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## Between Worlds, Between Times: Thinking with Trans Narratives at the Limits of Ontology and Temporality

Elden L. Yungblut, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Calcagno, Antonio, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Theory and Criticism

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# Between Worlds, Between Times: Thinking with Trans Narratives at the Limits of Ontology and Temporality

## Abstract

My thesis offers up an explicitly transfeminist mobilization of the theoretical notions of ontological pluralism and queer temporality against the pervasive cultural norm of cis-normativity and the dominant temporal logic of chrono-normativity. First, I critique the blatantly transphobic and fallacious rhetoric of Kathleen Stock, the face of the “gender critical” feminist movement in the UK, which I contextualize as part of a contemporary resurgence of the hateful legacy of trans-exclusion rooted in the second wave feminist movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s and cemented in academic theory by Janice Raymond’s (1979) *Transsexual Empire*. I then delve deeper, aiming to expose a subtle and under interrogated trend of transphobia and trans-resistant presuppositions endemic to Anglo-American and French feminist philosophy through an extended engagement with the work and thought of Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler. Next I trace an evolution of philosophical treatments of the notions of ontology and temporality, from the early groundbreaking interventions of Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger in the historically masculinist continental philosophical tradition, to the contemporary notions of ontological pluralism and queer temporalities. Finally, I engage in an affirmatively critical analysis of a selection of autoethnographic and autobiographical accounts of transsexual femininity and transfeminine transitioning. Ultimately I argue that the embracement of diverse and even seemingly conflictual narratives of gendered existence, including both transsexual narratives and narratives of gender variance or nonconformity – a possibility predicated on broadened and radically inclusive understandings of ontology and temporality – is crucial to both the theoretical goal of expanding and transforming hegemonic cultural understandings of gender in relation to personal identity, and to the political aim of fostering equitable and just conditions for persons who occupy nonhegemonic subject positions – specifically trans and nonbinary identities – in society.

## Keywords

Feminist Philosophy, Feminist Phenomenology, Ontological Pluralism, Queer Temporality, Queer Theory, Transfeminism, Transgender Studies

## Summary for Lay Audience

In my thesis I contend that the eradication of societal trans-resistance and transphobia depends in part upon embracing narratives of gendered experience which may depart from or conflict with conventional temporal and ontological norms. I start by exploring how the concepts of temporality (time) and ontology (the study of existence) have been dealt with in the history of philosophy in order to show how current avenues of thought in the academic domains of queer theory and transgender studies can build on and amend early philosophical approaches to thinking about the human experience in new and productive ways. Specifically, I emphasize how the work and thought of current queer and trans theorists is paving a path toward more inclusive and less “normative” ways of understanding and conceptualizing how human beings exist, ontologically and temporally, as gendered beings with distinct and equally valid ways of self-identifying (i.e. “gender identities”).

## Acknowledgments

I humbly acknowledge, and pledge my fierce and undying solidarity to, the many scholars for whom the academic theorization of gender and sexuality is not a dispassionate or apolitical endeavour. Your smallest acts of resistance carry greater integrity and force than even the most violent attempts to silence or discredit them. Many thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Antonio Calcagno, and second reader, Dr. Wendy Pearson, for their thoughtful guidance and feedback during this process. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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# 1 Chapter One: Introduction: Gender and Subjectivity

## 1.1 Acknowledgment of Positionality

A desideratum of theoretical investigations of gender carried out by cisgender scholars or theorists is that they refrain from the presumption of “an insider’s view” (Lugones, 1990, p. 234)<sup>1</sup>. Engagement with trans self-narratives is unequivocally imperative to the avoidance of perpetuating the material harms which can result from the uncritical tendency to construe trans subjects as “purely manifestations of discourse” (Hayward, 2011, p. 234). Each of the major spheres of mainstream discourse have historically been complicit – formally and informally, directly and indirectly – in perpetrating a widespread, systematic assault on transness which has entailed the virtually ubiquitous exclusion and derision of trans identity and, correspondingly, the near total elision of lived trans experience, from every aspect of social, cultural, and political life.

As a consequence, trans people, particularly trans women, have long been subjected to various harmful and degrading stereotypes and false characterizations. In mainstream society, popular culture, and the fields of medicine and psychiatry, transness has been conflated with psychological and bodily abnormality, associated with self-deception or delusionality, and thought to imply sexual deviance or “inversion.”<sup>2</sup> Trans women have been labeled as “deceivers,”<sup>3</sup> depicted in film and television as mentally ill or psychotic<sup>4</sup>, and even viewed as

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<sup>1</sup> The basic dichotomy between “insiders” and “outsiders” will henceforth be a recurring theme and will serve to scaffold its central political demand that trans femininity be recognized universally and unconditionally in all areas of life as a valid subject position worthy of celebration and recognition in equal measure to its hegemonic and normative counterpart: the subject position of cisgender femininity. Moreover, I employ the notion of ontological pluralism to justify the major theoretical claim of the thesis that ostensibly disparate, mutually conflicting narrative models of gender can harmoniously coexist within both mainstream “worlds” and “worlds” outside the mainstream.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company, 1935); Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students* (London: Heinemann Medical Books, 1948).

<sup>3</sup> See Bettcher (2007).

<sup>4</sup> See Dry (2020).

dangerous, despite the documented reality that trans women themselves, particularly Black trans women, face an extremely disproportionate rate of fatal violence at the hands of a transphobic and trans-resistant public.<sup>5</sup> In the recent history of feminist thought itself, trans women have been deliberately misgendered, accused of inauthenticity, and denied a prominent place within debates and discussions concerning women in general. In a particularly heinous show of transphobic prejudice, Janice Raymond (1979) attempts to charge all trans women with defiling the very symbolic image of the “female body.” She famously writes, in *The Transsexual Empire*, that “[a]ll transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves” (Raymond, 1979, p. 104). Disappointingly, transsexuality and gender variance have been routinely and frequently mischaracterized and misapprehended in these and similar ways in even progressive sociopolitical, legal, and academic discourses of both late- and post-modernity, including many current mainstream gender and queer theoretical discourses. At the root of the problem is, arguably, the extreme degree of cultural unintelligibility, or illegibility, associated with trans identity in the public view – which is to say, plainly and simply, that trans women as a group are in danger of being seen as not *fully* or *really* subjects.

In the face of this bleak reality, a vast and growing body of literature and theory also exists under the heading of “transgender studies,” a domain of scholarship spurred on by the early work of vanguard thinkers such as Sandy Stone, a woman whose gender identity leaves her vulnerable to the harmful, potentially lethal, effects of systemic and interpersonal transmisogyny and transphobia. It is my intention to engage with this body of thought in a productive and respectful manner, and this necessitates an acknowledgment of my own gendered positionality. I occupy a position of privilege<sup>6</sup> in relation to gender in the sense that the relationship between my gender identity, physical appearance, and gendered behaviour more or less aligns neatly with culturally hegemonic conceptions of masculine gender and its veritable synonymity with male biological sex. My experience of gender is not characterized by oppression, marginalization, or

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<sup>5</sup> In a 2019 press release, the American Medical Association (AMA) refers to the ongoing “violence against the transgender community” as an “epidemic.” See AMA (2019); see also Human Rights Campaign (2019); see also Kaur (2019).

<sup>6</sup> “Privilege” should be understood as a purely relational term which does not imply superiority or preferability but denotes non-opposition to a norm, in this case gender normativity, or the presence of cisgender identity in combination with male-typical bodily appearance.

discrimination on the basis of difference, real or perceived, from the norm. My performance of gender rarely diverges from culturally established norms, and it causes me no anguish to maintain my adherence the rigid cultural ideals of masculinity consistently at all times and across all spheres of public and private life.

Because I am cisgender, I cannot meaningfully contribute to the important task of conceptualizing and articulating what it is like to be, or be perceived as, gender nonconforming, or to feel dysphoric in relation to my own gendered body, as many trans and gender nonconforming scholars can and have. Nor do I have any insight, as a man, into what it is like to be a woman. I can, however, highlight the work of those with personal experiences of being or being perceived as gender nonconforming within a highly gender normative and trans-resistant society. In practice, this means seeking out, examining, and taking seriously the work of authors who have intimate firsthand knowledge of gender-based oppression. It also means consciously and deliberately examining my citational practices through a political lens. These two tendencies/policies constitute mutually integral aspects of my research methodology.

However, I am not without my biases. I approach the phenomenon of gender, and the domain of gender theory, from the perspective of a former student of philosophy, which is to say, with an ingrained bias towards the fetishization of reason, an enduring tendency initiated at the dawn of the European Age of Enlightenment. But a cultural phenomenon as pervasive and insidious as transphobia does not sustain itself on its adherence to the rules of logic, and therefore cannot be eradicated through the use of logic alone. Thus, disproving or ‘debunking’ the logical accuracy, or ‘cogency,’ of transphobic discourse is not enough to eradicate the transphobic sentiment that continues to plague both formal theoretical discourses and common societal and cultural perspectives on gender and sex. Indeed, the numerous deeply held convictions about gender and sex perpetuated by dominant discourse and dominant culture cannot simply be eradicated on the grounds that they are technically “incorrect.”

For the deeply entrenched ideological biases regarding gender embedded in Western culture, no matter how logically incoherent they may be, subsist primarily on the non-rational faith of the indoctrinated who perpetuate them and the institutions that uphold them and enforce adherence to, or conformity with, them. Accordingly, I must go further than mere rational critique. On a theoretical level, “going further” means not only cultivating a hermeneutic of suspicion as I navigate the realm of traditional, masculinist and male-dominated philosophical



discourse, but also stepping outside of that realm to explore the ideas of those relegated to its margins. It means, in my context, pushing the boundaries, conventions, traditions, and norms of established philosophical domains, including both epistemology and ontology, to unapologetically and unconditionally highlight trans ways of being and knowing, and nonnormative ways of performing or subverting gender.

## 1.2 Initial Frameworks for Conceiving of the Subject

It is widely assumed that the act of thinking necessarily implies some form of ‘subjectivity’ or ‘I’-ness, even if it doesn’t guarantee the cohesive and fully formed ‘subject’ of René Descartes’ (1644) *cogito*<sup>7</sup>. Some would go as far as to say that human thought is never not imbued with a tacit awareness of the self. What is more, it is commonly held that the mind orders events sequentially or temporally, hence humanity’s seemingly universal and transcultural tendency to invest in the abstract notions of past, present, and future. Still another feature of consciousness is that it requires a body. It is *embodied*. The thinking subject – the ‘I’ – inhabits or is confined by what has come to be known in discourse as “the body,” or *soma* in ancient Greek. Plato, believing the body to be a kind of prison or “tomb” for the rational soul, sought to reason away the problem of the body by valorizing the pursuit of wisdom and the denial of sensual pleasures, or the pleasures or appetites of the flesh.

In spite of the somatophobic legacy of privileging abstract thought over embodied experience and Forms/Ideas over particulars<sup>8</sup>, however, the problem of embodiment persists. Not

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<sup>7</sup> Despite the enduring popularity of Descartes’ (1644) ‘*cogito*,’ *I think therefore I am* (Latin: *cogito, ergo sum*), the famous French philosopher did not technically prove the existence a substantial self beyond a shadow of a doubt. He does not in fact reach sufficient grounds to draw any exact conclusion regarding the nature of the being or thing (which he calls the “I”) that he believes his “meditations” have led him to discover. The most he can say is that *there is thinking*. Is he justified in going on to say that there is an I that exists necessarily, and further, that this I is a thinking thing? In fact, one might object that the apodictic certainty of the claim that constitutes the latter half of the *cogito* (“therefore *I am*”) is uncritically founded. If Descartes were only to take his own method seriously, he could never have arrived at the *cogito* in its self-assured entirety. That the ‘I’ exists necessarily is an unsupported supposition that he surreptitiously smuggles into his overall claim. The most we can say is that there is thinking, and that thinking is a feature of experience.

<sup>8</sup> This legacy of hyper rational somatophobic thinking in the history of metaphysics, as Judith Butler (1990; 1995) evocatively demonstrates, is closely linked to patriarchal constructions of femininity as

only have many postmodern and contemporary discourses sought to unsettle the neat paradigm of Cartesian dualism (viz. the hard and fast division between mind and body) but they have also problematized the category of the body itself, in some cases aiming to expose the supposedly objective medical and scientific category of “the body” as little more than a discursively saturated fiction. Similarly, the subject of modern discourse – Man<sup>9</sup> – has historically been the source of much debate and disagreement, especially within the domain of feminist thought. Subjectivity is surrounded by a host of theoretical terms: consciousness, awareness, cognition, thinking, wisdom, knowledge, etc. But regardless of the terminological tack with which one chooses to breach the abstract domain of subjective human existence, the concept of subjectivity lies at the heart of the enterprise of philosophy, not as a discipline but as a way of thinking and, indeed, living. The very notion of subjectivity has itself been central to philosophical speculation since the time of Socrates and the pre-Socratic philosophers of ancient Greece who preceded him. relatedly, due to the acute and unrivaled self-awareness of philosophical thought qua philosophical thought, classical thinkers have adhered to rigorous programs of introjection and self-reflection which often require a great deal of both mental solitude and interpersonal isolation.

For all its self-attributions of robustness and fortitude, however, the classical philosophical mode of thought can easily lead to solipsistic and aleatory dead ends which threaten to preclude or obscure pressing political and ethical considerations and objectives. Hence the interdisciplinary nature of my thesis is meant as a deliberate acknowledgment of the aporias which have arisen out of the narrow and parochial foci of traditional ways of thinking and knowing since antiquity. Foucault coined a neologism for discourses and ways of knowing that have been systematically relegated to the margins of dominant discourse: “subjugated knowledges.” In a related vein, the emergent domain of transgender studies aims to foreground voices and narratives that have been routinely ignored in the academy while transfeminism generally aims to put into practice anti-transphobic methods and practices of activism and thought.

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irrational and formless in contradistinction to masculinity, a category more heavily associated with rationality and substance.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter One of Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman* (2013); see also Wynter (1995).

### 1.3 A Preliminary Roadmap to Thinking Beyond the Gender Binary

Capitalism – arguably the main linchpin of Western society – sustains itself and is predicated on a sexual division of labour whereby women's unpaid physical and emotional labor is simultaneously relied upon and invisibilized and devalued<sup>10</sup> while men traditionally occupy the majority of political and economic positions of power. That many undervalued and under/unpaid, historically female-dominated forms of labor (e.g. domestic and kinship work) which have long fueled the numerous structures of power endemic to the dominant socioeconomic paradigm of patriarchal capitalism in the West, continue to be performed mostly by women even today serves to perpetuate and reinforce a pervasive logic of hierarchal binary dualism which has not only dominated Western epistemology and influenced the cosmological and metaphysical narratives of Western philosophy for centuries but, accordingly, constitutes a guiding force in shaping and determining the production of (asymmetrically gendered) cultural norms and the organization of society at a fundamental level.<sup>11</sup>

Hence capitalism is obviously not just an economic paradigm. Its reach extends to the political and social spheres, pervades the production and circulation of linguistic and cultural norms, and, arguably, informs the very production of subjectivity in late capitalist culture. The disproportionate relegation of domestic labour, kinship work and sex work (which is even more pathologized and invisibilized due to the widespread cultural demonization and invisibilization of women's sexuality and sexual autonomy/ agency which contributes to rape culture, issues of reproductive justice and access to abortion, and the feminization of poverty) perpetuates the systemic oppression of women as a group. Although seeking to construct more egalitarian juridical and sociocultural paradigms is no doubt a preferable alternative to resigning oneself to the inegalitarian status quo, proponents of “equality” between the sexes (specifically with respect to participation in the responsibilities associated with child rearing) unwittingly leave uninterrogated the driving force which underlies the notions of family, kinship, etc.:

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<sup>10</sup> See Mies (1986).

<sup>11</sup> See Frye (1989).

namely, what Lee Edelman (2004) famously identifies as “reproductive futurism.”<sup>12</sup> Within our dominant cultural paradigm, heterosexual reproduction is taken as an evolutionarily based imperative, and gender roles thus understood as epiphenomenal to the static and universal dictates of human biology.

Moreover, the cis-heterosexual paradigm upholds the cultural matrices of intelligibility through which we deem behaviours and bodies as either normal or abnormal, acceptable or undesirable, from the standpoint of normativity – which is taken, for all intents and purposes, to be an objective standpoint. Biological reductionism upholds gender essentialism insofar as social gender is taken to be coextensive with biological sex. However, the immutability of 'sex' has been challenged and the possibility of its discursivity and malleability raised, most notably by Butler (1993). The possibility of sex as a discursive category, and not an ontological or biological given, cuts open dominant perspectives on gender roles and renders them vulnerable to feminist critique. Not only can we make the epistemological argument that scientific knowledge in general is not objective but permeated by cultural and personal bias, but we can observe genealogically that the various subdisciplines of biology such as Endocrinology fail to deliver truths about gender and sex and is permeated by a history of pathologization that permeates the entire sphere of medicine. For example, the related domains of psychiatry, sexology and psychoanalysis are three of the most obvious culprits in the contamination of scientific or quasi-scientific data with normative heteropatriarchal values.

However, the fact that sex cannot be supported let alone proven to be a fixed or static entity corresponding to gendered forms of behavior, leaves us in a position of radical uncertainty. Although ideology often obscures the inherent ambiguity of what we call gender and sex (and for many leads to an irrational refusal to accept it irrespective of its logical self-evidence), the polysemic ambiguity of the contested terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ will be the starting point of the present investigation. Moreover, I hold that any degree of imprecision or inaccuracy in the external application of purportedly objective determinations of sex – which cannot be divorced from the dominant gender terms to which they are meant to correspond – to living human bodies is indicative of the instability of Western culture’s medicalized system of sex determination overall – and therefore of the taxonomic system of classification and categorization to which it is

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<sup>12</sup> See Edelman (2004).

intimately related. However, the hypothesis of fundamental ambiguity to which I subscribe is not intended to be homogenizing or restrictive but to defend dissent from culturally established norms and expectations around sex, gender, and sexuality. Rather I aim to defend people's right to identify however they choose on a spectrum ranging from the assertion of gender as a static and unchanging aspect of one's ontological makeup to the belief that gender is a fluid or flexible entity influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by sociocultural and environmental factors. Because of the legitimization, naturalization, and normalization of dominant gender positions, argues Sharlee Cranston-Reimer (2014), "other ways of being in the world become difficult—and in some cases, impossible—to be read or be understood as legitimate, and this delegitimization lends itself very quickly to both pathologization and dehumanization" (p. 27). Overall, while I do intend in part to avow gender identity as a "locus of imaginative possibility" (Cranston-Reimer, 2014, p. 27) and freedom, it is equally my intention to affirm it as a site of certainty, immediacy, and authoritativeness from the perspective of outsiders, and in this sense to clarify its subservient role to the inviolable will of individual personal authority.

I adopt this position with the open intention of combatting the persistent delusion of gender as a site of objective discoverability, which leaves nonnormative identities at the mercy of societal and scientific norms which determine the livability and social acceptance of their identities on the false basis of empirical verifiability. Judith Butler is right that gender requires repetition to acquire cultural legibility, however, no similar requirement applies to the determination of its ontological stability. The latter, I maintain, is always already implied and guaranteed by any relevant expression of self-avowal. The ontological stability of a given gendered subject position is automatically and immediately ensured on the basis of self-identification alone. The burden of verifying one's identity falls exclusively under the domain of the subject herself who can be said to possess an ethical authority over her identity of the type which all subjects universally possess over their identities. It is not temporally dependent on any specific duration; rather, it is immutable if the subject says it is, and fluid if the subject says it is.

Moreover, the ontological qualities of immutability and of fluidity are not dependent on consistency or duration; their legitimacy is no less inviolable or immediate should one choose to shift between or traverse categories of identity (e.g. male and female) over the course of a life or, indeed, at the very same point in time. And to be quite clear, this leaves open the possibility of simultaneous identification with multiple categories of identity.

## 2 Identifying the Enemy: A Critique of Contemporary Trans-Exclusionary Feminism

### 2.1 A Brief Primer on the Term ‘TERF’

It is no secret that the history of mainstream feminism is marred by its legacy of hostility against trans women. During the “Second Wave” of feminism in the United States and Canada, a period roughly demarcated from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, mainstream Anglo-American feminisms – which, to indulge in a gross oversimplification, were divided into two camps: liberal and radical – inexcusably displaced trans women from the fold of liberatory struggle. As a rule, trans women’s perspectives were unjustly omitted from mainstream feminist discourse, which in turn neglected to prioritize the pursuit of rights and protections for trans women specifically and failed to show concern for or awareness of their dignity or humanity as women. Trans women’s presence in women’s-only spaces and attendance at women’s events was a source of contention and open debate, as the deployment of an array of codified propagandic rhetoric such as the infamous “Womyn-born womyn (WBW)” policy of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MichFest)<sup>13</sup> curtailed the possibility of trans women’s full inclusion in feminist discourse and praxis.

With this unbearably sordid history in mind, it is more important than ever to denounce trans-exclusionary feminism as a logically baseless and unjustifiable ideological regime engineered to advance and serve the interests of cisgender women only. For trans-exclusionary feminist ideology has not vanished but continues to be ardently upheld by transphobic gatekeepers of women’s rights, some of whom occupy positions which afford them unignorable degrees of social influence and culturally ascribed authority. In one related instance, a group of seven British and Australian feminist philosophers co-authored a guest post in the online interdisciplinary academic journal *Daily Nous*, entitled “Derogatory Language in Philosophy Journal Risks Increased Hostility and Diminished Discussion,” which they intended to be viewed

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<sup>13</sup> See McConnell (2016).

as a public complaint about “two papers” published in an “issue of *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (PPR),” the contents of which supposedly indicate the publication’s complacency in the “normalization” of the term “TERF,” which, in their words, “is at worst a slur and at best derogatory” (Stock/Weinberg, August 27, 2018).

The first of the two papers under attack by the group of scholars for their use of the term “TERF” is a “discussion note” on Jason Stanley’s (2015) book *How Propaganda Works* in the form of a paper entitled “The Epistemology of Propaganda,” in which Canadian philosophy professor and transgender rights activist Veronica Ivy, formerly known as Rachel McKinnon, “[uses] Stanley’s account of propaganda to analyze a modern form of propaganda where so-called *trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs)* are engaged in a political project to deny that trans women are women—and thereby to exclude trans women from women-only spaces, services, and protections” (McKinnon, 2018, p. 483).

While I have little doubt that the complainants’ motivations are nefarious, my unverified suspicions are beside the point. In what appears to be a genuine attempt to assuage criticism by reassuring readers of the purity of their intentions, however, the aforementioned complainants find it necessary to clarify that their shared

concerns are not directed at transsexual women who have transitioned under medical care and acquired a Gender Recognition Certificate. Rather, the issues are around the intent to change the protocols for trans women to one operating on the basis of self-identification, and the way that could make women’s sex-segregated spaces *de facto* inoperative (Stock/Weinberg, August 27, 2018).

Ironically, this very attempt to pre-emptively ease the potential backlash to their grievance, to couch in explicitly in the ostensibly progressive sentiment of approval (at best) or tolerance (at worst) of medically and legally sanctioned instantiations of transfemininity *to the exclusion of all other (unofficial or unverified) claims to womanhood*, betrays a deeper and more stubborn faith in cisnormativity as the *neutral ground* of gender identity. It speaks volumes to what I am inclined to diagnose as an underlying tendency toward trans-resistance. In other words, they have not eradicated the transphobic bias within themselves but simply replaced it with an arbitrary belief in the necessity of official documentation in support of one’s self-avowed gender identity – a false requirement which, it bears pointing out, is by no means mandatory for the adoption of a *cisgender* identity.

Given that advocating for trans women’s freedom to “operate on the basis of self-identification” is precisely a central concern at issue throughout my thesis, the disingenuous and conditional proclamation of trans acceptance displayed in the above statement strikes me as particularly heinous and counterproductive to the political objective of trans women’s unconditional social inclusion and protection from unduly intrusive interrogations into the authenticity of their feminine identity. It is statements of this type which I therefore unreservedly seek to condemn at the same time as I delineate my theoretical assertions. Along similar lines as my condemnation in this regard, Australian freelance writer Viv Smythe – credited with one of the earliest recorded uses of the term “TERF”<sup>14</sup> – writes in a blog post entitled “An apology and a promise” (2008) that

marginalising trans women at actual risk from regularly documented abuse /violence in favour of protecting hypothetical cis women from purely hypothetical abuse/violence from trans women in women-only safe-spaces strikes me as horribly unethical as well as repellently callous.

## 2.2 Critique of Kathleen Stock

“How did it come to pass that Stock’s blog-posts should be so widely discussed in philosophy?”  
(Bettcher, 2018)<sup>15</sup>

Kathleen Stock, who teaches Philosophy at the University of Sussex, has come under fire in recent years for her views on gender identification. Stock (April 11, 2019) asserts that “neither social nor legal transition can change facts about individual sex determination and differentiation at a biological level.” First, it must be pointed out that it is a preposterously misguided approach to imply, as Stock does, a relation between the rational viability of “facts” about the biological (i.e. “chromosomal, hormonal, morphological”) basis of “sex determination” and the personal pursuit of seeking social or legal sex transition even if one is invested in defending the hegemonic biogenico-cultural narrative regarding the static and binary nature of “sex differentiation.”

To imply that trans people who choose to transition unitarily share a desire to “change facts” is to enact, quite presumptuously and arbitrarily, a blanket politicization of the act of

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<sup>14</sup> See Smythe (2008).

<sup>15</sup> See Weinberg (May 30, 2018).



transitioning. The above quotation represents an attempt by Stock to perform a woefully transparent sleight of hand in which she conflates the personal actions of those seeking social recognition as members of the sex and/or gender to which they have rightfully and definitively asserted their membership, and the (politically or theoretically motivated) desire to deconstruct and challenge the commonly accepted narrative of a dualistic or dichotomous paradigm of sex – a hegemonic paradigm maintained in both the social sphere, under the heading of what has in recent years come to be known as the “gender binary,” and within the theoretical purview of mainstream biology under the heading of a model referred to as “sexual dimorphism.” It is flatly counter to the aim of trans liberation to attribute a desire to “change facts<sup>16</sup>” to members of a marginalized group, namely trans people, explicitly and primarily engaged in a battle to attain social recognition with respect to the “factuality” of their gender identities.

Yet the indignant tone in which TERFs like Stock tend to emphasize the biological “facts” which undergird and inform their ideological ethos obscures and obfuscates not only the relevance of such debates to the urgent issue of obtaining legal rights and protections and access to adequate medical care for trans men and women, but also, and perhaps even more subtly and ironically, fails to recognize the symbolic and sociocultural connotations that the very terminological category of “sex” in the so-called biological sense, has undeniably accrued in both the ‘common view’ or ‘natural attitude’ regarding sex in Western culture and society and throughout the corpus of recent and modern medical, scientific, legal, political, and philosophical discourse. This is to say, in short, that the linguistic signifier “sex” encapsulates a plethora of conflictual symbolic and socioculturally fraught meanings which polysemically exceed and confound the parochial specificity of its use within and in reference or allusion to the domain of biology – a sphere powerless to restrain or circumscribe it absolutely.

At the same time as we revere the authority of biology, moreover, we blissfully cling to societally normalized, mythically manufactured, and culturally privileged views about sex and gender regardless of the extent to which they may prove conflictual to the very scientific authority we appeal when, and only when, we feel threatened by the very existence of ostensibly

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<sup>16</sup> Any objection to an objective “fact” or “truth” about reality has the appearance of an impossible delusion when compared to the rational-scientific will to knowledge which seeks to uncover the pre-existing nature and order of phenomena in reality, and the medical and scientific discourses which inform the common public view on such contested phenomena as biological sex are bound historically to the paradigm of reason and scientific characterized by this very same will to knowledge.

nonconforming or nonnormative modes of embodied, sexed, and gendered human being. Before the turn of the last century, Butler gestured towards the possibility that the category of sex might not be immune to the effects of social construction. “If the immutable character of sex is contested,” she writes, “[then] perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (Butler, 1999, pp. 10-11). Though it is by no means necessary to go as far as Butler speculatively invites us to in this passage<sup>17</sup>, the fundamental insight that the linguistic signifier ‘sex,’ along with the phenomenon to which it supposedly refers, is not necessarily immutable but could be susceptible, to a greater or lesser extent, to extrinsic sociocultural influences outside of the human organism over which the discipline of biology has historically purported to stake claim, is profoundly unignorable.

It seems, in contrast, that Stock has allowed herself to become swept up in debate over the factuality of biological sex – the precarious basis on which the Anglo-American societal gender binary is tenuously predicated – to the extent that her entire philosophical system (and she is a professor of philosophy) depends upon the current moment’s dominant definition of “biological sex” to provide an adequate framework for the conceptualization of the world in which we live and breathe – an environment of tumultuous complexity in which things, including perhaps our own bodies, often seem to offer endless possibilities of rediscovery and reinvention. Stock’s facile preoccupation in this regard only serves to distract from the urgent political issue of acquiring legal protections against transphobic discrimination and violence, especially for trans women who are forced to endure a well-documented statistically disproportionate onslaught of material harms as compared to cisgender women. What is more, it prevents her from apprehending the porosity or openness of the constructed linguistic category of ‘sex’ to myriad conflictual ambiguous social and cultural influences and its ability to adapt and transform itself in accordance with the shifting nature of both cultural and scientific norms. For there should be nothing, I argue, preventing the formation of new attitudes and beliefs about what constitute the essential nature of sex from altering that essential nature *in a concrete and literal sense*.

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<sup>17</sup> She seems to suggest that the influences of social construction and cultural normativity on biological science, in conjunction with the semiotic ambiguity of gender and sexual signifiers, constitute sufficient conditions to consider the eradication of the distinction between sex and gender altogether.

## 2.3 Transphobic Bias and the De-Literalization of Sex

Corporeal interiority, in this case the notion that the body has a sex, is thus indexical of the literalizing fantasy of heterosexual melancholia, its incorporative response to the prohibition of homosexuality. It is only via this fantasy of literalization that the body comes “to bear a sex” as

literal truth, that gender gets inscribed on the body as sex and sex appears as the literal embodiment of gender:

The conflation of desire with the real—that is, the belief that it is the parts of the body, the “literal” penis, the “literal” vagina, which cause pleasure and desire—is precisely the kind of literalizing fantasy characteristic of the syndrome of melancholic heterosexuality.

The disavowed homosexuality at the base of melancholic heterosexuality reemerges as the self-evident anatomical facticity of sex, where “sex” designates the blurred unity of anatomy, “natural identity,” and “natural desire.” The loss is denied and incorporated, and the genealogy of that transmutation fully forgotten and repressed. The sexed surface of the body thus emerges as the necessary sign of a natural(ized) identity and desire. The loss of homosexuality is refused and the love sustained or encrypted in the parts of the body itself, literalized in the ostensible anatomical facticity of sex. Here we see the general strategy of literalization as a form of forgetfulness, which, in the case of a literalized sexual anatomy, “forgets” the imaginary and, with it, an imaginable homosexuality. (GT 71) (Prosser, 1998, p. 64)

Stock is quite emphatic about tying the concept of literality to the category of biological sex; she retreats into the conviction that although social transition and legal sex change are indeed possible and undeniably becoming increasingly socially accepted practices, changing one’s gender is a “*literal*” impossibility<sup>18</sup> (April 11, 2019). In defiance of the position she identifies disdainfully as “sex eliminationism,” Stock declares “biological sex” to be “a politically important feature of material reality” (April 11, 2019). In spite of her excessive paranoia about the dangerous consequences of positing the “nonexistence of material sex,” however, she devotes little space to defining with any specificity the criteria one should possess in order to rightfully claim ownership of a female biological sex.

Judith Butler’s seminal text “*Gender Trouble*’s most thorough accounting for sex as discursive effect,” according to Jay Prosser (1998) in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of*

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<sup>18</sup> Stock (April 11, 2019) opines that “current attempts to suppress talk of material facts about sex by progressive institutions and academics can be read as a sympathetic attempt to bolster the fiction of actual transition: to preserve an illusion that sex-change is literally possible.” She continues shortly thereafter to warn, in the context of legal sex-change, that we should not “lose track of the fact that sex isn’t literally changed.”

*Transsexuality*, “appears in the discussion of melancholia in the second chapter, ‘Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix’ (GT 35–78)” (p. 55). In Prosser’s (1998) view, the second chapter of *Gender Trouble* showcases the text’s undeniable primary achievement: a “thorough accounting for the construction of sex via a thorough accounting of the construction of heterosexuality” (p. 57). In it, Butler “begins to account for the construction of *sex*, that is how sex is ‘gender all along,’” by “turning to Freud’s writings on melancholia and incorporation” (Prosser, 1998, p. 59). According to Prosser (1998), Butler “[grounds her description of heterosexual sexing through melancholia] on a misrecognition, a mistaking of the signifier of gender for the referent of sex, of the metaphorical for the literal” (p. 65). “For transsexual embodiment,” he continues,

Butler’s harnessing psychoanalytic discussions of melancholia and incorporation to the processes of gendering has two interdependent significant effects: it refigures sex from material corporeality into phantasized surface; and through this it reinscribes the opposition between queer and heterosexual already at work in *Gender Trouble*, sustaining it by once again enlisting transgender as queer (Prosser, 1998, p. 67).

In short, Prosser (1998) argues that Butler enacts a “deliteralization” of sex (p. 74).

Thus, it might appear that Stock is in fact right to ignore Butler on the basis that the latter wrongfully and unjustifiably discounts the concrete materiality of sex. But even if this is the case, believing in the literality of sex does not have to be a trans-exclusionary position. And this is where Stock exposes her unforgivable bias against trans-bodies in favor of cisgender embodiment. The materiality of sex is by no means the exclusive domain of cisgender sexed subjects and should not be considered as such; rather, *sex*, even when defined strictly in a material-biological sense, is an equally crucial aspect of transsexual bodily inhabitation and embodied processes of transsexual becoming. Hence the surgical reconstruction of genitalia or the therapeutic replacement of male- or female-typical hormones can easily be viewed as naturally compatible with a radically materialist conception of sexual embodiment, provided that one is careful to avoid the trap of conflating the literal fleshly materiality of multipliciously sexed corporeal bodies with a cisnormative model of sexed materiality. And this is precisely what radical feminism and “gender critical” feminism fail to do.

## 2.4 Trans-Exclusionary Anti-Essentialism

Before moving on, I would like to focus briefly on the anti-essentialist aspect of Stock's position. While I believe Stock's arguments to be misguided and the hesitancy or refusal of her and her peers and supporters to embrace or advocate for trans women's rights and freedoms inexcusable, her non-essentialist outlook of sex is one point on which we do not disagree. Interestingly, Stock's rejection of essentialism stems directly from her acknowledgment that "information about people with Differences of Sex Development ('DSDs', sometimes also called 'intersex') challenges what's traditionally considered standard for the categories of 'male' and 'female.'" Relatedly, in 2019, Stock collaborated with a group of self-described "gender-critical and radical feminist academic philosophers," to co-author an open letter in which they set out to "challenge their opponents to avoid some obviously bad argumentative moves" (Stock, May 23, 2019)<sup>19</sup>. In the third section of their blog post, labelled "questions for our opponents," the authors make the following appeal:

If you think that the existence of people with Differences of Sexual Development (sometimes "disorders of sexual development" or "intersex") shows something about whether trans women are literally women, what is it? Please lay this out clearly, in stages, with no skipping (Stock, May 23, 2019).

To form a productive reply to this vague and unspecific question, we should be clear in acknowledging from the outset that it is by no means a logical necessity that the existence of variability itself, specifically the presence of diversity in the biological processes of sex development, be seen as disproving or discounting the general rule/norm governing the distribution of sexed characteristics in human beings, namely that they can be seen to be distributed in a binaristic fashion<sup>20</sup>.

At first glance, the lack of sufficient grounds for the necessary abandonment or condemnation of the law/norm popularly known as the "gender binary" might seem to render Stock's overall argument condonable. Upon closer inspection, however, the possibility is

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<sup>19</sup> This band of self-styled "radical feminists and gender-critical philosophers" include Sophie Allen, Jane Clare Jones, Holly Lawford-Smith, Mary Leng, Rebecca Reilly-Cooper, and Kathleen Stock. See Stock (May 23, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> This naturally leads to the construction of coextensively binary categories of male and female as well as the hypothesis that these two sexes pre-exist their discovery by way of scientific observation and subsequent linguistic signification.

revealed that perhaps the binary quality of the rule/norm was only ever a provisional hypothesis in the first place. Perhaps the attribution of an inherently or necessarily binary quality to the category of ‘sex’ – which can never be reduced to a ‘purely’ empirical-biological category but is also permeated by sociocultural, symbolic, linguistic or semiotic, disciplinary, and historical influences– is not strictly necessary, thus throwing into question the rigidly binary manner in which the category of ‘sex’ is formulated by, as well as perceived through the lenses of, both mainstream culture and biological science. Perhaps the binaristic quality of sex is less rigorously justifiable and more arbitrary than we first assumed. This does not obligate us to do away with the category of biological sex, but shows us that we are free, as it were, to do with it as we please – to expand and modify it as we see fit in accordance not only with potential advancements in the biological study of human bodies but also and equally in accordance with the evolution of social, political, and cultural norms and values.

But it is evident that, for Stock and her colleagues, “literal” womanhood, which for them resides firmly in the register of “biological sex,” occupies a more primal and superior status in relation to what we might call sociosymbolic womanhood or femininity. Because it is the possession of biological femaleness which affords one (or precludes one from attaining) a feminine social status (i.e. the social right to be recognized as a woman), biology thereby also indirectly, but quite *literally*, presides over the arena of gendered social relations, including the abstract and nonliteral realm of sociolinguistic identification. While it is by all means reasonable and unproblematic to point out that the materiality and literality of sex can be distinguished from the social category of gender, the further insistence by so-called “gender-critical” feminists, that literal/material sex exerts a clear and undeniable causally determinative effect on the politically and socially oriented category of gender, does not follow necessarily from that initial premise by any stretch.

American social psychologist Suzanne Kessler (1998) was among the first scholars to elucidate the indeterminacy inherent to medical constructions of gender, exposing the impact of personal and cultural biases on physicians’ determinations of “biological sex.” The presence of implicit bias, she argues, guides and shapes their official “recommendations” regarding the correct or appropriate course of action to be taken when the ambiguity of an infant’s outward sex characteristics becomes the source of parental uncertainty or anxiety. In her book *Lessons from the Intersexed*, she explains that “members of medical teams have standard practices for

managing intersexuality, which rely ultimately on cultural understandings of gender” (Kessler, 1998, p. 12).

When Kessler conducted interviews of six medical experts in the field of pediatric intersexuality in 1985, she discovered that the “management of intersex cases [was] based upon a theory of gender” developed by John Money and Anke A. Ehrhardt which “argues that gender identity is changeable until approximately eighteen months of age” (1998, p. 14). “To use the Pygmalion allegory,” write Money and Ehrhardt, “one may begin with the same clay and fashion a god or a goddess” (Kessler, 1998, p. 14). Money’s theory that “gender and children are malleable” and “psychology and medicine are the tools used to transform them” (Kessler, 1998, p. 15) – which contributed heavily to the formation of the current dominant epidemiological wisdom in the management of intersex births – constitutes what can be called an “interactionist” model of gender in which biological, psychological, and social factors contribute to gender development.<sup>21</sup> According to our author, in the determination of “chromosomal and hormonal gender, which is typically taken to be the real, natural, biological gender, usually referred to as ‘sex,’” a practice enabled by technological advancements in late twentieth century medical-scientific practice, “biological factors are often preempted in physicians’ deliberations by such cultural factors as the ‘correct’ length of the penis and capacity of the vagina” (Kessler, 1998, p. 12). Similarly, she estimates that for Money and his colleagues, the “male” sex defined less “by the genetic condition of having one Y and one X chromosome or by the production of sperm [than] by the aesthetic condition of having an “appropriately” sized penis” (Kessler, 1998, p. 19). One physician interviewed by Kessler candidly and tellingly remarks, “Why do we do all these tests if in the end we’re going to make the decision simply on the basis of the appearance of the genitalia?” (Kessler, 1998, p. 20).

Sex, for Stock (April 11, 2019), is “determined by possession of most or all of a cluster of particular designated properties—chromosomal, gametic, hormonal and morphological—produced via endogenous biological processes.” Conceding that “there is no hard and fast

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<sup>21</sup> Incidentally, this model presciently prefigures the biopsychosocial approach to psychology first proposed by George Engel (1977) which, in contradistinction to the biomedical model of disease, considers the complex interaction between “the social, psychological, and behavioural dimensions” of illness and health (Borrell-Carrió, Suchman, & Epstein, 2004). Thus, the biopsychosocial model enabled researchers to acknowledge explicitly the ways in which medicalized phenomena “are affected by multiple levels of organization, from the societal to the molecular” (Borrell-Carrió, Suchman, & Epstein, 2004). See Wade & Halligan (2017).

“essence” to biological sex, at least in our everyday sense: no set of characteristics a male or female *must* have, to count as such,” she nevertheless contends that “competent non-essentialists don’t think it follows from this that there are no real constraints on what counts as sex” (Stock, April 11, 2019). Rather, she defines sex as a “cluster concept,” leading her to depict the “possession of most or all of” a set of unnamed properties as the sole criterion for the determination of a male or female sex. In a short article entitled “Can You Change Your Gender?” published in the 2019 Summer edition of *The Philosopher*, she clarifies in slightly different terms her position that “maleness and femaleness are two clusters of non-essential characteristics”. In this article, the properties or characteristics (again left unnamed) to which she ascribes the capacity to dictate sex, fall within the purview of the “chromosomal, gonadal, genital, [and] hormonal” aspects of human physiology specifically (Stock, July 25, 2019). In her view,

The majority of people have all of the characteristics in one cluster or other; a smaller proportion of people have most or many of the characteristics in one cluster or other, but not all of them. So, for instance, you don’t need to possess all of the “female” sex characteristics to count as female. However, you do still need to possess some of them. This is a real, material condition upon sex-category-membership (Stock, July 25, 2019).

Since no insurmountable barrier exists preventing trans women from obtaining and possessing numerous of the so-called “properties” or “characteristics” typically associated with biological femininity, no aspect of the above definition precludes the inclusion of trans women under the purview of biological femininity. Stock’s efforts to debunk what she views as the propagandic doctrine of “sex eliminationism” and to defend the “literal” existence of material sex makes her seem paranoiac of some conspiratorial consensus among trans and gender variant individuals, unanimously or by majority, minimally to portray sex as immaterial or non-literal, and maximally to dissolve the category of sex entirely. She fails to realize, however, that the possibility of changing one’s sex, both literally and conceptually, by no means implies the demise of sex as a meaningful category; cross-sex identification does not imply the “nonexistence” of biological sex but simply entails that its definition should not pose barriers to the social inclusion of trans-bodies and trans people, specifically trans women. It is plainly evident, however, that Stock’s trans-resistant interpretation of biological sex openly threatens trans women’s access to social acceptance and medical care.



Moreover, it is not remotely justifiable to imply, as she appears to, that transsexual women and trans allies uniformly wish to draw a singular hard and fast “conclusion about the nonexistence of material sex.” Many transsexual women do not seek to deny or downplay the existence of the visible sex characteristics which differentiate female bodies from male bodies but seek, on the contrary, to thoroughly embody a version of femininity and/or femaleness that exists in direct contrast to masculinity and/or maleness in both a social and biological sense. Such a pursuit is often accomplished, moreover, not by rejecting but by affirmatively enacting one’s conformity to feminized behavioural norms and modes of gender presentation, sometimes with the aid of surgical or hormonal aids. The variable and variegated practices of behavioural and bodily modification, maintenance, presentation, and performance involved in sexual transitioning and trans-becoming are not the exclusive domain of trans people, but are activities in which most, if not all human beings find themselves constantly and actively engaged, albeit with vastly different degrees of both visibility and volitionality in relation to social norms and standards of intelligibility, acceptability, and propriety. These various practices involved in the ongoing project of being/becoming<sup>22</sup>, for example, a woman, do not inherently privilege cis subjects over trans subjects.

*Over and against the divisive rhetoric of trans-exclusionary feminism, I insist that there is nothing of substance that separates trans women from their cisgender sisters on an ontological level.*<sup>23</sup> To defend this claim, we must, of course, resist the antecedent assumption that ontology is inextricably, deterministically linked to both biology and psychology in the sense that would imply a necessary correlation between (one’s) ontological status and (their) biological or psychological makeup. And in order to be successful in *that* endeavour – that act of resistance to the status quo regarding gender in society – we would do well to examine and interrogate the conventional ways that “gender nonconformity” is described and diagnosed by the medical professionals and scholars who safeguard hegemonic conceptions of (psycho-physiologically)

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<sup>22</sup> Being and becoming can be seen as virtually synonymous in the context of gendered existence inasmuch as each of us, cis and trans men and women alike, are constantly locked in a processual state of becoming-with our gender, and realizing our gendered selves in relation to a gendered ideal, whether that ideal be cultural, personal, or as it often is, both.

<sup>23</sup> This in no way discounts the quantitative fact that trans women face disproportionate levels of violence and discrimination in comparison to cis women.

‘normal’ or ‘natural’ gendered existence and experience in relation to those with the potential to be deemed ‘abnormal’ or ‘disordered.’

Importantly, one such descriptive/diagnostic term is the highly clinicalized and depersonalized condition of so-called psychological ‘dysphoria’ outlined in the *DSM-5*.<sup>24</sup> The term, and the notion of, ‘dysphoria’ occupies a central role in the determination and classification of gender variance or nonconformity, and particularly affects trans people seeking to gain access to the medical means to transition or to obtain legal documentation that aligns with who they are and the way in which they identify.

Although dysphoria is not a necessary or universal feature of being-a-woman but does appear to be a unique feature of transfeminine experience for certain trans women, it is also not a necessary precondition for being a trans woman. It should therefore go without saying that is not necessary for a trans women to claim affinity with the notion of dysphoria to be considered women. Stock, however, states categorically that “[m]ost trans women, trans men and so-called non-binary people have, in response to feelings of dysphoria, made the decision to live as the opposite sex” (2019). To be complicit, as Stock is, in perpetuating without exception or qualification the natural attitude that trans women are or must be dysphoric by virtue of their transness, is to erroneously and stereotypically distanciate trans femininity from cis femininity.

Whereas Stock hastily and uncritically presupposes the ascendancy of the dominant medical-psychiatric model of gender, trans women’s relationships to the clinicalized category of dysphoria in reality can, of course, be far more complex and various. Yet this is precisely the narrative implicit, and often explicit, in mainstream medical scientific literature, which has not only served as the most ‘official,’ objective, authoritative discourse on the subject of gender and sex in society throughout modern history but also intimately informs our cultural and societal laws and norms and the practices procedures of their enforcement, both juridical and extra-judicial (i.e. what is often classified in sociological parlance as “gender policing”). In reality, *‘dysphoria’ is a condition experienced by some women* – women who may personally identify as trans or be categorized as trans by the systems/institutions that grant trans women access to

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<sup>24</sup> “In adolescents and adults,” the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) states, “gender dysphoria involves a difference between one’s experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, and significant distress or problems functioning.” It is diagnosed on the basis of at least two of six criteria, the first of which being “[a] marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and primary and/or secondary sex characteristics” (*American Psychiatric Association, 2016*).

medical care and social support – whose intrinsic femininity, female nature, or *womanhood*, should never be in question but should be viewed as always already certain and immutable (so long as they avow it as such) in precisely the same way as it is in cis women.

With that said, it is relevant to emphasize that transsexual women’s participation in conventional, normativized and naturalized practices of gender presentation and performance can actually serve to reinforce the very binary model that Stock and others ironically claim is under threat by the existence of queer and trans people, whom she/they falsely subsumes into a homogenous group, thus failing to grasp, for example, the many palpable commonalities between trans and cis women who share a common belief in and desire to preserve and conform to a specific, culturally prescribed model of femininity which corresponds to the dominant/hegemonic social categorization system of 'gender binarism.'

While trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) attempt to drive an ontological wedge between cis and trans femininity, their efforts will always be in vain. At some point the esteemed proponents of TERFism must emerge from the depths of their delusional and delimiting conception of sex and gender to face the reality that no tangible or intangible border or boundary between cis- and trans-femininity pre-exists their efforts to locate one. Refusing to abandon their evangelistic crusade against trans women, TERFs inevitably come up empty handed after each futile attempt at justifying their arbitrary and absurd hostility and exclusionary sentiment. They fail at every turn, and will continue to do so, to ground their divisive hatred in logic or biology or psychology or sociology. Even if, and when, authority figures in the fields of medicine, biology, philosophy, and so on purport to grant legitimizing power to the false ideology of trans exclusionary radical feminism, logic itself is not on their side; empiricism itself is not on their side; the concrete material effects of social constructivism on bodies and subjectivities does not conform or correspond to such a distorted model of social reality as the one peddled by the agents and structures of normativity.

## 2.5 Critique of Meghan Murphy

“Only a tiny number of ideologues believe that Murphy’s opinions are transphobic rather than female-defensive” (Kay, 2019, National Post)

Meghan Murphy is a Canadian writer and journalist who, like Stock in the UK, has gained infamy for her “contentious” views on the topic of gender. In an article entitled “How feminist Meghan Murphy fell victim to progressives’ double standards,” National Post columnist Barbara Kay (2019) sets out to defend Murphy from the backlash she has understandably received for her views, likening her to a “dramatic protagonist” caught amidst a theatricalized conflict between advocates of human rights for transgender persons (“trans activists”) and trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or “TERFs.” Kay (2019) writes in her article: “[t]he conflation of biology with subjective feeling is, Murphy correctly argues, erasing women as a social category.” First, let us not lose sight of the logically incontrovertible fact that the inclusion of trans women into the fold of women as a distinct social group in no way poses a threat to the solvency of the category of “woman” itself, nor does it threaten to erase the status of any individual who claims, of her own accord, to *be a woman* as a member of a distinct, marginalized social group.

With this in mind, not only does it become apparent that Kay’s words dubiously convey a wholly unsubstantiated sense of panic over the dissolution of the category of woman, but also and more importantly, that the Canadian journalist’s haphazard deployment of alarmist rhetoric in support of the false premise of women’s social erasure can all too easily serve to obscure the grave and urgent situation in which trans women specifically face disproportionate rates of patriarchal oppression and gender-based violence in comparison to cis women throughout North America. Regardless of Kay’s motivations or political leanings (a charitable reader might attribute her indiscretion on this subject to little more than a journalistic penchant for contrarianism), it is hastily strewn together arguments such as hers that threaten to lull unsuspecting readers into agreement with the harmful and logically fallacious ideological camp of trans-exclusionary radical feminism. Nevertheless, the quotation I have extracted from Kay’s article is demonstrative of yet another logical inconsistency common to much of trans-exclusionary radical feminist discourse: Kay’s allusion to a “conflation of biology [and] subjective feeling” among proponents of trans rights is predicated, quite ironically, on an analogous presupposition of its own, namely the *conflation* of biology and identity – more specifically, the fervent belief in the existence of a coextensive relationship between biological sex and gender identity.

The subtle yet far-reaching implication here is that one's gender identity results directly from his or her biology; in other words, it is the biological makeup of one's body, to the exclusion of all other factors, which occasions the attribution of either one or the other of two mutually exclusive designations: *male* or *female*. The harmony between nature and culture, and/or biology and (social) identity, entails that one may be (and notably, no discrepancy is permitted to arise between *being* a man or a woman and *identifying* as such within this paradigm) either male or female, never both or neither. Furthermore, it is precisely the supposedly concretely empirical basis of biology – of physiological 'maleness' or 'femaleness' respectively – which in turn determines, in a straightforward, one-to-one manner, one's *social identity* as either a *man* or a *woman*. The necessary and unchangeable correspondence between the body into which one was born and her assigned identity ensures, so the story goes, that the assignation of womanhood can be practiced without any initial or ongoing input on the part of the gendered/sexed subject; one's gender identity becomes an independently verifiable aspect of her existence, inextricably bound to the contours, both visible and hidden, of her biology.

As a result, "biology," when deployed as a euphemism for biological sex, can be viewed as unaffected by, and unsusceptible to, the whims and uncertainties of "subjective feeling" (and here, of course, we are forced to bracket the complexities and ambiguities of the physiological body itself, which indeed throw the conflation of biology and identity even further into question). Even if social identity bore a straightforward causal relationship to biology, even if it were wholly reducible to biology, (and even this is in question within the very realm of biology itself), the analytically distinct question of whether a given social identity can be deemed 'true' or 'correct' in a technical sense, from a strictly biological perspective, would be, and is, utterly irrelevant to the smooth functioning of the myriad social relations which flow from the initial assumption that *one is the gender that she says she is*. That one's attestation of personal membership to the social group known as "women" can be verified by biological means has no bearing on her ability to adopt a female, or feminine, identity. Nor does the logic of verificationism hold sway in the contemporary sphere of gender and sexual identification in which a growing number of identities are proliferating exponentially, one of multiple gendered identities, operate independently of the dictates of biology.

For "biology," let us not forget, serves as a placeholder for a self-contained set of principles which remain applicable and relevant to our bodies and our selves only on the basis of

our provisional collective agreement, as critically thinking subjects, regarding their value to society. Considering the status of biology as one domain among an array of others engaged in the age-old pursuit of mastery over the slippery and evasive nature of human existence or human *being* (a phenomenon which many esoteric philosophical doctrines have failed to adequately capture or explain, not least because of our inescapable proximity to ourselves, the very beings whose existence we wish to study from a distance, an unattainable vantage point for even the most disciplined contemplators among us), it becomes apparent that the biological legitimacy of one's claim to *be* a man or a woman (indeed, even to be 'male' or 'female,' terms which can be appropriated from their origin to mirror or mimic the symbolic authority historically exercised over sexed subjects by agents of the entangled domains of medicine, psychiatry, and biology) simply has no bearing on the ethical defensibility of a way of freely identifying, nor on the phenomenological certainty and validity of an identity which a subject feels to be an intrinsic and unchangeable aspect of his or her or their being (i.e. a core or 'native' gender identity).

To hold that social identities must be mediated through the scientific domain of biology is only possible on the basis of a misperception of the nature of social identity itself and the various social relations engendered and supported by our participation in multiple modes of identification within multiple social spheres. Thus, it is indeed presumptuous to assert or imply that personal declarations of membership to a social group (or identification with a particular social identity) ought only to be accepted if they can be legitimized by the authority of biology, a discipline which, like any other, is not without a history nor immune to bias on the part of, or dissensus among, its numerous practitioners. While many of us identify in one way and one way only across all social spheres (i.e. we identify as a man or as a woman regardless of the social setting or environment in which we find ourselves), the broadscale social decontextualization (and physiologico-temporal hypostatization) of gender identity perpetrated by Kay and other sympathizers and proponents of trans-exclusionary feminism nevertheless erroneously implies, and in some cases demands, that one's gender identity be reinforced or legitimized by an external authority, namely the authority which flows from the culturally coveted domain of biology, in order for it to maintain its integrity. Crucially, trans theorist Talia Mae Bettcher's model of First-

Person Authority (FPA)<sup>25</sup> provides an alternative framework which easily overcomes the vain requirement of extrinsic verificationism with respect to gender identity.

In actuality, the social policing of gender rarely directly seeks to extort proof from individuals as to the authenticity of their avowed gender identity. Make no mistake, instances of forcible verification do, importantly, occur from time to time, such as in the violent act of anatomical revelation enacted upon the body of American trans man Brandon Teena, or the intrusive and gratuitous biological scrutiny directed towards female professional sprinter Dutee Chand by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). However, the infrequency with which comparable demands for verification are directed towards cisgender or cis-passing subjects is palpably indicative of the intolerable incoherence endemic to the cissexist logic of gender verificationism. Every day, cis people go about their lives without the legitimacy of their chosen gender identities (and they are perpetually chosen; day to day and moment to moment we choose to behave and present ourselves in ways that either conform to what is socially prescribed for us as members of one or the other ‘sex’) ever being challenged or questioned as to whether they can back up their claims of womanhood or manhood with biological evidence – that is, with an *appeal to the external authority of biology*.

And in order to protect the sanctity of this appeal, to demonstrate our faith in the objectivity of its findings whether they conflict with our desires or our “subjective feelings,” no matter how deep and unignorable they may be, we must offer up a sacrifice: we must give over our agency to the gatekeepers of our social and political welfare. For our own feelings can be deceptive, and our proximity to them can cloud our judgment of the appropriateness or justifiability of continuing to claim them as our own. Only biology can gain insight into our true nature, the nature which dictates clearly and precisely which of our inclinations to action, and indeed which parts of our anatomy, rightfully belong to us and which have been placed there erroneously. Without a doubt, our possession of radical agency means that we cannot be trusted to make the correct decisions regarding how to act and how to be, of our own accord, with only the limited and frequently deceptive mode of perception endemic to the untrustworthy practice of self-observation. And in return for this sacrifice, to add insult to injury, we receive no guarantees that the identity with which we have declared an affinity will be deemed the proper one for us;

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<sup>25</sup> See Bettcher (2009).

we can only pray that our identity, *our gender*, is returned to us unharmed and we are allowed to continue to identify with it without consequence.

However, this rigorous and intrusively interrogatory program of verification is not applied equally to each of us who claim a gender (that, of course, would be inefficient in the extreme) but rather is exclusively and forcefully on either those whom we believe, for one reason or another, to be *mistaken* about their own identity, or whom we suspect are guilty of *deception* with respect to the true nature of their gender or sex. Yet agency is the very thing that endows us with the potential to *rebel* against gender norms that also and simultaneously lends us our capacity to *conform* to the normative expectations of gender so idealized within our culture.

It is with this in mind that I wish to contend that to deprive a human being of agency is to deprive her of her very humanity. To discount, disavow, or deny agency that facilitates one's avowal of his or her gender identity is to violate, at the same time, that most basic sense of autonomy within us that has been called, by Sartre and others, our "radical ontological freedom." To deprive an individual of the right to freely avow her own gender identity, and indeed also her 'sex,' can only be seen as a repression of the fundamental human desire to be free – a desire which resides among the most fundamental features of human existence.

### 3 The Ontology of Sexual Difference Through the Looking Glass: A Deeper Look at Transphobic/Trans-Resistant Sentiment in Feminist Philosophy

#### 3.1 Introduction

In contrast to the emancipatory logic of resistance to systemic oppression typical of Anglo-American feminisms, it is not only a commitment to equality and non-discrimination but an irreducible notion of ontological difference which lies at the heart of Italian and French



feminist thought.<sup>26</sup> Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray – whose reputation outside France situates her amongst the most “active and vocal [advocates] of the concept of *sexual difference*” (Grosz, 1989, p. 100) – persistently maintains throughout her body of work the controversial assertion of the ontological irreducibility of the female sex to the male. She pits her insistence in this regard on a paradigm of “true difference,” or “twoness,” of which gender is an essential component, against the pervasive homogeneity, or “sameness” which she attributes to a historically patriarchal culture built around one male subject whose neutral and singular authority is predicated on the deeply entrenched repression of the feminine. Even the dichotomous polarization of the gender and sexual binaries we have constructed in the West constitutes, for Irigaray, a superficial and illusory framework of difference reducible to the underlying and insidious logic of sameness (Grosz, 1989, p. 108). Notably, she does not strictly reserve this criticism for the phallogratic regime of the dominant culture but applies it equally to the hitherto uncritically reflexive strategies of resistance endemic to representationalist feminist politics which, in striving for a position of equality (read: sameness) in relation to men, keeps female subjects captive within a masculinized (read: singular) conception of subjectivity (Grosz, 1989, p. 113).

In “Ethical Gestures Towards the Other,” the eighteenth chapter of *Building a New World*, Irigaray plainly asserts a central tenet of her philosophical system of ethics: that “ethical relations between human beings...[prove] to be impossible in a culture or tradition which the subject appears as neuter or neutral” (Irigaray and Marder, 2014, p. 253). Throughout her corpus, she contends that the masculinist linguistic and discursive norms endemic to the current phallogratic order have obscured an unavoidable form of ontological difference which defines human existence—which is, at its core, a relational existence, an existence invariably and unavoidably affected by its fundamental inability to circumvent or surmount the existential alterity of the other, who is, above all, a sexual other. Hence the domain of the feminine in Irigaray, in which the corporeal female body figures prominently, takes on a high degree of specificity and existential autonomy, and it is precisely this point which has inspired much of the confusion and controversy over her work.

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<sup>26</sup> “In contradistinction to Anglo-American feminism, which emphasized both equality and emancipation as ends,” writes Antonio Calcagno in his Translator’s Introduction to Lea Melandri’s *Love and Violence*, “Italian feminism can be said to have stressed female difference, autonomy, and liberation” (Melandri 2019, p. ix).

My main objective in this chapter is to expand Irigaray's "notion of woman's sexual *autonomy and specificity*" (Grosz, 1989, p. 100) beyond the limited scope in which Irigaray articulates it. I apply a transfeminist lens to her hypothesis of a specifically feminine "morphology" as well as her psychoanalytically informed descriptions of "female sexuality" to argue that, while she should not be branded as an essentialist, she unwittingly relies, at certain moments, on outmoded traditional metaphysical presuppositions regarding the coextensive relationship between gender identity and biological sex, thus unnecessarily foreclosing the possibility of cross-sex identification. However, I contend that her notion of sexual difference can be elaborated in an inclusive manner not incommensurable with the breadth of philosophical innovation evident in the emergent "proto-disciplinary" (Currah, 2019, p. 2) field of transgender studies. As Elaine Storkey (2001) points out, Irigaray's descriptions of female identity and sexuality (specifically her notion of "polymorphous sensuality") need not be read as referential – that is, as "a 'true' or accurate description of women" insofar as Irigaray makes no attempt to "designate a female essence or anatomy" What she does intend to do, however, is to subvert what she sees as "dominant male conceptions of women's essence" (Grosz, 1989, p. 116), to combat the dominant phallogocentric representations of women and female sexuality which saturate the whole of discourse within our patriarchal culture.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.2 The Sexually Differentiated Body

Carving out and maintaining a crucial, but often implicit, division between anatomy and morphology, Irigaray shows us that *morphological* sexual difference can be understood as

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<sup>27</sup> This is readily apparent in Irigaray's notorious metaphor of the "two lips," which Elizabeth Grosz (1989) lucidly analyses in the following passage from her book *Sexual Subversions*:

*"So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further, it is plural...Indeed, woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, for example. The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute irreplaceably, to women's pleasure. (1985b:28)*

The 'two lips' is not a truthful image of female anatomy but a new emblem by which female sexuality can be positively *represented*. For Irigaray, the problem for women is not the experience or recognition of female pleasure, but its representation, which actively constructs women's experience of their corporeality and pleasures. If female sexuality and desire are represented in some relation to male sexuality, they are submerged in a series of male-defined constraints" (p. 116).

pluralistic and relational instead of binary and hierarchal. However, her preoccupation with cultivating one's natural identity in accordance with the body with which he or she was born must be addressed and reconciled with insofar as the subsequent foreclosure (or, minimally, pathologization) of cross-sex identification and gender nonconformity not only proves inadequate to the political and theoretical objectives of trans(feminist) discourse but negates the radical inclusivity inherent to the category of woman. Throughout her corpus Irigaray develops a non-exclusionary notion of solidarity among women which she seeks to maintain and defend against the partisan divineness of social activist groups in the women's liberation movement as well as the realm of political feminist thought itself.

Considering that such a feminist political outlook must necessarily be predicated upon an inherently anti-essentialist definition of woman that decisively rejects the incorporation of essential criteria such as the possession of a single trait or collection of essential feminine traits, I argue that although Irigaray's notion of sexual difference does not fundamentally rely on biological essentialism and thus can be articulated along radically inclusive lines. In this vein, the Irigaray of *I Love to You* (1996) portrays the category of *woman* as a "plurality that seems to elude the definition of a unity" (p. 64). So, the category of woman cannot be defined positively. However, its conceptual irreducibility and categorical incoherence can be taken up as sources of strength insofar as the term 'woman' implies an irresolvably complex, various, and acausal relationship between nature and culture. It is precisely the combination of radical ontological ambiguity and perpetual openness which lends woman the unique freedom to constantly reinvent and rearticulate (or indeed, conversely, to embrace and affirm) her cultivated relationship to nature, thus preventing the category of woman on the whole from ever acquiescing to the epistemological trap of essentialism.

As such, there is unity to be found, paradoxically and counterintuitively, in the radical conceptual disunity specific to female identification and embodiment which stands in opposition, in Western culture and Western thought, to the naturalized primacy, originality, and neutrality of the masculine subject position. In the same stroke as she affirms woman's inherent multiplicity, however, Irigaray cites the possible unifying capacity of "natural immediacy," a notion which lacks a clear definition despite the fact that she returns to it repeatedly, even possessively appropriating it as "my natural immediacy" (Irigaray, 1996, p. 63; Irigaray, 1996, p. 64). Elsewhere in the text, as she weaves between generic consideration of the phenomenon of female

birth and personal reflection on her own birth as a “girl,” she asserts: “[n]o doubt female physiology is present [at birth], but not identity, which remains to be constructed” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 107).

According to feminist biologist Ann Fausto-Sterling (2000), a majority of feminist scholars have tended to view the body “not as essence, but as a bare scaffolding on which discourse and performance build a completely acculturated being” (p. 6). Such a formulation stands in stark contrast to the hypothesis of essentialism, the “belief that there are properties essential to women and which all women share” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 6). However, the unfinished project of identity to which Irigaray refers in the above quotation—although it does not boil down to a matter of teleological determination—also does not align with the social constructivist hypothesis of the body as a raw material surface which pre-exists its sexed signification. To be born a girl, according to Irigaray, is to be born with a certain physiological makeup. “Of course,” she writes, “there is no question of [identity] being constructed in repudiation of one’s physiology” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 107). This statement amounts to a blatant and needless pre-emptive disavowal of cross-sex identification, and this is the crucial point on which I disagree with Irigaray. There is in fact an abundance of possibility to repudiate one’s physiology through the construction of identity, not in a merely theoretical sense but at the phenomenological level of lived actuality, as demonstrated in the wealth of trans narratives which provide contradictory evidence to Irigaray’s narrow sighted claim. For the contours of physiological sex are increasingly contested not only by sociological critiques of a feminist ilk but by the empirical findings of the culturally and symbolically authoritative domain of biology itself.

The casual manner in which she glosses over the possibility of divergence between identity and “physiology” betrays an affinity with Freud’s biologism insofar as she fails to critique, and thus keeps intact, the determinative power of physiology over identity. But such a conflation of woman with a singular blueprint of her physiological makeup, however unintentional and secondary to her overall project, is unforgivably untenable both politically and theoretically. The rhetoricity of her dismissal of refuting one’s physiology in the above quotation camouflages the uncritical assumption of a causal connection between identity and physiology; and the faith in the coextensive relation between gender identity and physiological sex of which

her remarks are indicative is a surprising presupposition to fall back on considering the otherwise keenly critical nature of her analysis.

Ultimately, I intend to emphasize the historicity of the system of sex determination endemic the culture into which subjects are born without discounting the possibility that a genealogical critique thereof could easily function in tandem with Irigaray's analysis of sexual difference. Although Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, which frequently invokes the potentially hegemonic identity category of 'woman' and the biologically resonant term 'female,' has been decried and dismissed by critics for its incommensurability with the political and theoretical ends of poststructuralist gender theory, especially with respect to transsexual and transgender liberation, I argue that the deployment of dominant gender terms in Irigaray's writings can be read through an anti-essentialist, non-biological reductionist lens which attends to the psycho-anatomical diversity of femininity, including both transfemininity and intersex femininity.

It is possible, I claim, to reconcile the Irigarayan framework of sexual difference with the emergent perspectives on gender set forth in the myriad of burgeoning discourses in the field of transgender studies, as well as to tailor discussions of sexual difference inspired by Irigaray to the urgent political demands of trans resistance, inasmuch as sexual difference cannot simply be conflated with bodily difference (even if the latter is understood in broader than binary terms) but refers to a dynamic process whereby individuals cultivate their identity in relation to their embodiment. While Irigaray is acutely aware of the symbolic nature of bodily organization, as evinced by her invocation of the notion of "morphology," which, in her parlance, signals a departure from the domain of "anatomy," her delineation of female sexuality relies partially on outmoded presuppositions, both implied and explicitly stated, about female anatomical materiality and the connection between one's cultivated female identity and the body with which he or she is born. Thus, a transfeminist reading of Irigaray will no doubt require, as Danielle Poe (2011) points out, that we read Irigaray against herself (p. 118).

In the titular essay of her monograph *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray's (1985) discussion of sexual pleasure and erogeneity revolves entirely around the body. Whereas the classical psychoanalytic construction of anatomical femininity remains trapped in a patriarchal framework of hierarchal binary opposition which imbues the materiality of the female body with the supposedly inescapable attributes of passivity and lack in relation to the active and fully

formed force of masculinity, Irigaray refuses to confine femininity to the negative by defining it as consisting in the absence rather than the presence of distinguishing features. She repudiates the reduction of woman's multiple erogenous zones to "a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 23) perpetrated by Freud and others by emphasizing the embodied plurality of female sexuality in her descriptions of a variety of bodily erogenous zones, thereby circumventing the absolute primacy of masculine anatomical singularity which deprives the female sex of a positive definition.

Over and against the androcentric solipsism of psychoanalysis, by which I mean specifically to emphasize the Freudian tendency to posit femininity as a lack in relation to the phallus, Irigaray (1985) imagines the female body as a multiplicity of sexual organs. Strictly speaking, according to her mimetic revamping of psychoanalytic language which, cleverly, does not stray from the biological intonation or technical specificity of its terminology, woman does not have a single sex organ but "at least two of them," which are nevertheless "not identifiable as ones" in and of themselves (p. 28). For Irigaray (1985), the female sex, unlike the male, is not defined by her/its possession of a single sex organ (e.g. one analogous to the phallus), nor can it be reduced to its startling appearance of lack against the substantial backdrop of the male phallus. Rather, the female sex can be rendered in terms of a collection of many sexual organs: "*woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*" (p. 28). Female sexuality, therefore, is never singular (i.e. masculine), but always *plural* (Irigaray, 1985, p. 28). Further, it does not by any means appear necessary that the multiplicity of organs constitutive of the female sex must be observed uniformly in all women but may be subject to variances and anomalies.

Precisely what is it, however, that requires the designation of the range of sexual organs Irigaray (1985) names (including the breasts, vulva, clitoris, and vagina) as feminine (p. 28)? In direct refutation of biological essentialism, I argue that the link between bodily materiality and ontological femininity must be autonomous and constative self-identification. For what does female embodiment amount to without the clarificatory addition of female identity? Irrespective of the influence of a plethora of cultural norms on sexed subjects, the saturation of identity with discursivity, and the potentially non-volitional nature of gender identification implied by Butler's infamous theory of performativity, the enduring significance of identity must not be discounted or devalued. Regardless of whether femininity is ontologically innate or socially constructed, and correspondingly, whether the criteria for femininity are anatomically dependent or the result of

social conditioning, a vast array of transsexual narratives imply that the category of so-called “biological sex” is intimately and inextricably tied to identity. Furthermore, as our engagement with Kessler’s (1998) qualitative interviews with pediatric surgeons and endocrinologists has elucidated, the medical determination of sex at birth is more imprecise than one might hope for the simple reason that for the notion of biological ‘sex’ to be objective and applicable to human beings, the experience of perfect alignment between psychological interiority and external anatomy – which has not yet had a chance to develop or not develop in the infantile pre-subject – would have to be a universally shared experiential condition. And we know, if we listen and pay attention to the voices and narratives of our trans brothers and sisters, that it is not.

### 3.3 Sexual Difference and Transsexuality

In “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality,” Butler (2001), in a questionable move, takes up the case of David Reimer, the anonymous subject of the “John/Joan case” which circulated in medical circles before being widely publicized and used as fodder by theorists of gender, feminist activists, and social critics of all stripes. Reimer’s experience of gender has been narrativized in a tragic light by numerous biographers and journalists, after his death by suicide. But Reimer’s autonomy and dignity as a gendered subject was first and most intrusively invaded while he was alive by psychologist and sexologist John Money, who encouraged his parents to allow him to undergo surgical and hormonal gender reassignment as an infant following a failed circumcision that caused severe and irreversible damage to his genitals, and to raise Reimer as a girl. When Reimer, who was born with XY chromosomes, “was eight months old, his penis was accidentally burned and severed during a [routine] surgical operation” (Butler, 2001, p. 184). Despite extensive efforts on the part of his parents and physicians to raise him as a girl, a decision made based on the strong professional recommendation of John Money, Reimer recognized or discovered his masculine identity early on in his childhood and subsequently lived out his adult life as a man. Ironically, Reimer’s life in its retrospective totality has since been appropriated in service of prompting “a revision and a reversal in developmental gender theory, providing evidence...that counter’s Money’s thesis [regarding the malleability of gender socialization], supporting the notion of an

essential gender core tied in some irreversible way to anatomy and to a deterministic sense of biology” (Butler, 2001, p. 186).

Irrespective of ongoing and contentious debates over biological essentialism and social constructivism, the bottom line for contemporary gender theory is indisputably clear: we must listen to and respect the incontrovertibility of trans claims to belong to a sex. The desire or need for anatomical reassignment is evident in a plethora of trans narratives. In what Atalia Israeli-Nevo (2017) calls the *classic* narrative of transsexual transition, exemplified by Caitlyn Jenner’s highly publicized transition story, both the temporal trajectory of and the physical alterations involved in transition align and cohere with established cultural expectations of development and biological metrics of male/female physiology and anatomy: the person transitioning seeks, in a linearly progressive manner, to confirm or attain an identity deprived to them by their current embodied condition with respect to its possession or lack of certain anatomical and/or physiological traits (Israeli-Nevo, 2017, p. 35). Accordingly, there is a wealth of “[t]ranssexual discourse that understands sexual difference as a dualism” (Poe, 2011, p. 119).

Likewise, the category of *transgender*—although it was originally “introduced [in the mid-1990s] as a broad umbrella term—bringing together different gender-variant people” (Bettcher, 2014, p. 384)—need not be seen as oriented toward the eradication or obfuscation of difference: terminologically, the word “transgender” implies an oppositional relation to the subject position of “cisgender.” Thus, transgender identification, far from entailing the erasure of the many relational differences between sexed subjects, in fact marks a tacit recognition of differences and oppositions, albeit not strictly or necessarily in the straightforward sense of essential, static, binary, or predetermined difference. Indeed, for Jack Halberstam (2005), “[t]ransgender proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside of categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition” (p. 49).

Talia Mae Bettcher (2014) outlines the inception of what she calls the “transgender paradigm,” a radical new vision of gender which subscribes to a “beyond the binary” model which ostensibly subverts the gender binary and deconstructs the exclusionary dichotomous logic by which trans and gender nonconforming people are systematically marginalized and oppressed (pp. 383-384). Since the advent of trans studies in conjunction with the transgender politics forged by Leslie Feinberg and Kate Bornstein in the mid-1990s, the notion of gender as



spectrum has gained significant traction, eventually attaining widespread acceptance within both intersectional feminist-activism and academia (Bettcher, 2014, p. 384). From the perspective of the transgender paradigm, the proliferation of identificatory taxonomies is viewed as a subversive counter-hegemonic enterprise in opposition to the dichotomous heterosexual disciplinary norm. In short, discourses at the frontiers of transgender studies and activism has come to reflect a systematic and supposedly unitary “attempt to move beyond dichotomies” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 116).

But the universalizing, utopian vision touted by the “beyond-the-binary” transgender movement has been met with measured resistance from transsexuals who “see themselves as nonconsensually subsumed under the transgender umbrella” (Bettcher, 2014, p. 385). One major concern regarding the transgender paradigm is the way in which its allegiance to social constructionism is at odds with “the actual experiences of transsexual people for whom gender identity seems impervious to cultural modification” (Bettcher, 2014, p. 385). Indeed, Alenka Zupančič (2012) notes that “[o]ne of the conceptual deadlocks in simply emphasizing that gender is an entirely social, or cultural, construction is that it remains within the dichotomy nature/culture.” Therefore, compared to its predecessor the wrong-body model, the beyond-the-binary model is equally incapable of justifying the epistemic centrality of constative self-identification insofar as it takes for granted dominant gender terms (Bettcher, 2014, p. 385). The inadequacy of the transgender paradigm to which she subscribes stems from its inability to offer strategies of resistance to those who do not conform to its delimiting parameters of subversion. In short, the transgender paradigm exclusively “locates the resistant potential of trans people beyond the binary” (Bettcher, 2014, p. 404). The transgender paradigm is amnesiac of the fact that the transgender paradigm upholds the gender binary by necessitating that all resistance be organized in oppositional relation to it. Hence its refusal to authenticate acts of political resistance made by those whose mode of gendered identification resides within the binary logic of the heterosexual regime.

Over and against the impulse to eradicate the notion of sexual difference rather than rather than reinterpret or expand its purview, I argue that the absolutely inalienable and ineradicable force of constative self-identification with respect to gender and/or sex (which often entails the rigid assumption of either a male or female identity) can exist in harmonious simultaneity with the recognition of irreducible difference. Human beings are historical and

social creatures forced to contend simultaneously with our inescapable embodied relationship to what Irigaray calls “the natural.” Yet this observation in no way precludes the radical openness of either gender or sex to processes of de-/re-construction, transformation, and alteration—whether imaginary or corporeal, conceptual or practical. The metaphysically essential notion of womanhood or femininity endemic to early feminist thought and praxis cannot be universalized as a self-evident and irrefutable ontological truth nor has it proven objectively verifiable by empirical scientific means; yet simultaneously I see no productive reason to discount or invalidate claims which may appear to (or indeed explicitly seek to) recapitulate the hypothesis of essentialism. Indeed, subjective claims to possess a native gender or an essentially gendered core can be asserted with apodictic certitude by individuals whose felt experience of gender contributes to the confirmation of the essentialist outlook which certain theorists and activists find untenable. Essentialism and constructivism are but two among a plethora of possible ways of orienting oneself toward gender, each of which, I claim, must be defended as equally credible from a critical transfeminist standpoint.

Not only have we moved past the need to rely rigidly and exclusively on the antiquated paradigms of biological or metaphysical essentialism, but Irigaray’s work, correspondingly, *can be read otherwise than as advocating any form of essentialism*, whether biological or anatomical, despite both her tacit reliance on bodily norms and her admittedly problematic negligence of actual discourses on sexual and gender nonconformity. I wish to suggest that Irigaray’s nominally parochial notion of female sexual specificity is not indicative of an irredeemably essentialist faith in the anatomical reducibility of sexual difference, and thus can be expanded and elaborated in radically inclusive directions. Relatedly, Irigaray herself excels (unsurprisingly given the extent of her psychoanalytic influence) in articulating the interconnected relationship of sex, gender, and sexuality (encapsulated by her notion of “female sexuality”) with attention to each term’s thorough implication in the symbolic register. Further, not only is each term which comprises the sex-gender-sexuality triad itself caught up in the ethereal domain of language and culture but the relationship between each term is also highly symbolic – which is to say linguistically and culturally mediated.

### 3.4 Addressing the Charge of Essentialism in Irigaray

In observation of the centrality of the body to Irigaray's delineation of sexual difference in her writings, it is not difficult to locate compelling evidence for the allegations of essentialism waged against her. Indeed, as Danielle Poe (2011) observes, "[t]he argument that Irigaray relies on biological essentialism for her notion of sexual difference seems to come from her analysis of women's bodies" (p. 113). Identifying a deceptively uniform array of "specifically female pleasures" including "[f]ondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on," Irigaray (1985) posits a closed circuit of plural but ultimately contained features which exist in a state of mutual exclusion to the masculine singularity of the phallus (p. 28). However, the boundary between feminine and phallic or masculine embodiment, which is palpably present in Irigaray's writings, cannot be ubiquitously upheld in reality. In human embodiment – whether cis, trans, and nonbinary – there will always be slippages, crossings, discursive and somatic excesses recalcitrant to normative classification.

We must therefore interrogate our latent presuppositions regarding the corporeal specificity of the female body and of female sexuality in a radically anti-essentialist way. And, if we are charitable, we can use Irigaray's framework of sexual difference to do so. Unfortunately, as we have seen, discourses which purport to locate gender "beyond the binary" fail to offer a sufficient alternative to the hegemony of the gender binary, or to definitively refute the broader notion that sexual difference constitutes a central aspect of the human condition. Indeed, the proper rejection of dualistic difference – a refutation which would transcend even the ostensibly emancipatory notion of gender as spectrum – constitutes a problematic avenue of thought insofar as humanity depends for its posterity on reproduction. Relatedly, Hilge Landweer (2005) aims to center the debate around the fundamental concept of generativity:

I claim that reproduction is indeed a topic that has to be negotiated on a social-theoretical level and that it should not be turned into a taboo on grounds of a general suspicion of essentialism. Due to the anthropologically still valid fact that humans are born and die, generativity leads in every culture to categorizations of "gender." By *generativity* I mean the simple insight that human societies (similar to many animals) depend for their reproduction on two sexes, no matter to what extent and with which culturally specific meaning" (Poe, 2011, p. 116).

Although it can be developed in a heterosexist manner, there is nothing binding the fundamental notion of generativity to the exclusionary legacies of oppression and violence to which it has found itself tied for centuries. Technological advancements in reproductive technology notwithstanding, it remains an insurmountable fact that the human animal is bound to ongoing processes of generation and degeneration, both in life and in death. In spite of the powerful and polemical nature of Lee Edelman's (2004) attack on the ideological imperative of reproductive futurity—a notion predicated on a pervasively heterosexualized logic of futural investment which underpins the very sphere of the political in the West—we have little hope of completely displacing the conceptual “trap” of dualism considering the centrality of reproduction to human posterity. Although we can, and should, trenchantly critique the resultant valorization of heterosexuality and heterosexual relations which stems from uncritical acceptance of our investment in reproduction and the future as ideological constructs, the fact remains that the logic of generativity constitutes the fundamental condition of possibility for human existence, and a total negation of generativity would spell the eradication of the species.

Crucially, however, the generative aspect of human life, which renders the notion of sexual difference an ineradicable theoretical consideration, does not preclude a cultural interpretation of sexual difference as multiplicitous instead of binary. For Poe (2011), “sexual difference is something that is perpetually present, but its manifestations continue to change and evolve” (p. 117). In other words, sexual difference is not bound by any biologically specific criteria to the extent that the male/female dyad (with its attendant sets of mutually opposing physiological and anatomical characteristics) falls short of satisfying any fixed criteria which could defensibly be rendered as naturally necessary.

Ample justification for such a speculative assertion can be drawn from the empirical findings of a region of current evolutionary biological research which emphasizes not only the high degree of physiological variance among individuals assigned to one or the other biological sex category but the fact that sex traits can be viewed as dynamic and not static. Specifically, I am referring to the dynamic model of sex inaugurated by Malin Ah-King and Sören Nylin (2010), in which sex is emphasized as “a dynamic process in which organisms have more or less ‘open potentials’ of sex, sex related characteristics, and behavior” (Ah-King & Hayward, 2014, p. 6). In short, sex, at the physiological level, is not only a highly *variant* category in that it differs from body to body (and incidentally it does so in a pluralistic rather than a merely

dualistic fashion), but also a highly *variable* category (in that its expression(s) is/are reactive and subject to change over time within one and the same body). Hence the vast array of unique anatomical formations among those who identify as members of the same ‘sex’ demonstrably illustrates the constructed and ambiguous nature of sex itself. On this view, the falsely totalizing paradigm of sexual dimorphism represents one instantiation among many possible instantiations of sexual difference, even if the latter is understood as a fundamental physiological and ontological reality.

Sexual difference can thus be revealed to possess no necessary teleology; considering that the trajectory of its cultural development did not *have to* result, in the absence of divine predetermination or biological necessity, in the construction of (and subsequently serve as a basis for the disciplinary societal maintenance of) a gendered social stratification system predicated on a binary logic of hierarchal dualism, we must thusly concede that the notion of sexual difference retains within it, in however diminished a form, the capacity to be retroactively remoulded and rearticulated as *relational* as opposed to hierarchal. No doubt, the unfolding of history thus far in the West has tended to privilege hierarchal opposition, resulting in the cultivation of a nearly ubiquitous general dynamic of masculine domination and feminine subordination – one well concealed by the purportedly primal and original authority attributed to oppressive patriarchal structures of power.

The notion of difference contains within it the possibility to be articulated otherwise than in binary hierarchal terms; the fundamental notion of difference is not, at bottom, indebted to the hierarchal dualism of dominant gender terms, nor must it loyally maintain its historical attachment to the paradigm of sexual dimorphism reinforced by our culture’s legacy of biological and medical discourses. Incidentally, not only does the replacement of hierarchy with relationality lie firmly within the realm of speculative possibility, but the advent of such a paradigmatic shift is not hindered by any known biological conditions. In spite of her recognition of the conceptual potentiality of relationality, however, Irigaray is stubborn in her cathexis to traditional depictions of the male-female dynamic, clinging to the indissolubility of bodily differences between man and woman. In *I Love to You*, Irigaray (1996) remarks with indefensible conviction:

Some of our prosperous and naïve contemporaries, women and men, would like to wipe out all difference by resorting to monosexuality, to the unisex, and to what is called identification: even if I am bodily a man or a woman, I can identify with, and so be, the other sex. This new opium of

the people annihilates the other in the illusion of a reduction to identity, equality, and sameness, especially between man and woman, the ultimate anchorage of real alterity (p. 62). The idea that one can be identified as “bodily a man or a woman” blatantly implies an unnecessary conflation of a specific set of anatomical traits with the discursive and socially mediated identity categories of manhood and womanhood. Such an uncritical conflation violates the pluralistic notion of sexual difference that Irigaray herself has developed in opposition to the homogenous and delimiting psychoanalytic one. Irigaray’s outright refusal in the above passage to admit the conceptual possibility of crossing sex boundaries hinges, troublingly, on a failure to rigorously maintain the crucial distinction between anatomy and morphology, a distinction to which Irigaray is ironically highly attuned throughout the vast majority of her work.

“Morphology,” within the context of the innovative conceptual framework of what Margaret Whitford calls Irigaray’s *Body Symbolic*, refers to “the way in which bodies are culturally mediated” (Poe, 2011, p. 123). Elizabeth Grosz (1989) notes that “[i]f morphology is reduced to biology, the charge of *essentialism* seems well justified,” yet “[the] reduction of morphology to biology occurs only on the crudest of misreadings” (p. 113). The notion of morphology invokes a host of both cultural and biological norms which get inscribed on the body since birth, norms which are endlessly, habitually, and coercively reinforced both at the hands of others and internally in the psyche of the subject. Moreover, poststructuralist discourses teach us that these features, which can easily be mistakenly understood as being inscribed on the pre-discursive surface of already extant material bodies, are actually, paradoxically generative or constitutive of the concept of the body itself.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the centrality of genital anatomy to the cultural intelligibility or legibility of one’s sex can be revealed as a constructed and arbitrary standard rooted as much in our cultural imaginary as it is in the likewise culturally permeated system of sex determination used in the biological and medical spheres. Indeed, Sandy Stone (1992), in her groundbreaking “Posttranssexual Manifesto,” echoes Judith Shapiro’s (1991)<sup>29</sup> insight that “[t]o those...who might be inclined to diagnose the transsexual’s focus on the genitals as obsessive or fetishistic,

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<sup>28</sup> Relatedly, Judith Butler has deftly demonstrated in her work that bodily materiality is always already saturated with discursivity and thus affected by masculinist processes of codification; as we begin to discern and uncover “the history of sexual difference encoded in the history of matter, it [becomes] radically unclear whether a notion of matter or the materiality of bodies can serve as the uncontested ground of feminist practice” (Butler, 1990, p. 26).

<sup>29</sup> See Shapiro (1991).

the response is that they are, in fact, simply conforming to *their culture's* criteria for gender assignment” (p. 231). Shapiro’s (1991) prescient defense of anatomical transition coheres with insights voiced by a number of scholars on gender and sexuality. Elizabeth Grosz (1990), for one, states in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* that “[t]he body is lived in accordance with an individual’s and a culture’s *concepts* of biology...the imaginary body is the consequence of the meaning of biology rather than biology itself (p. 44). Similarly, for Thomas Laqueur (1992), “[a]natomy...is obviously not pure fact, unadulterated by thought or convention, but rather a richly complicated construction based...on observation, and on a variety of social and cultural constraints on the practice of science” (pp. 163-164). Margaret Whitford (1991), for another, “points out that...anatomical reference is never an unmediated reflection, even in phallogomorphic discourse” (100). And in the words of Danielle Poe (2011), “we begin with some anatomical structures, but the interpretation of our anatomy is filtered through culture” (p. 123).

However, the constructedness and historicity of the widespread cultural and subjective psychological meaning of anatomy, and specifically the emphasis on genitality, does not detract from the significance of its influence on the social and cultural levels. Nor does the fact of its historical construction, in and of itself, necessarily have any bearing on its desirability or its value as a metric for cultural and clinical processes of sex determination. Nevertheless, such insights throw light on the arbitrariness of the procedural centrality of visible factors such as external genitalia to the social determination of one’s sex at birth, exposing anatomical reductionism as a material effect of the cultural mediation of biology (specifically the biological branch of morphology, of which anatomy is technically a subdiscipline). Thus, Irigaray’s ungrounded categorical refusal of cross-sex identification as an effacement of difference can only indicate a temporary lapse, a slippage from the sharp awareness of the distance between the anatomical and the morphological realms which characterizes her work as a whole.

### 3.5 Redefining the Morphology of the Feminine: A Transfeminist Recuperation of Irigaray’s Model of Sexual Difference

Faced, at this juncture, with what can only be viewed as an aporia from a transfeminist perspective, one solution is to follow Irigaray’s own counsel in “Women’s Exile”: that “[w]e

must go back to the question not of the anatomy but of the morphology of the female sex” (1977, p. 64). At the same time, however, the concept of anatomy is also an indispensable aspect of our culture’s notion of biological sex, and thus figures prominently in trans discourses. In any case, the prejudicial assertion that one’s sexed identity must be cultivated in accordance with the body does not preclude the alternative possibility, for others who are not Irigaray, of the cultivation of a sexed or sexually differentiated “spirit” that is incongruent with the body with which one is born. Irigaray violates the integrity of her own critical project by failing to address the implicit assumption latent in her statement, “I was born a woman,” that the anatomical features present in her body at birth should determine the character of her spiritual development. She assumes, based on her own experience of cisgender embodiment, that the linearly progressive nature of her own developmental trajectory of spiritual cultivation with respect to her sexed body can be universalized, and thus that, because her relation to sex has remained constant and unchanged over the course of her lifetime, that such standards of psychosomatic alignment and temporal consistency can be taken as ontological norms.

Irigaray’s (1996) characterization of sexual difference as an “immediate and natural given” (p. 47) need not be taken as a deterministic appeal to biology or to ‘Nature’ in the normative sense but instead could be charitably interpreted as an affirmation of the indeterminacy of sex, and a recognition of the fact that sexual difference is not a biological given but, as Danielle Poe (2011) puts it, a “process of cultivating nature” (p. 123). Irigaray rightfully observes that “[n]o one nature can claim to correspond to the whole of the natural. There is no ‘Natural’ as a singular entity” (1996, p. 35). The trouble, as Poe (2011) succinctly summarizes it, stems from the fact that “Irigaray’s descriptions of cultivating the natural require one to cultivate the body with which one is born,” while transsexual accounts of identity cultivation, in antagonistic relation to this tacit imperative, require a great deal more agency insofar as they involve “changing [the body], or the way that others view [the body]” (p. 123). Within Irigaray’s underdeveloped paradigm of ontological sexual difference, the rejection of the sex assigned to one at birth can only signify a retreat into the deceptive clutches of identity, under which lies an illusory abyss of ontological sameness.

“It’s not as Simone de Beauvoir said: one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (through culture), but rather: I am born a woman, but I still must become this woman that I am by nature,” writes Irigaray (1996, p. 107). However, trans claims to womanhood complicate the



presumption of inborn femininity that Irigaray appears to take for granted and erodes the solidity of the hypothesis of ultimate alterity between the sexes, the ontological disparity between man and woman. Take for example Atalia Israeli-Nevo's (2017) plain and succinct statement, "I wasn't born a trans woman" (p. 34). Unlike Irigaray, Israeli-Nevo holds that she was not born a woman, even though she is unquestionably a woman today and therefore holds as much dominion over the mantle of ontological femininity as does Irigaray and as do all women. Irigaray's articulation of sexual difference constitutes a clever marriage of biological determinism and personal autonomy in which one must existentially come to terms with the originary femininity of her body. Yet her method of description fixes the temporality of psychosexual development to the birth and death of a static subject, forcing one to identify with the body with which one is born, foreclosing (or at least pathologizing) the possibility to alter one's body, and thus to take up a different relationship to the notion of origin, which Irigaray parochially restricts to natality and the maternal scene, according absolute primacy to the event of biological birth.

Irigaray remains ignorant to (or at least silent on) the possibility that the generativity of maternal-biological birth can be metaphorically appropriated, and its temporally disrupted, insofar as one can choose, later in life (either as an adult or an autonomous decision-making child) to alter one's embodiment through the use of hormones, surgery, or both, to such an extent that s/he experiences a second birth by assuming, adopting, or being "born into" a female body—which, importantly, is not to discount the claim that one was always a woman on the part of trans women who were indeed, as only they can attest, born women. Israeli-Nevo's personal narrative underscores the absurdity of positing a definitive link between any one form of embodiment to the attainment of womanhood. She defines her own transition as a process without a definitive ending, which contradicts the classic model that it must eventually – and the quicker the better – culminate in a state of "completion." On this front, Irigaray misses the extent to which the materiality of a body designated female at birth (viz. assigned a female sex) constitutes the discursive effect of a vast collection of normative culturally inscribed meanings attributed to it within the cis/heterosexist grid of cultural intelligibility that designates bodily materiality as male or female.

To be "born a girl" (Irigaray 1990, p. 107) does not constitute the only avenue into female embodiment. The possession of corporeal-morphological femininity ought not to be

gatekept by such a specific yet empirically ambiguous criterion. Her description of a reality in which one must cultivate the natural immediacy and indisputable givenness of sexual difference as an affirmational process of becoming what one already is betrays a concealed personal bias which can be extracted from the workings of her ultimately robustly inclusive notion of sexual difference itself. She regards the inescapable ubiquity of sexually differentiated embodiment as tied to a broader situation facing each human being, namely our entrapment within an absolutely irreducible condition of existential alterity in opposition to the sexual other.

But the way in which she binds that conception of ontological alterity to the body is arguably problematic. For Irigaray, it seems, there appears to be a fragment of universal difference lodged within the individual subject which corresponds exclusively to the anatomical organization of the body with which one is born. Yet what of the fact that one's relationship to her or his body, the body into which s/he was born, is not immune to processes of transformation, modification, and rearticulation as deemed desirable, even necessary or natural, by the subject who inhabits that body? Surgical and medical technologies now engender methods of altering the body in accordance with one's lived experience of sex and gender, while historically, and at the same time, the socially visible perceptions dimension of the body has always been and continues to be intentionally manipulated, and with far less difficulty in strictly pragmatic terms.

Notably, the thing, besides the body, that is being "manipulated" in such instances is not necessarily some essential spiritual or ontological property—though it certainly can be. But it is never this property alone that is affected by the process of transition; even in cases in which an individual seeks medical intervention as a direct means, not only of 'passing' as one gender or another, but of ontologically *becoming* that desired or innate gender, what also inevitably undergoes a process of change and evolution during that transition is one's complex personal relationship to a set of hegemonic cultural beliefs and assumptions about sexual difference that have been imposed on him or her from birth. And these beliefs and assumptions, in addition to having a tendency to evolve and fluctuate over the course of history, cannot be traced back to any objective or static origins, in either a metaphysical or biological sense. As such, they must be interrogated, even if we are to decide in the end that they still have some use to us.

Instead of acknowledging that the possibility of changing one's body to cultivate a different subject position remains open, Irigaray refuses to admit the ontological import of

constative self-identification, diagnosing the possibility of authentic cross-sex identification, rather flippantly to say the least, as an “opium of the people.”

In my view, however, the limited scope of her work with respect to its fundamental inability to incorporate a growing body of theoretical work on transsexual and transgender ontology nor the expanding body of scientific research on sex variability in an evolutionary context merely indicates an arbitrary personal unwillingness to actively elaborate the theory of sexual difference in a radically inclusive direction, but not a foreclosure of that possibility. I believe, like Poe (2011), that we can use “Irigaray’s rejection of biological essentialism to counter [her own] rejection of transsexual and transgender identification” (p. 116). As such, I seek to move toward a radically inclusive recuperation of sexual difference which does not threaten to undermine the validity of trans people’s identities or the ontological weight of trans narratives. Still, Irigaray’s misapprehension of cross-sex identification as a reduction to “sameness” amounts to a stark refusal to consider the vast and open potentialities inherent in the notion of “cultivating one’s nature.” Irigaray mistakes the inclusive and non-essentialist alterity of sexual difference for static forms of bodily difference which supposedly exist between all men and all women. Differences do, of course, exist between men and women. But an equal degree of difference also exists among the anatomically diverse field of women and female-identified people: some women have penises, and some do not; some women have uteri, and some do not. Therefore, it is not justifiable to presuppose any static anatomical criteria for what makes one “bodily a man or a woman.” Ironically, it would seem that Irigaray’s cultural biases, in combination with her positionality as a cis woman, leave her trapped within the clutches of a cissexist relativism that posits a predetermined array of “natural” differences between the “sexes” instead of leaving what is to be deemed “natural” up to the subject herself.

Let us not lose hope too quickly, for whatever has been naturalized can always be denaturalized. Freud himself is unambiguous in his refutation of and the necessity of bracketing off cultural norms from psychoanalytic investigation into the nature of sexual difference, an endeavour he would no doubt characterize as “scientific”: he insists in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1966)<sup>30</sup>, as Alenka Zupančič (2012) notes, that

The auto-erotic activity of the erotogenic zones is...the same in both sexes, and owing to this uniformity there is no possibility of a distinction between the two sexes such as arises after puberty...Indeed, if we were to give a more definite connotation to the concepts “masculine” and

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<sup>30</sup> Originally published in 1905.

“feminine,” it would even be possible to maintain that libido is invariably and necessary of a masculine nature, whether it occurs in men or in women and irrespectively of whether its object is a man or a woman (p. 7).

Freud (1966) himself further reinforces the sexual ambiguity of pre-adolescence in a footnote in the *Essays*, in which he warns explicitly that it is “essential to understand clearly that the concepts ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ whose meaning seems so unambiguous to ordinary people, are among the most confused that occur in science” (p. 141).

Nevertheless, Irigaray (1996) insists on the biological dimension of sexual difference:

Between man and woman, there really is otherness: biological, morphological, relational. To be able to have a child constitutes a difference, but also being born a girl or a boy of a woman, who is of the same or the other gender as oneself, as well as to be or to appear corporeally with differing properties and qualities (p. 61).

Not only does Irigaray fail to couch her discussion of the maternal with the caveat that the biological ability to bear children not the universal mark of a woman but, through her premature desire to identify the pre-subject as a boy or a girl in advance of the processes of subjectivation and acculturation which produce sexed subjects, she falls victim to a metaphysical essentialism that cuts off the fruitful futural potentiality of the insight that one’s relationship to nature must be cultivated instead of given by limiting the abundance of agency available to subjects as they undergo and enact those processes of cultivation which mould and shape them into men or women.

As we have seen, Irigaray is well aware that the process of sexing does not end but only begins at birth. What she fails to perceive, however, is the extent of the multiplicity of trajectories open to the subject who must cultivate her identity in relation to her embodiment. But she fails to recognize that the possibility of altering one’s sexual anatomy does not detract from her fundamental view of ontological difference in any meaningful way but merely amplifies the number of available developmental trajectories open to the subject. She fails to deconstruct the uncritical assumption that the “differing properties and qualities” of corporeal bodies, which do very well exist, should be accepted as unchangeable aspects of human embodiment. The underlying imperative of ontological difference can be left intact even while the imperative of a specific and singular relation between the sexed subject and the body into which s/he was born is exploded. The subjective and objective “irreducibility...of the sexes to one another” (Irigaray, 1990, p. 62) on which Irigaray too often insists need not imply the foreclosure of total variability in sexed identification among individuals, including those born with similar bodies. The notion

of ontological sexual difference, in short, does not foreclose transsexual and transgender identification.

## 4 Gender and Time: From Queer Temporality to Trans Temporalities

### 4.1 Chapter Breakdown

If there is one thing universally applicable to the human condition, or essential to any attempt to describe the human experience, it is arguably that our existence seems to be ubiquitously and inescapably filtered through a constant interaction and negotiation with the concept we call “time.” Time is caught up and intertwined with aspect of our existence, including the experience and interpretation of gender and sexuality, both in ourself and others. I am not speaking about time as an abstract principle but as a subjective condition of experience. Indeed, without the subjective experience of time, gendered experience would have no order or meaning, no underlying chronology or organizing logic, normative or nonnormative. Thus, the phenomenon of gender is inherently temporal. As such, we will now shift from dealing with the theme of ontology to an extended exploration of the theme of temporality, and how it affects the development and perception of gender identity, and perhaps even sex itself, in ourselves and our fellow human beings.

Time is a polysemic phenomenon. It has been the source of wonderment and debate in academic thought from antiquity to modernity, and in the contemporary arena the concept of temporality continues to serve as a central area in which theorists set out to revise and reinterpret the assertions of their predecessors. Scholars in the humanities tend to emphasize time’s inextricable relation both to the historical subject and to the subjective interiority of the living subject – i.e. to the inescapable fact of embodied subjectivity that invariably mediates our experience of the objective world in which we reside as conscious human beings.

Since antiquity, some philosophers’ models of time have been based on the necessity of reckoning with death. From a Heideggerian perspective, the motivation and impetus for human action are impacted by our inescapable awareness of the “horizon of death”; any action or activity on the part of Dasein – “the entity which we are ourselves” – “is always essentially

ordered by anticipation of the end that is ‘the most extreme possibility’ and that constitutes the *originary temporality of existence*,” namely its own death (Stiegler, 1998, p. 5, emphasis mine). As one grapples with the notions of time or duration, s/he is eventually and inevitably pushed toward the existential realization of mortality. One may choose to embrace this fact: Plato’s Socrates, to use a well-known example, did not hesitate to entertain the possibility that death involved the cessation of consciousness, but many choose to reject it.

Introspective contemplation of the temporal harbors the potential to incite one to adopt an attitude of denial in relation to the finality of death, causing him or her to cling fervently and faithfully to a belief in the indefinite duration of an afterlife. Indeed, the most potent strategy for coping with the reality of human finitude, and the one most commonly employed by individuals and cultures the world over, as evinced by the content of numerous scriptural texts, has been to posit an absolutely divine being who/force which stands outside of time and, as such, wields the power to grant eternal life. This transcendent model of time has the dual effect of producing a conceptual division between mind/body (or *psyche/soma*)<sup>31</sup> and ameliorating the constraints of time on the body through the promise of eternal conscious life after the organic death of the finite body<sup>32</sup>.

Time and temporality cannot always be used interchangeably; rather, there exists a conceptual distinction between “time” in the quotidian sense (often referred to as “clock-time”) and temporality as such (a category which, first and foremost, refers to time as the fundamental condition of possibility for being but can also refer to the state of existing within or having some relationship with (and/or, paradoxically, being radically indistinct from) time on the part of individual subjects. For although mortality, through a theological lens, ostensibly guarantees the possibility of an eventual exit from earthly forms of suffering which rely on the sufferer’s experience of time in terms of duration and repetition, this does not mean we can so easily escape the recognition of time qua temporality as a fundamentally constitutive force, and as the very condition which must always already be assumed in order for the notion of *being*, each linguistic formulation of which necessarily implies an intrinsic spatiotemporal situatedness (i.e. *being-in-the-world*, *being-in-time*), to carry any weight.

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<sup>31</sup> Lea Melandri (2019) describes this divide as a “split” between what she calls the “thinking being” on the one hand and the “body-as-object” in Chapter One of her book, *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> See Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*.

As we will soon discover, furthermore, time does not necessarily have to be conceived as (and certainly should not be presupposed to be) totally distinct from Being, and therefore to describe an enworlded being as existing (or *be-ing*) *in* time could be viewed as technically untenable, at least in certain contexts. Incidentally, within the context of our analysis it is important to note that time is linked ideologically to sexuality via the cultural imperative of reproduction. Heterosexual reproduction constitutes the grounding narrative for both history and futurity. In my analysis of Martin Heidegger's treatment of the interrelated themes of temporality and historicity in his opus *Being and Time* in tandem with Immanuel Kant's writings on time in his monumental text, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I endeavour to demonstrate that the temporal bears a necessary relation to the ontological, as well as to deconstruct a monolithic concept that has historically been inextricably intertwined with the themes of time and history, namely teleology, for the purpose of debunking a commonly held faith in the teleological nature of development as it pertains to the existential subject. In doing so I maintain a sharp underlying focus on the ubiquitous existential phenomena of sex and gender, which enable a smooth introduction to the emergent notion of "queer temporality" as it relates to the aforementioned themes of temporality, ontology, history, and teleology.

This broader framework informs my subsequent close analysis of some of the divergent conceptualizations of trans temporalities (a phrase which alludes to the diverse range of temporally saturated experiences associated with gender transition and sex reassignment) carried out in relation to a number of real and fictional trans narratives – from former decathlete Caitlyn Jenner to the transsexual protagonist of Imogen Binnie's queer/trans novel *Nevada* (2013). This final portion of the chapter will also address a fundamental tension which often arises in queer theoretical discourse, namely the one between sex and/or gender essentialism and the notion of fluidity or 'flexibility.' This tension will become readily apparent as we tease out the points of divergence between the often-conflated signifiers, "transsexuality" and "transgender" – and, correspondingly, between the traditional concept of binary transsexuality and what Talia Mae Bettcher terms the "transgender paradigm."

## 4.2 The Indissoluble Union of Gender and Time

From an existential phenomenological perspective, gender and sexuality can be described as modalities of being. Relatedly, time is the abstract condition of possibility for the very notion of being: one cannot exist in a vacuum; to exist or to *be* we need time and space—which, at the quantum level, are one and the same thing (i.e. spatiotemporality)—in which to do so. Not only are all beings, human and nonhuman, suspended in the vast expanse of what we call *time*, but we can also posit the existence of a plethora of distinct and unique *times*, or temporalities, insofar as the term temporality can be made to refer to “the social patterning of experiences and understandings of time” (Amin, 2014, p. 219). Hence temporality is not a universally applicable organizational framework for gendered subjectivity. It is a much more expansive and multiplicitous concept than that. Temporality has a double meaning in our context: it refers not only to the state of existing within time, usually conceived as a linear progression of past, present, and future, but also our intimately subjective relationships to time, which do not always square with the common expectation of progressive linearity.

Notably, temporality never ceases to be an indispensable aspect of every instantiation of gender performativity, though it is no longer an exclusively linear conception of temporality with which we are dealing. Time is indispensable to gender insofar as the stylized acts which constitute gender, or rather produce and uphold the cohesive illusion thereof, must be carried out repeatedly to bolster the perception that one’s gender identity constitutes an innate, essential, and permanent aspect of one’s being. But to the keen eye, the unavoidably temporal quality of gender betrays the illusory constructedness of static gender identity. Butler (1990) troubles the notion that gender is a static and unchanging feature of human existence (and concomitantly the naturalness and originality of gender) by mobilizing a philosophical critique of unified subjectivity. In the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* she asserts that “*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes...gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). “In this sense,” she writes, “gender is a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (Butler, 1990, 25). She then goes on to quote Nietzsche’s claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (Butler, 1990, p. 25).

In addition to Nietzsche, Butler’s early work also relies heavily on Foucault and his exposure of the productive and constitutive aspect of power over and against the erroneous, or at



least parochial, emphasis on the strictly repressive function of laws and norms, such as those governing sexuality in Western society and culture. Foucault's writings help to clarify that the true function of the discursive and regulatory norms which govern sex and sexuality is, in short, not to repress but to *constitute*. The Foucaultian insight regarding the blurred lines between repression and constitution can also be expressed in terms of a distinction between *being* and *becoming*, a dichotomy which, originating in ancient Greece in the thought of Heraclitus, would continue to plague the metaphysicians for centuries to come. For our purposes, however, the distinction between being and becoming naturally raises the question of subjectivation: the process by which one becomes a subject. Butler throws into question numerous attributes of subjectivity that went unchallenged during the reign of the Enlightenment subject, namely the qualities of unity, freedom, autonomy, and rationality. Because gender is largely socially constructed and sexed subjects are inherently discursively saturated, the possibility for agential transgression or subversion is opened up, especially for marginalized and oppressed subjects.

Once the universal subject of the eighteenth century is put into question, the way is paved for an alternative definition of temporality—one more commensurable with concepts such as rupture, contingency, fragmentation, and nonlinearity than with unity, universality, cohesiveness, and linear progression. Hence, we can begin to sense the emergence of a salient connection between the temporally imbued ontological distinction between being and becoming and the metaphysical tension between the two common models of trans ontology, the first of which appeals to the idea of a native gender identity and the second of which emphasizes the construction of identity as a temporal process (which will be represented by author Imogen Binnie and trans theorist Atalia Israeli-Nevo respectively).

Butler boldly rejects the expressive model of sex/gender, which is predicated on the assumption of some essential core which exists independently of the way one behaves, in favour of the now-famous performative model in which gender consists, both conceptually and materially, precisely and only in the vast and diverse range of stylized acts which we commonly (uncritically and erroneously) believe to be expressions of some underlying and invisible gendered essence within the subject who performs them. Moreover, she takes this initial insight a step further in the early pages of *Gender Trouble*, daring to consider the implications of the possibility that not only gender but sex, too, might be a discursive construct rather than a cut and dry biological reality. This opens up the radical notion that sex cannot be objectively determined

or verified at any one point in time (let alone singularly maintained throughout the course of variably embodied sexed subjects' lives) due to its imbrication, owing to the status of 'sex' as a discursive category, with a host of historically and culturally contingent factors, not to mention the myriad physiological ambiguities shrouding the clinical determination of sex at birth.

Butler's interventions in traditional feminist discourse at the close of the twentieth century productively split open the pragmatic and didactic binary between gender and sex which originated (and there is some uncertainty dispute regarding its precise historical origin in relation to demise of the ancient one-sex model) sometime after the eighteenth century.<sup>33</sup> From a Butlerian perspective, gender is not a biological given, but a processual phenomenon enacted over time. In this vein, Butler (1988) explicitly asserts, before the publication of *Gender Trouble*, in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (p. 519).

While series of constantly repeated acts or behaviours may congeal over time to produce the *appearance* of a stable gender identity, we must keep in mind that the performative model critically exposes the inherent instability of gender over and against the commonly accepted expressive model of gender. The mere appearance of gender as the outward projection of a static and enduring essence does not necessarily imply the existence of such an essential entity beneath the appearance. Similarly, the mere appearance of autonomous action does not guarantee the capacity for unrestricted freedom of action on the part of the acting subject. As one might surmise, therefore, what is at issue for Butler is not merely the conceptual tenability of gender essentialism but the very unity of the embodied subject – the being whose discrete individuality might culminate in a locus of agency which would constitute the condition of possibility for the subversion of identity. Furthermore, agency remains a prerequisite to the capacity for subversion whether one believes in the universal possession of innate or intrinsic personal gender identity or subscribes to a purely social constructivist interpretation of the Beauvoirian maxim "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283). In any case, neither sex nor gender can be totally reduced to either biology or cultural construction. This line of argumentation has

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<sup>33</sup> See Laqueur (1990).

been demonstrated elsewhere by numerous feminist biologists.<sup>34</sup> But we have not the space here to analyze such debates in any detail. Instead, I would like us to consider the complex relationship between temporality and gender variance in what follows.

As it happens, the regulation of temporality is one major avenue through which heteropatriarchal structures of power accomplish the maintenance of the deeply entrenched cultural norms of heteronormativity and cisnormativity at the affective and personal level of subjectivity. Specifically, it is evident in narratives such as that of Caitlyn Jenner—who, referring to a photograph depicting her former self, a male-identified decathlete, declares “That is me, that is her,”—that we as sexed subjects make sense of our intimate experiences of gender by bestowing them with a sense of temporal order. Interestingly, the form of Jenner’s claim leaves ambiguous whether or not she was fully conscious of her native femininity at the time the picture was taken. Regardless, although the ascription of innate femininity onto her past has the potential to be ‘read’ as a retrospectively constructed narrative, the truth or falsity of such a reading would be irrelevant even if it were objectively verifiable. What matters most is that the articulation of such a narrative must and does occur in accordance with the prevailing cultural understanding of time as coextensive with progressive linearity. Her explicit attribution of internal femininity to her previous embodied self, which was at the time universally read and understood as masculine and male to the outside world, affirms the dominant paradigm of temporality as progressive linearity—a paradigm inextricably linked to the orderly, consecutive temporality which underpins normative psychosexual developmental trajectories and the exclusionary norms of cisnormativity and heteronormativity. And to be sure, she has every right to subscribe to that model of temporality.

To recap, I have clarified here that the concept of gender refers to nothing more concrete than a series of acts attributed to a single subject which together cement the illusion of a fixed identity *over time*. However, this implies that gender also has the potential to be otherwise than a static entity. The fact that we have to constantly perform our gender to maintain it, and police others’ gender expressions to guarantee the societal dominance of cisnormativity, means that individuals can also subvert dominant norms. But can subversion be overemphasized? Can counter-hegemonic subversion of gender and sexual normativity mutate until it has unwittingly

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<sup>34</sup> See Fausto-Sterling (2000); see also Fausto-Sterling (2012); see also Ah-King & Nylin (2010).

accrued a hegemonic status which resembles the very dominant paradigm it set out to resist and oppose? Where do calls for the eradication of binary gender leave transsexuals who assert that gender identity corresponds to a metaphysically innate gender—one which has been present since birth—or a deeply embedded desire to transition so that his or her aspired gender can be achieved through somatic transition?

### 4.3 Dasein: A Temporal Being

I begin this section with an examination of the groundbreaking phenomenological conception of time in relation to human being delineated by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* before subsequently considering its points of connection to the treatment of temporality by Immanuel Kant in his system of transcendental idealism. The overview just mentioned, of two of the more influential contributions to the theorization of time in the recent history of the philosophical tradition, will then serve as the backdrop against which I launch my discussion of queer temporality and my subsequent close investigation of multiple unique and specifically trans temporalities, both fictional and autobiographical (which is preceded by a more in depth discussion of the temporal nature of gendered subjectivity via Butler’s theory of performativity).

Michael Wheeler (2018) sums up Heidegger’s influential notion of *Dasein* – which is itself a transfiguration of Husserl’s postulation of an irreducible thinking subject who serves as the grounds for all objective inquiry (often referred to under the moniker of “transcendental subjectivity”) – as “the inherently social being who already operates with a pre-theoretical grasp of the a priori structures that make possible particular modes of Being.” As it pertains to the concepts of time and temporality specifically, *Dasein* is the entity which exists, precisely and only, between the two poles of enculturation (or ‘birth’) and finitude (or ‘death’). The being of *Dasein* stretches out across the distance between enculturation and finitude, which together comprise the conditions of possibility for *Dasein*’s unique, enworlded and embodied experience of temporality as an existential phenomenon rather than simply a matter of objective relativity or linearly sequential chronology.

Although counterintuitive from a strictly scientific or historical perspective, this latter insight becomes all the more evident when we recall the principal defining characteristic of

Dasein, namely that Dasein is a (or *the*) being for whom existence, or Being, itself, is always at issue (or *an* issue). In short, *Dasein*'s essence is identical with its inherent sense of comportment in relation to its Being, which is defined by the potentiality it harbors, at every moment, to take up a vantage point, as if from outside itself, on its own Being). Following its 'birth' (not a biological birth but an existential one) into a pre-existing culture, *Dasein* assumes its place in the world as a creature fundamentally indistinct from culture in an ontological sense and yet, simultaneously, thrust into an extrinsic cultural realm not identical with its being, from which there is no escape – indeed, even death, in its unlimited finality, offers not a true escape insofar as the event of death relegates Dasein to non-existence – a realm (culture) whose norms, customs, and rites of passage cultivate in *Dasein* distinctly other-directed, non-solipsistic modes of thought.

In any case, despite the predominance of the scientific tendency to conflate the notion of time as a whole with the strings of temporally ordered events that comprise a human lifespan, a historical society, and civilization as a whole, or even for that matter the unimaginable series of moments which constitute the "age" of the extant universe itself, is to falsely attribute to it an air of objectivity which the term by no means deserves. Furthermore, even to include in one's mathematical quantification of time those potentially infinite durations, or 'infinities,' which presumably (must have) elapse(d) before one is born and (will occur) after s/he dies – which, incidentally, are at once conceptually multiple and discrete and yet at the same time boundless in scope, continuous, and unending – or, indeed, even to account for nuanced variables such as the constantly expanding nature of the universe, would not, from an existential phenomenological perspective, redeem any formulation of time that renders it as an indefinite succession of distinct moments inasmuch as the very notion of succession bears little relevance to phenomenological interrogations of the various and variegated subjective experience of time, or 'temporality.'

In short, the quantitatively based notion of time-as-linear-succession (or clock-time) differs dramatically in kind from a qualitatively attuned conception of temporality as a subjective phenomenon experienced by a living subject, opening the door to temporalities which may, for instance, be deemed 'queer,' or 'heterosexual/straight,' among a multitude of other qualitative descriptors pertaining to the subjective, experiential nature of temporality within the purview of phenomenological investigation. We will address this in greater detail later. We now find ourselves in a position to assert with some confidence that time is irreducible to mere succession

and that, accordingly, to recognize the plethora of ways in which each of us uniquely experience and interpret the phenomenon of temporality is to strike at the heart of what it means to be a human being – that is, to be an embodied, enculturated, sexed, and gendered subject.

#### 4.4 Heidegger's Kantian Roots

The Kantian roots of Heidegger's treatment of time should not be overlooked, for indeed, striking resonances emerge between Heidegger's and Kant's theories of time in relation to ontology. In fact, Wheeler (2018) goes so far as to suggest that "[t]he ontological emphasis that Heidegger places on temporality might usefully be seen as an echo and development of Kant's claim that embeddedness in time is a precondition for things to appear to us the way they do." "According to Kant," he briefly remarks, "embeddedness in time is co-determinative of our experience, along with embeddedness in space." For Kant, temporality is not a concept that is derived or abstracted from experience but rather constitutes a necessary *a priori* condition (along with spatiality) for the experience of objects in the first place. While space for Kant represents an *a priori* condition for our *outer experience*, time represents the *a priori* condition of our *inner sense*. In his words, "[t]ime is nothing other than the form of inner sense, i.e. of the intuition of our self and our inner state" (Kant, 1998, p. A33/B49).

Since Kant holds that all representations, even those of external sensible objects, count at the most basic level as determinations of the mind, and therefore depend for their existence on "inner sense," he thus holds, similarly to Heidegger, that all appearances (phenomena) necessarily take place within time. For the purposes of clarification on this point, "appearances," in Kantian parlance, can be correctly described as being "objects of representation" (Stang, 2018). Put another way, it might be said that appearances take place within representations. It is for this reason that Kant is able to claim, in the "Transcendental Aesthetic," that time is a necessary representation while at the same time rejecting the notion that it is the result of appearances:

Time is a necessary representation that underlies all intuitions. In regard to appearances in general one cannot remove time, though one can very well take the appearances away from time. Time is therefore given *a priori*. In it alone is all actuality of appearances possible. Appearances may, one and all, vanish; but time itself, as the universal condition of their possibility, cannot be removed (1998, p. A31/B46).

Thus, it is possible to represent time without ever abstracting from particular appearances.

Ultimately, Kant wishes to claim not only that time functions as the form of our internality but that our experience of sensible objects takes on a pattern of succession, which he identifies as an essential and inherent characteristic of time, and therefore of time. A fundamental characteristic of time for Kant is that it is successive, whereas, on the other hand, spatiality is characterized by its fundamental simultaneity; different times are not simultaneous but successive. The assertion that different times occur in succession, and thus temporality can itself be called “successive,” serves as an apodictic principle of time for Kant (1998, p. A31/B47).

## 4.5 Temporalizing

Heidegger’s treatment of time, however, differs significantly from Kant’s in that Heidegger’s writings function to weaken the hitherto unquestioned link between time and succession – a link that appears positively inviolable from a Kantian perspective. Heidegger refrains from characterizing time as a succession of moments, throwing into question the successive nature of past, present, and future. He distinguishes between ordinary temporality, which he views as “authentic,” and inauthentic temporality, or “*intratemporality*.” The latter refers to “abstract, homogenous, and alienated time” (which I have been referring to and will continue to refer to as “clock-time”), a conception of time divorced from the fundamental and primordial (authentic) “time of human experience” (Martineau, 2015, p. 4).<sup>35</sup> Heidegger implicitly rejects, in *Being and Time*, the notions of both clock-time (the idea that time is a chronologically ordered, infinite succession of self-contained moments) and relativistic time (the idea that time has only a relative existence reliant on and influenced by the motion of the conscious observer and the distinctness of past, present, and future is therefore only a persistent illusion). Considering that both of the above ways of viewing time erroneously portray time as a “present-at-hand” phenomenon (meaning, essentially, a fully-fledged independent entity),

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<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Martineau (2015) helpfully articulates this conceptual schism in terms of a dichotomy between “private” and “public” time. See Martineau (2015).

Heidegger opts instead to characterize temporality as “an internal feature of Dasein's existential constitution” (Wheeler, 2018). “According to Heidegger,” explains Wheeler (2018),

temporality is a unity against which past, present and future stand out as ecstases while remaining essentially interlocked. The importance of this idea is that it frees the phenomenologist from thinking of past, present and future as sequentially ordered groupings of distinct events.

In Heidegger’s (1962) own words:

Temporalizing does not signify that ecstases come in a ‘succession’. The future is not later than having been, and having-been is not earlier than the Present. Temporality temporalizes itself as a future which makes present in a process of having been (p. 401).

## 4.6      Historicity

Recognizing, as we now do, the incompleteness from an ontological perspective of scientific formulations of temporality as reducible to measurable duration which necessarily follows a chrono-linear pattern of succession, let us now mobilize this insight for the purposes of interrogating the dominant historical-teleological connotations of the concept of “time.” Should we not now find it equally necessary to reject tacit overestimations of the jurisdiction of History as an organizing force in ontological matters by resisting the temptation to organize and contextualize the passage of time in terms of events of significance for the development of civilization, and in doing so equate time with chronology?

In deconstructing and dismantling the presupposition of chronological linearity with respect to temporality, we thereby allow for the possibility of circumventing the closely related notion of teleology, or rather subverting it given its hegemonic status. Indeed, not only have queer and postmodern theorists found themselves driven by a sense of obligation to deconstruct and dismantle the notion of chronology (due, for example, to the harmful nature of normative narratives of psychosexual and/or physiological development of normal boys and girls predicated on predeterminations regarding the purported existence of biologically intrinsic teleologies specific to male and female human organisms respectively), but also and relatedly, postmodern and queer theory has aimed, at long last, to dispose with finality of the historically coveted notion of teleology.



## 4.7 Queer Temporalities

A certain model of time as a concept reducible to linear progression stems from Platonic philosophy and continues into the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and it is precisely this model which the notion of queer temporality seeks to interrupt. Queerness is often seen as standing outside of biological time (the ‘straight’ time of heterosexual reproduction and futurity). The queer subject has been constructed as “stuck in the past,” developmentally arrested or stunted, unable to move forward, and therefore recalcitrant to social, economic, historical, and even evolutionary norms and standards of *progress(ion)*. Queer theorists E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (2011) suggest that “living on the margins of social intelligibility,” as is presumably the fate of many if not all queer subjects, “alters one’s pace; one’s tempo becomes at best contrapuntal, syncopated, and at worst, erratic, arrested” (p. 1). Tracing a theoretic-intellectual evolution from widespread uncritical investment in the static ontological framework of classical Western metaphysics to the advent of a queer hermeneutics of suspicion which gave way to critical and deconstructionist methodologies that undermine the very notion of ontological stability by way of rejecting conventional conceptions of identity as static, McCallum and Tuhkanen seek to resurrect what they perceive as “Nietzsche’s radical impulse of appropriating history and temporality for the moment” (McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011, p. 3).

Accordingly, the two authors suggest that to formulate explicitly queer critiques of so-called “clock-bound” temporality is to mobilize oneself and one’s thought against the dominant teleology of History—a conceptual category whose monolithic and totalizing influence perpetuates the delusion that human beings (and nonhuman forms of life alike) are essential and static entities. For such a position forecloses the possibility of understanding the *temporality of life*—which inevitably encompasses the lived experience of gender and the sedimented identities associated therewith—in relation to the myriad dynamic processes of *becoming* constitutive of the phenomenon we refer to as “life,” but which bear no tangible relation to that linguistic signifier. In what remains of this chapter I wish to raise the question of whether it is possible, even likely, that increased recognition and acceptance of a plethora of modes of gendered expression, including and especially those which fall under the umbrella of trans\*, might contribute to the Nietzschean revelation of a “mode of life liberated from baleful teleology” (McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011, p. 3). That gendered experience ranges from variable to

consistent, and from ambiguous to definitive, provides one occasion to unsettle teleology by embracing indeterminacy –at both the level of ontology and that of epistemology.

Moreover, considering the newly hypothesized (might we venture to say established?) objective instability and non-stasis of personal identity, does not a total acknowledgment of self-determined identification productively fly in the face of the antiquated and outmoded metaphysical *telos* to which Nietzsche supposedly directs his impassioned animosity? (A gendered *telos*?) Gender cannot be determined as stable from the outside (empirical observation is powerless in this instance; even cutting-edge endocrinology cannot provide philosophically satisfying results) but nevertheless can be asserted as stable by the individual, and is indeed described as such by some trans people (as evinced by the exemplary and highly publicized narrative of Caitlyn Jenner’s transition).

Hence a paradox emerges: for such assertions can in some cases be understood simultaneously as constituting a passive description of the very core of one’s existence and at the same time as holding the power and potentiality to concretely shape and define that gendered core. In other words, the act or process of communicating or expressing one’s self-identity evinces the autonomous agential capacities s/he wields as an individual subject with respect to her or his embodied self; yet in order to arrive at such self-knowledge, the subject must “look inward,” taking on the role of observer with respect to her remembered past and her current subjective state (a role which no one else is qualified to take on inasmuch as it requires a singularly unique and inaccessible vantage point).

A major deadlock plagues the ostensibly progressive and inclusionary theories of queer becoming insofar as many transsexual narratives (e.g. that of transsexual women who lay claim to a ‘native’ sex) actually align more closely with a metaphysically essentialist account of gender which we hastily took to be outmoded since it conflicts with social constructivist hypotheses which privilege social gender while downplaying the category of ‘sex’ in order to emphasize the supposed universal malleability and fluidity of gender insofar as it appears to be a social construct. In light of this conceptual aporia, however, we must take pains to stress that taking transsexual assertions of identity seriously, even and especially when they appear to reinforce a binary model of gender as well as a seemingly untenable conflation of sex and gender (and thus a return to the previous century’s paradigm of sex-gender), in no way undermines the philosophical integrity of nonconventional approaches to the conceptualization and

theocratization of gender, but on the contrary, only enriches gender and sexual difference as sites of investigation.

As we have already seen, Butler (1990) alludes, well in advance of the birth of queer theory as a distinct discipline, to the unintelligibility of a rigid distinction between biological sex and social gender in the following, oft-cited quotation:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all (pp. 10-11).

Despite the problems with defining sex as a purely discursive effect (which, as we have seen, Prosser makes abundantly clear in his reading of *Gender Trouble*) Butler’s point is an invaluable one, and it contributed greatly to the tumultuous revolutions in gender theorizing set in motion at the turn of the last century. Hidden in the above assertion, however, is not only an implicit overestimation of the sovereignty of social construction in relation to the constitution of sexed and gendered identities but also the threat of discounting the validity of personal identities which complicate or disrupt the logic of social construction.

As the current century unfolds, I contend, the category of transsexuality represents an increasingly necessary foil to the universalizing language of “transgender” which masquerades as an adequate signifier in contemporary Liberal human rights discourses.<sup>36</sup> Although it might appear likely that a radically unrestricted acknowledgment of self-determined gender identifications of any and all types serve to displace and unsettle the gendered teleologies of both the scientific and sociocultural realms – two interrelated realms reinforce one another’s ‘truths’ to the point of constituting a normative, strictly binary epistemological model of gender which possesses no identifiable origin – an insurmountable problem remains: namely that some identities and narratives (which do not fit neatly into the normative confines placed on gender in a culture but are at the same time not necessarily queer), such as those associated with classic definition of transsexuality, rebelliously and inconveniently uphold precisely that epistemological model. Although I am sympathetic to the McCallum’s and Tuhkanen’s (2011) claim that “it is precisely [its] skewed relation to the norm that also gives queerness its singular hope” (p. 8), the fact remains that the categories of ‘queer’ and ‘trans’ do not always exist in symbiotic relation to one another. The vast symbolic and practical power of queerness with

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<sup>36</sup> See Nay (2019).

respect to advancing explicitly counterhegemonic and anti-normative theoretical and sociopolitical objectives is precisely what Lee Edelman recognizes when he identifies conservatism's conception of the queer as being, however counterintuitively, the only formulation which truly bears witness to the immense counterhegemonic power inherent to queerness, its destructive potential against oppressive regimes which seek to impose social norms on its subjects and instill faith in fictitious models of a rightful or natural social 'order.'

Thus, it is all too easy to gloss over the often-tenuous relationship between queer theory and trans theory and, correspondingly, the disharmonious, non-equivalent struggles and hopes between those who identify as queer and/or nonbinary and those who identify as transsexual due to radical and irresolvable dissensus of opinion regarding the value and necessity of (straightforward) *opposition to* and/or *rebellion* against the norm. McCallum and Tuhkanen (2011) regard *reproduction* (which they connect to the ambiguous notion of "fruitfulness" in Nietzsche's parlance) as the primary mechanism of historical progression. Thus, the Edelmanian notion of reproductive futurity (a specialized term originating from the domain of queer theory specifically) establishes the imagination of queer histories, presents, and imagined futures as a legitimate theoretical pursuit, ensuring that queer theoretical investigations and rearticulations of dominant history, analyses of the present, and predictions for the future cannot be pre-emptively ignored on the basis of their supposed parochial preoccupation with fleshly desires, but must be considered epistemologically valuable on the basis that an overdetermining, normative force like reproductive futurism, which encapsulates and accounts for the ubiquitous impulse toward reproduction (simultaneously an individual and sociocultural impulse), might subtly undergird all recourse to the culturally coveted monolith of *historicality* itself.

And this intervention on the part of queer theory pollutes the long-standing societal and academic perceptions of the study of abstract entities including history and time, removing the disguises which allowed them to masquerade as pure and noble pursuits exempt from any consideration of the perversely mystifying, all-too-human phenomenon of sexuality which, irreducible to biology, endlessly complicates conveniently straightforward explanations regarding the formation of civilization and the impetus of individual action. Advancing the cultural normativization of heterosexual reproduction can be seen, without a doubt, as the single most important task of that monolithic force, namely History, which wishes to coerce us into complacency with the delusion of a teleology synonymous with linear progression. In contrast,

queer conceptions of temporality can therefore be taken up as potent counterpoints to, or wielded as weapons against, the blindly universalizing narrative of history-as-progress.

For History, when rigidly conflated with linear progress and the capitalistic aim of *development*, functions as the antithesis to a dynamic and nonlinear conception of *life*, the latter term signifying a dynamic, a-teleological phenomenon replete with stunted rhythms and nonlinear trajectories, which may be termed “queer.” Such a conception of life can furthermore only hope to thrive within a theoretical paradigm which does not merely tolerate but affirms and encourages the disorienting oscillations between the unhistorical fervour of “youth” and the suprahistorical overcoming of the past in favor of a still anti-futurian affirmation of the present as a finality, which cultivate a uniquely queer modes of relating to, engaging with, and describing, temporality. Indeed, inasmuch as “the notion of queerness [is] posited not as an identity or a substantive mode of being but as a way of becoming,” in the words of McCallum and Tuhkanen (2011), “temporality is necessarily bound up in the queer” (p. 8). Temporality is thus also bound up in the gendered dimension of life, for cis and trans people alike.

## 5 Comparative Analysis of a Selection of Autoethnographic and Autobiographical Trans Narratives

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. (Simone de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283)

I wasn't born a trans woman. (Atalia Israeli-Nevo, 2017, p. 34)

### 5.1 Introduction

The question has been hotly debated in recent decades: does gender identity fall under the category of discursive construction or can it be traced back to an intrinsic essence within the subject? According to Butler's (1988; 1990) famous theory of performativity, which has gained somewhat of a dominant status in recent queer and feminist theory, temporality is a crucial aspect of the performative enactment of gender. Butler's core innovation is to expose gender as a

linguistic and cultural construct, the coherence of which hinges on the non-volitional repetition of its performance. Although the performative enactment of gender can easily be conflated with *expression*, gendered performance does not, in fact, imply the necessary existence of an original gendered essence or nucleus within the subject. Upon inspection, gender reveals itself to be a metaphysically ambiguous and temporally dependent construct. Thus, the phenomenon we call gender appears to be no more than a collection of actions habitually carried out by sexed subjects and sedimented through repetition over time.

Yet the stylized manifestations which sustain its pervasive and illusory existence—the subtle ways in which we are constantly ‘doing’ gender—nevertheless ubiquitously continue to be dutifully performed, albeit often unconsciously or under a kind of duress. I will begin this, the second and final part of my chapter on the theme of temporality by firmly establishing the importance of temporality to gendered expression and performance. More specifically, a keen, phenomenologically inspired observation of the unique temporality of gendered embodiment constitutes a key aspect of Butler’s theory of gender performativity: the hypothesis that gender is a psychologically ingrained construct insofar as such a notion entails that gender is not itself nor does it not arise from a stable or static essence within the subject but relies for its coherence on its repetition in time. Thus, I rely on but remain critical of Butler’s (1988) characterization of gender as an “identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 519). throughout the remainder of the chapter to inform my investigation of both the emergent concept of queer temporality broadly as well as the actuality of certain specific trans temporalities insofar as the experience of temporality unavoidably mediates diverse (linear and non-linear) trajectories of trans becoming.

I also introduce the useful analytical distinction succinctly articulated by Talia Mae Bettcher in her article “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” between the “trapped in the wrong body” model, which aligns with conventional epidemiological wisdom, and the “beyond the binary” model increasingly favoured by the current Anglo-American political and epistemological “transgender paradigm,” in which (binary) gender is thought to be wholly reducible to social construction.<sup>37</sup> I outline this crucial distinction to provide a strategic foundation for my rearticulation of the concept of “taking one’s time”

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<sup>37</sup> See Bettcher (2014), p. 385.

outlined by Atalia Israeli-Nevo in “Taking (My) Time: Temporality in Transition, Queer Delays and Being (in the) Present” whereby I claim that diverse agential manipulations of temporality debunk the fantasy of a universally applicable narrative trajectory of transition and/or a unified notion conception of trans temporality. I argue that the coexistence of such dissenting perspectives on and narratives of gendered experience and identification is crucial to overcoming the conceptual deadlock between fluidity and stasis which frequently arises in the context of gender and sexuality studies.

In section 5.4, I embark on a comparative analysis of Israeli-Nevo’s transition story and the fictional transition narrative of Maria Griffiths, the protagonist of Imogen Binnie’s queer/trans novel *Nevada* (2013). Retaining a critical emphasis on the necessarily temporal character of gender performativity in tandem with an acute awareness of Bettcher’s dichotomy between the two major ways of conceptualizing trans ontology, I deal heavily in this section with what has been posited by numerous contemporary theorists as the uniquely queer temporality of gender and sexual nonconformity. In doing so I seek to illustrate how diverse and heterogeneous trans temporalities complicate and disrupt not only the presupposed temporal unity of transition but also the latent metaphysical presupposition of gender (i.e. masculinity or femininity) as an innate and eternal aspect of the human being which has fuelled the crude conflation of sex, gender and sexuality for centuries.

Israeli-Nevo complicates normative assumptions about sustained futural aspiration and intense bodily dysphoria in trans subjects by choosing to embrace liminality and to resist the imperative of linear progression. She does so through her deliberate abstention from conforming to the expectations imposed upon (trans)feminine bodies, such as the removal of body hair, and through her decision to take occasional breaks from the hormone treatments designed to guide one’s process of somatic transitioning along a predetermined and highly medicalized trajectory, thus disrupting the linear temporality of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Similarly, Binnie illustrates, in her literary work, a complex narrative of transition affected by normative sociocultural demands. But a major point of difference unavoidably crops up between the two texts, namely their respective characterizations of transness on the one hand as processual and constructed and on the other as an essential and pre-existing component of one’s being since birth. I suggest that this asymmetry reveals itself in the exemplary juxtaposition of Israeli-Nevo’s

(2017) assertion, “I was not born a trans woman” and Maria Griffiths’ opposing assertion, “I have been trans since I was a tiny little baby” (Binnie, 2013, p. 41).

Finally, I attempt to reconcile the tendency to valorize gender fluidity and/or flexibility with the unavoidable and ineradicable existence of less obviously subversive forms of gendered embodiment. For trans temporalities can, and often do, exceed the limitations of both the wrong body and beyond the binary models, casting trans identification as a practice of discursive excess for which dominant culture has no place. Indeed, it is precisely the attribution of excessive ambiguity which relegates transness, within the heteronormative symbolic order (the realm of language and culture), to a perpetual state of perceived temporal discontinuity and ontological illegibility and leads to its designation as a culturally unintelligible form of pathological difference. Although it may be justifiably asserted that the coexistence of Bettcher’s two competing models leads to an irresolvable epistemological deadlock, Israeli-Nevo’s deliberate decision to embrace the liminal tension between the two opposing models generates a productive and liberatory manipulation of linear temporality without, however, falling victim to the tendency to deify sexual and gender flexibility as inherently queerly subversive. In conclusion, I argue that the widescale subjectivization of temporality enacted, in collective isolation, by trans people as they navigate divergent experiences of transition liberates the concept of temporality from the confines of both cisnormativity and transnormativity and forges an intermediary link between the seeming rigidity of the wrong body model and the extreme fluidity of the beyond the binary model, both of which have the untenable potential to acquire an almost hegemonic status.

## 5.2 Opposing Ontologies: Reconciling Seemingly Conflictual Ontologico-Temporal Narratives of Transgender Self- Determination and Discovery

“What gets dropped from transgender in its queer deployment to signify subversive gender performativity is the value of the matter that most often concerns the transsexual: the *narrative* of becoming a biological man or a biological woman (as opposed to the performative of effecting one)—in brief and simple the materiality of the sexed body” (Prosser, 1998, p. 32)



Susan Stryker (2004), in an article titled “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” suggests that within the context of academic queer studies the signifier “transgender” has been pushed into an all-subsuming role whereby it “increasingly functions as the site in which to contain all gender trouble” (p. 214). In anticipation of the comparative analysis of two trans narratives to be undertaken in section 5.4, I shall now briefly introduce Bettcher’s (2014) distinction between what she calls the “wrong body” model of transsexuality and the “beyond the binary” model. “The wrong body model proper has two versions,” she writes:

In the weak version, one is born with the medical condition of transsexuality and then, through genital reconstruction surgery, becomes a woman or a man in proper alignment with an innate gender identity. In the strong version, one’s real sex is determined by gender identity. On the basis of this native identity one affirms that one has always really been the woman or a man that one claims to be. In both versions, one is effectively a man or woman “trapped in the wrong body” (p. 383).

In contrast, the revolution in trans theorizing and activism which began to gain traction near the close of the last century “witnessed the introduction of the word ‘transgender’ as a broad umbrella term” (Bettcher, 2014, p. 383). Bettcher (2014) claims that the new vision of gender nonnormativity

subscribed to a ‘beyond the binary’ model. It claimed that because transgender people don’t fit neatly into the two dichotomous categories of man and woman, attempts are made to force them into this binary system. The medical regulation of transsexuality, in this account, is one of the main ways that society tries to erase transgender people (p. 384).

It should be recognized, in any case, that femaleness is not synonymous with or dependent on the implication of a specific type of personal history, nor on the general notion of the past. Trans existence can be described in the same temporal terms as cisgender gendered existence. A trans woman is both trans and a woman in the present moment, and the act of emphasizing her transness does not have to mean emphasizing her past or a linear temporal trajectory of her transition, even if her transition occurred along normative lines and was temporally linear. Transness is a feature of present gendered existence. The phenomenon of trans existence, like cis existence, does not require temporal contextualization in order to be, or be seen as, valid or authentic. To focus on one’s transness in its isolation can be done independently of any focus on her past.

Furthermore, transness can be separated out analytically from womanhood or femininity. Current trans identification – by which I mean the fact that one currently identifies as trans – does not necessarily imply, in any way or to any extent, any specific details about one’s past. The

act of identifying as trans today does not imply or require that one has formerly occupied a body commonly gendered as the opposite sex, was formerly perceived as the opposite sex (in everyday life and in public or private settings), or that one formerly personally identified with a sex or gender other than the one with which he, she or they identify presently. Rather, the precondition for being trans is identifying as trans in the present, in the here and now. It is in this sense that existence and identification, being and identifying, are inextricably intertwined when it comes to the gendered aspect of trans, and of human, existence. I have no intention here of employing/deploying trans identity abstractly as a disembodied figure of exceptionality, as inherently transgressive<sup>38</sup> nor as an abstract allegory of bodily transcendence<sup>39</sup>. Relatedly, I hold – contra the numerous outmoded and conceptual frameworks of gender such as Butler’s (1990) seminal model of ‘gender-as-drag,’ or Rosi Braidotti’s (2011) construction of the “transsexual imaginary,”<sup>40</sup> which she uses as “a floating signifier for the trouble with modernity” (Hayward, 2011, p. 227) – that no gender identity or form of gendered embodiment, including transsexuality, should be fixed by the logic of exception – much less cast as the ‘exception’ *par excellence* – to the culturally established and preferred norm of cis identity, which functions to expose, or ‘show up,’ the constructedness of the norm itself – or indeed emblematic of the contradictory and unsustainable nature of modernity itself.

The relative naturalness or constructedness of gender norms, each of which is culturally and historically specific, is peripheral to our present investigation. The looming dichotomy between “natural” and “constructed” (nature/culture) ought to be superseded by the more pressing issue of personal identification, and by the urgencies and complexities which undergird the necessary labor of realizing, recognizing, and respecting (on both a broader sociocultural level and an interpersonal one) the inviolable authority individuals ought to be assumed to possess over their identities. To avoid the emergence of a deadlock between fluidity and rigidity with respect to the conceptualization of gender identity, I claim, it is crucial to recognize that the theoretical project of divorcing ‘transness’ from its common cultural association, if not conflation

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<sup>38</sup> Indeed, “[discourses] about trans-becoming [are] often delimited by the ways trans-identities resist or ‘transgress’ gender/sex categories” (Hayward, 2011, p. 227).

<sup>39</sup> “Transsexuals do not transcend the body” (Hayward, 2011, p. 227).

<sup>40</sup> “[T]he technological field has evolved into a space of sexual indeterminacy, which I rendered in terms of a transsexual imaginary. Advanced capitalism has consumed and subsumed the old gender system” (Braidotti, 2011).

with, 'pastness'<sup>41</sup>, can be done in simultaneity with the celebration of trans narratives that *do* conform to normative expectations.

An innovation such as Susan Stryker's notion of "*pastpresents*" – "an always present past in the present" (Hayward, 2011, p. 236) – is indispensable in this regard insofar as it encourages us to bracket the distracting question of whether trans-identification is "in fact" intrinsic to the individual (in either an empirical, biological sense, a spiritual sense, or both) or a culturally constructed identity category that derives meaning only oppositionally, viz. in relation to cisnormative identities and identificatory practices. Such a notion could provide a theoretical launching point from which to begin dispensing with the rigidity of the invisible boundaries between individual subjectivity and social world(s), and to embrace the "sensuous transaction between body and environment" (Hayward, 2011, p. 225), without ever sacrificing the possibility of a robust defence of the ethical authority one possesses, to wield as she pleases, over her identity on the basis of the self-avowal of subjective experience alone.

Thus, to wonder how you yourself, as a cis person or as a trans person, might interact with your own gender in the absence of transphobia or hegemonic cultural gender norms – and of course to assume the existence of such an interaction is to presuppose gender-as-a-concept, vis-à-vis a general category called 'gender' that is separate from individuality or personhood, and then to subsequently assume the necessity or inevitability of a tangible and quantifiable (conscious or unconscious) personal relationship to it – is a separate consideration entirely from the ethical question of whether one should be free to (or has a 'right' to) identify in this or that way regardless of how they might actually choose to, or feel compelled to identify *if* she lived in a world in which the conditions of reality were other than they currently are and historically have been in our world.

Without doubt, there is much to discover and much to learn from engaging with the realm of speculative inquiry on the topic of gender. We might ask ourselves, for example, "How might

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<sup>41</sup> While Sandy Stone (1992) evocatively critiqued "the ways transsexuality [is coerced into conforming] to narratives of conversion [and of] lost history," there are, of course, "counter narratives...about the desire for passing, for finally being sexed or 'at home in the body'" (Hayward, 2011, pp. 234-235). The crucial thing to note in light of the potential discrepancy that might appear to arise between these two seemingly disparate theoretical approaches – of seeking to liberate transness from the confines of a temporally linear, absolutist, and relentlessly future-oriented model of sexual transitioning on the one hand and of embracing the straightforward narrative model implied by the term "conversion" as itself potentially liberatory and desirable on the other – is that they need not be seen as mutually destructive or agonistic in relation to one another.

my relationship to my gender identity and/or sex change in a trans-inclusive society?” Or, “What gendered behaviours would I disavow or discontinue and which aspects of my gendered existence/features of my gender identity would I seek to continue and/or reinforce?” Such inquiries as these are captivating and indeed important to explore, but my goal here is quite distinct and far less ambiguous: I aim to naturalize and defend one's freedom to identify how one wishes (as male, female, other, or neither) *regardless* of the cultural conditions or constraints operating on him/her/them with respect to the taxonomic procedures of gender assignment and categorization, and the laws and norms governing how gender is expected to be or should be performed and/or embodied.

### 5.3 A Preface to the Analysis of *Nevada*'s Literary Narrativization of Transgender Experience

“I read transsexual narratives to consider how transition may be the very route to identity and bodily integrity. In transsexual accounts, transition does not shift the subject away from the embodiment of sexual difference but more fully into it” (Prosser, 1998, p. 6).

In juxtaposing the narrative of Imogen Binnie's (2013) fictional text *Nevada* with the personal narrative of Atalia Israeli-Nevo, I have no intention of conflating the articulation or recollection of lived experience with the imaginative act of constructing a fictional narrative. I do wish to highlight the capacity of literature with respect to its inherent socio-politically transformative and revolutionary capacities, the capacious potentialities of the literary narrative form with respect to its “political efficacy for imagining alternatives” (Cranston-Reimer, 2014, p. 34) – in our case, alternative ways of embodying and identifying with gender/methods of gendered identification and embodiment.

As a society, it is important that we hear stories from real people, stories that are true-to-life, when attempting to address and assuage the social contention and hostility surrounding issues of gender nonnormativity. It is also important that nondominant narratives of gender begin to infiltrate other aspects of life, culture, and language – including, for example, the literary realm – to inspire the indiscriminate perception of gender conforming and nonconforming characters alike as human and as equals, as they are and should be considered in reality.

Optimistically, one might reflect that a shift has been initiated in recent times in the very possibility of imagining and articulating gender as a concept.

Accordingly, a vast range of possibilities of imagining and living-with gender that have always existed but have only begun to be more widely recognized and celebrated in recent times, also exist beyond the confines of quotidian life in the realm of fiction and storytelling, in which dominant ways of articulating gendered experience have long prevailed to the exclusion of nondominant alternative stories and trajectories of gendered experience. It would not be a stretch to say that all literary genres involve some degree of political engagement with contemporary reality, whether that engagement be direct or indirect. And this remains no less true when the literary fictional work takes on the form of a personal autobiographical narrative, as does Imogen Binnie's *Nevada*. A great number of diverse gendered subject positions and gendered ways of being exist both conceptually (as in the fictional world of *Nevada*) and concretely (as in the multitude of real trans narratives including and in addition to the ones I reference) within and outside of the dominant paradigm of gender (i.e. the cisnormative gender binary).

As such, those who occupy nondominant positions must navigate the dominant "world" (or numerous "worlds") of sense in which gender is strictly delimited and circumscribed in the ways which we call 'dominant' or 'normative' or 'hegemonic.' However, such individuals also can, and do, carve out and live in alternative "worlds" in which their identities are perceived differently. In such worlds one may not only identify in different ways but might even be said to possess different ontological attributes, the choosing or discovery of which may occur more freely in the new "world" – as in the way Argentine feminist philosopher María Lugones (1987) finds herself to be "playful" in some worlds and not in others.

While trans narratives of becoming are often excluded from or pushed to the margins of mainstream discourses such as biology, we must remember and remain attuned to the fact that Biology in its own right is a producer of narratives and scripts, of which dominant versions and methods of interpretation exist paralogously to a plethora of nondominant authorial and hermeneutical possibilities related to the articulation/trajectory of biological research, its interpretation, and the often discontinuous and fragmented ways in which it gets picked up by and rearticulated in the cultural imaginary, or 'zeitgeist.'

## 5.4 Comparative Analysis

Atalia Israeli-Nevo was not born a trans woman. Likewise, it took time for Maria Griffiths, the transgender protagonist of Imogen Binnie's (2013) queer/trans Bildungsroman, *Nevada*, to discover her transness. Binnie (2013) describes Maria's path to self-knowledge as a process of connecting a "constellation of dots" which, viewed collectively, precipitated a shift in her subjective experience of gender: "the sometimes I want to wear dresses dot...The oh man do I get more fucked up than I mean to, every time I start drinking dot. The I might hate sex dot" (5). She alludes to a long personal history of perpetual entrapment in a tormented affective state: "for as long as she could remember, she had felt all fucked up" (Binnie, 2013, p. 5). It took time for her confusion to crystalize into a state of definitive self-realization with respect to her identity as a trans woman. Indeed, in a passage early in the novel she reminisces about teenage past in which she "hadn't figured out yet that she wasn't [a boy]" (Binnie, 2013, p. 14).

Israeli-Nevo (2017) attests that she faced "enormous pressure" from both cis and trans people to either "go on with" her transition or "forfeit this trans escapade" (p. 38). However, she tells us that, instead of rushing herself, she resolved to embrace the liminality of physical transition (Israeli-Nevo, 2017, p. 39). In contrast to the "classic" rubric of transition exemplified by Caitlyn Jenner, whose path to public female identification bears points of connection to the formulaic trappings of an "extreme makeover storyline," Israeli-Nevo's (2017) notion of "taking time" encapsulates a range of deliberate ways of being (in the) present. "This is a mindful embodied present," she clarifies, "in which one has a chance to halt and delay his/her futural aspirations regarding his/her identity and explore them" (Israeli-Nevo, 2017, p. 39). Recalling McCallum's and Tuhkanen's (2011) remarks on queer temporality as "at best contrapuntal, syncopated, and at worst erratic, arrested" (p. 1), it is easy to account for the formation of the plethora of pathological diagnoses to which nonnormative bodies, subjectivities, and identities have historically been susceptible. But the vast majority of (if not all) clinical or extra-medical diagnoses and stereotypes related to "irregular" or "abnormal" psychosexual development, whether perpetrated today or in the past, are predicated on the notion of a failure, or stubborn refusal, to live up to numerous medically and socially constructed standards and expectations that all harken back to conventional (i.e. cis-/hetero-normative) models or trajectories of development laid out for the subject/body/person that have one thing in common: their reliance

on a linearly progressive model of temporality. As such, does it not seem that what I am calling “chrononormativity” could be, if not the root of the problem, then at least a significant barrier to the attainment of free and unrestricted self-identification and self-actualization for all gendered subjects?

In a similar vein, Israeli-Nevo (2017) respectfully appropriates Nasser Abourahme’s notion of a “halted present”<sup>42</sup> in which temporal markers become blurred and past and future appear “more closed and yet more present” (p. 38). “We [trans people] are dissociated,” continues Israeli-Nevo (2017) following her exegesis of the “halted present” hypothesis, “from our bodies, our loved ones, and our general environment” (p. 38). Thus, her strategy of giving herself time constitutes a reclamation of temporality from the margins; in taking her time she wrests her experience of time from its capture by the heteronormative domain, disrupts the normative tempo of linear progression, and enacts a refusal to acquiesce to the pathological attribution of stunted development imposed by the agents of a hostile heterosexual matrix. These agents are not abstract entities but employers who serve as the custodians of financial stability, livelihood, and even survival, family members who can give or refuse loving care, and medical professionals, including physicians and psychiatrists, the authoritative gatekeepers to hormone replacement therapy and/or sex reassignment surgery.

Israeli-Nevo (2017) clearly suggests that she had to undergo a period of self-realization/discovery regarding her already extant transness. Likewise, Maria, who did not realize concretely that she was trans until she reached her twenties, describes a similar process of gradual internal recognition in relation to her trans identity. Not only did Israeli-Nevo (2017) have to discover her trans identity, but for her, the very fact of its hiddenness, its concealment both from the outside world and from herself, entails, ontologically speaking, that she *was not always* trans. Maria, on the other hand, asserts repeatedly throughout the novel that she has

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<sup>42</sup> Notably, Nasser Abourahme’s own discussions of temporality in terms of a stunted or “halted” “present” emerge from his analysis of the failures of Palestinian revolutionary politics. Hence a juxtaposition between the affective connotation of failure engrained in his notion of the halted present and the myriad affective feelings of failure that can result from one’s embodied inability to live up to his/her gendered aspirations (and/or cultural expectations of femininity or masculinity) proves fruitful in uncovering points of connection between the melancholic affects shared by many gender variant subjects and the somber solidarity in “failure” of ethnic minority citizens oppressed by an occupying force. See Abourahme (2020); see also Abourahme (2014).

*always been trans* (Binnie, 2013, p. 9; Binnie, 2013, p. 41; Binnie, 2013, p. 42; Binnie, 2013, p. 127).

I have been trans since I was a tiny little baby. Whether it was something in my brain from before I was born, like people argue sometimes, or it was something I picked up developmentally after I was born, like other people argue sometime, or whether somebody sexually abused me and then I repressed the shit out of it and then that repression transmogrified into transsexuality, as some other folks will argue, who fucking cares (Binnie, 2013, p. 41).

The above passage in particular powerfully illustrates a crucial point of difference between the two trans narratives. On the one hand, Binnie's (2013) portrayal of fictional protagonist Maria serves, however subtly or inadvertently, to reinforce the metaphysical essentialist claim that trans identity is an innate and original aspect of oneself, whereas Nevo does not. Incidentally, although *Nevada's* narrator clearly states that Maria has *been trans* "since [she] was a tiny little baby" (p. 41), she qualifies this assertion shortly thereafter by stating that *took time* to recognize her trans identity despite the fact that, as a trans person, "you are supposed to have *known* you are trans since you were a tiny little baby" (p. 42).<sup>43</sup> In another passage midway through the novel, Maria manipulates (or queers, in the verb sense) temporality by reimagining her teenage past, a time before she had identified, or rather discovered, her transness: "She's sixteen, but she's the right sex this time, and it feels mostly liberating and exciting but also a little sad" (Binnie, 2013, p. 125). Her use of the phrase "the right sex" in this quotation is illustrative of a particular ontological position in relation to her gender identity, one that is not temporally dependent but a seemingly atemporal and absolute aspect of one's gender identity deeply entrenched in her being. It is evident, in short, that Maria believes the innermost dimensions of her being to be, and to always have been, completely shot through with transfemininity, viz. with both transness and femininity. As a younger child, Maria "didn't know she was trans, she couldn't put into words that *she was a little girl*, but she did know that something was horribly wrong and she blamed herself for it" (Binnie, 2013, p. 127). In spite of her former existential naivety, it is retrospectively clear to her, looking back, that she was nonetheless decisively and categorically trans throughout her younger years. Her transness has no identifiable causal origin. It simply *is*. It was not something which suddenly came into being from within at a certain stage in her

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<sup>43</sup> Note that we can map the aforementioned distinction between the "strong" and "weak" versions of the wrong-body model delineated by Bettcher onto these opposing perspectives: Maria's narrative corresponds to the former while Israeli-Nevo's is more commensurable with the latter.



psychosexual development, nor something engendered by an external force. It was there all along in one form or another, merely waiting to be discovered and properly articulated.

Importantly, neither Binnie nor Israeli-Nevo is more “correct” than the other. One perspective does not, and cannot, emerge victorious over the other, or any other for that matter, lest the sphere of trans politics devolve into a state of irresolvable divisiveness. Hence, I claim that the dogmatic will-to-truth so often demanded by dominant culture, with its insatiable desire for epistemological certainty and/or validity, must be subordinated to the unconditional validity of acts of constative self-identification, even and especially when they appear to be conflictual. We must refrain, I claim, from hierarchizing the various theoretical postulations regarding the precise origin of the elusive and ambiguous notion of (trans)gender identity. We must make room for a diverse assemblage of trans narratives to speak on their own terms, with their so-called logical contradictions in full view.

In foregrounding Israeli-Nevo’s (2017) autobiographical narrative of transfeminine transitioning, I have aimed to demonstrate the quasi-hegemonic status of “progressive linearity” in what she dubs “classic” trans temporalities, namely those which accede to the normative cultural demand for the renunciation of past identities in favor of forward oriented and unambiguously “complete” narratives of gender/sex transition. I argue that, by radically embracing the liminality of transition and refusing to validate the demand for such narrative homogeneity, Israeli-Nevo (2017) opens a horizon of alternative possibilities to conventional or “classic” conceptualizations of trans temporality. Moreover, she validates the viability of embracing liminality and ambiguity in the temporal present without in the same stroke discounting the value of transition narratives which do appear to conform to normative expectations.

## 6 A Mobilization of María Lugones’ Notion of Ontological Pluralism

### 6.1 “World”-Travelling

In “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” María Lugones (1987) emphasizes that the “failure of love” that exists between individuals and groups and those whom they view as ‘other’ – such as the failure of some white/Anglo women to love women of color – “lies in part in the failure to identify” (p. 8). She intends here to evoke the possibility of authentically “identifying” with others while retaining the solidity of one’s own identity. She hints at the importance of attempting to see the world through another’s eyes does not necessitate that one severs any aspect of the connection which binds her to her own perspective(s) or worldview(s). Instilled in the psyches of many white/Anglo women is the problematic unconscious or not-quite-conscious conviction that to afford solid identities to their sisters of color would threaten to dissolve or diminish the solidity and/or stability of their own identities. “I am profoundly dependent on others,” Lugones (1987) writes, “without having to be their subordinate” (p. 8). “We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible” (Lugones, 1987, p. 8). She suggests that the practice of “world”-traveling can engender the cultivation of a unique and undertheorized form of *identification with others* (specifically other women), one that does not erode the independence of either subject in a given encounter or dynamic. To travel to another woman’s “world,” to “see with her eyes,” allows one to identify with her as an/Other, as separate from oneself, in a way that does not imply subordination or dependency.

Although Lugones (1987) is reticent to assign a static definition to the notion of a “world,” citing what she views as the “suggestiveness” of the concept, she describes what she means by “worlds” in some detail. A “world” can be a society – “an actual society”; however, the same society viewed through various and distinct lenses of personal experience can at once be constitutive of multiple different “worlds” (Lugones, 1987, p. 10). She says concretely, furthermore, that “for something to be a ‘world’ in my sense it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people,” thus foreclosing any possibility of the term’s conflation with the future-oriented and phantasmatic notion of ‘utopia’ (Lugones, 1987, p. 9). “A ‘world’ in my sense may be an actual society given its dominant culture’s description and construction of life...But a ‘world’ can also be such a society given its non-dominant construction” (Lugones, 1987, 10). At the same time, a “world” need not refer to the (dominant or non-dominant) cultural climate or ethos of a “whole society” but may also refer to that of “a tiny portion of a particular society” (Lugones, 1987, p. 10).

Put simply, a “world” is a “construction of life.” “In a ‘world’ some of the inhabitants may not understand or hold the particular construction of them that constructs them I that ‘world.’ So, there may be “worlds” that construct me in ways that I do not even understand” (Lugones, 1987, p. 10). “Or it may be,” she continues – and this may be the point that has the most relevance to our present investigation – that *I understand the construction, but I do not hold it of myself*. I may not accept it as an account of myself, a construction of myself” (Lugones, 1987, 10, emphasis mine). “And yet, she concludes warningly, it is not impossible for one to be “*animating* such a construction,” however inadvertently (Lugones, 1987, p. 10). She then moves on to the crux of her theory with respect to its implications in the everyday/quotidian life of those whose bodies reside within, but who at the same time are routinely cast out, relegated to the margins of, and are forced to live (or choose to live) as ‘outsiders’ to, dominant society. And dominant society must be understood as fundamentally capitalist, heterosexist, white supremacist, cissexist in nature, with the further implication that all those who live within its domain (which is to say, whose life itself is, without exception, constructed and sustained by those same interlocking systems of oppression we just named) as an agent and representative of that all-subsuming matrix of intelligibility which renders perceived-nonnormative or nonconforming identities and persons *unintelligible*, both symbolically and actually.

Because of the fact that, as Lugones (1987) asserts, “[o]ne can ‘travel’ between these ‘worlds’ and one can inhabit more than one of these ‘worlds’ at the very same time,” it follows logically that those who are/have been constructed as outsiders to mainstream society or culture, or to a “dominant construction or organization of life,” can be identified, in Lugones’ parlance, as “world travelers” (pp. 10-11). Whereas she herself offers the example of ethnic (Hispanic and Latino) identity to illuminate her model of world-traveling and multiple ontologies, arguing that “[o]ne can be at the same time in a ‘world’ that constructs one as stereotypically latin [sic], for example, and in a ‘world’ that constructs one as [simply] latin” (Lugones, 1987, p. 11), I intend to demonstrate how another form of personal and/or collective identity, namely gender identity, can be seen to be equally relevant and applicable to this model.

Specifically, I would like to introduce one socioculturally marginalized identity that I believe, taking my lead from prominent trans theorist and philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher, also aligns quite seamlessly with the intersectionally oriented theory of “world”-travel under development by Lugones: transsexual identity. If one were to substitute “latin” identity for trans

identity, for the sake of illustration, the next line of Lugones' (1987) article would read as follows: "Being stereotypically [trans] and being simply [trans] are different simultaneous constructions of persons that are part of different 'worlds.' One animates one or the other or both [constructions] at the same time" (p. 11).

## 6.2 Travelling While Trans, or Traveling as an Ally

"Ask yourself if you can travel in our trans worlds. If not, you probably don't get what we're talking about. Remember that we live most of our lives in non-transsexual worlds, so we probably do get what you're talking about." (C. Jacob Hale, 1997)

Trans women are forced to live in and navigate a world that is directly and relentlessly hostile to them on the basis of their identities and/or their bodily appearance. Such hostility is unfortunately a hallmark of the current dominant trans-resistant cultural order, and as such features prominently in the dominant "world" (or "worlds," for there may be multiple) in which a ubiquitously accepted narrow and exclusionary model of (binary) 'gender conformity' serves as justification for the outright exclusion of trans women from 'normal' social life. In extremely blatant instances of transphobic policy or rule-enforcement, trans women's participation in gender-specific activities, including in some cases the use of women's washrooms, admittance to 'women-only' spaces, and accessing of feminized or 'female-specific' forms of health and medical care, has been unjustly limited or even prohibited.

From an unapologetically anti-transphobic perspective, it is plain to see that any and all such prohibitions have in common is that they stem from a misrecognition of trans women's identities as women. Trans women as a group are also disproportionately victimized by lethal gender-based violence and made targets of transphobic hate speech, and with respect to this issue, it is similarly straightforward to discern from a transfeminist perspective that at the nucleus of such bigoted remarks resides the nonsensical notion, whether it remains implicit or is directly asserted, that *trans women are not really women*. The assertion that a woman "is a man"<sup>44</sup> due to her possession, or assumed possession, of genitalia or bodily attributes commonly

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<sup>44</sup> This false assertion can be found woven into the writings of such widely celebrated and respected feminist thinkers as Elizabeth Grosz, whose use of the masculine pronoun, "his," in reference to

gendered as masculine or male, is not only inaccurate but poses a threat to trans women's personal autonomy. It throws into question something that is always already in question for trans women living in transphobic societies, namely their right to be viewed as competent agential subjects worthy and capable of determining their own identities. Whether or not such a verbal violation is followed by a violation of her bodily autonomy in the form of physical violence or unwanted sexual or physical contact, the notion that a trans woman is, in any sense, more "masculine," or less "female," than a cis woman is in actuality an absurd proposition.

The term "man" and the masculine subject position exist in antithetical relation to the kind of gendered subject a transsexual woman *is*, ontologically and biologically, concretely and abstractly, materially and symbolically, and therefore ought to be registered as simply incorrect and inaccurate when and if it should ever be directed at her. A transsexual woman *is* a woman, on the surface and at the very core of her being. She is woman and, if she wishes, female; she participates in womanhood and femininity in the deepest and most superficial senses of her ontological and material existence at the very same time. The signifier "man," and actual flesh and blood men, can serve, respectively, as symbolic of and representative of absolute alterity in relation to trans women's own gendered subject positions in precisely the same way that they ("man" and men) serve that function for cis women.

The external judgment or evaluation of a trans person's authentic or 'real' sex imposed, hastily but with no less conviction, by the cisgender enforcer-of-hegemonic-gender-norms on the basis of the trans person's physical appearance (an assessment which relies on *assumed* knowledge about the nature and shape of her genitalia, even though her actual genitalia are by no means necessarily visible, rendering such 'knowledge' doomed to inaccuracy even if it were a clue or indicator of sex, which, in and of itself, *it is not*; a penis can be female, and a vagina male in tandem with the affirmation of the individual to whom such genitals are attached).

Without detracting from the extraordinary fruitfulness of the concept of "world"-travel – for let us not forget that the practice of world-traveling a "matter of necessity and of survival" for many (Lugones, 1987, p. 11) – I want to emphasize that although it is accurate to say that the violence that characterizes hostile encounters between cis perpetrators of transphobic violence

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transsexual women is not only abhorrently disrespectful but inexplicably runs counter to her own emphasis on "the centrality of bodily knowledge for the formation of subjectivity" (Hayward, 2011, p. 234).

and their trans or gender nonconforming victims (encounters of the type which plague North American society on a level that can only be described as systemic) stems from an illogical misrecognition of the nature of gender identity on the part of the perpetrator (and this is not only a frustrating “mistake” but a cruel, inhumane and often lethal one), the failure to respect trans women as women it is not only a logical misapprehension but an ethical failure. It constitutes a failure, in an ethical sense, to set aside cultural biases regarding the necessary and/or requisite conditions for female “category membership” and to instead apprehend the true nature of the category of female or feminine identity: i.e. as a radically open and inclusive category. The widespread and systemic phenomenon of transphobic violence, unsettling both in scope and with regard to the extent of its cruelty, is compounded by the fact that misrecognitions of this type are not recognized as harmful and incorrect but in fact perpetuated and protected by dominant society, its institutions and its agents/figures of (legal, moral, etc.) authority, thus sheltering the heinous actions of those who take it upon themselves to enforce gender conformity in others with violence from unmitigated condemnation they rationally and objectively deserve and allowing a regime of vigilantism to operate with relative impunity and in the absence of significant social or legal obstacles. For these norms are always and without exception viewed as implicitly inviolable norms of both conduct and appearance in cisnormative/trans-resistant society.

Whether we happen to be emphasizing the microcosmic interpersonal effects of transphobia or the wider trend of transphobia in the systemic register, the phenomenon remains rooted in an unwillingness, a refusal – one that is simultaneously collective and individual – to expand and rework outmoded conventional understandings and definitions of womanhood and femininity. At worst, this refusal is deliberate; at best it is unrecognized unacknowledged and thereby invisibilized. To harbor the belief, silently or vocally, that a trans woman is anything but a woman is, plainly and simply, to misapprehend the incontestable solidity of her self-given gender identity, one aspect among others of her overall personal identity, over which she alone presides and which no other party but she retains the authority to assert or ‘verify.’ To contest one individual’s claim to femininity is, moreover, to discount the process of self-avowal in general.

But when contextualized as the logical and inevitable consequence of a nearly ubiquitous cultural sentiment of trans-resistance/transphobia, such a “mistake” cannot simply be remedied by pointing out its irrationality or logical incoherency. For *misrecognition* in this context is

bound up with and inseparable from a broader culture of violence and erasure predicated on the oppression of trans existence itself, a culture predicated on the deliberate and systematic erasure of trans lives and, arguably, heavily invested in a coordinated campaign of genocide against trans bodies. Let me therefore state the following unequivocally: the misrecognition of identity is a form of violence. This sentiment is as applicable to the phenomenon of institutionalized transphobia as it is to that of transphobic hate speech and physical violence. The refusal to recognize or accept one's avowed gender identity, whether perpetrated on a systemic or individual basis, cannot be entirely divorced from the threat of concrete violence. It cannot be divorced from the epidemic of social exclusion or the gatekeeping practices that run rampant in the social, medical, and legal realms and have the effect of jeopardizing the welfare, and the very lives, of trans women – especially trans women of color, who inhabit multiply marginalized identities – and the communities of which they are a part.

While it may be plainly evident at this point that individuals ought to be afforded ethical authority over their identities, it is important to remember that such a claim operates in a register distinct from the register of ontology. This is consequential because, in the realm of “oppression theory,” according to Lugones (1990), “[t]he ontological or metaphysical possibility of liberation remains to be argued” (p. 502). One way to accomplish “the ontological possibility of liberation,” she suggests promisingly, is through the embracement of ontological pluralism (1990, p. 502). I therefore claim that through by highlighting the liberatory potentiality of ontological pluralism at the same time as we embrace the idea that everyone possesses absolute ethical authority over his or her identity, it is not only possible to construct a philosophically robust notion of gender that is both inclusive and multiplicitous, but also to clear a path toward liberation from the systemic form of oppression we call transphobia.

## 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 Embracing Diverse Trans Temporalities

Kadji Amin (2014) asserts, in his keyword contribution to the inaugural issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, that “transgender experiences are constituted by yet [simultaneously] exceed normative temporalities” (p. 219). Paradoxically, nonnormative experiences of gender are partially constituted by the normative temporal paradigm in which they are forced to exist, even if such constrained modes of gendered existence are often figured as illegible, unimaginable, even unlivable. Queerness and transness hang suspended in paralogous states of constitutive abjection beneath Western culture’s hegemonically constructed ideals of sexuality and gender, namely heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Because of the current dominant status of heterosexuality and cissexuality, trans and queer instantiations of difference are relentlessly pathologized. Far from being a necessary reality, however, this situation is but a second order addition to external behaviours and traits which, we have been conditioned to believe, variously reflect our internal embodied experiences of gender.

Thus, the potential for the reversal of gender and sexual norms is always already guaranteed by the very fact of their prior constitution by historically contingent structures of power; it is, counterintuitively, precisely the presumed inviolability of such norms which exposes them as fallible – as modifiable and not immutable. If heterosexuality and cissexuality were in fact natural and original – whether biologically given or metaphysically innate – society would have no need of endorsing the array of coercive and regulatory norms and injunctions with which we find ourselves inundated to secure the maintenance of such norms and to ensure widespread conformity to normative sexual and gendered behaviours.

With specific respect to temporality, it is precisely the inescapable fact of the imaginary, phantasmatic constitution of gender normative experiences of time as natural which implies the ineradicable possibility of deviance and/or nonconformity by means of gender variant experience; sexual and gendered deviation(s) are indispensable to dominant homophobic and transphobic sociocultural regimes insofar as the constructed norms of heteronormativity and cisnormativity would have no coherence without them, and without the dominant notion of time figured as progressive linearity, along with this “heterosexual” notion of temporality’s attendant set of acceptable, ideologically imbued ways of relating to the past, the future, and the present. In short, the naturalization of heterotemporality implies its porosity to processes of denaturalization, or rather, queering.



Trans temporalities often exceed the limitations of both the ‘wrong body’ and ‘beyond the binary’ models of transgender experience, relegating transness to a perpetual state of ambiguity which can lead to its designation as a culturally illegible form of pathological difference recalcitrant to straightforward classification. However, the pathologizing effects of dominant gender norms can only be sustained as long the inherent ambiguity at the heart of the discursive categories of gender and sex remains concealed and/or disavowed through the construction of cisgender, heterosexual identification as a natural and original norm predicated on the exclusion and disavowal of gender and sexual nonconformity.

In a related vein, Bettcher’s reconsideration of trans oppression and resistance benefits from her sharp awareness of the ontological tension between flexibility and rigidity, a tension which transcends the already fragile division between transfeminist theory and trans politics. The epistemological uncertainty with respect to the true nature of gender nonconformity continues to haunt the field of queer and feminist theoretical discourse due to the insurmountable existence of a mutually exclusive dichotomy between the “beyond the binary” model of transgender experience, criticized for its “alleged commitment to the [problematic] view that gender is a mere cultural construction” and the apparent metaphysical essentialism of the (trapped in the) “wrong body” model (Bettcher, 2014, p. 385). Although it may be justifiably asserted that the coexistence of these two opposing perspectives leads to an irresolvable epistemological deadlock, however, it can also crucially be rearticulated as a generative of a productive form of ambiguity. Like many trans and queer individuals in reality, Maria Griffiths, the protagonist of Imogen Binnie’s (2013) *Nevada*, spends a great deal of time pondering the socially aleatory or marginalizing implications of the ontological identity she inhabits. Although the potential for uncertainty, introspection, and even dysphoria (due to the radical potential of trans temporalities to break with cis temporality) of nonnormative gendered experience is troublingly vulnerable to pathologization, it is also loaded with productive potentiality. Indeed, the apparent disjunct between heterotemporality and queer temporalities is especially relevant in current cultural climates in which trans people are disproportionately forced to navigate a hostile heterosexual matrix bound up with structures of power which place a premium on the heterosexualized temporality of linear progression, masculinized psychosexual development, and reproductive futurity.

As I have showcased, Israeli-Nevo convincingly argues that “as trans subjects in this transphobic world, we are encouraged and *forced* into a position of not being present” (emphasis mine). Therefore, presence, though it is certainly not inherently queer nor is it the only queer modality of temporal experience, can be both a valuable tool in the struggle to resist cis temporality in that its mobilization as a (queer) alternative to hegemonic temporalities which does not tend toward becoming a hegemonic imperative itself. If treated with care, the concept of taking one’s time poses little danger of mutating into a totalizing force, unlike the paradigm of fluidity which threatens to unwittingly recapitulate the normativizing tendencies of precisely the paradigm it is meant to resist. By making room for the liminality of transition, Israeli-Nevo opens a horizon of alternative possibilities to “classic” conceptualizations of trans temporality without discounting the value of narratives which do conform to normative expectations – such as Caitlyn Jenner’s highly publicized and chronologically progressive transition narrative. Importantly, Israeli-Nevo makes no claims to universalize the concept of taking time, nor to prescribe it as an ethical imperative, acknowledging that trans people can be forced into delaying the process of somatic transition due to structural inequalities and that her privileged position allows her to take her time in ways that others cannot. Israeli-Nevo’s article takes a uniquely egalitarian approach to the phenomenon of gender transitioning insofar as it wages a powerful critique of linear progression which nevertheless leaves intact more conventional modes of being in time and ontological becoming including narratives of aspirational transition in which one deliberately seeks to transition as quickly and “completely” as possible, namely enterprises of transsexual crossing aimed at passing as distinctly and inflexibly male or female.

Furthermore, the embracement of liminality through the template of taking one’s time need not and does not inadvertently function to hierarchically displace or pathologize more rigid narratives and/or experiences of trans temporality (such as the classic of linearly progressive and fully complete transition exemplified by Caitlyn Jenner). Therefore, the concept of taking time represents an attractive alternative to the model of fluidity insofar as the former opens up the option to remain for a time (either temporarily or indefinitely) in a state of fluid ambiguity if one so chooses but stops short of inscribing such inclinations as imperative or as prerequisite to the assumption of a transgender identity or other queer mode(s) of identification. On the one hand, the common conservative view of gender operates, unsurprisingly, in sync with the cissexist and transphobic disciplinary regulation and enforcement of gender norms enacted and sustained by

heteropatriarchal, capitalist structures of power. On the other hand, purportedly progressive liberal assimilationist gay rights discourses subtly collude with heteronormative regimes of power to invent contrived and (inadvertently?) homogenizing models of trans identity and gender performance which elide the diverse actuality of trans experience. For Lee Edelman, both conservative and liberal politics are likewise invested in the logic of reproductive futurity which underpins all political discourse: in his polemic text *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, he diagnoses “every political vision as a vision of futurity,” arguing that, within the current paradigm of oppositional queer politics, “the only queerness that queer sexualities could ever hope to claim would spring from their determined opposition to this underlying structure of the political” (Edelman, 2004, p. 291).

Amidst the universal consensus in the political sphere regarding the value of reproduction and futurity posited by Edelman (2004), I claim, trans identity is locked into a problematic double bind: from the conservative standpoint, a false dichotomy is manufactured in which transness, like homosexuality, must either be eradicated or assimilated to preserve the social order, while from a radically progressive or liberal standpoint it perpetuates the imaginary preponderance of an idealized transnormative subject eager to disavow his or her past, a subject for whom transition is always aspirational, complete, and irreversible, a subject who always looks forward, never backward. As such, the disproportionate attention afforded to “classic” transition narratives in media coverage and popular culture, reinforces the totalizing influence of a singular ideal of transfemininity rigidly oriented toward the anatomical and physiological approximation of normative femininity.

Diversity and dissensus within the vast and richly multiplicitous field of trans(sexual) narratives, however, productively threatens to de-naturalize, as it were, this ironically proto-hegemonic model of nonnormative transgender/nonbinary temporality, to challenge its absolute primacy and its ability to represent all trans people, especially transsexual persons. As long as even a minority of individuals resist subsumption by such an ideal and refuse to subscribe to the fantasy of its supposedly universal applicability, there will still always be ruptures to be exploited by those who so choose in the straightforward temporal fabric of linear progression, but at the same time, the “classic” trajectory will not (and must not) be forcibly foreclosed to those who currently derive fulfilment and empowerment from it.

## 7.2 The Vital Force of Self-Identification

In “From Duration to Self-Identification? The Temporal Politics of the California Gender Recognition Act,” published in *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ)*, Marie Draz (2019) prefaces her investigation of the agonistic interplay between nonnormative gender identification and state legislative policy by acknowledging that trans and genderqueer experiences of time can appear to “emerge against a backdrop of a normative temporality in which gender identity is understood as a single discoverable thread moving from a knowable past to a knowable future” (p. 593). Arguing that “temporality is a generative framework” rather than an inherently restrictive one, she speculates about the possibility of a general social and cultural shift towards the recognition of identity – both gender identity and the historically rigidly biologized category of ‘sex’ – “grounded in self-identification rather than duration” (Draz, 2019, p. 595). In her estimation, recent developments in North American legislative policy such as the 2017 California Gender Recognition Act (CGRA) “[appear] to open trans futures, and multiple temporalities of gender more broadly, rather than insist that a particular temporal model must legitimate all trans identity” (Draz, 2019, p. 595). With this line, Draz (2019) implicitly testifies that, in regards to both the social management and personal navigation of gender, we need not absolutely privilege or insist upon ubiquitous conformity to one particular temporal model, namely the historico-culturally dominant linear model of time known as “straight time” in many contemporary queer theoretical discourses on temporality. The “logic of duration” (Draz, 2019, 596) traditionally favored in Western culture and employed in service of state-sanctioned programs of social organization and control, is not only logically incoherent but pragmatically impotent in its outmoded/outdated capacity as the silent and invisible guardian-and-enforcer of the prescriptive sociocultural norm of cisnormativity.

Rather, it seems possible, and indeed logically evident, that a potentially infinite plurality of personally specific and highly diverse, experientially grounded/informed conceptual models of ‘temporality’ may coexist alongside a multiplicity of identities/gendered ways of identifying. This would also inevitably imply the existence of a myriad of corresponding and conflictual relations between an infinitely various array of experiences/models of time and a similarly unlimited array of categories of identity and modes of identification. Such an insight is at once especially applicable in a logical sense to the nonnormative timelines of trans and gender variant

narratives of identification and intimately relevant in a phenomenological sense to the everyday experience of those forced to navigate a paradigm of temporality ('straight time') at odds with their own divergent lived experience of time.

Draz's (2019) article orbits around the central theme of the relation between time and identity. She demonstrates beautifully how the contested nature of that conceptual relation becomes problematic when one realizes that, in the context of "the larger relationship between time and state practices," it is precisely a lack of change, "or the duration of an identity across time, that is often used to justify the legitimacy of a marginalized identity" (Draz, 2019, p. 597). The socio-juridical preoccupation with 'duration' in the context of gender corresponds, moreover and more specifically, to a corollary fixation on the length of time that one has been, and/or known themselves to be, in possession of a 'male,' 'female,' or otherwise gendered core self. To this end, legally sanctioned changes to the type of sex marker recorded on an official document are often accompanied by the explicit expectation that for such an administrative amendment to occur, the gender or sex listed on the amended document must not only be supported by the individual testimony of the person to whom it belongs but additionally legitimated by medical and/or psychiatric "testimony about the legitimacy of such a claim" (Draz, 2019, p. 596).

In a sociocultural paradigm in which gender identity is taken to be permanent and unchanging from birth until death, nonnormative gender identities may seem durationally irregular and those who occupy them coerced into striving toward the durational extreme of *permanence* with respect to their identity as one gender or the/an-other. Whereas the idealized status of "authenticity" is afforded to cis subjects without question, instances of nonnormative gender identification are only deemed legitimate on the basis of their verifiable alignment with the ideal of permanence, a fact "proven" (or disproven) by the presence of sufficient evidence that one will not change his or her mind in the future and has not changed it too frequently or at all in the past. Indeed, according to Draz, the medicalized social and legal emphasis on duration has "shifted [in recent years] to focus more explicitly on the permanence of an identity" (p. 596). Ideally, according to the dominant model of the interaction between personal identity and time in which the former is presumed to maintain a strictly coextensive relationship to the latter and *vice versa*, one's gender identity should stretch all the way back to one's earliest memory, with no gaps or moments of uncertainty plaguing the narrative. In other words one's lived experience should mirror and reinforce the 'born this way' ontological narrative in which one is always

already assumed to have been in possession of a permanent, immutable, and unchanging gender identity, one that either straightforwardly aligns with or conflicts with the sex s/he was assigned at birth.

Legal documentation undeniably serves a “promissory” function, binding the “document holder” to a linear orientation both to their own personal future and to the very notion of futurity itself (Draz, 2019, p. 597). Thus, the moment one is granted approval by the state to alter the way a given document represents one’s gender identity or sex, the gendered subject is catapulted into a presumptive relationship to time that is not necessarily her own; for in reality the temporality of gender is not always or necessarily static, immutable, or concretely or straightforwardly comprehensible or coherent, but can also, alternatively or simultaneously, be erratic, evanescent, shifting, multiplicitous, schizophrenic, even provisional, even if it returns to stasis after a period of rupture. Thus, simply opting to define gender as self-identification instead of duration is not alone sufficient to assuage the deeply rooted normativizing effects of the socioculturally established relation between identity and time on a fundamental level; the underlying fixity of this relation, in which temporality-as-linear-progression dictates and circumscribes the conditions in which identity must exist, thus forcing the latter to operate and appear legible in only one limited and specific way, namely as an unchanging entity reliant upon its possession of a stable past. Draz (2019) suggests that, beginning in the late twentieth century, the normative and binary conceptual paradigm undergirding the state-administration of gender in Western society has begun adapting to the possibility that gender is not always perfectly commensurable with a model of continuous duration.

However, “even when changes are granted to [state] policies,” she asserts, “the underlying view of time and identity has often remained untouched” (Draz, 2019, p. 596). It is precisely this “underlying view of time and identity,” the one privileged by Western culture in which time is portrayed as progressive linearity and identity is portrayed as static, unchanging, and always oriented toward a knowable future) to which María Lugones’ (1990) notion of “ontological pluralism” (p. 502) poses a considerable challenge. For society to afford sexed subjects the freedom not only to determine every aspect of their gender identity without restriction, but also the possibility of identifying in multiple different ways at different times, in different situations, or in different “worlds”—and of switching between these identities seamlessly, not in the way that an actor might perform different roles but as a wholly natural and

authentic way of being-in-the-world, at the appropriate time, or in the appropriate situation or “world” (even if one’s ontological status in one “world” directly conflicts with her status in another)—society must adjust its fundamental conceptions of both time and identity and the underlying relation between the two.

We should attempt to shift away, I claim, from a strictly chrononormative conception of temporality and toward a more pluralistic understanding of subjective time – away from the static and singularizing traditional approach to ontology which informs our strictly unitary model of gendered personal identity toward an embracement of ontological and identificatory pluralism. Only then will we achieve radical inclusivity and begin to unconditionally accept the infinite potentiality of gender variability as a principle inherent in humanity, allowing us to become equally accepting of cis, trans, and nonbinary ways of being. In other words, we must depart from the established normative models of time-as-linear-progression and identity-as-static-and-immutable in order to afford intelligibility and dignity to individuals whose experiences of gender, whose narratives and ontologies, confound normative assumptions and conflict with normative standards.

One crucial step María Lugones takes in this direction is to flatly reject the assumption of unified subjectivity. “I am giving up the idea of a unified subject”, she declares in “Structure/Antistructure and Agency Under Oppression” (Lugones, 1990, p. 503). And in “Playfulness, World-Travelling, and Loving Perception”: “One does not *experience* an underlying ‘I’” (Lugones, 1987, p. 12). She detaches herself from and remains radically uncommitted, in other words, to the traditional notion of a “transcendental self” (Lugones, 1990, p. 506), the stable, unified entity that supposedly lies beneath or behind one’s outward identity or identities, or the “doer behind the deed” in Butlerian/Nietzschean terms. While she admits that her phenomenological conceptualization of identification might be seen in some sense as “ontologically problematic,” she suggests that “any account of identity that could not be true to [the] experience of outsiders to the mainstream would be faulty even if ontologically unproblematic” (Lugones, 1987, p. 11). Yet the ethical dilemma of ensuring control over gendered individuals’ *own* identities persists; individuals must be afforded the freedom to identify how they wish lest the ideal of the highest possible degree of agency and freedom with

regard to the existential project of self-determination, from which no human being should be exempt or disqualified, be compromised.<sup>45</sup>

The notion that someone whose experience of gender conflicts with the gender identity assigned to them at birth, or who may possess bodily features commonly associated with the gender or sex opposite to or other than their felt gender or sex, *should only transition if*, should only live openly as a member of the sex category to which they know they belong *if* they “truly” are (and preferably have always known, or at minimum have known for a long enough duration of time) that they are really a member of that sex, undermines the validity of transgender identity on the whole and discounts the fact that trans identities are equally as valid as their normative counterparts, namely cisgender identities. The logic of truth or falsity, the notion of ‘verifiability,’ and the fallacious absolutism of empiricist verificationism are irrelevant and immaterial to the validity and authenticity of one’s avowed identity. As Marie Draz (2019) makes clear, shifting our understanding of gender as primarily an act of *self-identification* – “Gender as Self-Identification” (p. 598) – as opposed to viewing it as reducible to duration doesn’t fully resolve the problems of “Gender as Duration” (p. 595). For even if it is conceded that one should have the authority to determine his or her gender identity the underlying conception of temporality as a linear progression from past to present to future which reinforces the cultural expectation that the nature of an individual’s identity be static and immutable, remains unchallenged; the assumption is never compromised that one’s gender identity must be determined *once and for all*, such that the avowal of a new way of identifying can never coexist with a previous way of identifying but should be seen as completely and permanently delegitimizing any past assessment of sex or gender identity attributed to or avowed by the subject.

### 7.3 Ontological and Temporal Diversity Contra Chrononormativity and the Injunction to Be Flexible

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<sup>45</sup> Hence, Talia Mae Bettcher’s (2014) model of FPA is not an ontological authority but an ethical authority.



At this late stage of our investigation I think we are prepared to ask: what effect might the embracement of dominant gender terms as a source of empowerment as opposed to an obstacle to liberation have on the much-celebrated notion of queer subversion? Should ‘subversion’ be defined solely on the basis of an opposing or antagonistic relation to heteronormativity and hetero/cis-temporality, or can the concept be reimagined in a more expansive light – rearticulated in a way that accounts for the plethora of possible ways of interacting with the universal features of human experience known as temporality and embodiment? Can it be deemed subversive not only to subvert expectations but to “take one’s time,” as Israeli-Nevo puts it, in fulfilling precisely such (“normative”) expectations – to linger in the uncertainty and indeterminacy of a present in which one has not yet fully “completed” the highly personal process of transitioning? How might queerly subversive formulations of transgender identity inadvertently displace or further marginalize forcibly non-normativized subjects who do not find unmitigated value in the “subversion of identity”<sup>46</sup> but instead wish to occupy a gendered subject position that is either normative (i.e. heterosexual female or male) or conventionally queer (i.e. lesbian female, gay male, or bisexual male or female)?

We are now well familiar with Bettcher’s (2014) exposition of the politically charged disjunct between two disparate metaphysical models of transness – the “wrong-body” model and “beyond-the-binary” model – as a consequence of which some transsexual subjects “see themselves as nonconsensually subsumed under the transgender umbrella” (p. 385). With this nuanced point of concern in mind, I wish to elaborate upon an insight voiced by Jack Halberstam (2007), who opines that “the emphasis within contemporary subcultures on ‘flexibility’ ... ascribes mobility over time to some notion of liberation and casts stubborn identification as a way of being stuck in time, unevolved, not versatile” (Dinshaw et al, 2007, p. 190).<sup>47</sup> To what extent might binary transsexuality be susceptible to being stereotypically portrayed as an instantiation of just such a “stubborn” mode of identification? From an ethical perspective, if we are to claim to have even the slightest regard for ontological agency, we cannot afford to allow individuals or their identities to be hierarchized on the basis of their

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<sup>46</sup> As evoked by the latter half of the title of Judith Butler’s seminal text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

<sup>47</sup> The expression of this statement occurred in the context of a virtual roundtable discussion edited by Elizabeth Freeman and published as part of a special issue on queer temporalities in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. See Dinshaw et al (2007).

amenability to the subversion or transgression of normative boundaries. Nor can we condone, in good conscience, the tendency to unilaterally conflate immobility or inflexibility with “stubbornness.” Individuals who refuse, for whatever reason, to adhere to a specific blueprint of “subversion” or resistance, deserve to be regarded with greater consideration and respect.

Given the skewed emphasis on fluidity and subversion to which Halberstam alludes, the comparatively straightforward and inflexible desire to transition from male-to-female or female-to-male cannot escape the possibility of being viewed symptomatically as resulting from a pathologized internalization of gender normativity on the part of the transsexual subject. We ignore the liberatory power of unbridled self-determination at our own philosophical and social peril. Though it may seem counterintuitive to some, we cannot treat conformity to the idealized traits commonly associated with cissexuality as counterrevolutionary. We cannot view acts or identities that may appear to reinforce or reinscribe ‘normativity’ as necessarily indicative of an uncritical subscription to the belief that gender identity must fall statically and inflexibly on one side of the gender binary or the other.

In defense of less-obviously-subversive forms of gendered embodiment, I therefore wish to challenge the exclusionary tendency to valorize sexual and gendered fluidity or flexibility over and against other non-hegemonic or non-normative ways of embodying gender. We must not allow ourselves to become too deeply entrenched within the parochial ethos of a specific historical model of queer subversion that, if it has not outlived its usefulness, remains inadequate to the experiences of the most marginalized and targeted sexed subjects. The simple reality is that neither subversion nor conformity is preferable in and of itself. Neither fluidity nor stasis can be deemed preferable in and of itself. Herein lies the heart of the tension at play between an anti-normative queer paradigm that valorizes acts and modes of identification which it perceives as “queerly subversive,” and transsexuals who lay no claim to “nonnormativity” but who routinely come up against significant barriers to being accepted as “normal,” or, for that matter, “real,” within a trans-resistant society. The queer or homosexual transgression of heteronormativity, while important and potentially liberatory, reproduces a hetero/homo binary pertaining to sexuality specifically that leaves transsexual subjects who both wish to be viewed definitively as men or women and desire the opposite sex without a stable place in queer theoretical discourse; queer theory has failed, in other words, to construct an adequate framework in which to elaborate the unique relationship between transsexuality and sexual and gender hegemony.

Unsurprisingly, Butler (1993) appears to fall victim to precisely such an uncritical valorization of queer subversion to the exclusion of the possibility of unrestricted gender diversity in *Bodies That Matter*, the follow up to her massively influential *Gender Trouble*. This is most readily apparent in her portrayal of Venus Xtravaganza, a Latina transsexual among a group of drag queens portrayed in the documentary *Paris Is Burning*, to whom she attributes the desire for a “transubstantiation of gender” (p. 89). Butler’s (1993) portrayal of Venus’ “fantasy” foregrounds the fact that Xtravaganza does not simply wish to *perform* her femininity freely but to *become* “real” – to thoroughly and authentically assume an embodied subject position other than the one to which she currently has access; and it is clear that for Venus, this would have entailed “both achieving coherent sexed embodiment and middle-class security” (Prosser, 1998, p. 81). In Jay Prosser’s (1998) estimation, Butler (1993) perpetrates a twofold presupposition with respect to the general relationship between transsexuality and gender realness. Firstly, she assumes that “inherent to *doing* realness is an agency resistant to and transformative of hegemonic constraint that the desire to *be* real lacks; and following this, that the transsexual’s crossing signifies a failure to be subversive and transgressive of hegemonic constraint where it *ought* to be” (Prosser, 1998, p. 82). Against the monolithic trend of fluidity, which arguably has the potential to become a dominant script in its own right<sup>48</sup>, I argue that we must refrain from valorizing one specific model of queer subversion at the expense of sexual and gender identities and modes of being which cannot be characterized as fluid or flexible and do not straightforwardly disrupt the dominant paradigm of gender normativity, and therefore may be in danger of being seen as not “queer enough.”

While it is tempting to make the reductive claim that queerness is fundamentally incommensurable with the linearly progressive, chrono-normative, nature of heterosexual temporality, the truly revolutionary potentiality of queer temporalities is rooted, I claim, in queerness’ general “refusal to submit to a temporal logic” (Dinshaw et al, 2007, p. 188); likewise, trans temporalities are not bound or obligated to any specific or singular temporal logic. We must begin to recognize, as individuals and as a society, that any and every way of

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<sup>48</sup> I want to stress here that while I categorically resist universalization and normativization with respect to human experience or identity, I do not seek to discount the viability or validity of non-dichotomous/dualistic forms of gender expression. Rather, I advocate for a position of sustained dissensus within gender theory and trans feminism whereby all identities are equally valued regardless of the theoretical positions they might appear to implicitly reinforce or negate.

narrativizing the complex internal interplay between temporality and gender should be viewed as a valid avenue to human flourishing. Trans narratives have no more obligation to adhere to a nondominant, or queerly subversive model of temporality than they do to adhere to the currently dominant teleological model of temporality – i.e. chrononormativity – which undergirds both heterosexual time or “hetero-temporality” and cis normative time (or “cis-temporality”?). Trans men and women as well as nonbinary individuals should be under no obligation to pledge allegiance to any one temporal or ontological model of gendered existence.

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## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Elden Yungblut

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** Brock University  
St Catharines, Ontario, Canada  
2014-2018 B.A.

**Honours and Awards:** Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship  
2018-2019

Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2019-2020

**Related Work Experience** Teaching Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2018-2019

**Publications:**  
Yungblut, Elden. (1). Sex in Posthuman Futures. Gnosis Journal of Philosophy, 17(1), 1-13.