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YouTube as a site of desubjugation for trans and nonbinary youth: pedagogical potentialities and the limits of whiteness

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the educative significance of YouTube as a space of self-expression for transgender and non-binary youth without being hindered by pervasive cisnormative and cisgenderist expectations that are institutionalised and sanctioned in the education system. We employ transgender studies informed epistemological frameworks to investigate one specific online project called *The Gender Tag Project* created by and for youth, which we argue serves as a desubjugating space for self-identification of gender, and specifically, trans self-determination. Case analysis of selected videos posted by trans and non-binary youth is undertaken as a basis for providing critical insight into their relevance for generating knowledge about gender expansiveness and their pedagogical potential in the classroom. We reflect on the implications of *The Gender Tag Project* for envisaging more broadly a trans expansive educational agenda that is cognisant of addressing the limits of whiteness.



KEYWORD

Transgender and non-binary youth; gender identity; trans pedagogy; whiteness; cisgenderism; YouTube

Introduction

In this paper, we provide critical insights into YouTube as both a productive site of self-determination and self-expression for transgender and non-binary youth and a basis for thinking about the pedagogical potentialities of digitally devised archival projects for enhancing our understanding of gender expansiveness (Rawson 2014). While there is an emerging body of research that addresses the topic of trans video storytelling and vlogging (Dame 2013; Horak 2014; Jenzen 2017; Miller 2017, 2019; Raun 2015), we are concerned to extend trans scholars' epistemological insights into these online archiving practices. Attention is drawn to the knowledge-generating and pedagogical implications of one specific YouTube gender project known as *The Gender Tag Project*, which was created by and for youth as an illustrative case. Such online projects create ontologically legitimating spaces for youth to express their own self-understandings of trans and non-binary bodily knowing and becoming (Lane 2009; Rubin 1998; Stryker 2006).

We conceive of *The Gender Tag Project* as a *subaltern counterpublic* arena, where trans and non-binary youth are afforded the possibility to engage in communicative forms of

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self-expression and *participatory parity* (Fraser 1990) not always afforded to them within the cisnormative contexts of their everyday lives and specifically in the education system (Frohard-Dourlent 2018; Sinclair-Palm 2017). In fact, Fraser's (1990) notion of a *subaltern counterpublics* takes on a particular significance with respect to conceiving of YouTube projects, such as *The Gender Tag Project*, as self-determining spaces for trans and non-binary youth (see Jenzen 2017). We chose to focus on this youth project as it provides a case in point of what Rawson (2014) refers to as 'a proliferation of digital technologies' for enabling 'new archival spaces' for documenting trans and non-binary informed understandings of *bodily ontology* and gender expansiveness which refutes a cisgenderist and cissexist¹ logics (Rubin 1998; Johnson 2015).

The Gender Tag Project

The Gender Tag Project was started by Ashley Wylde (2015), who states that her purpose was to establish an online archival space – what she herself terms 'a playlist' – where 'anyone who is curious or interested in the experience of gender would be able to go ... and instantly find a bunch of examples of how different specific individuals experience the world when it comes to gender' (n. p.). It was designed with a particular ethic in mind of creating a *counterpublic* space for youth to express their own self-understandings of gender identity and gender expression. Ashley Wylde is adamant that the project is 'for everyone', and is aimed 'at creating conversation about the individual's own understanding of gender', given that 'everyone lives a gendered life, and not everyone is talking about how that affects their lives and informs their views – that needs to change' (Wylde 2015, n.p.). Wylde talks about her own experiences of being misgendered 'when at 18 years old the person serving me in a sandwich shop called me sir [and] it was the first day I had been outside after cutting my hair short' as the motivational and political force behind the creation of *The Gender Tag Project* (Wylde 2016, n.p.). She explains that this experience led her to ask herself a whole set of questions, such as: 'What' is gender?' 'How do we learn gender?' 'How does it come to be?' 'What does it mean?' 'What does it look like?' and 'How does it feel?' This experience resulted in the invention of *The Gender Tag Project*, which has become a proliferating site for trans and non-binary youth to post their own reflections on such questions with its potential for educating about gender diversity (ibid).

Wylde (2015) provides a series of guiding questions – what she herself refers to as *prompts* – that serve as discursive frames which function 'to make conversation more accessible, and to provide information and education for those who may not fully understand how others experience gender, or how gender affects the world we live in' (n.p.). There are 10 questions, the first which explicitly asks individuals about how they 'self-identify their gender' and 'what does that definition mean to you?' The other questions range from a focus on preferred pronoun use, style of clothing and choices about body hair, cosmetics, the experience of being misgendered, body dysphoria, interest in having and caring for children and 'talk about money', specifically as it relates to dating and family responsibilities. The prompts end with a final question that encourages the participants to add 'anything else you want to share about your experience with gender'.

While the questions help to provide a guide and focus for the youth who decide to participate in the project, they unwittingly occlude an explicit focus on race and

intersectionality (Anthias 2012). The result is a proliferation of white representation with mainly white gender tag recipients posting videos on the site – of the 1016 videos posted as of 12 July 2018, only 7% are produced by people of colour and those of diverse racial backgrounds. Thus, *The Gender Tag Project* functions as a site and manifestation of how ‘whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed’ (Ahmed 2007, 149), and, hence, through its elision of race as an important ‘category of experience’ (150). Our intent in pointing to such elisions is to highlight the pedagogical limits of the framing prompts which result in diminished possibilities for addressing the racial dimensions of gender, and the extent to which it is necessary to create pedagogical spaces that interrupt and trouble ‘racializing hegemonies’ (Noble 2012, 140). Additionally, there is a representational proliferation of certain sorts of trans and non-binary youth rather than others – mainly white, trans/non-binary males or FTM (90%) and trans/non-binary females or MTF (4%). The remainder of the videos comprises postings by cisgender youth.

We focus on examples of video postings from *The Gender Tag* playlist to explicate their capacity to address hermeneutic injustice in generating knowledge and insight about non-assigned gender identities and bodily becoming from the standpoint of trans and non-binary youth themselves. In these online spaces, youth are invited to provide accounts of themselves which speak to a ‘desire for recognition’ that is governed by the ethico-political terms of a ‘consideration of who they are and what their personhood says about the range of human possibilities that exists’ (Butler 2001, 30). As Cavalcante (2018) notes, ‘the growth of the internet and the evolution of digital networked and convergent technologies’ have ‘allowed the transgender community to connect and develop active and sophisticated online subcultures’ which have played a vital role in facilitating communicative processes of community building and practices of self-recognition and self-determination that have been responsible for fostering ‘the cultivation of a trans critical collective consciousness’ (62–63).

This level of gender expansiveness is evident in the proliferation of videos addressing the complexities of non-binary self-identification which challenge dominant cultural narratives and accounts of trans experience that focus on early childhood recognition of a fundamental misalignment with one’s birth assigned gender understood in terms of being ‘trapped in the wrong body’ (Garrison 2018, 624). In fact, Miller (2019) stresses that this ‘monolithic understanding of transness has prevented a deeper analysis of the often contradictory “ambiguouitie and polyvocalities” of trans lived experiences, ultimately limiting the ways gender variant people can express themselves’ (816). Such transnormativity is indeed troubled and interrogated by many of *The Gender Tag* participants who identify as non-binary, and who provide deep insight into the polyvocality of gender expansiveness and trans subjectivity. We provide an analysis of selected YouTube videos which we employ as illustrative narrative cases of how trans and non-binary youth are engaging in communicative processes that function in terms of both their enabling and facilitative capacities for self-determination and knowledge-generating insights into awareness of gender expansiveness – what Raun (2010) refers to as ‘a platform for self-expression’ (114). The video postings exemplify ‘not only the importance of trans visibility, but also the transformative effect of trans storytelling in forming identities and changing lives’ (Raun 2015, 372). They also draw attention to the whiteness and the politics of race as they come to define the unstated terms for participation in this particular online project.

Hence, our methodological approach is best informed by our reading of Flyvbjerg (2006) who writes about the selection of *strategic* cases as a basis for ‘exploring

phenomena firsthand', and which 'begin with an interest in a particular phenomenon that is best understood narratively [and which] develop descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon from the perspective of participants, researchers and others' (240). We provide insights into a more nuanced analysis of gender identity and gender expression that is onto-epistemologically grounded and centred in trans bodily becoming and desubjugation as it is reflexively accounted for by trans and non-binary youth themselves. As Lane (2009) argues, what is needed is 'a reflexive, rather than objectivist, research framework that works in a context of social relations located in the everyday social world and that explains how trans people perceive their lives and experiences' (140).

Generating this knowledge is vital given that it is lacking within the formal context of schooling and teacher education (Blair and Deckman 2019; Frohard-Dourlent 2018; Human Rights Watch and Gender Spectrum 2014; Ullman 2017). Our purpose in this paper is threefold: (i) to generate knowledge about gender diversity and trans embodied understandings of selfhood that is derived from testimonial accounts of trans and non-binary youth themselves; (ii) to highlight the pedagogical potentialities of online repositories such as *The Gender Tag Project* for educating about transgender phenomena and gender expansiveness in classrooms (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2018, 2019; Rands 2009) and (iii) to examine the implications of generating pedagogical knowledge about gender diversity that disrupts 'the racializing [and ableist] logic through which white gender variant bodies' become the unmarked norm for delimiting trans-informed understandings of embodied ontological difference and recognisability (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 10; Ahmed 2007; Rice et al. 2018).

As cis white scholars with responsibilities for preservice teacher education, we conceive of our study of *The Gender Tag Project* as motivated by a commitment to generating trans-informed knowledge about addressing gender justice in schools, especially given the emerging literature in the field which highlights the lack of support for trans and non-binary students who themselves are often required to take on the responsibility for ensuring their own recognition and educating about gender diversity 'often without institutional backing in place to do so' (Frohard-Dourlent 2018, 329; Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz 2009; Morgan and Taylor 2019; Payne and Smith 2014). In fact, recent research in teacher education has found that 'teachers are not meeting the needs of trans and gender creative students' (Blair and Deckman 2019, 1). We are cognisant, therefore, of the need to work against transgender marginalisation in the education system which we understand entails a commitment to generating pedagogical knowledge that simultaneously centres 'transgender experiences in ways that actively resist cisgender privilege ... while engaging earlier transgender scholarship, challenging cissexist knowledge claims, and undermining cissexist power structures' (Johnson 2015, 25). It is in this sense that we embrace the necessary critical reflexivity that Johnson advocates in our concern to address the limits of what he terms *ciscentricity* in enacting a transfeminist methodology which works against 'the centring and privileging of cisgender rather than transgender understandings of sex and gender' (26).

Transgender-informed epistemological frameworks and online counterpublic spaces

Our analysis is epistemologically informed by our engagement with Transgender Studies, and specifically the work of Stryker (2006) and Rubin (1998). These scholars stress the

need to centre the perspectives and voices of trans and non-binary people's own self-understandings of their gender identities. As Rubin (1998) points out, generative understandings of trans people's lived experiences of gender identity entail a phenomenological commitment to a project of desubjugation, which attends to 'the productive, creative work of the subject struggling to articulate itself within received categories' (266; see also Connell 2012). This centring of the legitimating authority of trans people's own self-understandings of their personhood enables more focussed attention on what Rubin refers to as the 'emergence of new discursive categories' (266) for grappling with gender complexity as it is lived, while simultaneously foregrounding 'the critical possibilities that result from the subject's negotiation with the world' (267). It also requires attention to the racialising logics at the heart of 'how whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed' (Ahmed 2007, 149), and what this means for trans/non-binary youth *coming together* and for understanding 'gendered bodily difference' in online spaces, such as those created by *The Gender Tag Project* (Rice et al. 2018, 672).

The necessity of such a trans focus on generating knowledge is central to Stryker's (2006) understanding of trans desubjugation: Transgender Studies considers the experience of the speaking subject, who claims constative knowledge of the referent topic, to be a proper – indeed essential – component of the analysis of transgender phenomena; experiential knowledge is as legitimate as other, supposedly more 'objective forms of knowledge, and is in fact necessary for understanding the political dynamics of the situation being analyzed' (12). This focus on trans and non-binary people's self-understandings as a primary source of generating authoritative insights into gender identity is essential, especially given the pathologisation of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals and the perpetuation of epistemological violence (Teo 2010) enacted from within the medical, clinical and psychiatric establishment (Butler 2004; Kuhl 2019; Prosser 1998). Raun (2010), for example, points out that the *polyvocalities* of the lived experiences of trans people have been silenced, and indeed thwarted by the medical establishment with its history and persistence of clinical subjugation in the form of enforcing a particular master narrative of *gender identity disorder* and *gender dysphoria*. As Stryker (2006) points out: 'What Foucault describes as "a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges, naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity", is precisely the kind of knowledge that transgender people, whether academically trained or not, have of their own embodied experience and of their relationships to discourses and institutions that act upon and through them' (13). In fact, Stryker asserts that facilitating the reappearance 'from below' of the knowledge of those at the margins 'is absolutely essential to contemporary critical inquiry' (ibid).

These ethico-political concerns of testimonial and hermeneutic injustice are at the heart of our critical inquiry into *The Gender Tag Project* as a trans desubjugating space. Fricker (2007) defines testimonial injustice 'as a distinctively epistemic injustice, as a kind of injustice in which someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower' (20). Hence, testimonial injustice is intertwined with hermeneutic injustice in that it entails interpretive foreclosure in 'having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization' (154; Johnson 2015). It is in this sense that Fraser (2009) argues

for the necessity of addressing the terms of *social belonging* in the public sphere with respect to interrogating communicative practices and representational discourses which result in certain groups being 'excluded from the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition' (17). Her notion of a *subaltern counterpublics* takes on a particular significance with respect to conceiving of YouTube projects such as the *Gender Tag Project* as a site of desubjugation for fostering communicative possibilities which are not always possible 'under the supervision of dominant groups' (Fraser 1990, 66), or readily facilitated within the cisnormative context of schools (Frohard-Dourlent 2018; Ingrey 2018; Ullman 2017). For example, she explains that counterpublics involve the creation of spaces for 'members of subordinated groups' who have limited 'arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies' for addressing societal inequality and finding their voice (66). In fact, the emerging research reveals that trans and non-binary youth in schools are not only 'less likely to find the right voice or words to express their thoughts', but are not encouraged to 'invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (Fraser 2009, 67; Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz 2009; Kennedy 2018; Sinclair-Palm 2017; Travers 2018; Ullman 2017).

It is important to understand, therefore, that these online arenas afford the potential for creating 'training grounds for agitational activities directed toward a wider publics' (Fraser 1990, 68), and thus play a major part in building and generating 'counter discursive knowledge' and understanding about gender democratisation that has pedagogical import for educators (Rubin 271). In fact, Jenzen (2017) argues that online cultural spaces provide a means by which trans youth are able to counter 'the routine and institutionalized practice of [being denied] their own understanding and articulation of their gender' (1627). Moreover, Horak (2014) claims that online forums and vlogs 'position trans youth as experts, implicitly contesting the expertise over trans bodies claimed by medical professionals, educators and parents' (575) and rely on 'fostering communicative capacities that are derived from and rely primarily on subcultural knowledge and information-sharing networks for ways to make sense of their transness' (Dame 2013, 40).

Trans /non-binary youth

In this section, we focus on seven trans/non-binary youth who provide insights into the discursive categories that they employ for communicating their own self-understandings of their trans personhood.² They exemplify the extent to which *The Gender Tag Project* serves as a space to define the terms of their own recognisability and bodily self-actualisation.

Andra

Andra, a black youth aged 23 who identifies as FTM non-binary trans masculine, decided to do *The Gender Tag Project* to honour his first month of being on testosterone. Their FTM embodied and felt sense of transness is explained through a non-binary lens which they explain as follows: 'When I say that [I identify as a non-binary trans man] it's because I am not a hundred percent female or a hundred percent male, so I feel like that's where I fit best ... I just feel that the world isn't traditional anymore, the world isn't black or white anymore, there's no male and there's no female ["Well it is for some people but the point

is” appears on the screen in print] like it’s not just the way the world is, we are all different [“There are different kinds of people out there” appears on the screen] in so many different ways and it should be more accepting. I am masculine in more ways than others and I can be feminine at times, like, that’s who I am and that’s the way that everyone should accept me and accept others.’

Andra’s video narrative is a means by which they are able to express and account for their transness in terms that defy a binary categorisation of gender, while simultaneously capturing their own embodied and felt a sense of masculinity. This complexity is reflected when Andra speaks about their preferred pronouns: ‘I would probably stick more with they/them/their because I am not all masculine and I’m not all feminine but I answer to he/him/his like with ease with natural instincts so I will also go with he/him/his but she/her/hers is not me, it’s not a part of me and I ask all of my family and friends and whoever I meet to not call me that.’ As Raun (2015) points out, online articulation of trans autobiographical narratives in these spaces serves as a means by which to account for ‘an authentic and recognizable self’ (371) outside of cisnormative frameworks, and ‘confirms not only the importance of trans visibility, but also the transformative effect of trans storytelling in forming identities and changing lives’ (372).

Daniel

Daniel, however, a white, grade eight youth, identifies simultaneously as ‘transgender’, ‘gender fluid’ and ‘demiboy’. They explain the complex temporality that comes to define the shifting terms of their own understanding of trans bodily awareness and becoming – what Eckstein (2018) refers to as the ‘spatio-temporal fluidly’ of transing (26). In fact, Stryker (2008) asserts that transgender is best understood as ‘the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place – rather than any particular destination or mode of transition’ (1). These complexities are reflected in Daniel’s attempts to explain and grapple with their own understanding of their situated transness. For example, at the outset of the video they define *gender fluid* ‘as someone who is either female, male, neither [and who] kind of somewhat shifts between all of that’. They indicate that given that their parents ‘don’t exactly approve of this’ and moreover that ‘a lot of people don’t know’, they feel ‘forced into identifying as female’. Daniel also shares that they prefer their chosen rather than birth-assigned name, Erica, given the ‘whole situation of me being trans . . . it really really defines me a lot’.

However, Daniel indicates that the notion of ‘gender fluidity’ does not exactly capture a felt sense of their own self-articulated trans bodily awareness and becoming. As Butler (2001) explicates, what is at play here are perhaps the limits imposed by never being able to fully account for oneself and ‘recuperate the conditions of one’s emergence’ (35). Daniel, for example, actively chooses to embrace a number of identity categories, simultaneously. Doing so enables them to capture and explain their own bodily ontological experiences of transness. Daniel also claims to be a *demiboy*, which enables them to account for an embodied sense of transmasculinity which is not understood to be necessarily fixed or stable: ‘It’s pretty much like someone who is male part-time, sometimes not’, they explain. At this point in the video, the following definition in writing is superimposed and moves up the screen disappearing from sight in milliseconds: ‘A demiboy, also called demiguy, is someone

whose gender identity is only partly male, regardless of the assigned gender at birth. They may or may not identify as another gender, in addition to feeling partially a boy or man.'

According to the prompts, Daniel also spends time discussing gender expression with respect to the clothing that they prefer to wear. They mention a preference for 'like sports kind of more boyish and masculine clothing', expressing the desire to 'dress more like masculine', and indicate that they are currently binding. Daniel also mentions that while their hair 'used to be very long' and is short at the moment being just above the shoulders, they are hoping to get 'more of an FTM haircut if my parents let me'. In this sense, Daniel makes the point that such possibilities of transing will need to be negotiated, given the fact they are not out: 'I'll probably ask them if I can get my haircut shorter, and then I'll tell my hair stylist person if I can I get a cut more in the style of a tomboy because of the fact nobody knows that I am trans.' However, Daniel qualifies this statement by saying 'but a lot of people on the internet do', and then mentions a desire for 'a masculine type' of expression/embodyment that has been pre-empted by *The Gender Tag* questioning prompts. Nonetheless, Daniel asserts: 'I'm still figuring out what I call myself exactly ... you know I identify as transgender, as demi-boy, as genderfluid, but I can't say to my [on-line] friend, "Oh, I'm a fanboy" but then they're going to say "But aren't you a girl?" but then like "I'm Daniel whoa shocked, it's like that's the whole situation.'"

Daniel's narrative reveals the complexities at play in their own self-understanding of their trans non-binary sense of personhood and desire for recognition. In fact, their decision to employ a number of discursive identity categories reflects what Davy (2019) conceptualises as 'bodily aesthetic desires' that are in 'constant processes of becoming' (10). Embracing a number of categories simultaneously is an attempt to capture 'the development of more complex reconfigurations of eluding, flowing, leaking and disappearing transgender and sexual desires, while moving away from dichotomous and theoretically limited analyses of "duped" (transsexual) or "subversive" (genderqueer) sexed and gender embodiment ...' (ibid). As such, Daniel's testimonial reflects a desire for self-recognition as a trans subject which draws attention to Butler's (2001) point about 'the social temporality of norms by which my recognizability is established' (26): 'And it means that my story always arrives late. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, even as I produce myself differently in the very act of telling' (27). In this sense, the online archive enables a mapping and charting of a developing self-recognition and understanding of gender identity that defies a 'conceptual dichotomization of stability and fluidity' (Davis 2009, 104).

Trans non-binary youth such as Daniel are at the forefront of generating knowledge about such desubjectifying processes of trans knowledge generation with all of their *trickle up* effects for informing our understanding of the sorts of gender complex frameworks that need to inform critical trans pedagogical approaches in classrooms (Rands 2009). As Keenan (2017) stresses:

We do not need more imposed and enforced scripting of gender. Rather, we do desperately need ways to be with each other to ensure the survival of transgender people and others who do not strictly conform to a prescribed gender binary: For that we need pedagogies that allow us to share the complexities of our own unique embodied knowledge with one another and to question the limitations of that knowledge. (548)

Overall, what emerges with Daniel's narrative is the importance of *The Gender Tag Project* as an enabling space where they can bear witness to their own sense of trans bodily becoming without having to contend with the cisnormative constraints imposed in other arenas of their life where the possibility for 'reciprocal recognition' is not sustainable (Butler 2001, 23).

Dakota

Such insights into trans bodily becoming are also exemplified by another white, non-binary youth, Dakota who identifies as 'a transmasculine non-binary person' and mostly as 'a trans man'. He gestures towards a nuanced bodily ontological understanding of gender as his trans masculine identification is not at odds with simultaneously being non-binary. However, Dakota explains that 'non-binary' was an identificatory term that he used prior to starting testosterone, but now that his voice has changed and that he can pass, he is 'going full blown as just a trans guy' though he still likes that former term. He also indicates that he uses both he/him and they/them pronouns and prefers a more androgynous style of clothing that 'tips more towards the masculine.' Towards the end of his video and as a closing point he states: 'I started off as gender fluid, non-binary, agenda and now I'm trans masculine, trans man, non-binary, these three things combined ... nothing is set in stone.'

What emerges is more of a gender complex understanding of transitioning that speaks to what Eckstein (2018) refers to as a 'temporally inflected sense making process' which defies the cisgenderist conceptualisation of transition as a linear and teleological progression of becoming one's *true* self (39). For example, Dakota's sense of being a trans man does not somehow cancel out his prior experiences and identification as a non-binary person that becomes incorporated into his developing sense of embodied transness in the present moment. As Eckstein points out: 'Whereas uptake of transition in dominant culture has largely functioned to reinscribe the separateness of men and women, masculinity and femininity with linear and teleological transition connecting the two poles, the complex temporality of transition holds the potential for transition to be a messier relationship ... [with] the radical potentiality of doing gender differently' (41).

Jayden

This awareness of complex temporality is also reflected by Jayden, a white youth who decides to *re-do* their gender tag video which they completed 2 years previously. Jayden answers each question and then replays his previous response for the audience and offers his own critical self-insights into his prior accounting of himself. This strategy encapsulates a testimonial commitment to 'archiving present and past embodiments' in order to make sense of his own developing understandings of transing (Eckstein 2018, 42). For example, currently Jayden explains that he 'feels more nonbinary, but I tend to be more on the masculine side', and as such identifies as 'a nonbinary male', but qualifies that they are 'still trying to figure it all out'. He then inserts past video footage on the screen in a smaller framed box where he answered the same question about self-identification 2 years previously, and which reveals him identifying as a woman on the basis of his assigned gender at birth. The effect of viewing the older Jayden viewing an earlier version

of himself and then proceeding to reflect on the self-revelatory differences in his embodied self-identification serves as a powerful manifestation of 'the everydayness of present and anticipated embodiment' (Eckstein 2018, 41). Jayden, for example, is able to step back and to stand outside himself, which is reflected in his commentary about what he is able to identify visibly about himself in that video: 'Yeah, that's all I said, that I identify as a woman (laughter), that was a little painful there (laughter) I obviously was not comfortable saying that.' By going back to that video footage, Jayden is able to identify a sense of anticipatory embodiment that is reflected through unease and discomfort, which is rendered visible to him from his embodied standpoint in the present.

When speaking of pronouns, Jayden indicates that he currently uses she/her pronouns, but 'secretly' prefers male-identifying pronouns such as he/him. He prefaces such statements by asserting that 'I should do a part three a year from now', and indicates that he is still *trying to figure* himself out 'as of right now', and that 'maybe down the road it's gonna change, I don't know'. When showing past video footage of how he answered the question 2 years previously, he notes that there is not a lot of difference apart from the fact that he had previously indicated a preference for terms such as 'ma'am', which he asserts he no longer likes. Jayden also comments on how he goes into much more detail about his pronoun use in the current video. Such juxtapositioning of past and present moments helps Jayden to capture or realise the continuing and possible anticipatory effects of his trans bodily becoming. As Eckstein (2018) points out, this archiving of the self serves to capture present and past embodiments in ways that often serve to 'convey the significance of the yet to come' (42). Rawson (2014) also highlights how such online archiving practices often function as a means by which to legitimate trans identification in ways that capture the significance of the past sources of evidence through a process of self-revelatory documentation that reflects the temporality of bodily ontological recognition in its capacity to address hermeneutic injustice. In this respect, the online archive that Jayden creates through his postings on the *Gender Tag* platform enables him to capture his embodied trans self-awareness 'in a way that is tangible in the present through an understanding of the weight of [the past]' (Eckstein 2018, 42). Such videos provide important insights into gender complexity that defy cisnormative constructs of gender and embodiment. Indeed, they illuminate the need to create spaces for sharing and learning about trans-informed perspectives of embodiment and selfhood in the classroom.

Magnus

This degree of complexity is also reflected by Magnus, a white trans youth, who also decides to re-do *The Gender Tag Project*. This decision stems from his need to revisit his previous experiences of trans 'embodied becoming' given that he has been on testosterone for the past 5 months (Rubin 1998, 277). For example, he states that 'if you go back and watch the videos, I know that I have only been on testosterone for almost five months ... I have changed a lot [and] that's very evident even over that span or period of time and so am remaking the gender tag again.' As Rubin points out, and which is reflected by many of the youth posting videos on the *Gender Tag* site, 'identities are always identities in progress – identities that are, at one and the same time, ontologically distinct from the material body and in the process of unfolding through a process of bodily

change' (277). Magnus identifies as a boy and his self-narration is motivated by *desire for recognition* and *the desire to be recognised* as realised through a need to account for his trans embodied subjectivity and personhood (Butler 2001, 28). For example, he states: 'I am a boy and that's what I tell people publicly. I don't generally tell people, "Hey, I'm female to male transgender . . ." I don't typically go out into the world and tell people that I am trans because that makes me feel awful . . . personally, I'm always on the fence on if I am a boy or a demiboy.'

This space of indeterminacy vis-à-vis identifying as a *demiboy* reflects the ongoing process of becoming that Magnus is attempting to document here, and is a phenomenological exemplification of what Rubin refers to as the 'productive, creative work of the subject struggling to articulate itself within received categories' (266). Magnus also mentions that while he currently prefers he/him pronouns, previously he had embraced both he/him and they/them pronouns. He is adamant about his decision to no longer use they/them pronouns as he believes it erases a recognition and acknowledgement of his male gender identity: 'On earlier videos, I went by he/him or they/them pronouns but now I just go by he/him because in my experience people will use they/them as a reason to not call you a boy . . . it may not be that way for everybody but in my experiences with people . . . if they know I am trans they call me "they" . . . they don't disrespect me but they don't completely support me so they will use they/them and that's just why I don't go by "they" anymore it just feels uncomfortable now.'

These declarations function as a testimonial act that is at the heart of the necessary project of trans desubjugation (Stryker 2006). In fact, Raun (2012) points out that these 'interconnected practices of (self)-disclosure, coming out, and testimony [are] part of an ongoing self-representation and community building' (28). Magnus' narrative highlights the impact of cisnormative regimes at play which means that he is comfortable only declaring his transness in this counterpublic space, while feeling conflicted in denying his bodily ontological need to just live and be in the world as a boy offline. There is also a complex temporality at play that is expressed in his ambivalence about his identification as a demiboy, which speaks to processes of bodily becoming and unfolding that are not static, and which disrupt the 'teleological nature of transition' as 'a linear point A to point B process' (Eckstein 2018, 44).

Magnus' desire for recognition and identification as a boy is very significant and one which cannot be understood within the antinormative limits imposed by queerly informed epistemological frameworks (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2018). As Raun (2012) stipulates, there is a need to avoid embracing a critical and deconstructive approach that is driven by an anti-normative requirement to *trace and expose* the terms of what is understood as a project of reproducing essentialist or normative understandings of gender (59; Wiegman and Wilson 2015). In fact, Johnson (2015) argues for the necessity of avoiding 'cissexist analytical pitfalls' which can involve embracing an *artifactualist logics* that results in transgender people being used 'to support the notion that gender identity is a socially constructed phenomenon and therefore open to change' (Serano 2013) (35). Such an ethical commitment to refusing such a logics is born out of a necessity to disrupt the antinormative logics governing the 'expectation that trans people enact (or should enact) a more "queer" version of femininity or masculinity (whatever that means) and refrain from producing normative versions/understandings of gender' (Raun 2012, 30). It is in this sense, Butler (2001)

argues, that 'not all ethical relations are reducible to acts of judgment' and, in fact, require a suspension of judgment in order to 'become ethically educated or addressed by a consideration' of how the subject is accounting for themselves in terms of 'who they are and what their personhood says about the range of human possibility that exists' (30). This commitment to witnessing the ontological and phenomenological terms of trans embodiment and transness, as they are understood and articulated by youth such as Magnus, highlights that 'categorization has its place and cannot be reduced to forms of anatomical essentialism', and, moreover, that 'the transsexual desire to be a man or a woman is not to be dismissed as a simple desire to conform to established identity categories' (Butler 2004, 8). Raun (2012), for example, speaks to the terms of ethical engagement when engaging with and producing readings of trans vlogs and narratives in the sense of both 'letting the stories breathe' (60) and 'developing the analysis with respectful curiosity' (62).

Kairo

Kairo, a black trans youth, aged 23, also identifies as non-binary and goes by they/them/their pronouns. Their account is another exemplification of *The Gender Tag Project* as a site of self-determination which grants legitimacy to trans youth as experts in producing knowledge about their own bodies and sense of selfhood (Dame 2013; Horak 2014). For example, as Kairo explains: 'For me nonbinary is just sort of a placeholder like an umbrella term to describe how I can't really name my gender. I know it lies somewhere outside of girl or boy and that's about as close as I can get to it because my gender sort of moves somewhere between some days feeling like I don't have one at all and some days having just like a strong gender feeling but not knowing what this particular gender is.' In refusing the familiar binary constructions of gender, Kairo attempts to account for the bodily affective intensities that underscore their own self-understanding: 'Like, it feels like something light, soft, warm, I don't know, like, I feel like I am describing like a pillow but that's kind of where my actual gender is ... a couple of days ago I looked up the word *ethereal* and it was like light, airy, delicate, beautiful and I'm like, yeah, that's kind of where my gender is when I can feel it but some days it's just, like, I don't feel like I have a gender and some days I feel like I do, but it's not male or female.'

However, Kairo does talk about experiencing 'chest dysphoria' which they indicate is 'really strong: 'I mean I can't leave my house without my binder on like even if I'm just going outside to rake the leaves or something I don't like being outside without my binder on and I think I might leave my binder on for longer than I should because even when I'm going to bed I don't really take it off.' What Kairo highlights here is the haptic ontological sense of trans embodied experience which speaks to Rubin's (1998) observation that 'the body as it exists for oneself is the point of reference by which the whole world unfolds' (268). They end their vlog with this overall reflection: 'When I started realising that I wasn't a girl I didn't know what my gender would be, if it meant that okay I'm a boy now but then I realise, you know what, it's fine that I don't know what my gender is, and that it's fine that I move between not having a gender and then just having a bunch of gender feelings.'

Peyton

Peyton, aged 19, is one of the few youths who identifies as a trans woman, and who specifically states that she is 'a black woman first'. However, she does not reflect on her bodily experience of blackness, and how it articulates her gender in terms of its ontologisation with respect to her everyday life. Peyton is motivated by a desire to offer advice to other trans youth and leaves her viewers with a sense of hope in the possibility and livability of their trans embodied knowing and subjectivity: 'I'm not happy being considered a male so I'm doing something to change it and I'm living my life free and happy as I've ever wanted, and I think that everybody should live their life happy and free as they want. I think we get so wrapped up in what society is presenting to us and forget that there is a grey area ... that there is something beyond what you've been told ... if you're a man and what makes you happy is wearing flower crowns on your head, then don't let no one stop you because ... you define what the limits of your gender are ... don't let society tell you that you have to fit into these boxes ...' Both the content of Peyton's narrative and her visible embodied presence as a black trans woman have a pedagogical import in terms of simultaneously serving to interrupt the pervasive whiteness of the *Gender Tag* online platform, while also creating, as Jenzen (2017) points out, a community and civic counterpublic space for 'peer education, activism and enculturation' (1638). In this respect, such audio-visual accounts 'offer a complex and haptic sensation of [trans] embodiment that is less about simple representation and more about being in space'.

The gender tag project as a site of unmarked whiteness

While not wanting to detract from the significance of *The Gender Tag Project* as 'a site for memory preservation as well as for experiential identity communication and negotiation' (Raun 2015, 376), it is important to reflect on its potential as a colonising space of unmarked whiteness in the sense that it is predominantly inhabited by *white* trans and non-binary youth. Raun (2012), for example, observes that whiteness is an unacknowledged norm on YouTube and is representative of what we understand to be 'an overdetermined social geography of racialization' (Noble 2012, 140). This observation concurs with Ahmed's (2007) point that '[w]hiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitation that they learn not to see it, even when they are not it' (157). As the above postings by black trans youth illustrate, while the visibility of black trans/non-binary youth and people of colour is disruptive in the sense of exposing 'YouTube's sea of whiteness' (Raun 2012, 307), it does not necessarily mean that there is a focus on 'the complex interplay between race and trans as it unfolds' for these youth in this space (Raun 2012, 204; Bey 2017).

The fact that what is missing from such narratives is a reflection on race and how it articulates an understanding of trans embodied being in the world attests to the colonising effects of the white pedagogical frames that are employed to guide self-reflection on gender identity. This necessary attention to race is also absent from the narratives of white trans and non-binary youth and highlights a fundamental erasure with respect to addressing white privilege and how whiteness articulates gender. Noble (2012), for example, makes the point that it is not so much his gender as a trans man, but his whiteness that *facilitates his mobility* (144). This relates to Ahmed's (2007) point about the ways in which

white and cis bodies 'come to feel at home in spaces' and 'in a world that is oriented around whiteness' (160). It highlights the facility with which white bodies are able to move through social spaces unencumbered by certain bodily and *social experiences of restriction* that are determined on the basis of what their blackness signifies (Ahmed 2007, 161). This consideration of race erasure reflects a fundamental whitewashing, albeit unconscious, that characterises the pedagogical terms governing the limits of self-expression for trans and non-binary youth in this particular site. In other words, the prompts for generating self-reflection on gender identification within the space of *The Gender Tag Project*, eclipse a necessary focus on a consideration of how one's experiences of race/ethnicity articulate or influence an understanding of being and moving in the world, what Rubin (1998) refers to as *bodily ontology*.

As such, there is not an equivalency between being a *white* trans man/woman/non-binary person and being a *black* trans man/woman/non-binary person with respect to understanding the ways in which the institutionalisation of anti-blackness impacts on how one inhabits and is compelled to navigate social spaces (Bey 2017; Krell 2017; Santana 2019). For example, as Noble (2012) explicates: 'If I move through the world with power as a man, it certainly is both my whiteness and my class position articulating my gender. If a "woman of color" undergoes surgery and hormone treatment to materialize *his* sex differently, it would be a serious failure of our anti-racist analytics to ascribe to that man of color the status of categorical privilege' (144). There are questions of access, discrimination, stereotyping and profiling with respect to understanding the material effects of the signification of black bodies and populations in terms of their criminalisation, fetishisation, inferiorisation and demonisation that need to be brought into the foreground in what Spade (2015) envisages as a critical trans politics. To centre race in a discussion of transness, therefore, requires an explicit prompt that creates a space for fostering reflection on how race is embedded in one's experience of gender and sense of embodied personhood. Currah (2008), for example, draws attention to the need to engage with questions related to the racialisation of gender while simultaneously attending to the fact that 'racial categories are also enforced through gender norms' (93). As one of the black trans women in Raun's study (2012) highlights: 'I am not trying to undermine the white transition, but I think it is much harder to transition to a black woman [...] It is not just trans that you have to worry about when it comes to discrimination, housing profiling, stereotyping' (204).

In light of such concerns, Noble (2012) advocates for a pedagogical space of *critical consciousness* in the classroom wherein as a white, trans male educator he is concerned to expose the whiteness of cis hegemonic masculinity through exposing 'the degree colonial white supremacy has colonized definitions of normal' (148). He proposes enacting such a decolonising focus through employing texts such as those produced by Yellow Bird (2004), who writes about the bags of cowboy and Indian plastic toys that can still be purchased, and which masquerade as *just* toys for children: 'Imagine if children could also buy bags of little toy African American slaves and their white slave masters, or Jewish holocaust prisoners and their SS Nazi guards, or undocumented Mexicans and their INS border patrol guards' (148). Introducing such critical accounts into pedagogical spaces that are committed to addressing the racialised terms of transness expose 'the unconscious imperatives of white supremacy' and settler colonialism (Noble, 148) thinking about how 'gender is also racialized' and that 'racial categories are also enforced through

gender norms' (Currah 2008, 93). Thus, Noble highlights the need for incorporating both anti-black and decolonising frameworks into trans pedagogical approaches that are committed to generating understanding and knowledge about how white, able-bodied, cis-hetero-patriarchal systems are deeply embedded in the logics of settler colonialism (Driskill 2010).

Embracing trans-informed pedagogies

Given these critical insights, we see much pedagogical potential in *The Gender Tag Project* where accounts by trans/non-binary youth can be employed in classrooms in ways that are aligned with a necessary commitment to trans desubjugation and decolonisation. In fact, employing the polyvocal accounts of trans and non-binary youth within the context of a commitment to teaching about gender complexity goes some way to addressing the limits of what Malatino (2015) refers to as the 'special guest' approach (398). For example, she rejects an approach that entails simply inviting a trans/non-binary person into the classroom to offer an autobiographical narrative of transness. This approach spotlights the individual trans person 'as a representative of a relatively uncommon minority' (397) and is often concerned with a reductive focus on 'coming out' and an accompanying 'declaration of pride and self-love' (400). In fact, Malatino points out that this approach does very little to address testimonial and hermeneutic injustice for trans and non-binary people which is inflicted through the institutionalisation of 'cultural cisgenderism' and cisnormativity (Kennedy 2018; Lennon and Mistler 2014).

Thus the polyvocal aspect of *The Gender Tag Project* renders it a productive site for generating pedagogical knowledge about understandings of transness and non-binary personhood. However, as already noted, its singular focus on gender as a basis for participation on this online platform also results in a fundamental elision with respect to both supporting a politics of unmarked whiteness. As a result, the project of trans self-determination comes to be understood within the normative limits imposed by pedagogical prompts that are provided for self-narration. What is needed is attention to explicit questions of 'interlocking mechanisms of race' in terms of their effects in articulating gender (Noble 2012, 146). By encouraging youth to reflect solely on how they self-identify with respect to gender does not engage with necessary questions of the impact of race relations, ableism and the legacy of settler colonialist mindsets with respect to how bodies are oriented in social spaces (Ahmed 2007; Driskill 2010). Simply adding more voices of diverse trans and non-binary youth is not the answer to enacting a trans pedagogical commitment to addressing this effacement. What is needed are other pedagogical prompts for inciting self-reflection beyond a singular focus on gender are needed related to (i) how race and specifically white privilege or anti-blackness impact one's experiences and how one self-identifies one's gender; (ii) experiences other forms of discrimination, disrespect or lack of acceptance apart from being misgendered or because of one's gender expression; (iii) able-bodied privilege experiences of living with a disability; and (iv) the privileges that come with being a cisgender person.

The polyvocal space that online projects such as *The Gender Tag Project* afford for facilitating gender-expansive understandings of bodily difference cannot be underestimated with respect to their pedagogical implications. Online stories can be retrieved from such archives

and integrated into curricular units of work that address trans and non-binary informed understandings of gender diversity committed to exposing the limits of cis, white, able-bodied privilege. As Keenan (2017) reiterates, educators need to 'find a way into a conversation' in classrooms that centre the perspectives and understandings of how trans and non-binary youth themselves understand gender (549). At the heart of this pedagogical project is a commitment to building classroom spaces that emulate those exemplified by *The Gender Tag Project* where conditions are created not only for trans but for all youth to 'become together' with the possibility of envisaging 'radical relationality' (Rice et al. 2018, 674). Such community is enacted through the sharing of self-narrated accounts of gender that are inclusive of embracing transness and non-binary selfhood, and which centre an intersectional focus on the limits of cisgenderism, whiteness and able-bodiedness (Spade 2015).

However, such spaces cannot be envisaged or enacted outside of a necessary commitment to a more *universalising* and historically specific contextualised approach to addressing the *disciplinary* effects of gender regimes 'across the gender spectrum' (Malatino, 404). In other words, while the centring of trans and non-binary narratives is a necessary part of the project of desubjugation of which Stryker (2006) speaks, a trans pedagogical commitment to addressing gender complexity has important implications for all students. In other words, a trans-informed pedagogy has the potential to address what Rands (2009) refers to as 'the gender oppression matrix' with critical attention being directed to the effects of *gender categorisation* and *gender transgression* for all people (422). As Malatino argues:

Trans pedagogy, in its disruption of hegemonic certitudes about corporeal stability, sex determination, gender dimorphism, and naturalized linkages between gender enactment and sexuality, is infused by a concern with the mediation between disciplinary and biopolitical power, on the one hand, and on the other enactments of self-determination and autonomy . . . it familiarizes students with disparate and overlapping struggles to reconfigure that terrain of determination, with embattled legacies to self-identify beyond the staid boundaries of naturalized dimorphic gender. (408)

In this respect, online narratives which treat trans and non-binary youth as gender experts can be integrated into broader curricular units on gender education where they serve as invitations for students in classrooms 'to reflect on and share their own experiential knowledge' and understandings of gender that speaks to their pedagogical potentialities (Keenan 2017, 551; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2019). However, as Keenan points out, 'making sense of our bodies in the world requires a constant analysis of the intersectional manifestations (Crenshaw 1991) of such institutionalised and hierarchical systems of race, gender and ability while maintaining a keen awareness of the limitations of our own analytical vantage points' (551).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have drawn attention to the necessity of a project of trans desubjugation as central to generating knowledge about gender expansiveness and for redressing vital questions of hermeneutic and testimonial justice for trans youth which refute the terms of a cissexist, cisgenderist and artifactual logics (Johnson 2015). Our case study of *The Gender Tag Project* has illuminated the need to centre the perspectives and standpoints of trans and

non-binary youth themselves in envisaging a critical trans pedagogical project and a gesturing towards what this might entail. As we have demonstrated, their own YouTube videos contribute to a rich archival repository for sourcing and enhancing educators' understanding of trans and non-binary personhood. Such online platforms provide the means to create community and *counterpublic* spaces where more expansive possibilities exist for trans youth to share their own self-understandings of their personhood as they navigate a cisnormative world which often refuses and works against the proliferation of such knowledge of gender expansiveness, especially in schools (Frohard-Dourlent 2018; Kennedy 2018; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2019; Payne and Smith 2014; Sinclair-Palm 2017).

However, we have also pointed to the racialised limits of *The Gender Tag Project* as a space of unmarked whiteness. Our analysis, therefore, has highlighted that simply including black trans youth and trans youth of colour, while necessary in terms of ensuring representational and testimonial justice and its potential for exposing the unmarked norm of whiteness, in itself does not translate into enabling conditions for reflecting on processes of racialisation and their significance with respect to sharing experiences of trans and non-binary ontological awareness. We attribute such occlusions to pedagogical prompts that fail to address the terms of the reification of whiteness 'as an effect of racialization', which leads to a foreclosure in guiding youth to focus on the singularity of their experiences of gender, and as such, 'shapes what it is bodies "can do" [and say]' (Ahmed 2007, 150).

Notes

1. In drawing on these terms, we understand them through Serano's (2016) interpretation, where *cissexism* is the belief that 'cis people's gender identities, expressions, and embodiments are more natural and legitimate than those of trans people' while *cisgenderism*, similarly, denotes the 'assumption or belief that cisgender identities and expressions are more legitimate than their transgender counterparts' (n.p.).
2. For the purposes of maintaining anonymity, we have assigned pseudonyms to the youth. While their videos are available for public consumption, we wanted to ensure we afforded the same ethical diligence and conduct that we would with any participant.

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