they aren't really interested in doing like—they felt like it was becoming a little too political, and so I listened to that, and so we're not doing that anymore (Interview, 9 March 2018).

Jeremy described himself as a political person, but said that many TNB group members did not want to turn the group into an activist organization. Jeremy still attends political events, but no longer plans TNB events that are partisan or politically charged. As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, Jeremy stated that trans identities are inherently political due to our country's current political environment, but many group members may not feel this way. An important function of TNB may be that it provides an apolitical respite from politicized discussions of trans identities, allowing transfolk to simply exist and spend time with friends.

Although the majority of group members do not want TNB to be involved with political events, group members generally enjoy special “fun” events, like movie nights, holiday parties, and Pride. Both TNB and the Queer Student Union occasionally host queer-themed movie nights, which members regularly attend. Movie nights generally include snacks and informal conversation, and may or may not include a discussion of LGBTQIA+ themes present in the films. Group members also regularly meet up for informal activities, like hanging out or going out to eat. During the Fall 2017 semester, TNB began hosting holiday parties, including a Halloween party and Transgiving

(Transgiving will be discussed in much more detail later in this chapter). The group's Halloween party included a costume competition (some members, including Kanyon, cosplayed), snacks, and a showing of *Little Shop of Horrors*, which was described as "super transgender." Group members were encouraged to bring their friends and partners, and all the individuals that I interviewed reflected positively on the event.

The Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group was involved with Bowling Green's first annual Pride event. TNB members created queer-themed items to sell at their table, some members (like Jeremy) were involved with organizing the event, and others spent most of the day at Pride, running the TNB table and educating passersby about the group. Jeremy said that the event was important for many group members:

We worked really hard preparing for Pride. People made bracelets. [A group member] reached out and found a lot of people willing to donate art for us to sell. We made a lot of pins that we sold. We really worked hard on that. We had people that were going to work the table at different times. It was awesome. I think that made a big impact on some of the members, being involved with that. I definitely saw members who previously—they always came to the meetings, but I didn't really have much of a relationship with them and they didn't necessarily speak up a lot with that. They really came out of their shell [ . . . ] Pride was so much fun. It was such a great celebration. Just having it was the amazing part, but also how successful our booth was. We made almost \$800 or something. We got a lot of money that goes right back to the group. Everyone had a really great time and worked together. Especially, it played on the strengths of some of the members who are interested in crocheting—they got to feel like they were giving something to their group and were more involved than just a member (Interview, 9 March 2018).

Jeremy said that preparing for the event drew on the strengths and interests of various group members and helped members feel as though they were active contributors to the group. By contributing their skills to prepare for the event, participating members became more engaged with the group and developed stronger relationships with other members.

Additionally, the success of Pride seemed to validate and inspire several TNB group members. Group members have often described Bowling Green as a conservative area, and the large number of community members who came out to support the LGBTQIA+ community was encouraging to TNB members.

### *Education and Resources*

The secondary function of the group is connecting members with needed resources.<sup>30</sup> The group works to meet the needs of individual members and help make WKU a more welcoming place for trans people. According to Jeremy, TNB provides a broad range of resources for group members, ranging from tangible items like chest binders to lists of trans-friendly therapists and doctors:

We have a wardrobe [ . . . ] So we do like free clothes. And we just connect people to resources—like we have a doctor recommendation list. We have—just like day-to-day advice, like “my family is treating me like shit. What did you do when your family treated you like shit?” Or just having someone to talk about those sort of circumstances and to get other people’s perspectives on it, and I think that’s really validating. And connecting people especially to resources on campus [ . . . ] if you need help with tuition stuff, anything like that, we can connect them to help. I think that connecting people to resources in the community is a big one, and also advocating for things on campus. Like trying to get these [gender neutral] bathrooms is a big thing. We also have a list of all the [gender neutral] bathrooms [on campus]. We explain like Title IX stuff on our webpage. I think that stuff’s important [ . . . ] we pay for people’s name changes. Like at Pride, we made a lot of money for that. We applied for organizational funding and stuff. And we used that money for buying clothes. Or when members have dealt with food insecurity, we’ve bought them food. We paid for name changes. We paid for gas for doctors’ appointments. We paid for doctors’ appointments. Anything like that. If a member is needing something—binders, we buy a lot of binders and other transitional apparel. If a member is needing something, this money is available for them to get the things that they need. Because especially when we’re dealing with like job insecurity, food insecurity, homelessness, they don’t have the money for these extra things that are

necessary for their comfort and their ability to move forward and deal with those things (Interview, 9 March 2018).

None of the group members that I interviewed mentioned an item or resource that the group would not provide. Jeremy stated that he wished the group had more money to spend on resources (mental health services in particular), but the group is exceptionally effective with the money they have.

Although the group primarily provides resources that trans people need in order to more comfortably and satisfactorily live as trans, the group also recognizes the importance of meeting the basic needs of its members. The group attempts to help any homeless members by finding them more stable housing, and, in the meantime, homeless group members are taken into the dorms/apartments of other members. For food insecure members, the group works to connect them with on-campus resources such as the on-campus food pantry, and provides members with grocery money. The group's willingness to provide food and housing to those in need demonstrates the group's recognition that, in order for a trans person to thrive, their basic needs must first be met. Trans people face higher than average levels of food insecurity, unemployment, and homelessness, and TNB attempts to compensate for the social inequities trans people often face.<sup>31</sup>

The group accepts clothing and financial donations, and also makes money through creating and selling different accessories and volunteering to clean up Diddle Arena after sporting events. All of the money that TNB makes directly benefits the group, and resources are provided according to need. Kanyon explained that, the meeting after Pride, each member was asked to list one or two things that they needed:

When we made that money for Pride, we each took a piece of paper and wrote down something that we needed and we put it in, and I'm assuming that everyone who put that in has gotten help or gotten what they needed



or is at least on a list to get what they need [ . . . ] They announced [their earnings] the week after Pride. They were like, “This is how much money we made. Take a piece of paper, write down one or two things that you want or need, and we’re going to buy them.” So they bought x amount of binders, stuff like that (Interview, 30 January 2018).

The process that Kanyon describes is a democratic, communal pooling and distribution of financial aid and resources to group members. According to Madi, there is no formal process for asking for advice, information, or financial help; she said, “It’s just bringing it up to certain people in the group [ . . . ] Or just announcing in the group like ‘Hey, I want to do my name change,’ and they’ll be like, ‘Well, talk to me, and we’ll get you set up to help you pay for it’” (Interview, 9 January 2018). There is no policy governing how much can be spent on individual members; the group seems to value the physical and emotional well-being of group members over an equal distribution of resources. Members of TNB acknowledge that group members are all at different stages of their transition; have different financial, physical, and emotional needs; and have different employment and financial situations. Each group member may have vastly different needs that must be met in order to thrive.

TNB also provides resources and information for those not in the group. Kanyon explained TNB’s creation of a list of gender neutral bathrooms on campus, saying “We worked out the whole name change thing and got this document where we list every single gender neutral bathroom on campus, and made a map, and shared it with the college. That’s on CTC’s [Counseling and Testing Center] website” (Interview, 30 January 2018). Ben Couch added, “Last semester we were very focused on this idea of creating, like, a PDF of resources about, you know, legal name changes, stuff that you can do to make you feel more comfortable at school regarding ID, paperwork, your

email” (Interview, 14 August 2017). All of these resources are available online, for TNB members, current WKU students, prospective students, and general community members. During the Transgender Day of Remembrance/Resilience, Madi made an informational pamphlet that was distributed around campus; she said, “I went through and found as much information as I could and wrote up a pamphlet that used very little community-specific terms to make it as easy to understand for a cis person as it could be. And I feel like that did help quite a bit. It wasn’t perfect, but it’s a first step” (Interview, 9 January 2018). Copies of the pamphlet were posted in various buildings around campus, and Madi said that she was still finding them weeks after the event, which she interpreted as evidence of their utility and success. The group is interested in not just improving the lives of group members, but improving the experience of all trans and non-binary people in the area; this is accomplished by providing resources to those within the group, making resources available online, and reaching out to the cis population in hopes of educating them about trans issues and opening up a dialogue.

#### “It’s Like a Little Family of Trans Kids”: TNB as Chosen Family

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, group members would frequently refer to the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group as a chosen family. Jeremy defined chosen families as “people in your life who you consider your family, whether or not they are your biological family” (Interview, 9 March 2018). Although group members acknowledged that members of the group are close friends, they believed that the group relationship was something deeper and more akin to kinship—a relationship that more closely mirrored those in biological families. Chosen families have been an important

part of queer culture for decades, but became especially significant in the 1970s, when the Gay Rights Movement began encouraging queer people to come out. Kath Weston (1991) explains that, during the coming out movement, many queer people lost or feared losing their biological families, and often created “chosen families” of other gays, lesbians, and allies:

As the lesbian/gay movement gathered strength in the 1970s, it called upon “everyday queers” to disclose their sexual identities to society at large, or at least to parents and other close relatives. “To come out or not to come out” became the question of the day. To contemplate that question was to confront the possibility that biological connection might not be enough to make kinship, or to make it last. Although people seldom lose aunts or grandparents in the event, they knew too well that family ties could be severed by the shock of revelation. Everyone had heard stories about the parent who reacted by saying, “A son of mine would not do this. Get out of my sight! You were never really my son!” Kinship began to seem more like an effort and a choice than a permanent, unshakeable bond or a birthright. The mute substance of genes, blood, and bone had to be transformed into something more. And if such efforts at transformation could fail—if blood could prove thinner than water—why dismiss out of hand the kinship potential of other sorts of social ties: the connecting tissue of friendship, say, or nonbiological parenthood, or a committed gay relationship? (1991:xv).

Weston notes that “chosen family” means something different to every group, but argues that, despite their composition, chosen families play a central and important role in queer culture. According to Weston, “Gay or chosen families might incorporate friends, lovers, or children, in any combination. Organized through ideologies of love, choice, and creation, gay families have been defined through a contrast with what many gay men and lesbians . . . called ‘straight,’ ‘biological,’ or ‘blood’ family” (27). While the notion of “choice” is an important characteristic of these kinship groups, Weston notes that “choice” is often constrained by race, class, experience, and other demographic and geographic factors. Although Weston did not discuss trans and non-binary individuals,

much of her research can be directly applied to chosen families made up of trans and non-binary people.

While Weston notes that chosen families vary widely, her research highlights characteristics that chosen families frequently share. According to Weston, “Like their heterosexual counterparts, most gay men and lesbians insisted that family members are people who are ‘there for you,’ people you can count on emotionally and materially” (113). Weston states that individuals who create chosen families often view kinship as an extension of friendship, and may refer to chosen family members as “kin” and “friends” interchangeably. Additionally, chosen families generally include emotional ties, a system of conflict resolution, and the idea of a shared past (115).

Joseph Goodwin explains that, though the family is often considered a bedrock of society, “folklorists and other scholars . . . have generally overlooked the existence of family-type groups beyond the biological or natal family” (1994:35). Goodwin argues that “because they offer the same advantages and express the same types of traditions as natal families, I believe we are justified in referring to such groups as families as well” (35). He notes that chosen families fulfill several of the same functions as biological families: “In gay families, as in others, folklore defines the closeness of relationships, underscores that closeness, and gives us a sense of history, of heritage, and of who we are, as well as a sense of pride and understanding of how we fit (or do not fit) into the larger culture” (44). Goodwin’s definition of gay families can be applied to chosen families or trans and non-binary people: “[Gay families] are informal institutions in the gay subculture that function as support and educational systems, helping gay men to function completely as gay men” (37). In the same way, TNB provides emotional and

material support for each other, and helps provide its members with resources that will enable them to live successfully as trans people.

In *Trans\* in College: Transgender Students' Strategies for Navigating Campus Life and the Institutional Politics of Inclusion* (2017), Z Nicolazzo uses ethnographic data, collected from a group of trans college students, to build upon Weston's study of chosen families, proposing a broader notion of kinship networks:

[My work] expands on Weston's (1991) discussion of kinship from a singular perspective, or of gay and lesbian people developing one unified family of choice rather than multiple kinship networks. The kinship networks of the trans\* participants did not always overlap with each other. Some networks were mutually exclusive, meaning there was no overlap of individuals or goals from one group to the next . . . Therefore, one might imagine these networks as sites on a map with participants' movement in and among these networks creating a constellation of relational spaces where they could retreat for temporary respite from the cultural regulation of gender (2017:262-3).

According to Nicolazzo, trans university students often build multiple kinship networks, on and off campus, that provide safe spaces in which trans people can comfortably exist. Nicolazzo states that kinship networks are a "close group of peers who recognized and honored participants' gender identities, expressions, or embodiments; provided a refuge from the cultural realities of gender binary discourse and compulsory heterogenderism on campus; and acted as a potential site for participants to use to resist or push back against systemic trans\* oppression if they chose" (262). Nicolazzo argues that these kinship networks are essential for trans students and help them more effectively and comfortably navigate college environments.

TNB can certainly be described as a kinship network; members' identities are honored and respected within the group, TNB provides a space in which individuals can exist without being entirely defined by their trans identities, and TNB members have the

option of coming together to advocate for trans rights. Based on observations from my fieldwork, there are varying degrees of relationships within TNB; various members of TNB have formed smaller chosen families or friend groups, and members are often closer to some members than others. Additionally, TNB members maintain kinship networks outside of the group, forming relationships with other members of the LGBTQIA+ community off campus or online.

My consultants repeatedly described the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group as a chosen family, and often listed alienation from biological family as a reason for the feeling of kinship within the group. Levi Hanson stated that many people in TNB had lost important friends and family members:

I think [TNB] is vital for a lot of people [ . . . ] I see many people, they lose everybody, and “everybody” to them is like immediate family or those people that they thought were their best friends. I see more of it with family. Or maybe somebody you’re in a relationship with, maybe they don’t make you feel accepted. And so you find that acceptance in the group and you learn that like “hey, it’s not you. It’s everyone else, they need to—you’re not a problem.” Other people—I don’t like to blame other people, but other people need to become more educated (Interview, 10 January 2018).

Many group members seem to have begun thinking of TNB as a chosen family after their relationships with friends and biological family members became strained or were severed. For example, Sophia Arnold said, “Whenever your biological family just totally disowns you, it just sort of happens that way that, you know, you form those sorts of bonds, what’s essentially chosen family” (Interview, 15 January 2018). Kanyon explicitly stated that chosen families function as replacement for biological families, saying, “There’s a lot of people that don’t have really supportive families. So being able to go to TNB where we all support you is kind of a replacement, more accepting family at

least” (Interview, 30 January 2018). Madi described TNB as an “adoptive” family; she said, “We’ve all, for the most part, become adopted family. Some of us don’t have a family that is supportive, but we do have the group, so we’ve become our own big family” (Interview, 9 January 2018). While not all TNB group members have been rejected from friends and family, many have been, and those who have not yet come out fear the potential of losing family members. TNB steps in to fill the void that is created when trans and non-binary group members are rejected by their biological families, providing an alternative source of emotional and material support.

The group shares many of the characteristics of chosen families that were described by Weston. Group members often describe each other as kin and close friends interchangeably. For example, when asked whether TNB was a group of close friends or a chosen family, Kanyon said, “Mostly chosen family. Especially friend groups within the group. Like with me, [three other group members], the four of us are our own little family within a bigger family” (Interview, 30 January 2018). Kanyon describes the group as a friend group *and* a chosen family, and even describes smaller chosen families within the group. The group shares a strong emotional connection. Madi Withrow said, “Even the people who I’m not super close with, I still feel a sense of kinship with. Like I’m not close to them *yet*, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be” (Interview, 9 January 2018). According to Madi, she is closer to some group members than others, but she still feels a strong connection – a sense of kinship – with group members she spends less time with or shares fewer commonalities with.

Although group members generally get along well, disagreements within the group may occur, and sometimes group members may share opinions and experiences

that make others uncomfortable. When this happens, the group tries to handle it in a way that makes all members feel seen and heard. According to Jeremy, “I try to talk to people about being respectful about other people’s—like things that they’re dealing with. And they might not be communicating in a way that they like or anything, but this is—it has to be a welcoming space for both people” (Interview, 9 March 2018). Jeremy, functioning as group leader, will have conversations with members if there is a disagreement or if they are making others uncomfortable, but he emphasized that importance of making *all* group members feel comfortable and making TNB a welcoming space for everyone. Similarly, Levi said, “If someone says something that is problematic, we bring awareness to that, and it’s not arguing” (Interview, 10 January 2018). The group often discusses difficult and emotionally charged topics, and the group attempts to make everyone feel as though they can voice their frustrations and experiences.

Weston states that chosen families often have a sense of a shared past, which generally refers to the fact that chosen family members have known each other for a significant length of time; although TNB members met each other in college, they feel as though they can understand the life experiences, past and present, of other members. For example, Madi stated that she joined the group because, “I needed people who understood what I was going through and could be there for me in person. And even see examples of what I was going to go through in the future” (Interview, 9 January 2018). Madi believes that group members can understand her current life experiences, and believes that her life will be similar to the lives of other members.

The most important way in which the group functions as a chosen family is by providing financial and emotional support to other members. When Kanyon described



how TNB functions as a chosen family, their explanation focused on both emotional and financial support:

It's kind of like a little family of trans kids who just hang out and help each other talk through problems. It's like any other club, but all trans people [ . . . ] I had this four-year-old binder that was killing my ribs, and with some of the money that we made from Pride, that bought me a new one [ . . . ] I definitely see a lot of people relying on each other and being able to talk to each other and trust each other in dire situations, the way that you would trust a supportive family. When I got kicked out, Jeremy offered me a place to stay (Interview, 30 January 2018).

When asked what makes TNB feel like a family, group members consistently mention this act of caring for and supporting one another. Perhaps the best example of the constant emotional support the group provides is the group's active GroupMe chat. GroupMe is a mobile messaging app that the group uses to communicate throughout the week. According to Jeremy, one of the primary reasons that the group can be considered a chosen family is because "We spend a lot of time together and communicate with each other pretty constantly on our group chat and stuff. Even if not everyone is constantly involved, our group always has people communicating with each other" (Interview, 9 March 2018). Jeremy said that the group chat is not a place to discuss pressing emotional problems or issues between group members, but is instead a means of communicating frequently and informally with other group members:

People just kind of talk about their days. Recently, we've had some members who were dealing with like moving out of their home because of issues with families. So it's been a lot of people talking about that. There's also just goofing around and people talking about how their classes are going. And, you know, having a conversation or posting a meme, or just whatever they want [ . . . ] there have been times where I've had to tell people that a conversation is not appropriate for the group chat. Or had to cut off conversations if there was any kind of conflict going on or anything, because having that kind of—having any kind of real conversation over GroupMe, you can't do it. I mean it's not—it's going to just blow up. And trying to make sure people aren't—if someone says

something about someone, it takes a little bit of management (Interview, 9 March 2018).

The group chat is generally informal. Madi stated, “Everybody talks about problems, posts memes, or is just there for support [ . . . ] actively, it’s smaller than what is listed. There’s 37 members in the group, and I’d say about 20 or so of us are always active in speaking, maybe less” (Interview, 9 January 2018). Jeremy has recently begun participating less frequently in the group chat, and stated that he is giving group members their space to talk in an unregulated environment. Madi highly values the group chat, and believes it provides a necessary service to group members – a way of receiving instant feedback and support. She said, “I’ve got everything set up so that every time someone sends a message, I can see it, and a lot of the time, I’ll just message random little bits of encouragement or post a picture of my cats and just be there for support” (Interview, 9 January 2018). For Madi, the GroupMe is emblematic of what makes the group a chosen family: it provides a space in which group members can be constantly connected and there for each other in real time. The GroupMe also gives members an opportunity to discuss things that are not related to being LGBTQIA+. Jeremy said, “We’re all big nerds. I think that’s a really interesting thing. I mean not all transgender people are into the same things, but we really hit a vein—people who like really nerdy stuff like cosplay and internet culture and things like that. So yeah, we have a lot of that. We have a very specific kind of transgender person who tends to come to the group, which is just like nerdy, very nerdy” (Interview, 9 March 2018). Although group discussions tend to center around more serious or trans-related topics, the GroupMe allows members to discuss other interests and commonalities, further strengthening relationships among group members.

In addition to providing emotional and financial support, group members often room with or live together, mirroring traditional notions of family life. According to Jeremy, “Our students who live on campus, they usually end up dorming with each other because they know the person living in the dorm with them will be cool with them being trans” (Interview, 9 March 2018). Jeremy also stated that homeless group members are often placed in the homes of other group members. It is notoriously difficult for trans people to find stable housing, as they are often discriminated against by landlords and potential roommates. Members of TNB are willing to open up their homes and apartments to members in need. Jeremy stated that next year, WKU is planning to create an LGBT Living Learning Community, which will offer a dorm wing exclusively for LGBT students.<sup>32</sup> It is unclear how this will broaden or solidify the kinship networks of group members, but it is likely that living around other queer people will help TNB group members feel safe and welcome on campus.

Many members also noted that group members totally accept each other, regardless of a member’s mistakes or quirks, much like they imagine a family would. Jeremy stated that group members feel free to be themselves, and do things that they might feel uncomfortable doing in the “straight world”:

People do stuff that maybe out in the straight world they feel weird about or be made to feel uncomfortable about. It’s never brought up. It’s never made a big deal. Everything that one does is completely, wholeheartedly accepted. And that wasn’t something I anticipated seeing, necessarily. It wasn’t something that I really thought about, but I’ve observed that from the very beginning. You’ll have someone who might say something that’s a little bit awkward or something, they are really particular in a certain way, or they’re really anxious about something in particular. They have some kind of tic or something, and no one says anything. Immediately accepted, just in the same way you would want a family to do, just immediately accept it (Interview, 9 March 2018).

The total, immediate acceptance practiced by TNB allows members to be themselves and to try out different names, pronouns, identities, and manners of presentation. Jeremy believes that TNB has helped some members work through and develop their trans identities:

I've seen a lot of people come out to their families after joining the group. Because it's a good place to get advice about how to do it, too. And a lot of people feeling more confident about presenting, or things like that. Or taking steps towards, you know, we had a lot of members-it was a little while there where a bunch of people were starting HRT [Hormone Replacement Therapy] all around the same time. And that wouldn't have been possible for them before because, by and large, the only reason they knew where they could go was because they joined the group. Yeah, so I think it's—yeah [ . . . ] we've had members whose identities, of course, have changed during their time within the group. Like who might identify as binary and go into non-binary. Or vice-versa. We've had people who have come to the group, and later on have decided that they weren't transgender, and they just didn't come to the group anymore. But we're still friends. It's a comfortable place where you can try different names if you're exploring that, or try different pronouns. And we're all comfortable respecting that [ . . . ] I think that's something that trans and cis people should be allowed to do. To be allowed to have that space where it's allowed to be a phase if it is. Not to imply that that's super common or anything, but you just let people figure it out themselves. That's the way you find out if it's a phase. You let them explore it. And I think TNB has been able to be that for a lot of people. Where they're able to come in and explore their identity and, you know, experiment with presentation, experiment with names and pronouns and see where they land and where they feel comfortable in a way that the cis world doesn't necessarily allow for (Interview, 9 March 2018).

Jeremy noted that biological families *should* provide spaces for members to experiment with gender identities and sexualities, but families often say that being gay or trans is “just a phase.” For Jeremy, an important function of TNB is that members do not trivialize or discourage the feelings of other members. Instead, they encourage them, respect their identities and preferred names and pronouns, and allow members to change their mind if they need to. In TNB, members often find a level of understanding and

acceptance that they did not have with their biological families, or could not find in the straight world. Joseph Goodwin, speaking specifically of chosen families of gay men, identifies the facilitation of identity development as an important characteristic of chosen families. He said, “Much gay folklore is learned in gay families; gay families even help with the acculturation of gay men who are trying to come to terms with their homosexuality, just as natal families enculturate their young” (1994:40-1). Goodwin identifies coming out as one specific way in which gay families help members become part of the gay community; he said, “One of the most common forms this assistance takes is the sharing and discussion of coming out experiences, along with suggestions for how one might deal with the process himself” (41).

Because of the myriad ways in which TNB functions as a chosen family, group members often comment on or joke about familial roles played by certain individuals within the group. Joseph Goodwin states, “Sometimes members of [chosen families] verbalize their relationship; more often the bonds are recognized but not voiced” (37-8). TNB would be what Goodwin calls an “emic unit” because they verbally identify themselves as a family and assign familial titles to some members (38). Jeremy mentions the documentary *Paris is Burning*,<sup>33</sup> and explains that the dynamic between TNB members is similar:

If you’ve seen *Paris Is Burning*, they talk about the family dynamic and they talk about the mother of the house and stuff like that. I think the trans community, that’s something that definitely still exists because so often you’re isolated from your biological family. Even within our group, there are these layers of kind of—you’re put in a familial world, in a lot of ways. So our advisor, we called him our group dad. And then I’m like the big brother, but he’s gone right now so I think I’m the dad now. I definitely feel like a dad. I definitely feel like I take on a paternal role with them or at the very least the big brother role. I think they all feel very close in a kind of familial way (Interview, 17 August 2017).

Levi agreed that Jeremy is considered the group “dad”; he said, “We’ll make a joke . . . to everyone, Jeremy’s our dad. Just to be silly. But I mean he does play a very big—I wouldn’t say a parental role, that’ll probably make him feel weird, but people can go to him for things. And each other, we rely on each other” (Interview, 10 January 2018). Other than Jeremy being considered the dad of the group, group members do not usually assign other familial roles to other members. Eventually, Madi might come to be considered the group’s mother; she said, “There’s not a group mother, necessarily. I’ve joked and said I’m very motherly to the group [ . . . ] We defend our people for the most part. Kind of a familial looking out for each other” (Interview, 9 January 2018). Madi often cooks for group events, and feels as though she is very nurturing and provides a motherly sense of comfort and support. Even if the group does not use other familial language (ex. big brothers, big sisters), their interactions often reflect familial structures. For example, older group members or those farther along on their trans journey are often looked up to by newer members of the trans community; older members tend to take younger members under their wing, and are valuable sources of information, advice, and support for younger members.

It is important to revisit Noyes’ discussion of folk group as a dialectical tension between the community of the social imaginary and the empirical world of day-to-day network interaction (2003:33). TNB is an imagined community that conceives of themselves as a chosen family, and, in this imagining, TNB draws upon and identifies with idealized notions of family. The notion of *family* as described by TNB members is one they think *should* exist in the real world. However, families are rarely fully supportive and accepting of one another, and many do not provide its members with

emotional and material support. In the prologue to *Southern Folklore's* "Family Folklore Studies" issue, an anonymous writer states that their experience of their own family (complicated, sometimes contentious, disinterested, growing apart) did not align with folkloristic notions of an idealized family folk group. They said, "No one told me that growing up means growing apart. No one suggested that folk groups emerge and disappear according to circumstances and in response to needs" (1994:10). Instead, the writer argues, "a family is not a given, but a process, a constant renegotiation of identity and relationships. To believe otherwise . . . is to blind ourselves to how folklore actually works in families and to how families as folk groups – no matter how 'natural' or obvious they may seem to be – can dissolve and die" (10). Although we culturally conceive of the family unit as a strong, cohesive folk group, imbue it with social importance, and associate it with various positive characteristics, families frequently do not align with the familial ideal. Families are often complicated, non-democratic, and composed of contentious relationships. Many people do not view biological family members as the most important relationships in their life, and instead surround themselves with a chosen family of friends and romantic partners. TNB exists as a created, chosen family that embodies and attempts to replicate the group's idealized notions of family life and identity.

#### *Case Study: Transgiving*

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, members of TNB consistently referenced the group's Thanksgiving meal, referred to by group members as "Transgiving," as an important event in the group's history. In 2017, a few days before Thanksgiving, TNB

members gathered at Jeremy's house to share a meal and spend time together; Jeremy stated that Transgiving was "so much fun and it was such a happy, joyous thing."

According to Weston, the lack of familial acceptance is never so noticeable as during the holidays (1991:30); many queer people who have been rejected by their families (or whose families refuse to acknowledge their identity) feel exceptionally lonely during the holidays, and chosen families often hold their own holiday gatherings in order to fill the void of biological family (30-3). In "Why Queer People Need Chosen Family" (2017), Kyle Chu explains that many LGBTQ individuals still face personal discrimination, and may not be able to see family during Thanksgiving:

For the 39 percent of LGBTQ adults who have experienced rejection from a family member or friends, or the whopping 40 percent of homeless youth who identify as queer, Thanksgiving might mean not seeing one's biological family at all. The statistics are a stark reminder that many LGBTQ people, despite enjoying more rights and visibility than ever before, still deal with overwhelming amounts of personal homophobia and abuse.<sup>34</sup>

Joseph Goodwin also discussed the role of holiday celebrations; he said, "Traditional celebrations are also part of gay family life. Holidays, birthdays, and special events are all times for gay families to gather, just as other families do" (1994:43). Members of the Trans and Non-Binary Student Group reported high levels of familial rejection and experiences with transphobia. Although most members of the group went home for Thanksgiving, they often expected their interactions with family members to be painful and strained. Jeremy said that he decided to have the event because he knew that Thanksgiving would be difficult for some TNB members:

Some people came into the Pride Center and were saying "I don't have anywhere to go" [for Thanksgiving]. I knew that was the thing, but I was just like, "Well, I really..." It's so sad to think about that. And I was like, "Okay, we are going to have Thanksgiving then." So we went and ordered



food from Cracker Barrel. You know how they do Thanksgiving? So we got that, and then people brought—we got some extra stuff from KFC and we got—people brought cookies from Fresh [Foods at WKU]. It wasn't like a gourmet meal, but it was really good. We had a really fun time. We just fit everybody into my little house, which was not—I have a very small house, but we fit—I don't remember. It was like 20 something people, 30 people into my little house. And we all had dinner and it was very fun [ . . . ] Everyone really pulled—came through and helped out with it. It was my house and I ordered the food, but two members went and picked up the food. I wasn't able to be home until later, so they cooked it and prepared it all, and I just sat. I had to get the tables and stuff for people that didn't have any. But, yeah, everybody pitched in together for the most part (Interview, 9 March 2018).

Group members contributed food and labor to the event, and, although they only began planning the party a day earlier, the majority of the group cleared their schedules and attended the event. Thanksgiving seemed to strengthen the group's bonds and allowed them to feel a strong sense of togetherness. When asked how the group functions as a chosen family, many group members mentioned the importance of Thanksgiving and the way in which it felt like a family gathering. For example, Kanyon said, "We all just kind of hung out at Jeremy's house and talked and watched TV and ate. It was a family get together. That's what it was like. It was really welcoming, comforting hanging out with your family, if they were a good, supportive family of all trans kids" (Interview, 30 January 2018).

Jeremy stated that he, along with other group members, intentionally attempted to make Thanksgiving feel like a family gathering:

It definitely felt intentional because Thanksgiving—I know for me, I know for a lot of my members, it is uncomfortable. I still get misgendered at least once or twice every Thanksgiving dinner, every time my whole family is together. It happens at least a couple of times. And that sucks, you know. That sucks that Thanksgiving is supposed to be this very fun time where you're supposed to be around your family and enjoy it, and for so few queer people that's what it is. And so it was definitely intentional.

This is our family dinner, and we referred to it as a family dinner when we talked about it (Interview, 9 March 2018).

By intentionally creating a family environment, TNB members gave each other a memorable experience that could sustain them throughout the holidays. Transgiving occurred right before the group went home for WKU's Thanksgiving break, and many group members stated that it helped make time with biological family more manageable and enjoyable. Kanyon, who has had a strained relationship with their family since coming out, said that attending Transgiving helped ease some of their anxiety about going home; they said, "It helped, knowing that you just came from your REAL Thanksgiving, and now you're just having to put up with family. It's definitely like, 'I already had my holiday celebration. I don't need this to be what I want it to be. I've already had a great one' [ . . . ] It definitely helped with not really relying on the holidays to go easy because they've already gone easy" (Interview, 30 January 2018). For Kanyon, their *real* holiday celebration was Transgiving, where they could spend time with individuals who support and fully accept them. For Kanyon, as well as other group members, Transgiving functioned as a stress-free holiday gathering that stood in stark contrast with the more strained and stressful Thanksgiving celebration with biological family that several group members anticipated. Joseph Goodwin stated, "Perhaps the most significant difference between gay family holiday celebrations and those of heterosexual families is the substantially lower levels of stress when gay families gather" (1994:44). For group members who could not go home to see biological family during the holidays, Transgiving was their only chance to celebrate the holiday and spend time with people they care about. Sophia Arnold said, "It was a fantastic experience. You know, especially for me. I mean one, if my family hadn't completely disowned me, I'm

still not going back to Detroit for a four-day weekend. So just having someone to spend that time with—having people to spend those sorts of times with that are generally considered family time” (Interview, 15 January 2018).

Transgiving was successful because it brought group members together, allowed trans and non-binary folks to celebrate Thanksgiving in a way that did not force them to downplay, defend, or conceal their trans identities, and strengthened group unity through collective action. Jeremy stated that the group did not want the gathering to end; he said, “I had to just tell people to leave. No one would leave. I think it did mean a lot to people who didn’t have anywhere to go, to have something to do. And also, it was really good for new members that we have” (Interview, 9 March 2018). While group members frequently talk and hang out outside of weekly group meetings, whole group social events are rare. The success of the party, along with the comments regarding its importance by group members, demonstrate that group members truly consider themselves a chosen family, and desire experiences that promote group unity and cohesion.

### Trauma Support and Stigma Management

While the purpose of this study is not to speculate on the mental health of TNB members, many of the individuals that I interviewed discussed the ways in which participating in TNB helped manage trauma and mitigate the stigma they face as trans people. It is important to note that I am not a psychologist, and thus do not attempt to make broad statements regarding the trans community as a whole. Rather, I will use research gathered during fieldwork to support my observations of the group. It appears as though participating in TNB has improved the mental and, by extension, physical

wellbeing of some TNB members; this is accomplished by providing emotional support, allowing members a communicative outlet through which to discuss their experiences, and providing members the opportunity to be part of a community, which reduces loneliness and feelings of marginalization.

As previously discussed, transgender identities are incredibly stigmatized; trans individuals are often ostracized in heteronormative, cis society, and are also marginalized in the LGBTQIA+ community. Erving Goffman explains that, when an individual is recognized as having a stigmatizing characteristic, they are treated differently by society:

The actions we normals have toward a person with a stigma, and the actions we take in regard to him, are well known, since these responses are what benevolent social action is designed to soften and ameliorate. By definition, of course, we believe the person with the stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. We use specific stigma terms such as cripple, bastard, moron in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery, typically without giving thought to the original meaning. We tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one, and to impute some desirable but undesired attributes, often of a supernatural cast, such as “sixth sense,” or “understanding” (1963:5).

Trans people experience discrimination in most areas of daily life; living with such a highly stigmatized identity can be frustrating, isolating, and exhausting. Trans people often seek to surround themselves with other transfolk because they understand the difficulties inherent in inhabiting a stigmatized identity, and come together to commiserate and share support and advice. Joining a group of fellow trans people can radically change a person’s self-perception and view of the world. Goffman states that one of the groups that influence the stigmatized person’s personal point of view and

understanding of their social situation is the group of “fellow-sufferers,” or individuals that are stigmatized for the same reason:

The spokesmen of [the fellow-sufferers] claim that the individual’s real group, the one to which he *naturally* belongs, is this group. All the other categories and groups to which the individual necessarily also belongs are implicitly considered to be not his real ones; he is not really one of them. The individual’s real group, then, is the aggregate of persons who are likely to have to suffer the same deprivations as he suffers because of having the same stigma; his real “group,” in fact, is the category which can serve as his discrediting (112-13).

Individuals living with stigmatized identities often feel as though they are not fully welcomed in the world of “normals.” By intentionally joining a group consisting of other stigmatized individuals, a stigmatized person both discredits their own stigmatized identity (“outing” themselves as gay, trans, etc.) and enters a space and community in which their identity is no longer stigmatized. In Joseph Goodwin’s study of gay men in the 80s, he explained that joining the gay community involves accepting a stigmatized identity, but is also a way to mitigate stigma:

Gay acculturation involves a degree of dissimilation from the straight world. Gay acculturation is voluntary; it is sought rather than imposed, and membership in the dominant culture is almost always retained. Seeking membership in the subculture entails accepting the stigma associated with homosexuality, if only to fight the resulting oppression. Since no prestige and no economic benefits are associated with affiliation with the subculture, we must assume that the pressure of conflict and the need to be with like-minded others are stronger than the stigma and that sharing the stigma makes it less troublesome (1989:78-9).

In much the same way, joining the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group involves accepting a stigmatized identity; although TNB is a private group, the group itself is visible within the community, and TNB members often publicly discuss their participation in the group. Despite the fact that joining the group means accepting the stigma associated with being trans, surrounding oneself with a supportive community of

other trans people can be an effective method of fighting stigma. Goodwin explains that, when members of a marginalized community come together, they experience a sense of cohesion. Goodwin states, “Cohesion results in a support system for coping with conflicts between the subculture and the majority culture. At the same time, conflict reinforces cohesion, causing people to unite when facing a common foe” (xiv). During TNB meetings, members are able to discuss various issues related to being trans—many of which are the result of conflicts between transfolk and the dominant culture. The desire of marginalized groups to form a subculture is not unique to the trans and non-binary community, and it is not even unique to subgroups within the queer community. For example, in *Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth, and the Politics of Stigma* (2014), Jason Whitesel explores Girth & Mirth, a group of fat gay men who formed a community to support and celebrate fat gay men, a group that is heavily stigmatized within the queer community:

According to a longstanding theoretical paradigm in sociology, symbolic interactionism, people sometimes foray into a subculture in response to feeling relegated to the margins, which is indeed the case in big men’s seeking out companionship at Girth & Mirth . . . many of them shared with me stories of how they almost gave up on finding happiness as gay big men before they encountered the safe space of Girth & Mirth (2014:10-11).

Through coming together to form supportive communities, members of marginalized groups create built-in systems of comfort and support, often boosting the social, mental, and physical health of group members.

According to Whitesel, one of the most important functions of Girth & Mirth is that it provides a space in which members are not solely defined by their weight and sexual orientation. He said, “I reflect on the club as both a physical space for socializing

and as an abstract, psychological space—or sanctuary—that allows big men to experience normalcy in a size-conscious world” (25). Whitesel continues, “Because many people at the Girth & Mirth bar night are big, men’s ample size gets established as a baseline, so that they are able to focus on and accentuate other aspects of themselves. When big men can move beyond being evaluated by their body shape and size, they are finally able to be ‘regular guys’” (128). In the same way, TNB meetings provide a space in which members are not constantly reminded of their stigmatized identities. In a space where everyone is trans or non-binary, members are able to relax and focus on other things. While the group often discusses topics related to trans identities, individuals are able to discuss their experiences without feeling alone in their transness or fearing criticism or discrimination by others. Jeremy acknowledged the importance of shared identities and experiences, and said that group members feel as though they can discuss difficult topics in an understanding space:

I think it’s a reprieve from isolation. So often, and in any other scenario or environment, you’re the only transgender person. And just being able to comfortably exist with another person, a group of people, is such a huge deal and I think that being able to talk about—we’ve all experienced a lot of similar things, so I know if you talk about suicidality with people who’ve never experienced that kind of thing, the whole conversation becomes about, “Oh, don’t do that. We’ll miss you so much,” and stuff like that. When we talk about suicidality, you’re allowed to just talk about it and it doesn’t have to be weird and it doesn’t have to be an awkward conversation. Same thing with a lot of medical stuff and body things and health things and things that worry you about your experiences in school and stuff where it’s like, you don’t have to explain it and try and justify it. You can just say it. I think that’s really valuable and that’s not an environment that trans people are usually in (Interview, 9 March 2018).

To Jeremy, the fact that transgender/non-binary identities are established as a baseline during TNB meetings can help group members feel less alone. Because group members often have similar life experiences and have experienced similar emotions, they are able

to discuss topics that cisgender people might not understand or might react negatively towards. Jeremy stated that, generally, trans people are able to understand each other in a way that cis people cannot:

I remember when I was dealing with my family, I was constantly being told, “Well, you know that they love you and it’s just going to take them a little while. I just really believe that they’re going to come back around.” And that’s so offensive when you’re dealing with it, when someone is just telling you, “You know, your mom—your family is going to be fine about it. They’re going to turn around.” Maybe they won’t, and cis people constantly—it’s so hard for nonqueer people to understand that maybe they just won’t be okay with it, but when we talk about, not only is there an understanding that maybe they’re just not going to come around and you just have to accept that as a reality. It’s not healthy to hang on this hope that might not come through. But also we just say, “Yeah, that’s shitty that they’re treating you like that. You don’t deserve to be treated like that.” I think that that makes a big difference. It shouldn’t be on the shoulder of the person being rejected to mend those relationships (Interview, 9 March 2018).

While cis people may attempt to reassure trans people that their situations will ultimately improve, some know that their families will never fully accept them. In many cases, trans people do not want reassurance; rather, they seek an accurate understanding of their situation, and a realistic response from their audience.

Jeremy stated that attending TNB meetings helps members realize they are not alone, develop confidence in themselves and their identities, and become advocates for themselves and transfolk in general:

I think, you know, just being able to see another transgender person who is alive and doing it, you know, just whatever it is. Even if they aren’t doing well. Just seeing them making it and pushing forward. When you’re going through a hard time, that’s very encouraging. And, a lot of times, it makes us—it teaches us resiliency through how much we care about the other person. It’s easier to say that, “oh, that person’s saying—that person is misgendering you. You should say something. You don’t deserve to be treated like that.” That’s much easier to say to another person than to turn on yourself. Like “oh, I shouldn’t be treated like that. I don’t deserve to be treated like that.” And sometimes you can get to that point through



realizing that the people you care about don't deserve to be treated badly [ . . . ] I have [noticed changes among group members]. [Anonymous group member], he's gotten really involved with like SGA and things like that. And I think it's made a lot of people feel a little bit more engaged on campus [ . . . ] I think that's been good for people to have that. That kind of anchor on campus [ . . . ] some members who are like feeling more motivated by their presentation, and want to contribute more to the group. Especially after we had our Cleve Jones talk. When Cleve Jones came, several members talked about how that was so invigorating to them. And how they really want to feel more involved and do more for the community after that (Interview, 9 March 2018).

By listening to the experiences of others and encouraging other members to advocate for themselves, members of TNB strengthen their sense of self-worth and develop skills for self-advocacy. As a result of being part of a strong community, some group members become interested in advocacy work, joining the WKU Student Government Association to support diversity and inclusion, and becoming active members of the social justice community.

Because coming out and living openly as trans can be a traumatic and painful experience, members of TNB attempt to anticipate the needs of members and provide them with a strong social support system that can compensate for the rejection they experience from family and friends. Jeremy said, "I think that people being able to come in and know immediately, more than anything, that they're anticipated, and that there is a community there ready for them. It instantly changes the feeling of a campus" (Interview, 17 August 2017). The group also attempts to prepare a supportive reaction for group members who choose to come out. Levi stated, "I think they were here at the beginning to prevent me feeling like there was any trauma. It was more of like a celebration. Like when I came out they were like 'Yay! We're proud of you.' Stuff like that [ . . . ] I think it is a place to celebrate coming out, or help you heal if it was a bad experience coming

out” (Interview, 10 January 2018). While coming out is often a traumatic experience for group members, TNB turns coming out into a celebration, alleviating some of the trauma that members might experience.

While its effectiveness cannot be measured, group members often emphasized the importance of simply being able to talk about difficult experiences with an understanding audience. During TNB meetings, individuals are able to discuss whatever they want, and group members listen attentively and provide encouragement. This format has been frequently employed by oppressed communities, such as the consciousness-raising rap groups discussed by Susan Kalčik in “‘ . . . like Ann’s gynecologist or the time I was almost raped’: Personal Narratives in Women’s Rap Groups” (1975). In the rap groups Kalčik studied, group members shared personal narratives in an open format in order to cope with systemic oppression. In much the same way, members of TNB share personal stories and, through telling personal narratives and listening to the narratives of others, group members are able to better deal with trauma and stigmatization. Jeremy said that group meetings may help members deal with trauma:

I hope [group meetings] are reassuring to them. We are coming into so many different experiences, but I think that there are several people who have experienced different types of trauma, so it can be nice to connect to someone and talk about those things with them while not worrying about how they’re going to interpret your gender and stuff like that. So I think that’s nice. I can imagine that makes it easier to deal with trauma. And it can also be nice to talk about trans-specific types of trauma (Interview, 9 March 2018).

Jeremy stated that he could only think of one or two of the group’s 40 members who have had a positive experience coming out to their family, and Madi estimated that approximately 50% of group members had been completely ostracized from their families. Because of this, it is likely that a majority of group members are dealing with

some type of trauma. Although talking about traumatic experiences does not necessarily improve one's mental health, many group members stated that discussing their experiences with fellow transfolk has been beneficial.

While the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group seeks to provide an emotional support system for members, it does not attempt to replace the importance of mental health care. Jeremy explicitly encourages TNB members to seek treatment from therapists as needed:

I think some of the stuff that we've done behind the scenes with different offices, particularly the Counseling and Testing Center, I think has been really beneficial. One of the big things I wanted to make really important in the group is being able to make talking about mental health normal. It doesn't have to be—you don't have to be embarrassed about going to a therapist. And so we talk really openly about that, about who's good, who we go to (Interview, 17 August 2017).

The group does not attempt to replace mental health care, but instead tries to normalize discussions of mental health and help connect group members to trans-friendly therapists and counselors. Therapists might also recommend that trans WKU students join TNB; for example, one member stated that she began coming to meetings after her therapist encouraged her to attend, demonstrating that some therapists might believe TNB complements traditional mental health treatment.

Various members of the Transgender and Non-Binary Group have stated that attending group meetings has positively impacted their mental health. For example, Madi stated that she decided to come out as trans because it was emotionally damaging to have to conceal her trans identity or to not be able to present as a woman (Interview, 9 January 2018). Joining TNB, participating in the group, and receiving the support of other group members helped Madi gain the strength and resources needed to come out, which helped

alleviate some of the dysphoria she experienced and drastically improved her mental health. Another consultant, Sophia, stated that attending TNB meetings helped her deal with trauma by letting her know she was not alone; she said, “[It helped] just realizing that I’m not alone and not some weirdo with problems” (Interview, 15 January 2018). By providing each other with the knowledge and resources needed to come out, TNB helps individuals empower themselves, and potentially alleviate trans-related stigma and dysphoria. By openly discussing personal experiences and mental health struggles, TNB members with depression, anxiety, or dysphoria feel supported and less alone.

### Conclusion

The WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Group is a democratic, student-led organization that supports and advocates for trans students. The group has created a strong community that fully supports its members, offering them a safe space in which they can feel secure and validated in their trans identities. Weekly group meetings allow members to freely discuss their experiences with each other, and receive advice and support from other trans people who have had similar experiences. The group is so close that members consistently refer to it as a chosen family; group members consider their relationships to be deeper than friendship, and describe feeling a kinship with other members. Group members provide emotional and financial support, often live together, and help connect other members with jobs, resources, and information, much like they think a biological family would. The emotional support provided by the group often helps members manage stigma and trans-related trauma; group members are able to discuss difficult experiences with an understanding audience, the group provides members with

realistic insight and advice, and at weekly meetings group members find a psychological respite from the outside world, in which TNB members are often defined solely by their trans identities. Group membership has continued to grow, and the group successfully retains its membership. Given the group's willingness to adapt, grow, and respond to the needs of individual members, it is likely that TNB will continue to be an important part of the LGBTQIA+ community at WKU.

## Conclusion

This project explores various topics related to transgender identities and communities from a folkloristic perspective. Through a combination of ethnographic and secondary research, I studied transgender coming out narratives, trans media representation, transgender performance and identity, and conceptualizations of group and chosen family in a community of trans students, the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group. This thesis is an attempt to contribute a folklorist's perspective to the field of transgender studies through analyses of narrative, identity, performance, and group. I hope that my research constitutes a foundation for further scholarship.

The three chapters of my thesis attempt to address some of the traditional milestones of a trans person's acculturation: coming out, constructing one's newly discovered trans identity, and finding community. In Chapter 1, I discuss coming out as transgender. I explore the differences between coming out as trans and coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual as a cisgender person. Coming out as trans is described by consultants as more difficult, dangerous, and time consuming than coming out as LGB; trans people generally have to answer insulting or intrusive questions, and are often burdened with the responsibility of educating friends and family members about transgender issues. I also discuss different types of coming out, and explore various functions of coming out within trans communities. I explain the difference between *declaring* and *disclosing* one's trans identity, which depends on whether an individual is living openly as trans or is passing as cis. For some individuals, coming out as LGB functions as a transitional identity, allowing them to try out membership in the LGBTQIA+ community along with various styles of dress and gender performance

before ultimately coming out as trans. Coming out is also a means of coming *in* to one's new trans identity, and the construction of a trans identity is often described as meaningful and artistic. While coming out functions as a rite of passage for lesbians and gays, coming out as trans functions as a means of coming *in* to a trans community, as identifying as trans is one way in which to gain entrance into trans spaces. Because coming out as trans is understood as potentially dangerous and often emotionally damaging, many transfolk do not emphasize coming out as a necessity. Instead, trans people generally prioritize well-being and safety, and state that a trans person should not come out until they are ready. In addition to recognizing the difficulty and danger inherent in coming out, transfolk usually respect a trans person's decision to go "stealth," or to attempt to pass as cisgender; while my consultants often stated that living openly as trans may be politically beneficial for the advancement of trans acceptance and trans rights, they recognize that some trans individuals may choose to go stealth in order to avoid discrimination and stigma. Finally, I discuss the way in which coming out as trans is often used to counter dominant narratives related to coming out and the trans experience. Amy Shuman's work on narrative and counternarrative in *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (2005), along with Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure, factor heavily into my discussion.

In Chapter 2, I explore media representation of the trans community and transgender presentation. In order to better explain ideas of presentation and performance, I discuss Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender as performance, as presented in Butler's groundbreaking *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Because Butler's notion of gender as performance has frequently been

weaponized by trans-exclusive radical feminists, I confront potential misrepresentations of Butler's work by providing my own interpretations of its implications, as well as Butler's response to those who have previously misunderstood or misconstrued her research. I discuss notions of what it means to "look" and "be" trans, as discussed by members of TNB, the trans community more broadly, and the general cis population. While stereotypical portrayals of transfolk in the media and popular culture often value those who are cis-passing, opinions of what it means to successfully be trans vary between trans people. While some value passing and prefer to pass as cis, others emphasize the idea that there is no one way to "look" or "be" cis, and support those who do not comfortably align with binary gender performance and categorization. Many of my consultants cannot or do not want to pass as cis, and I explain how the pressure and expectation for trans people to pass can be frustrating, limiting, and emotionally damaging for these individuals.

In Chapter 2, I also discuss the role of trans media representation. The extent to which the media influences the construction of LGBTQIA+ identities is unclear, but I note research that demonstrates a correlation between media representation and identity construction. I discuss trans media representation, and explain that, for some of my consultants, the first time they learned about the existence of transfolk was on television, often on tabloid television shows. These shows provided a mostly negative, highly stereotypical introduction to trans identities. Trans media representation has increased in recent years, with various television shows featuring trans main characters. I explore how trans media representation often reinforces transnormative notions of transgender performance, which value passing and, often, heterosexuality. For many trans people,



media representation of trans identities leaves much to be desired. In the absence of adequate and accurate trans media representation, transfolk often seek out alternative sources of information and representation. The internet is a valuable resource for trans people, and transfolk often seek out more varied trans representation on social networking sites like Tumblr, YouTube, and Instagram. Online forums like Reddit facilitate the creation of online groups of trans people, which can be used to share information and personal experience narratives. It is often difficult for young trans people to find reliable information about living as trans, and the internet allows individuals to connect and share information that is unmediated by pop culture, medical professionals, and other dominant cultural forces. As a case study, I explore the way in which Kanyon McKee uses *Homestuck* cosplay, fanfiction, and fan art to create alternate sources of trans media representation. I cite works on cosplay and fandoms by folklorists Bill Ellis (2015) and Matthew Hale (2014) that focuses on issues of community, presentation, and identity. For Kanyon, engaging with the *Homestuck* fandom through cosplay, fan art, and fanfiction allowed them to create alternate forms of trans representation that more accurately represents trans experiences, improve their artistic abilities, creatively reimagine characters in a way that reaffirms their identity, and, through cosplay, experiment with gender presentation in a way that feels safe and comfortable for them.

Chapter 3 is focused entirely on the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group. I engage with folkloristic understandings of folk group, especially Dorothy Noyes' discussion of folk group, network, and community (2003). I describe group structure and leadership, activities and events, goals and concerns, and the various emotional and material resources provided for/by group members. I mention the

significance of TNB as a “safe space” in which members are able to comfortably exist as trans without having to conceal or explain their identities. Group members regularly describe TNB as a chosen family, and explain that their place in TNB’s chosen family has helped members compensate for and cope with familial strain and rejection. I incorporate previous scholarly work on chosen families, including anthropologist Kath Weston’s *Families We Choose* (1991) and folklorist Joseph Goodwin’s work on gay families (1994). I explain that, in their enactment of chosen family, TNB draws upon idealized notions of biological family (ex. that they are unconditionally loving and accepting) that rarely exist in reality. To help illustrate the way in which TNB functions as a chosen family, I use a group holiday celebration, Transgiving, as a case study. For trans people, holidays can often be the source of much strain, anxiety, pain, and frustration. TNB’s Thanksgiving celebration allowed group members to attend a stress-free, gender-affirming holiday party with friends and chosen family members. For many, attending Transgiving helped group members feel more supported, confident, and resilient before gathering with biological family. Finally, I discuss the way in which the group helps members deal with trauma and mitigate stigma. I discuss Erving Goffman’s work on stigma (1963), as well as scholarly work that specifically addresses stigma and the LGBTQIA+ community, including the work of Joseph Goodwin (1989) and Jason Whitesel (2014). Although TNB does not attempt to replace professional mental health treatment, the group attempts to address the mental/emotional needs of members by providing a safe, gender-affirming space in which individuals can support each other and discuss their experiences; empowering group members to advocate for themselves and each other; discussing mental health issues in an open, encouraging format, and

connecting group members with mental health resources. Because of the closeness of the group and the variety of emotional and material resources it provides, the group is and will likely continue to be of immense importance to group members.

My thesis was heavily informed by fieldwork, and I adhered strictly to the field's ethnographic methodologies. I ultimately conducted thirteen interviews for this project. Ten of these interviews were with members of the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, while the remaining three were conducted with individuals outside of WKU. I interviewed six members of TNB, and conducted follow-up interviews with two members, Kanyon McKee and Jeremy McFarland. I believe that my project would have benefited from a greater number of interviews; however, due to time constraints and the unwillingness of many group members to speak to outsiders, I believe that the amount of fieldwork I was able to complete is acceptable given the circumstances. While there are 40 active group members, only 15-20 regularly attend group meetings, and all of the individuals that I interviewed are regular or semi-regular group attendees. For this reason, I feel as though the interviews that I conducted constitute a balanced perspective of regular group membership. I do not feel as though the interviews that I conducted adequately represent those that are only tangentially involved with the group, and thus my thesis does not attempt to address group outliers and less involved group members. Given more time and access to the group, I would have preferred to conduct between five and nine additional interviews. I would also like to have interviewed more trans women, non-binary members, and members that do not regularly attend group meetings. I think that interviewing more of these individuals would have given me a more comprehensive insight into the group.

The secondary research I conducted relied heavily on the work of other folklorists. Though folklorists have not contributed much to the field of transgender studies, I drew heavily upon research concerning folkloristic themes of narrative, performance, community, stigma, and identity. While my thesis is firmly founded on folklore scholarship and methodologies, I also incorporate work from other disciplines, including sociology, gender studies, queer studies, transgender studies, media studies, and anthropology. I believe that my work was considerably enhanced by the interdisciplinarity of my research. In addition to discussing research and methodologies, it is also important to address my own positionality as a folklorist and my final impressions of this research. I believe that my own identity as a queer person helped me more effectively access the group and communicate with group members. My foundational knowledge of LGBTQIA+ issues and my own life experiences as a queer person helped provide valuable insight and perspective into this research. Ultimately, I think that my position as a queer woman was beneficial to this study.

I learned a great deal about transgender communities and the experiences of trans folks throughout my research. The information that I gathered during fieldwork was of particular importance. When I started working on this project, my network consisted of very few transgender or non-binary friends and acquaintances. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I benefitted immensely from meeting other trans and non-binary folks, and from hearing their stories. I have been continually awed by the bravery and autonomy of my consultants. Working with members of the WKU Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group, in particular, has been a fulfilling, encouraging, and inspiring experience. I believe that the members of TNB have created something that is truly incredible – a

group of close-knit, like-minded individuals who strive to support each other materially and emotionally. The group's emphasis on equality, well-being, friendship, and resilience is exceedingly beneficial for group members, and stands as an example of what is achievable for other aspiring, student-led groups.

In 2014, *Time* magazine published an article titled “The Transgender Tipping Point” that argued that “another civil rights movement is poised to challenge long-held cultural norms and beliefs.” Trans actress Laverne Cox was featured on the cover of the issue, and the article sparked much discussion and debate. Author Katy Steinmetz cited recent legislative victories, as well as the fact that more and more trans people are coming out and living openly as trans, as an indication that the tide was turning on transgender rights and societal acceptance. However, many scholars, journalists, and trans people have noted that the “transgender tipping point” was really no tipping point at all, and the media visibility of trans folks in 2014 has led to a cultural and political backlash. For example, Samantha Allen, writing for *The Daily Beast*, explained the way in which visibility has recently harmed the community:

Yes, transgender people are on TV now. But it's clearer now than it has ever been that visibility is no silver bullet for transphobia. “Emerging from the margins,” as transgender people were reportedly doing in 2014 according to that *Time* cover story, can be tantamount to placing a target on your own back. And the “new transparency” of 2014 has actually opened up transgender people's lives to an unprecedented new level of legislative scrutiny. This—as we've learned the hard way—can lead to discriminatory anti-LGBT bills that are cruel in their attention to detail: requiring “original” birth certificates because anti-LGBT groups know that transgender people can often update theirs; defining gender by chromosomes because they know that transgender people can change sex characteristics with hormones and surgery; even effectively placing a “bounty” on transgender people who use the appropriate restrooms because they know that the bills would be all but unenforceable without financial incentives for citizens to sniff transgender people out (2017).

While many in 2014 had heralded increased societal acceptance of trans people and an expansion of transgender rights, these hopes have been dashed by the current political climate. Despite this disappointment, most trans individuals have chosen to continue to resist these negative social and political consequences, and to fight for transgender rights. Joseph Goodwin (1989) explains that gay men, resisting stigma and social rejection, often felt an increased desire to experience group cohesion, and to surround themselves with other gay people. In the same way, trans individuals across the country are coming together to form groups to resist political and social discrimination, and to provide each other with emotional support. Given the transitional, intense, and rapidly evolving state of the transgender community, I believe that it is important for folklorists to continue researching and working with trans individuals, as folklorists have frequently engaged with themes of identity, community, stigma, narrative, resistance, and the folklore and creativity of grassroots protest.

In my work, there are numerous avenues of further research that can be further explored. In *More Man Than You'll Ever Be!: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America* (1989), Joseph Goodwin provides an in-depth analysis of gay folklore. While my thesis is based on folklore scholarship, I do not deeply delve into trans folklore on a general level. However, trans folklore is vibrant and extensive, encompassing jokes, folk language, beliefs, etc. that should be further documented and studied. Another issue that I have considered is the experience of rural transfolk. While many of my consultants come from rural areas, few of them mentioned rurality as an important part of their identity or life experience. However, the work of media studies scholar Mary Gray (*Out in the Country* [2009] and *Queering the Countryside* [2016]) indicates that the experience of

rural queer youth is quite different than their urban counterparts. Gray explains that, for rural queer youth, the media is often one of their only ways of learning about and accessing queer culture. Because Gray's research does not include many trans consultants, a similar study of rural trans youth would be beneficial.

While I briefly discussed the importance of social media and the internet for trans people, I believe that this can be much more deeply explored. There are numerous online communities of trans and non-binary individuals, centered around a variety of topics including shared interests, activist efforts, and information and resource exchange. For example, some of my consultants mentioned that the internet is a valuable source of information regarding trans health and issues related to transition, including hormone replacement therapy and gender reassignment surgery. I am currently working on a paper about the way in which trans people use the internet to share research and information that is otherwise inaccessible for them; trans people regularly use online forums or support groups to share personal experience narratives related to their transition, and use photo and video sharing sites like YouTube, Tumblr, and Instagram to visually document their daily lives and trans journeys. Transfolk also use the internet as a means of educating each other about trans history and memorializing trans victims of violence. The actions of trans activists have, in large part, been forgotten or overshadowed by other members of the LGBTQIA+ community and the cis population. Contemporary popular media often ignores the widespread violence against trans individuals, and many trans people seem to believe that the media is intentionally ignoring an epidemic of violence against transfolk. On websites like Tumblr, trans people remind other members of the LGBTQIA+ community that trans women led the revolutionary Stonewall riots of 1969. Kanyon

McKee, for example, said, “Recently, I’ve seen a lot of posts reblogging special events, like historical events. ‘This was started by like a trans, black woman. This was done by a black woman of color who was also trans . . . there’s people who will try to erase trans voices. So it’s very important to try and find any history you can and share it” (Interview, 18 August 2017). Kanyon also stated that, on Tumblr, trans people memorialize murdered trans individuals, many of whom are trans women of color. They said, “I know on Tumblr . . . people all see and [are] reblogging, ‘These are their names. These are their faces. These are the people who have died. This is who they were. Recognize that these are the people who are dead because of the society that we live in.’” Kanyon continued, “We have to remember each other. It’s like Trans Day of Remembrance is constant with us” (Interview, 18 August 2017). These examples of folk history and folk memorial are interesting, meaningful, and worthy of further investigation.

In addition to these specific areas of further research, there are a few general topics that warrant further investigation. I believe that issues of race and class are important to consider when studying trans communities. Because the majority of TNB group members are white and middle class, I did not have the opportunity to interview any transgender person of color. Trans people of color, especially trans women, experience higher rates of violence and discrimination than other members of the trans community. It is incredibly important to better understand and document their experiences. Since most members of TNB were also middle class, I similarly did not have an opportunity to explore issues of class in this study. Despite this, it is important to keep issues of class in mind while studying trans communities, as transitioning is often an expensive and time-consuming process requiring access to financial resources and



insurance. Additionally, trans people often experience discrimination in the workplace, and have higher rates of homelessness, poverty, and unemployment than the general population. A comprehensive understanding of trans individuals will only be possible after issues of race and class are considered.

This thesis constitutes a folkloristic investigation of topics related to trans communities and identities. My research utilizes folklore scholarship in order to better analyze and understand coming out as trans, transgender presentation, trans media representation, stigma, trauma, and trans communities. While my work has covered a variety of topics, there are clearly various avenues of further research. Folklorists have much to contribute to queer studies, and *should* use their platforms and expertise to document trans communities, amplify the voices and experiences of trans folks, and provide a person-centered, ethnographic approach to a national debate that often generalizes and conflates trans experiences.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I am intentionally using the singular “they” (they/them/their/theirs) as a gender neutral pronoun. The use of they/them pronouns is quite common amongst non-binary individuals.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use phrases like “the transgender community,” “the LGBTQIA+ community,” “the trans experience,” and “the transgender identity.” These terms are often used because LGBTQIA+ individuals often share many experiential similarities, and transfolk often have similar life experiences. However, I do not mean for these phrases to imply that *every* trans person or *every* LGBTQIA+ person has the same opinions or life experiences. While it is often useful to use these terms to refer to the experiences and opinions of *most* or *many* transfolk, these phrases have many limitations and cannot apply to everyone.

<sup>3</sup> LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual, and is used as an umbrella term to represent the entire community. Throughout the paper, LGBTQIA+ may be shortened to LGBT (both are still commonly used by scholars), or LGBTQIA+ individuals may be referred to as “the queer community,” but unless otherwise specified, these terms refer to individuals who have non-hegemonic sexualities and/or gender identities.

<sup>4</sup> Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was the official United States policy on the military service of LGBTQIA+ individuals, and was in effect from December 21, 1993 to September 20, 2011. The policy banned lesbians, gays, and bisexuals from serving openly in the military, but also prohibited discrimination against closeted LGB individuals. The policy allowed LGB individuals to serve in the military provided they did not disclose their LGB identity or were not “outed” by others.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this thesis, I will use an ellipses [ . . . ] when integrating quotes from consultants. The ellipses indicate that some information, or some part of a consultant’s statement, has been omitted. I occasionally choose to omit part of a consultant’s statement in order to ensure that quotes are clear, concise, and relevant.

<sup>6</sup> Though transfolk frequently state that trans individuals are not required to come out, many find that they must come out in order to live more comfortably as a trans person; this could include changing one’s name and preferred pronouns and changing various aspects of one’s gender presentation.

<sup>7</sup> Because this study required individuals to self-report their trans status, it is possible that this statistic does not represent individuals who, for a variety of reasons, may have decided against disclosing their trans identity.

<sup>8</sup> Ze and hir are popular gender-free pronouns within trans/non-binary communities, and are Z’s preferred pronouns.

<sup>9</sup> The asterisk after trans (trans\*) is intended to represent all identities within the gender identity spectrum (ex. genderqueer, third gender, genderfluid, non-binary, agender, etc.). Trans activists have frequently debated the use and necessity of the asterisk. Some use trans\* in an effort to be more inclusive, while others argue that the word trans is itself an umbrella term, and thus already includes all non-cis gender identities.

<sup>10</sup> Although Kanyon does not explicitly state that sexism often influences these encounters, it is clear that Kanyon has observed that those who present as masculine or who are read as male are more likely to be heard and respected.

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<sup>11</sup> A list of the Trump administration’s actions against transgender people can be found here:

National Center for Transgender Equality. 2018. The Discrimination Administration: Trump’s Record of Action Against Transgender People. *National Center for Transgender Equality*. <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>

<sup>12</sup> According to Labov and Waletzky, abstracts are short, summarizing statements, and are not required for narrative coherence. Some of the narratives that I collected have abstracts, while others do not. Because of this, I decided against including abstracts in my narrative analysis. The orientation introduces the story, including who the story is about/involves, and where and when the story takes place. The complication constitutes the bulk of a story’s plot, while the resolution of a story refers to the way in which a story ends. An evaluation addresses the “so what” question of the story, explaining why the story was told and why it is important. Finally, the coda signals that the story has come to an end, and facilitates a transition back into regular conversation.

<sup>13</sup> Telling narratives of traumatic experiences does not necessarily help an individual deal with trauma, but many of my consultants mentioned the way in which sharing their experiences with others was beneficial for their mental health. I will be discussing the way in which my consultants use narrative to mitigate stigma and trauma in Chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> According to Julian Kevon Glover, transnormativity is the idea that trans people will be accepted into dominant society “by situating their gender embodiment, grooming practices, physical appearance, sexual practices, and sexuality (heterosexual preferably) alongside heteronormative standards and respectable behaviors” (2016: 344).

<sup>15</sup> The use of the word “transition” is revealing, and implies a normative assumption that an individual will move from one gender category to another. Thus, in discussing a change in one’s gender identity, transnormativity is linguistically reinforced.

<sup>16</sup> Many health insurances refuse to cover gender reassignment surgery or hormone replacement therapy. Health insurances that *do* cover trans-related medical treatments often require patients to receive letters from mental health professionals and fulfill other prerequisites. Fulfilling these prerequisites and undergoing a transition process often becomes quite expensive; an individual may need to pay co-pays for visits to doctors and mental health professionals, cover transportation costs to and from office visits, pay for prescription medication, and take off work for office visits and surgery.

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that, in some cases, cis-passing trans people are often stigmatized for conforming to traditional notions of gender. For example, Jeremy McFarland, who has had gender reassignment surgery, stated that he sometimes feels as though there is a backlash among people who have physically transitioned: “If I’m being honest, at times, there’s a kind of backlash against being binary trans too. Not in the same degree that I’m sure non-binary people experience in the inverse. That’s definitely stronger . . . But I think that at times, I feel like I’m made to feel that because I want it to be—I went through certain surgeries and stuff that maybe—that makes—that means that I feel inadequate or that I have some kind of shame about being transgender or something . . . It’s frustrating at times because—like I said, whenever I was first coming out, I made a point about not being this binary masculine because I’m fully aware that I’m never going to be a cisgender man. I don’t, and this is just me personally—a lot of transgender people feel differently—I have no interest in being a cisgender man. . . but sometimes, especially leading up to surgeries and stuff, I get a little prickly about it where I see a lot of things—it makes me feel like other transgender people think that I’m trying to fit into something, but I’m not. I’m just doing what I want to do” (Interview, 17 August 2017).

<sup>18</sup> In “The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity” (2011), written by Sarah C. Gomillion and Traci A. Giuliano, the authors include a lengthy literature review of previous studies examining the relationship between media representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals and the development of queer identities. Gomillion and Giuliano cited research conducted by Phillip Hammack (2005), which proposes a framework for GLB identity development and argues cultural factors (such as the media) may influence an individual’s self-perceptions (2011:331). Cheryl A. Parks (1999) highlighted parallels between sexual identity development (ex. the timing of an individual’s coming out) and the cultural context in which an individual matured (2011:331). The work of Larry Gross (2001) has “pointed to the importance of media figures in shaping GLB identity” (2001:333). Other work (Ochman 1996) has demonstrated a correlation between positive role models and high self-esteem, especially when the individual shares many characteristics with the role model. The influence of the internet should also be acknowledged; Gray (2009) argues that the online world should be viewed as intimately interwoven with the offline world, and that viewing the media as simply a contagion limits our understanding of its sphere of influence (2009:1168). Because our society has heavily integrated internet use into daily life, it is nearly impossible to determine the extent to which it informs behavior and identity.

<sup>19</sup> This portrayal was further complicated when Jeffrey Tambor, the actor who portrays lead character Maura Pfefferman, was accused of on-set sexual misconduct (Robinson 2017). Tambor ultimately left the show. While the show plans to continue without Tambor, it is unclear whether he will be replaced with a trans actor, or whether the show will attempt to change its direction or casting choices.

<sup>20</sup> Janet Mock is a writer, trans rights activist, journalist, and TV host. Mock has released two biographies about her life and her experience as a trans woman. Laverne Cox is an actress and trans rights activist; she is best known for her role in the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, where Cox plays a trans inmate. Both Mock and Cox are trans women of color, and both have had high profile heterosexual relationships.

<sup>21</sup> “Vloggers” is an abbreviated form of “video bloggers.”

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<sup>22</sup> Trans leaders like Laverne Cox prefer the term “possibility models,” which deemphasizes the influence of individual leaders and encourages trans people to broaden their understanding of their own potential.

<sup>23</sup> Fans often refer to “shipping” or say that they “ship” specific characters. The term “shipping” was derived from “relationship,” and refers to the desire of fans to see two (or more) characters in a relationship. While “shipping” may refer to platonic friendships, the term is most often used to discuss desired romantic relationships.

<sup>24</sup> A headcanon is a fan’s personal interpretation of a particular character or text. This includes a character’s backstory, sexuality, relationships with other characters, and gender identity.

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that, because the majority of my consultants are enrolled at WKU, many of them are able to eloquently articulate their experiences. My consultants also often engage with current trans and feminist discourse, and cite information learned in Gender and Women’s Studies classes. Other trans individuals who have not attended college may have different perspectives and experiences, and may narrate their experiences differently. Similarly, only a small percentage of my consultants have attended graduate school, and thus may not be able to engage with contemporary feminist and queer scholarship on the same level as those with graduate degrees.

<sup>26</sup> Although Jeremy is currently making an effort to delegate more responsibilities to other group members, he has been central to the group’s actions and decision-making processes for the entirety of the group’s existence. Jeremy is, thus, the only individual who can accurately and comprehensively describe the formation of the group, group infrastructure, and group activities. Because of this, the thoughts and opinions of Jeremy may seem overrepresented throughout the chapter. I have tried to incorporate the experiences and opinions of other group members whenever possible.

<sup>27</sup> When a trans person is “misgendered,” they have been referred to using incorrect pronouns. This is often an unpleasant or triggering experience for transfolk, and it demonstrates that one’s trans identity has not been acknowledged/accepted.

<sup>28</sup> A “dead name” is the name that was assigned to a trans person at birth. Because names are often associated with a particular gender, trans people often choose new names after coming out. Transfolk often view the choosing of a new name as an important, artistic part of constructing one’s trans identity. Trans people generally ask friends and family to stop using their dead names because they no longer identify with them. Sometimes, friends, family members, and acquaintances will refuse to stop using a trans person’s dead name, which can be a painful and dehumanizing experience for transfolk.

<sup>29</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, members of the Transgender and Non-Binary Student Group have discussed the various obstacles that trans people face upon coming out, and consistently state that no person should feel obligated to come out. Despite the fact that coming out is often difficult and emotionally painful for transfolk, TNB recognizes that many trans people *want* to come out, and work to create a support system for those who choose to come out and live openly as trans.

<sup>30</sup> In an attempt to document all of the resources provided by TNB, I will list all resources mentioned during the course of my fieldwork: binders (used by trans men to compress chest), gaffs (used by trans women to tuck genitals), and other transitional apparel; used clothing for those desiring to dress as their preferred gender; legal name change assistance; support for the Bowling Green Fairness Ordinance and Student Government

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Association initiatives that affect trans and non-binary students; money for food and housing; health care and transportation fees; a list of trans-accepting doctors; a list of trans-accepting therapists; medical advice related to trans health issues; a PDF of gender neutral bathrooms on campus; online resources that explain the rights of trans students under Title IX, how to change your name on WKU documents, and how to explain your transgender identity to professors; help finding jobs and housing; a mental health/suicide prevention clinic facilitated by WKU's Counseling and Testing Center; a weekly forum to discuss positive experiences and concerns; regular entertainment and informational events; a significant amount of advice and emotional support.

<sup>31</sup> According to the 2015 U.S. Trans Survey, a report by the National Center for Transgender Equality, 29% of transgender people live in poverty (compared to 14% of the general population), 30% of trans people report being homeless at some point in their lives, the rate of unemployment for trans people is three times greater than the general population, and 30% of trans people report instances of discrimination in the workplace.

<sup>32</sup> A *Talisman* article announcing LGBT-friendly dorms can be found here:

<http://wkutalisman.com/lgbt-housing/>.

<sup>33</sup> *Paris is Burning* (1990) is an American documentary, created by Jennie Livingston. *Paris is Burning* documents the drag ball culture of New York, and focuses primarily on gay and transgender African-Americans and Latinx folk. Although the film is primarily remembered for its documentation of drag performances, many have noted its portrayal of the significance of chosen families in the LGBTQIA+ community. In an interview for *Artforum* with Liz Kotz, Judith Butler stated that she believes the chosen families presented in *Paris is Burning* are more subversive and revolutionary than drag: "The subversive part of what [Jennie Livingston in *Paris is Burning*] documents, for me, is in the 'house' structure, where there are 'mothers' and 'children,' and new kinship systems, which *do* mime older nuclear-family kinship arrangements but also displace them, and radically recontextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship, or that turns kinship into a notion of extended community – one whose future forms can't be fully predicted. What is a 'house'? A 'house' is the people you 'walk' with. I love it that that's a house. I think that's a great subversive rearticulation of houseness. And that's actually what I find affirmative in that film" (84).

<sup>34</sup> The article cited two sources during this section. The first source cited explained that 39% of LGBTQ adults have experienced rejection from family members or friends: Pew Research Center. 2013. A Survey of LGBT Americans. *Pew Research Center*.

<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>. The second source surveyed the homeless rates of trans teens: Seaton, Jamie. 2017. Homeless Rates for LGBT Teens Are Alarming, But Parents Can Make a Difference. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2017/03/29/homeless-rates-for-lgbt-teens-are-alarming-heres-how-parents-can-change-that/?utm\\_term=.10dfc40325d4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2017/03/29/homeless-rates-for-lgbt-teens-are-alarming-heres-how-parents-can-change-that/?utm_term=.10dfc40325d4).

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