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## Beyond "Born This Way": Reconsidering trans narratives

Ashley Elizabeth Meyers  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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BEYOND “BORN THIS WAY”:  
RECONSIDERING TRANS NARRATIVES

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Ashley Elizabeth Meyers  
University of Northern Iowa  
July 2019

## ABSTRACT

When most Americans hear the words “trans” or “transgender”, celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner, Chaz Bono, or Laverne Cox likely come to mind along with their highly public stories of medical and social transition. While these celebrity representations have served to increase visibility for the trans community throughout the United States over the past decade, trans representation remains limited in terms of intersectionality and a narrow focus on celebrity stories and themes of essentialization, dysphoria, and medical transition. At the same time, research on trans narratives also remains focused almost exclusively on trans women and men who experience dysphoria and undergo medical transition. This leaves the following questions: What are the consequences of such a narrow focus on only one kind of trans story within the media? How did the representations we know today develop in the first place? What are the experiences of trans people who do not fit into the dominant narrative like? What can we learn from these experiences, representations, and histories in terms of theory and activism?

To answer these questions, in this thesis I will present a qualitative textual analysis of interviews with seven trans people from various backgrounds on their gendered life experiences and compare them to trans celebrity narratives, historical narratives, and alternative narratives trans people have formed for themselves. While the stories collected and analyzed in this study are not generalizable to all trans people, as case studies they will enhance our knowledge of trans narratives, experiences, and identities.

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This Study by: Ashley Elizabeth Meyers

Entitled: Beyond “Born This Way”: Reconsidering Trans Narratives

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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Date

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Date

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Dr. Jennifer Waldron, Dean, Graduate College

## DEDICATION

For my loving grandmothers, JamieAnn and Peggy Meyers, who taught me the  
importance of personal narratives.

And for my mother, who inadvertently helped to inspire this project.

And to everyone who shared their stories with me and made this project possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Carolyn Hildebrandt, for sharing her expertise as a seasoned researcher. This project would not have been possible without her diligence and care as an advisor. I would also like to thank Dr. Benjamin Baker for sharing his expertise in narrative theory and practical advice on interviewing methods. The interviews presented in this thesis benefited tremendously from his presence. I would also like to thank Dr. Jeronimo for her invaluable input on the theoretical foundations on which this project is built. Her insights added greater depth to my analysis and understanding of trans narratives and identities. This project would not be what it has become without the efforts and support of such an interdisciplinary, expert, and committed committee behind me.

I would also like to thank my participants for their willingness to speak with me and put their stories out there. Without them I would have no stories to tell. Also, I would like to thank my cohort, who were there through every step of the process and supported me as peers in countless and unique ways. I also would like to thank my parents and grandmothers for their support and unconditional love. They were always there to cheer me on when I needed it most.

Finally, I also wish to acknowledge all the feminist, queer, gender non-conforming, and trans theorists and activists, known and unknown, that have gone before me. It is because of them and their tireless work and sacrifices in the name of justice that I have the privilege of conducting this research in an era of relative visibility, openness, and safety. Today I stand on their gigantic shoulders.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

One experience from my everyday life as an intersex, multigender person that inspired this project was watching National Geographic's *Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric* with my mother. Given the documentary is geared toward a general audience and covers the basics of trans identities, I thought it would be a useful film for us to view together for educational purposes. Out of a desire to let my mother know the truth of my personal connection to what we were about to see, I told her as we were starting the documentary what I had only hinted at in previous conversations. I told her I identify as intersex and have been seriously questioning my gender identity since learning about nonbinary identities in college. At first it seemed little of what I was saying was getting through to her. She was only concerned with my pronouns and, without my even mentioning the subject, admitted it would be difficult for her to switch to singular they pronouns when referring to me. When I explained I was fine with my assigned pronouns for the time being she dropped the subject and continued watching the documentary. At that point, I thought the conversation had reached an early end, just as it had in all my previous attempts. Yet this time events took another turn.

A scene in which Katie Couric interviews an intersex trans man about his experiences navigating interphobic and transphobic medical spaces came on the screen. His was a story of coerced childhood surgeries, dysphoria, depression, pain, fear, secrecy, shame, and a life spent tragically mis-assigned. It was this story of what it means to be intersex and trans that finally reached my mother. Next thing I knew I was managing her

feelings of guilt over the hormone replacement therapy I began as a teenager and reassuring her these feelings were baseless since none of it caused me any distress, all while wondering, “Why is this the story she’s latching onto rather than the one I was telling her just minutes ago?”

A closer examination of the thematic patterns within mainstream media representations of trans people and their narratives offers a possible answer to this question. One of the most common genres of trans representation in American media is the trans celebrity narrative. With a few exceptions, such as writer Janet Mock and actress Laverne Cox, these celebrity narratives tend to center on a famous or well-known person born to white and class privilege who crosses from one side of the gender binary to the other under the scrutiny of the public eye. Some prominent examples of these subjects include musician and advocate Chaz Bono, reality TV and YouTube personality Jazz Jennings, and Olympic gold medalist Caitlyn Jenner. Armed with white and class privilege, these individuals have the resources to “pass” as the gender with which they identify, meaning the issues of those who lack these resources or the desire to pass often go unrepresented. In other words, trans representations in mainstream media, given the focus on celebrity stories, are far from intersectional and present an image of transness that does not apply to the majority of trans people. For instance, they do not encourage those in the general population, like my mother, to picture a person of color, a disabled person, a working-class person, or an intersex nonbinary person, like me, when they hear the word trans.

Furthermore, these celebrity trans narratives also tend to center on a narrow set of themes when presented to a general audience. The most prominent of these themes is how the trans person in question was “born this way,” or how they always knew they were trans or at least had some sense of their gender identity from an early age. This theme is exemplified in the following quotes from Bono, Jennings, and Jenner, respectively: “My father treated me like the boy I felt myself to be” (Bono 15); “Ever since I could form coherent thoughts, I knew I was a girl trapped in a boy’s body” (Jennings 1); and, “I have struggled with identity all my life. It’s not something that just happened last week” (Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner”). In all three of these cases there is a common thread of how each of them knew their gender identity early on, regardless of their lack of language to articulate it at the time or at what point in life they came out as trans and started publicly transitioning.

While such experiences of gender identity are certainly true for many trans people and it is by no means my intention to invalidate such narratives, it is important to acknowledge these stories may not be true for everyone in the trans community. For instance, the powerful expectation all trans narratives must begin with an “I was born this way” or “I’ve always known” statement can obscure the experiences of trans people who cannot say they’ve always known their gender identity or say with the same level of confidence they were “born this way.” Furthermore, such a narrative construction when taken as absolute can risk essentializing transness and, in the process, excluding those who do not fit the mold on the basis they were not actually born trans or are not trans enough.

Another prominent theme in these trans celebrity narratives as presented to the public is dysphoria, the intense discomfort or distress many trans people feel due to an incongruence between their gender identity and the sex they were assigned at birth. Often these feelings are described as being “born in” or “trapped in the wrong body” and are framed primarily in terms of a conflict between physical embodiment and psychological identity. This is best exemplified when Jennings describes herself as “a girl trapped inside a boy’s body” (Jennings 1). Once again, while such experiences of dysphoria are certainly valid and true for many trans people and it is not my intention to dismiss them, it is important to acknowledge such narratives may not be true for everyone. For instance, the experiences of trans people who primarily experience social rather than body dysphoria, experience little to no dysphoria, or experience primarily gender euphoria often go unrepresented. Not only that but focusing *exclusively* on stories of dysphoria can give the impression that trans lives and identities are defined by distress over one’s body and reinforce the medicalization of what it means to be trans, reducing a complex spectrum of identities to a diagnosis in need of treatment.

Given how serious dysphoria can be, it is perfectly understandable why it occupies such a prominent place in many trans narratives along with its remedy, medical transition. Often this discussion focuses on genitals and is conducted under sensationalized headlines like “Trans Chaz Bono: I’m Saving to Buy a Penis” (Hedegard) and “Chaz Bono Eyes Risky Surgery to Construct Penis” (James). While medical transition is an important and even life-saving part of many trans people’s lives that should be respectfully discussed as a valid path some people take, such sensationalized

representations focused solely on dysphoria and medical transition contribute further to the medicalization of trans identities and exclude other forms of trans experience. For instance, the experiences of trans people who do not have the resources to medically transition or do not wish to do so often go unrepresented. In short, the only trans narratives most of the general public are exposed to tend to be influenced by the life stories of trans celebrities as presented on television and in magazines and resemble the story of the intersex trans man interviewed on *Gender Revolution* far more than they do stories like mine. It is then no wonder why my mother zeroed in on this more familiar narrative when attempting to process what I was telling her. Such stories are among the only references to trans identities she, and many others like her, have of trans people and their experiences.

At the same time, many trans people of various gender identities are working to create their own narratives. Some examples of these alternative narratives can be found in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* as well as Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. In these works, Bornstein and Feinberg play with and even defy many of the expectations regarding trans narratives. Bornstein, for instance, questions the need to essentialize their gender identity and takes seriously the possibility that "the culture may in fact be *creating* the gendered people" rather than the culture creating roles for naturally gendered people (Bornstein 15; emphasis in original). Thus, rather than presenting a narrative that conforms to the idea of a true essential gender identity, Bornstein presents a narrative in which gender is understood to be socially constructed and transness need not



imply a transition from one side of the binary to the other. At the same time, in his semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg presents readers with a protagonist whose gender identity and sexuality do not fit neatly into either lesbian or trans scripts, undergoes top surgery and testosterone replacement therapy, passes as a man for years, and goes on to occupy a space between genders by the end of the novel (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*). These themes are explored further in *Transgender Warriors* as Feinberg examines the history of gender variant people alongside elements from his own narrative and challenges the contemporary boundaries of trans identities in adopting an expansive definition of the term “transgender” while doing so (Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*).

Writing in the mid-1990s, Feinberg uses the term transgender as “an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender,” including “transsexuals, transgenders, transvestites, transgenderists, bigenders, drag queens, drag kings, masculine women, feminine men, intersexuals,” and a whole host of other gender variant people (Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors* x). While this definition of transgender may be far broader than contemporary usages of the term, it does parallel contemporary uses of the word trans as an umbrella term that covers anyone whose gender identity differs from one they were assigned at birth in terms of its inclusion of trans women and men as well as nonbinary people whose gender identities differ from the one they were assigned at birth and do not fall neatly into a man/woman dichotomy. Given the prevalence of this definition among today’s activists and trans people on the ground, this is the definition I will employ for the purposes of my research into the variety of trans narratives, the expectations concerning them, the tensions between them, and how

common representations of trans people and their stories can differ from lived experiences.

The tensions between the aforementioned genres of trans narratives and lived experiences, in particular, raise several key questions: What are the consequences of such a narrow focus on only one kind of trans story within media? How did the representations we know today develop in the first place? What are the experiences of trans people who do not fit into the dominant narrative like? What can we learn from these experiences, representations, and histories in terms of theory and activism? To answer these questions and add to our knowledge of trans narratives, in this project I engage in textual analysis of trans narratives as found in mainstream media alongside alternative narratives, historical narratives, scholarly sources, and oral history interviews conducted with trans people themselves on their identities and life experiences.

Throughout this analysis, I give particular attention to the ways trans people understand themselves, their experiences with gender, and how these self-understandings and experiences compare to how trans lives are often presented in mainstream media, alternative narratives, and narratives from the past. The texts in question include celebrity stories like Chaz Bono's autobiography *Transition: The Story of How I Became a Man* as well as more alternative works like Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" and historical narratives like the life story of Christine Jorgensen as first presented in the *New York Daily News* in 1952 (White). Also, to ensure intersectionality is considered, the analysis of these texts and the oral histories collected encompasses the intersecting identities of

authors, subjects, and participants, including but not limited to class, race, sexuality, ability, and gender with the understanding that systems of privilege and oppression intersect and are experienced simultaneously.

While there has been research into trans narratives, so far most of these investigations have been largely theoretical and focus solely on trans women and men. This is mostly due to a low level of nonbinary visibility rather than an active exclusion on the part of theorists and researchers. An example of such theorizing can be found in Johnathan Alexander's "Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)composing Narratives of the Body" in which Alexander investigates how transgender theories can inspire pedagogical methods that complement feminist compositionist pedagogical approaches to understanding the narration of gender as a social construct (45). As such, Alexander's theorizing does add to our knowledge of trans narratives, the rhetorics such narratives employ concerning the body, and what they mean for feminism and the narration of gender as a social construct more generally. However, it is limited in terms of engaging the lived experiences of trans people directly.

At the same time, much of the research that does incorporate the voices and experiences of trans people directly has been restricted to trans women and men and largely engages in a single-axis analysis on gender identity. One example of such research is Sarah Bartolome's "Melanie's Story: A Narrative Account of a Transgender Music Teacher," in which Bartolome follows the case of Melanie, "a music educator who identifies as transgender (MtF)" (25). While Bartolome's research does contribute to our knowledge of trans narratives and the concerns of trans music educators, like Melanie, it

is limited in terms of aiding our understanding of how transness intersects with other social categories such as sexuality, race, class, ability, and age since Bartlome only engages in a single axis analysis. However, there are some examples of more intersectional work. One such example is Stephen Eyre and colleagues' ethnographic study of an African-American MtF transgender community in Oakland, California that engages in an analysis of how categories of race, ethnicity, and gender intersect in the lives of the research participants (147). Such intersectional work is important for our understanding of trans narratives in terms of their diversity and complexity.

The purpose of the current study is to add to this building body of knowledge concerning trans narratives through addressing some of the gaps in research and representation by means of including the lived, narrated experiences of trans people in the research process and applying an intersectional, queer, trans feminist approach to an investigation of the construction of trans narratives. In doing so, the current study sheds light on trans narratives beyond the generally expected "born this way" narrative to reveal narrative themes regarding the fluidity of identities, gender euphoria, medical and social transitions beyond binaries, and intersectionality that are just as much a part of trans experiences as the themes of essentialization, dysphoria, and medical transition found in most prominent media representations of trans experience. Furthermore, while the narratives shared in the current study are not generalizable to all trans people, they begin to expand our knowledge on the experiences of nonbinary people and others whose narratives do not entirely fit the expected mold and, by extension, the diversity of trans experiences as a whole.

To better elaborate on these narrative themes, this work is organized into five parts. In the next chapter, the literature review, I present relevant theories concerning gender and trans identities as well as past research on trans narratives. In addition, in the literature review I also present a history of gender variant people and their narratives in North America in the interest of shedding light on how the trans narrative conventions we know today developed. This discussion is followed by an analysis of contemporary media representations of trans people in the public eye who have influenced the way such narratives are told in public as well as alternative narratives are conceived by trans people primarily for other trans people. The third chapter discusses the methods used in the current study, specifically oral history and narrative analysis, and their place within feminist, queer, and trans research methods. In addition, this chapter also outlines the demographics of the participants in the study and the details of the procedures used. The fourth chapter presents a thematic analysis of the narratives shared in the interviews and places them in conversation with the historical, media, and alternative narratives presented in the literature review. Finally, the fifth chapter concludes with a summation of the study and its implications as well as a discussion of its limitations and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Queer Trans Feminist Theory, Trans Identities and Narratives*

In relation to trans identities and narratives, the past few decades have seen extensive theoretical debates within queer, trans, and feminist circles concerning what transness means for gender as a whole and the approach trans communities should take toward gender categories. Some, like trans feminist Emi Koyama, view transness in terms of the expansion of gender categories. This view is expressed in Koyama's "The Tranfeminist Manifesto" in her discussion of trans women and feminism in which she advocates for a widening of woman as a category within feminist movements. In her own words, "When a group of women previously silenced begins to speak out, other feminists are challenged to rethink their idea of whom they represent and what they stand for [...]. It is under this understanding that we declare the time has come for trans women to openly take part in feminist revolution, further expanding the scope of the movement" (1). Thus, from her position as a trans woman, Koyama seeks to expand the meaning of woman as a category and, along with it, who and what the feminist movement represents. Such an expansion is crucial for coalition building, especially in a context where the term woman usually refers first and foremost to white, able-bodied, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual, feminine, cisgender women to the exclusion of all others, including and perhaps especially, trans women.

However, as useful as the expansion of the category of woman may be for building coalitions between cis and trans women, such a position still risks creating

exclusions. In the years since writing “The Transfeminist Manifesto” Koyama has admitted her decision to theorize solely from her specific standpoint as a trans woman led her to engage in exclusions of her own. In a postscript written after the manifesto’s initial publication, Koyama brings attention to two issues she has with the manifesto in hindsight: 1) “Overemphasis on male-to-female trans people at the expense of female-to-male trans people and others who identify as transgender or genderqueer”; and 2) “Inadequate intersectional analysis” (10). Such issues are representative of the difficulties that come with using woman or any other social identity as a category of analysis.

In response to these difficulties, other trans feminist theorists, like Susan Stryker, prefer to disrupt binary gender categories. For Stryker, this is done by means of embracing trans monstrosity. In her creative piece “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” Stryker takes on the persona of the monster from Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* in the moment when the monster confronts its creator in the mountains above the town of Chamounix (Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein” 243). In doing so, Stryker employs monstrosity to confront a system that has shaped and reshaped her body and consciousness in ways that parallel the experiences of Frankenstein’s monster. Such a strategy is useful for challenging and disrupting the gender binary by introducing a third category of transsexual monstrosity into the mix and avoids some of the issues of exclusion that come with using woman or another social category as a category of analysis. However, from a feminist standpoint, this strategy is not as effective when seeking to form coalitions for activism among larger groups of women and other marginalized groups, some of whom

may or not be receptive to the idea of trans monstrosity, or when seeking to communicate a more coherent identity for the purposes of effecting change. These concerns are particularly relevant in a political context in which group identity claims are key to demands for social justice and have implications for trans narratives and how they are often constructed in a context of potential exclusions and coalitions and all the tensions that come with them.

In addition to Stryker, other trans theorists have gone further than simply disrupting the binary and advocate for going beyond the binary altogether. One of the more notable of theorists is Kate Bornstein, who, from a nonbinary perspective and in their own playful style, argues for taking a stance outside of the gender binary as a form of resistance (Bornstein). Once again, this approach can be useful for making room for the existence of nonbinary people and challenging an oppressive gender binary under which all trans people, even those who are men and women, suffer. Not to mention the fact that binary conceptions of gender are essential to patriarchy, meaning feminists would do well to resist the gender binary as well. However, it is not useful for coalition building even among trans communities considering the insistence on going beyond the binary can be exclusionary toward trans women and men who do understand themselves as being within the binary (Bettcher 383). In this way, Bornstein's approach faces many of the same drawbacks as Stryker's since both are useful for disrupting and challenging oppressive binaries but are not effective for coalition building both within and outside of the trans community.



Another debate that continues to have a major place within queer, trans, and feminist theoretical and popular discussions on gender, trans identities, and trans narratives is the familiar nature versus nurture debate. Given the history of gender oppression being justified as natural, biologically determined, and, therefore, inevitable and unchangeable, it is not surprising feminists have appealed to the theory that gender is socially constructed and, therefore, changeable when confronted with gender inequality. In fact, beginning in the 1970s with the publication of Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* feminists have successfully used this argument in the form of the sex/gender distinction. According to Oakley, "sex refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible genitalia, the related difference in procreation" while "gender [...] is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'" (16). In other words, sex refers to biology, specifically chromosomes, gonads, hormones, and genitalia. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the social, specifically ideas regarding masculinity and femininity and which roles are appropriate for men and women. It can then be said sex is the biological text culture interprets and gender is that interpretation, an interpretation that is theoretically malleable. Such an idea gave many feminists hope that gender oppression in society is cultural, changeable, and not inevitable.

In the case of the trans people, in their struggle for recognition and understanding some have used the sex/gender distinction to expand on the idea that biology is not destiny in the sense that one's sex does not determine one's gender and to explain how one can have a gender that differs from one's sex in the act of separating the two (Bono 21). For instance, one can have a female sex and a male gender or vice versa. Some

feminists likely dispute this use of the sex/gender distinction. However, such a distinction has, nonetheless, proven useful in some instances for explaining trans identities, especially those of trans men and women.

While the sex/gender distinction has proven to be successful for arguing gender oppression is cultural and changeable and debunking the idea that biology is destiny, it has come under criticism in the decades since, particularly from queer theorists. For example, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* Judith Butler asserts, “If the immutable character of sex is closed, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already sex, with the consequence that distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (10). In short, for Butler, sex is a *gendered* social category that is just as socially constructed as gender, making a strict sex/gender distinction nonexistent. This is not to say a person’s literal anatomy is socially constructed, but that the gendered meanings human societies assign to said person’s bodily characteristics as either male or female, masculine or feminine and the ways cultures attempt to shape said characteristics according to these meanings is a social construct. In other words, there can be no sex that is not already gendered. This has implications for how trans identities are conceived and constructed narratively given how transness has historically been framed in terms of being born in the “wrong body,” or a mismatch between sex and gender.

Furthermore, in a similar way to how feminists have appealed to social constructionism and the sex/gender distinction in response to the argument that gender oppression is biological and unchangeable, many trans people, bisexuals, lesbians, and

gay men have turned to strategic essentialism in response to the argument that their gender and sexual identities are immoral voluntary lifestyle choices. Such strategic essentialism can be seen in action when trans people construct a narrative that rests on the idea they were born trans, had no choice in the matter, and therefore should not be oppressed for an aspect of their identity over which they have no control (Bono, Jennings). Such a narrative is strategic in the sense that it is useful for challenging justifications of cissexism based on the assumption that being trans is a moral choice and not a matter of identity. However, adopting an essentialist “born this way” narrative for strategic purposes does have its limits.

The limits of strategic essentialism and, by extension, the entire premise of the nature versus nurture, constructivist versus essentialist debate are detailed in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*. According to Sedgwick, “The immemorial, seemingly ritualized debates on nature versus nurture take place against a very unstable background of tacit assumptions and fantasies about both nature and nurture” (40). In other words, the nature versus nurture debate is based on unexamined assumptions and fantasies concerning both nature and nurture that can be dangerous for those who wish to be queer-affirming. While Sedgwick penned these words in reference to conceptions of homosexual bodies and identities, they can also apply to conceptions of trans bodies and identities considering how in both cases the debate primarily concerns the origins of and explanations for identities, bodies, and behaviors many consider to be deviant on the basis of intertwined expectations of gender and sexuality.

One of the assumptions that grounds the essentialist versus constructivist debate is that culture is relatively malleable compared to biology. This assumption has been at the foundation of the aforementioned feminist sex/gender distinction and efforts to demonstrate gender inequality is only cultural and, therefore, changeable. Yet, as Sedgwick points out in reference to the feminist optimism concerning cultural malleability, “I remember the buoyant enthusiasm with which feminist scholars used to greet the finding that one or another brutal form of oppression was not biological but ‘only’ cultural! I have often wondered what the basis was for our optimism about the malleability of culture by any one group or program” (41). In other words, efforts to ground programs for change based on the assumption of cultural malleability may underestimate just how difficult it is to change culture. Not only that, but appeals to nurture based on this assumption also risk fantasies of conversion and a world without trans people or, at least, not more trans people in a context of cissexism. This is especially true when there is advice on how to convert a trans subject to a cisgender subject, but hardly ever the reverse, and the trajectory of identifying a place of malleability “ends in the overreaching, hygienic Western fantasy of a world without any more homosexuals” (Sedgwick 42) or, by extension, trans people. Given all the risks of such manipulations and fantasies involved in appeals to social constructivism, it is even less surprising that many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans people have employed essentialist frameworks in the form of biological explanations for their identities when confronted with heterosexism and cissexism in wider society.

However, it is also dangerous to assume biology is not malleable and treat it as a stable place from which to argue for trans affirmation or the affirmation of any other identity. In Sedgwick's words, "At the same time, however, just as it comes to seem questionable to assume that cultural constructs are peculiarly malleable ones, it is also becoming increasingly problematical to assume that grounding an identity in biology or 'essential nature' is a stable way of insulating it from societal interference" (43). This is especially true in the light of the increasingly manipulative fantasy of control over biology within western societies and the reality of technological advancements. In fact, according to Sedgwick, "If anything, the gestalt of assumptions that undergird nature/nurture debates may be in the process of direct reversal. Increasingly it is the conjecture that a particular trait is genetically or biologically based, *not* that it is 'only culture,' that seems to trigger an estrus of manipulative fantasy in the technological institutions of the culture" (43). This means appeals to biological essentialism to defend an identity may be more likely to elicit manipulations and fantasies of control than saying said identity is cultural. For instance, in the case of trans identities, saying transness is the result of genetics, hormones, or neurology may backfire and inspire fantasies of manipulation and a world without transness rather ground it as a stable and valid identity.

In the end, when it comes to the nature versus nurture debate and the question of trans origins as portrayed in many trans narratives, it is important to ask why the question is being asked in the first place, what sort of answer is being sought and for what purpose. Is it to affirm trans lives? Is it for purposes of hygienic fantasies? Is it for the purposes of harmful social manipulation? How might engaging in this sort of debate over

trans narratives be used to help or harm the cause of trans people? What group harms may unintentionally arise from engaging in this kind of debate? Such questioning is even more crucial as trans visibility increases within the larger cultural conversation and more academics turn their attention toward trans identities and narratives with various agendas in mind.

### *The Literature on Trans Narratives*

So far, the research on trans narratives has focused almost exclusively on trans women and men with a primary focus on the process of medical transition. A good example of this is the research of social psychologist Douglas Mason-Schrock as presented in “Transsexuals’ Narrative Construction of the ‘True-Self.’” In this study the focus remains on “preoperative transsexuals,” who, in Mason-Schrock’s words, “provide an intriguing opportunity to study [the] process of self-construction,” specifically the “interactive processes through which stories are used to construct a new self” (176). Thus, for Mason-Schrock, the main question at hand has to do with how individuals construct the “true self” through narrative with trans people, specifically preoperative transsexuals, being in a unique position to reveal elements of this process due to the significant self-transformation they are about to undergo on the level of sex/gender. For this reason, combined with limited visibility of other options at the time the research was conducted, Mason-Schrock’s study only includes those who are openly pursuing medical transition to cross from one side of the gender binary to the other.

Furthermore, Mason-Schrock’s understanding of the stories his subjects use to construct a new self are primarily understood in terms of being born in the wrong body

and the correction of this situation through surgical means. As he describes these narratives in his own words:

The desired identity change is indeed radical: from one gender to another. Typically, transsexuals, like those described here, believe they were born in wrong-sexed bodies and want to remedy the mistake, eventually through surgery. The process entails relearning how to do gender, down to the smallest details of self-presentations. The process is also anguishing, in that transsexuals often face rejection from family and friends. In addition, there are the problems of finding ways to pay for therapy, electrolysis, hormone treatments, and surgery. To be willing to undergo this process, one must believe firmly that the “true self” demands it (176).

Such an understanding of trans narratives was certainly common when this research was conducted in 1996. Arguably, this was due to decades of most discussions on trans identities within the wider culture being centered on how trans people are born in the wrong body and how they seek to remedy the situation with surgery and hormones. There was very little discussion of how some trans people understand their bodies in other ways or may choose to forego some or all medical transition processes. It is then not surprising that other forms of trans experience are not represented in Mason-Schrock’s work and other research of the time. Furthermore, his main interest lies not with the diversity of trans narratives or with their expansion, but with the “true self” that demands transformation from so many trans women and men and how they use narrative to construct this self.

The true self is a central concept within many western cultures. In fact, Mason-Schrock contends the true self is “a powerful fiction” without which “people in Western cultures tend to feel bereft, incomplete, and confused and will go to great lengths to find or create” (177). In other words, the true self is a powerful construct that motivates

individual behavior in the quest to maintain it. For the purposes of clarity, Mason-Schrock employs the argument that “people invoke the notion of a ‘true self’ or ‘real self’ when they believe they are acting consistently with closely held values—that is, when they are acting authentically” (176). For the subjects in his study this means acting in ways they consider consistent with how they understand their authentically gendered selves. In the course of conducting interviews with ten pre-operative transsexuals from a support group, nine of whom were assigned male at birth, Mason-Schrock observed how interviewees constructed a differently gendered true self through narratives (179). Mainly, Mason-Schrock observed how his research participants constructed narratives in which they saw themselves as biologically misaligned from birth to have a true self gendered differently from their sex and included early childhood stories of cross-gendered expression and identification as evidence of this true self (179). In many ways these narratives resemble the plot currently expected of trans people who tell their stories in the sense Mason-Schrock’s participants all have a story of being in the process of socially and medically crossing from one binary gender to the other and construct a true, stable, gendered self.

While Mason-Schrock’s research offers insights into how transgender women, and to an extent transgender men, who medically transition construct new gendered true selves by means of narrative, his findings may not apply to nonbinary people or others who do not fit the profile of a “preoperative transsexual.” Furthermore, issues of race, class, ability, and other forms of identity and how they may intersect with gender in the



narrative construction of a true self are not discussed, leaving a need for more intersectional research.

This is not an uncommon issue for much of the literature on trans narratives. Another example of a single-axis analysis within the literature on trans narratives includes Bartolome's "Melanie's Story: A Narrative Account of a Transgender Music Educator's Journey," in which Bartolome analyzes the case of a young trans music educator exclusively in terms of gender (25). There is also Alexander's "Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)composing Narratives of the Body," in which Alexander only considers gender when forming his theories on trans narratives, rhetoric, and feminist compositionist pedagogical approaches (45). Finally, there is sociologist Lori B. Girschick's *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men* in which Girschick engages in a single-axis gender analysis of in-depth interviews with 150 trans men, trans women, and other gender variant people (10). While such research does offer its own insights into the construction of trans narratives, they are limited when it comes to understanding the importance of other social categories besides gender have in shaping trans people's lives and the ways trans people experience these categories with their respective privileges and oppressions simultaneously along with their gender identities.

An example of intersectional research into trans narratives can be found in the ethnographic work of Kylan Mattias de Vries. In "Intersectional Identities and Conceptions of the Self: The Experience of Transgender People" Mattias de Vries focuses primarily on the experiences of trans people of color and the "ways race, social class, gender, and sexuality all intersect to create specific background identities that

others attribute to individuals to frame their interaction” (50). Such intersections are crucial for understanding not only the lives of trans people of color, but trans people more generally. This is because, as Mattias de Vries appreciates, “transgender people in the United States change genders in relation to androcentric, heterocentric, and middle-class whitenormative cultural narratives” (49). Thus, to transition as, for instance, a lesbian trans woman of color means transitioning not only as a woman, a person of color, or a lesbian, but transitioning as all these identities simultaneously in relation to a set of power narratives rooted in white, male, middle-class, heterosexual conventions. This also means transitioning as a trans lesbian of color is very different from transitioning as a white, heterosexual, trans man due to the very different relationships these individuals have to dominant androcentric, heterocentric, and middle-class white narratives.

Much of the literature on trans narratives that engages intersectionality so far primarily focuses on the intersection of gender and race while sometimes including class or sexuality. This is likely due to intersectionality’s origins within Black feminism as a namable theoretical concept and its subsequent association with race and the experiences of African-American women specifically. Examples of this tendency can be found in the ethnographic work of Eyre and colleagues and Maria R. Briones. In their work Eyre and colleagues engage in an analysis of the intersections between race, ethnicity, and gender in the lives of members of an MTF transgender scene in Oakland (147). Briones’ ethnographic work focuses on the simultaneously gendered, classed, and racialized experiences of transgender Filipino informal workers in Los Baños, Laguna regarding

their work aspirations and narratives (1). Yet there are some works that examine intersections beyond gender and race.

One example of such intersectional research can be found in Jackson Wright Shultz's *Trans Portraits*. This is particularly true of a chapter specifically on intersectionality entitled "What Happens to Those of Us with Multiple Identities?" that engages intersections of gender, sexuality, ability, and religion as well as race and class (100-135). This exploration is best exemplified in the inclusion of narratives of those like Hillary, who moves through the world as an autistic trans woman (132), and Filipe, who exists simultaneously as a Costa Rican, Catholic, heterosexual trans man (112). Then there is also the work of psychologists Jason VanOra and Suzanne C. Ouellette in which they apply critical personality psychology and narrative strategies to the narratives of two trans women to better understand how they construct and maintain a set of multiple, coherent, transformative identities as activists, women, and people of color (89). This is in response to the unidimensional and pathologizing depictions of trans women in the sociological and clinical literature and other forms of research that have historically ignored other identities trans people may occupy as queer people, people of color, and members of specific ethnic groups or socio-economic classes (89). The inclusion of such intersections is crucial for feminist, queer, and trans activism and our understanding of trans lives beyond what a single axis analysis can offer and are in need of further examination.

In the end, much of the literature on trans narratives has mirrored the expectations of such narratives found in the broader culture. While visibility is increasing for

nonbinary communities, much of the research thus far has focused almost exclusively on trans men and women, stories of medical transition and dysphoria, and is limited in terms of examining intersectionality, although this last pattern is changing. Yet, much of the scholarly research still repeats the same dominant narrative even as few have worked to contextualize these stories and ask the question: How did these narratives develop in the first place?

### *Historical “Trans” Narratives*

One of the challenges of conducting trans history is the fact that, while gender variant people have always existed, how they and their behaviors have been interpreted has changed over time and terms like “trans” have not always been available. Oftentimes these historical understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality do not translate well into current understandings of what it means to be trans. At the same time, there is also a need to acknowledge the existence of gender variant people in the past, understand how they viewed themselves, and, in the process, contextualize our current gender ideologies and narratives. It is then important not to impose present conceptions of gender onto the past while still acknowledging the existence of gender variant people in history and seeking to contextualize current narratives and ideologies. For this reason, in my investigation of how the trans narratives we know in early twenty-first century North America developed, I will refer to the following narratives and histories as “trans” or using the broader term gender variant. This is a means to emphasize the differences between them and contemporary people and narratives and acknowledge the historical actors in them generally did not understand themselves as trans in the current meanings of the term.

In the case of North America, the history of gender variant people can be said to start with indigenous cultures whose gender systems included options other than male and female before European colonization. Today these identities are referred to under the umbrella term Two-Spirit. According to historians and anthropologists, like Nancy Bonvillain, Two-Spirit genders varied from culture to culture and historically were most prevalent in what is today California, the Great Basin, and parts of the Plains and Prairies (Bonvillain 258). Some examples include the Two-Spirits of the Kaska and Carrier peoples of the Subarctic, the *nadle* of the Navajo, and *aylha* of the Mohave (Bonvillain 258-262). In many cultures Two-Spirits acted as go-betweens between women and men, performed spiritual roles, were most commonly revealed through dreams or visions, engaged in cross-gendered expression and subsistence tasks, and held positions of prestige in their respective societies (Bonvillain 259-262). Most importantly, Two-Spirits were generally understood to belong to a gender apart from men and women regardless of how they may have resembled either typical men or typical women in terms of anatomy (Bonvillain 258). Two-Spirits then historically differed from contemporary understandings of transgender men and women in the sense that they were not crossing from one side of a binary to another, but rather represented a third space entirely.

For much of the histories of these indigenous groups Two-Spirits were respected, sacred members of their own societies (Bonvillain 262). This changed, however, with the arrival of Europeans and the rise of colonization in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, during which time Two-Spirits were violently forced to abandon their social and sacred roles (Bonvillain 262). Here it must be noted that, despite this violent history, there are

still Two-Spirits living openly within certain Native American communities today, some of whom are working to re-educate their communities on Two-Spirit identities and histories.

In contrast, for seventeenth century European colonists, gender was not a matter to be determined by spiritual visions and dreams, like it was historically for many indigenous peoples, or a matter of individual identity, rights, and self-determination, like it is throughout much of American culture today. Rather, for the first colonists of North America, gender was a matter of divine hierarchy. In this divine hierarchy, firmly establishing an individual's gender and rank in day-to-day activities was essential for the smooth functioning of the community, making gender an important community matter and ambiguity not easily tolerated (Norton 38-39). An example of this can be seen in the case of the indentured servant Thomasine/Thomas Hall (better known to historians as T Hall) whose gender expression, identity, and sex caused much confusion and debate among the colonists of Virginia. In her article "An Indentured Servant Identifies as 'Both Man and Woeman': Jamestown 1629" historian Mary Beth Norton uses court records to piece together the narrative of T Hall. Through these documents, Norton follows Hall's narrative from T's beginnings christened as Thomasine Hall in northeastern England in 1603 to T's military service in France as Thomas Hall in 1625 to T's settling in Virginia on January 21, 1627 under the name Thomas Hall (34-37). From these documents it appears Hall spent T's time in Virginia going back and forth between presenting as Thomas and Thomasine (Norton 36). As expected, this level of gender fluidity eventually

caused a great deal of confusion for the community, who had to settle one burning question: What should T wear?

Clothing was a major marker of gender and rank within the divine hierarchy as conceived in early colonial society and having someone going back and forth between women's and men's dress, like T, was viewed as extremely problematic for the community (Norton 38-39). Thus, establishing Hall's gender meant deciding the uniform T must wear to show T's gendered rank within the divine hierarchy. Factors in making such a determination included skills and anatomical characteristics (Norton 39). Interestingly, some of the men in authority who sought to determine Hall's gender identity favored citing T's feminine skills while women, and some men, in the community favored citing T's ambiguous but somewhat masculine genitals (Norton 39). Either way, determining Hall's sex/gender meant subjecting T to multiple examinations at the hands of separate groups of men and women. Over the course of these proceedings none of the colonists appeared to have had any hesitations about examining the genitals of another colonist and were heavily involved throughout the process of determining Hall's sex/gender (Norton 39). All of this suggests the colonists saw an individual's sex/gender as a matter for the community at large and saw the individual's expression and identity claims as holding much less weight than the views of the community.

In the end it was not Hall or the men and women of Jamestown who decided T's gender, but the Virginia General Court in 1629. The court ultimately carved out a third separate space just for Hall and decreed T was to wear a uniform combining feminine and masculine dress (Norton 42). This unexpected decision was likely made as a compromise, an

attempt to avoid disturbing the hierarchy further either with the introduction of an atypical man who could not perform the expected male reproductive role due to “not having the use of the male part” or with the introduction of an atypical woman the women of the community had already rejected from being counted among their sex (Norton 40-41). In short, it was arguably a decision made in the interest of containing the apparent fluidity of Hall’s expressed gender and maintaining the hierarchy of the community rather than in the interest of affirming any gender identity Hall might have possessed as an individual. Such experiences differ dramatically from the narratives of gender variance, and specifically transness, we are familiar with in the early twenty-first century when gender is framed as a matter of individual rights, expression, and self-determination.

Some of the first signs of an ideological shift from the divinely ordained hierarchal view of gender of the colonial period in which T lived to the identity, rights-based model we know today can be seen in the anonymous fictional short story “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman.” This 1857 short story chronicles the tale of a man named Japhet Colbones who has a proclivity for feminine tasks, particularly embroidery, and secretly engages in cross-dressing, stealing his wife’s and sister’s clothes in the night (Reis, “Consider the Source”). Tragically, the story ends with Japhet’s wife discovering his body after he had hung himself dressed as a woman, leaving behind a note that reads:

I think I am a woman. I have been seven years making me a perfect suit of garments appropriate for my sex. As I have passed so long, falsely, for a man, I am ashamed to show myself in my true colors; therefore, I hang myself. The property all is to go to the woman I have called my wife. It is now twelve o’clock. I have prepared everything for the funeral, and desire that I may be laid out in the clothes I have on (Reis, “Consider the Source” 678).



In these words, one can see parallels between the deep sense of self Japhet expresses and those of contemporary transgender women, like those represented in Mason-Schrock's study. This is especially the case in how Japhet cites feelings of shame over hiding his true self as the reason for his suicide and does not write of cross-dressing in terms of sin. This is quite a shift from the colonial period when the prevailing gender ideology was based in the puritan belief in a rigid gender binary, the place of men and women within a hierarchy of roles was divinely justified, and gender was considered a community matter. What is even more striking is Japhet's family follows his request up to a point and burry him with most of the women's apparel in which he died, excluding the bonnet, shawl, and jewelry (Reis, "Consider the Source" 678). Such a gesture does show at least some degree of respect for Japhet's self-determined gender identity and expression in death that was never given to Hall roughly two centuries prior.

This major shift was arguably the result of an ideological move from a predominately religious understanding of gender to a more scientific model. According to historian Sarah Reis, "Just as in colonial times, when a biblical understanding of a strict gender binary prevailed, nineteenth century observers sought scientific methods in determining gender identity" (Reis, "Transgender Identity at the Crossroads" 657). As such, during this time people who straddled the gender divide were often conflated with "hermaphrodites" in medical literature, writers like Karl Heinrich began exploring the concept of a female soul in a male body to explain and validate same-sex desire between men, and many Americans were developing more paradoxical attitudes toward gender crossing (Reis, "Transgender Identity at the Crossroads" 657). In short, the prevailing

gender ideology and narratives being told about gender variant people were beginning to resemble more what most in the United States are familiar with today as gender began to be framed in terms of scientific classification and character traits. Most notably, this shift can be seen in the emerging idea of a female soul in a male body, a concept currently used as a means to validate and explain trans women, even if it was not applied to people like Japhet in 1857 (Reis, “Transgender Identity at the Crossroads” 657). Thus, the fictional story of Japhet represents the beginning of a major shift in gender ideology that has come to inform the way we tell and understand trans narratives and identities today.

The century following the publication of “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman” saw some major developments for gender variant people. New language was formed with words like transvestite entering into use to describe a wide range of gender nonconforming ways of expressing and identifying, new communities of gender variant people with common interests were beginning to be established, and new medical techniques and knowledges were being developed (Stryker, *Transgender History*). By 1952, all these developments culminated in the very public medical transition of Christine Jorgensen. On December first, 1952, the headline “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Bronx Youth Is a Happy Woman After Medication, 6 Operations” graced the front page of the *New York Daily News* and alerted post-World War II America to the story of the manly ex-GI who was transformed into an attractive blond woman through the wonders of modern medicine and science (White). In fact, the hyper-focus on Jorgensen’s body and medical transition likely represents a mid-twentieth century preoccupation with progress in medicine, science, and technology. While this

preoccupation has since changed, one can see the impact these early representations of Jorgensen as the first major proto-trans celebrity in the United States have had on the public's understanding of trans people and their identities as well as on how trans people themselves construct their own narratives.

It was arguably in Jorgensen's narrative as presented in the press that the public was first presented with many of the narrative expectations of how a trans(sexual) narrative should unfold. First, Jorgensen's medical transition involved all the expected steps, including hormone replacement therapy and genital surgery. According to *The New York Daily News* Jorgensen underwent a series of five operations in Denmark as well as a series 2,000 injections as part of her transition process (White). In this one can see the framing of transness in binary terms as a medical and physical journey from female to male or male to female that has become all too familiar since 1952. Second, Jorgensen's narrative also incorporated many of the psychological beats now expected of the trans celebrity genre. For example, Jorgensen's friends and family were said to have remembered Jorgensen as "a quiet youngster who preferred reading to sports" and "agreed that the right thing [Jorgensen's transitioning to being a woman] had been done" (White). This image of the transsexual woman as the once "quiet youngster who preferred reading to sports" falls in line expected trans narrative of the grown trans person who starts out as a gender nonconforming child that remains common to this day, especially within the trans children and trans celebrity genres.

Furthermore, one can also see in the telling and retelling of Jorgensen's narrative evidence of the border skirmishes within gender variant communities of the day and the

drawing of the identity borders that have shaped trans and queer politics and narratives to this day. This can especially be seen in the different language reporters and others used to describe Jorgensen over the course of her public transition. At first Jorgensen was described as a hermaphrodite or pseudo-hermaphrodite and placed firmly in the camp of individuals born to bodies considered to be ambiguous. Most notably, in a published excerpt of a letter written to her parents, Jorgensen described herself as having “a glandular imbalance that became apparent at puberty,” implying she was born with what is now called an intersex trait (Hale xvi). In doing so Jorgensen herself participated in blurring the lines between those born to ambiguous bodies (hermaphrodites) and those who wish to change their sex (transsexuals) and, by extension, the line between physical sex and psychological gender within the larger sex/gender system of the day. This blurring of the lines was reinforced in the press with articles like “Doctors Say Errors In True Sex Frequent: Ex-Soldier Who Changed Sex Just One of Many” and “Man or Woman? Thousands of Americans Unsure About Their True Sex” in which reporters firmly placed Jorgensen in the intersex camp alongside other examples of when “true sex” is uncertain and framed her story as one of a woman who simply set out to correct a mistake nature made.

However, this framing of Jorgensen did not last. Jorgensen was quickly relabeled a transvestite “in that older sense developed by Hirschfield, in which the term referred to a wider range of transgender phenomenon than it does today” (Stryker, *Transgender History* 49). This time a blurring of a different sort occurred, that between psychological identity and social gender. In this blurring those who change their sex through surgical

means, like Jorgensen, found themselves under the same transvestite banner as those who engage in cross-gender expression. Only this time not everyone was comfortable with the lines being crossed.

Over the course of the postwar era, then leading advocate for heterosexual crossdressers, Virginia Prince helped to launch the newsletter *Transvestia* and organized the nation's first support group for heterosexual crossdressers, the Hoes and Heels Club, which drew on *Transvestia's* subscriber's list (Stryker, *Transgender History* 46). The members of the Hoes and Heels club were generally heterosexual men who dressed occasionally in women's clothing and lived and worked as men the rest of the time. They were not attracted to other men, like homosexuals; nor did they identify as or seek to become women, like Jorgensen; nor were they born to ambiguous bodies, like the hermaphrodites described alongside Jorgensen in early news coverage of her transition. These distinctions became all the more important to make once Prince and the members of the Hoes and Heels Club found themselves having to distinguish themselves from those like Jorgensen.

Partly in response to Jorgensen, Prince worked to redefine transvestitism as a synonym for heterosexual male crossdressing distinct from the desire to change one's sex as well as from gay and lesbian styles of gender nonconformity (Stryker, *Transgender History* 49). In other words, Prince started drawing the lines between those who cross dress, those who change their sex, and those who are attracted to the same sex in highlighting the distinctions between the concepts we now know as gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation. These distinctions would be made even clearer

when prominent medical professional with a special interest in transgender phenomenon, Harry Benjamin, put a new word to the phenomenon of Jorgensen in creating the term “transsexual” to describe people who seek surgical transformation and distinguish them from people who do not. It is then by the close of the 1950s one begins to see the identity labels and boundaries that inform transgender politics today beginning to take shape. As historian Susan Stryker puts it:

Both transvestitism and transsexuality came to be seen as something different from either homosexuality or intersexuality. All four categories strove to articulate the complex and variable interrelations between social gender, psychological identity, and physical sex—intellectual labor that informed the concept of a “sex/gender system” that became an important theoretical development within the emerging second wave feminist movement (Stryker, *Transgender History* 49).

In this way Jorgensen and her narrative come out of a context of border skirmishes between gender variant communities attempting to distinguish themselves from one another. Over time these border skirmishes came to influence accepted understandings of gender identity, expression, and sexuality at the societal level as well as how trans people see themselves and, by extension, how they tell their narratives apart from other gender variant groups and sometimes in intersection and overlap with them.

Another important part of these border skirmishes in the decades following Jorgensen’s public transition was distinguishing gender from sexuality, especially for those living at the intersection of transness and queerness. Through much of the mid-twentieth century medical professionals saw themselves as “saving transsexuals from living gay lives” in fashioning their patients into upstanding, respectable heterosexual men and women as much as humanly possible (Smith 97). In short, in the minds of most

medical professionals working out of university gender programs during this period, sexuality and gender were conflated terms and heterosexuality was a mandatory part of the “typical transsexual narrative” they looked for in applicants. That is, the narrative these “gender experts” were looking for resembled that of Christine Jorgensen, who identified as a woman, expressed attractions to men, and desired to live a heterosexual life after transition. This heterosexist bias left trans gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals who’s lives did not fit this prescribed narrative with only two options: tell the truth and be denied medical services or lie about their sexual orientation and medically transition. Among those who chose to challenge this situation was Lou Sullivan.

Lou Sullivan became the first documented case of a gay FTM after a long battle to receive transition related medical care and an AIDS diagnosis in 1986. At first medical professionals working out of university gender programs were reluctant to work with Sullivan upon learning he was attracted to men. A prime example of this reluctance can be seen in Stanford’s written response to Lou’s application for medical assistance in 1980. In the rejection letter to the gender program, Stanford cited the personal history he presented on the application as the reason for their rejection, writing “[it] was not typical for the majority of persons who, in our program, have made successful adjustments with gender reorientation and who have been helped, not harmed, by sex reassignment” (Smith 102). In other words, Lou was denied medical care in Stanford’s gender program on the basis of his not fitting into the narrative medical professional expected of their transsexual patients, specifically on account of his being a gay man. Incidents like this

demonstrate what is at stake when trans people construct their narratives, particularly for cisgender medical professionals with power to give or deny transition-related care.

Fortunately, Lou did not give up on his medical transition. Through friends he found private practitioners like endocrinologist Dr. Waedell Pomeroy and surgeon Dr. Edward Falces to assist him in his transition process before going on to work to educate medical professionals on the existence of gay trans men (Smith 103-110). An important part of this education was the differences between sexuality and gender identity. For Lou, as a gay trans man, sexuality and gender identity were two very different phenomenon. In Lou's own words in an interview with Dr. Ira Pauly:

[...] sexual preference and gender identity are two totally different phenomena. That because someone feels male does not necessarily mean they're going to be attracted to females. That your self-perception is a far different—how you feel about yourself is a different matter than who you want to sleep with or who you want to have sex with (Smith 202).

Thus, in telling his story as a gay trans man living with AIDS and framing sexual preference as separate from gender identity for medical professionals like Dr. Pauly, Lou helped to open up a space for gay trans people and draw attention to the diversity that exists within the trans community in terms of sexual orientation. Most notably, he helped to decouple transness from heterosexuality and create important distinctions between gender identity and sexuality that inform trans and queer politics today. In doing so, Lou helped to widen the range of accepted trans narratives. Thanks to Lou and many others like him most contemporary medical professionals who work with trans patients today agree heterosexuality is no longer a requirement for a person to be taken seriously as trans, leaving room for a more diverse set of trans narratives to be told.



Furthermore, in Lou's narrative as told to Dr. Pauly, one can also see the emergence of an understanding of gender as a matter of self-determination, expression, and human rights that is so familiar today. Not only does Lou state, in agreement with Dr. Pauly, that sexual orientation should have no bearing on a person's transness and access to transition-related medical services (Smith 204). He goes even further and states, "[Sexual preference] or any other facet of their lifestyle—any other way they want to live their life shouldn't play into that" (Smith 204). In making such a statement Lou presents an expansive view of transness in which gender and sexuality are two different aspects of a person that do not determine one another and gender is a matter of self-determination and human rights that should not be abridged based on sexual orientation or any other part of a person's life narrative.

Arguably, the trans narratives we know today in the United States have emerged out of a context of centuries of settler colonialism and shifting gender ideologies. These shifts have involved the displacement of native peoples and their cultures, the introduction of new scientific and cultural ideas, and activism that have taken gender identity from a community matter determined to a matter of character to a matter of self-determination. These shifts are, in part, the result of colonization and larger cultural moves away from religious to scientific understandings of the world along with decades of activism on the part of gender variant communities, each with their own complex relationships to one another and to the wider sex/gender system. It is these kinds of cultural, ideological, and political shifts that make the narratives of today's trans celebrities and others possible.

*Trans Celebrity Narratives*

In the decades since Jorgensen became a kind of celebrity in her own right, trans narratives within the wider culture have been dominated by celebrities. As such, these trans celebrity narratives have an impact on societal expectations for how trans narratives are supposed to unfold and how trans people construct their narratives, especially when speaking to a cisgender audience. One of the most significant of these narrative expectations is that all trans narratives must begin with an “I was born this way” statement, a statement that makes it clear in no uncertain terms gender identity is innate and unchangeable. In other words, trans people are often expected to begin their life narratives in a way similar to that of Chaz Bono, who writes in the first chapter of his autobiography, “One of the clearest memories I have from childhood is this: I felt like a boy. I may have buried those feelings later, but as a child, they were there” (13). In short, his sense of male identity has been with him for as long as he can remember regardless of the perceptions of others or the fact he did not always understand what he was feeling and had to bury his gender identity feelings for much of his life.

This pattern of having a sense of one’s gender identity from an early age and subsequently burying those feelings is very common in the life narratives of older trans people who had to grow up in the closet for lack of community and language for their experiences. Many became good at hiding their sense of gender identity. For instance, as Caitlyn Jenner puts it in an interview with TIME Magazine, “I have struggled with gender all my life. It’s not like something that just happened last week. [...] When I was eight years old, I was running into my mom’s closet. Nobody would know. I was very

good at hiding it” (Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner”). Much like Bono, in this statement Jenner claims an innate gender identity that had been buried in a social and historical context in which to be trans was to be literally unintelligible. Today, after decades of activism and work toward trans visibility, new generations of trans children are now able to be recognized and socially transition from an early age. For example, Jazz Jennings was able to socially transition at the age of five (Jennings 21). Yet, even with this major generational difference, these trans celebrity narratives still frame gender identity as innate and spend a significant amount of space demonstrating how the trans subject in question was “born this way.”

Once a “born this way” statement is made, it is expected the trans subject will offer evidence to back it up. One of the most popular forms of evidence is childhood stories of perceived cross-gendered behavior. For example, Chaz backs up his “born this way” statement with stories of his childhood masculinity and his mother’s distaste for it going as far back as he can remember (Bono 13). Such stories help frame Bono’s male gender identity as innate and manifest in his gender expression from early on in life in a way that is legible for a general audience. In a similar way, Janet Mock also shares stories of cross-gendered expression, like the time she was disciplined as a young child for wearing a dress (17-21). Even as Mock admits growing certain of her gender identity, such stories serve to solidify her girlhood identity from early on in her narrative for the audience, thus establishing this often-contested part of her identity as an important and immutable part of herself.

The performance of such stories is so expected and the question of how a trans person knows they are trans are so ubiquitous that some trans people in the public eye even have specific memories prepared to recall when asked. For instance, when asked in an interview to narrate the first time she realized she may be trans Cox was ready to narrate the following experience from childhood:

I tell a story about third grade. My third-grade teacher called my mom and said, “Your son is going to end up in New Orleans wearing a dress.” Up until that point I just thought I was a girl and that there was no difference girls and boys. I think in my imagination I thought that I would hit puberty and I would start turning into a girl (Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks”).

In sharing this childhood anecdote, Cox presents her female identity as so ingrained in her psychology that she did not even realize others saw her as a boy until confronted with the reality of her assigned gender and adult reactions to her seeming gender nonconformity in the third grade.

In some cases, these signs go further back than a person’s earliest memories. In fact, Jennings goes even further and presents evidence of her female gender identity going back to her time in the womb. Examples of these signs include: the “old-timey” string gender test “nailed it” at her mother’s baby shower just as it had done with all of her older siblings, her mother was convinced from the beginning of her pregnancy she was going to have another girl, and her mother’s surprise when the doctor announced she had a boy (1-3). Such statements and narrative evidence are key to a running theme of essentialization. In this case, essentialization refers to the process of framing an identity as innate, stable, fixed, singular, and possessing shared commonalities across an entire group.

As valid as narratives like Bono's, Jennings', and Jenner's may be, there is a strategic element to the essentialist framing of what it means to be trans. It is generally much easier to combat transphobia with essentialist framings of identity in a culture like the United States where civil rights are won on the basis of stable identity claims. This means there is a strategic interest in essentializing trans identities when constructing a life narrative, hence the aforementioned "born this way" statements, childhood stories, and even stories from the womb. One trans celebrity who makes this form of strategic essentialism and its role in their own narrative process explicitly is writer Janet Mock. On why she says she always knew she was a girl and what that means for her, Mock writes in her memoir:

When I say *I always knew I was a girl* with such certainty, I erase all nuances, the work, the process of self-discovery. I've adapted to saying I knew I was a girl as a defense against the louder world, which told me—ever since I left my mother's body in that pink hospital atop a hill in Honolulu—that my girlhood was imaginary, something made up that needed to be fixed. I wielded this ever-knowing, all-encompassing certainty to protect my identity. I've since sacrificed it in an effort to stand firmly in the murkiness of my shifting self-truths.

I grew to be certain of who I was, but that doesn't mean there wasn't a time when I was learning the world, unsure, unstable, wobbly, living somewhere between confusion, discovery, and conviction. The fact that I admit to being uncertain doesn't discount my womanhood. It adds value to it (16).

In short, Mock uses the phrase *I always knew I was a girl* in part as a protective measure against those who question her womanhood and refute their rebuttals of her gender.

While making such a statement may be accurate to some degree and effective when confronting claims that her womanhood is not real, it does obscure certain experiential nuances and bars honest discussions of uncertainty, questioning, instability, and fluidity that comes with being a gendered social being and a trans-gendered social being

specifically. Thus, Mock openly engages in strategic essentialism when constructing her narrative and acknowledges its limits rather than leave the story at “I was born this way” like many other trans people in the public eye.

The theme of essentialization, consciously strategic or not, often goes hand and hand with the theme of dysphoria in phrases like, “I was born in the wrong body” or “I’m trapped in the wrong body.” This is most evident when Jennings describes herself as “a girl trapped in a boy’s body” (1); or when Bono describes his experiences with dysphoria during adolescence in terms of “going through the wrong puberty” or being “trapped in a female shell” (34); or when Jenner recalls in an interview with TIME magazine how she spent her years as an athlete valiantly trying to distract herself from a nagging sense of dysphoria regarding her gender identity and body (Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner”). In many ways this focus on dysphoria is perfectly understandable. Many trans people do experience some level of dysphoria over their bodies, sometimes even to the point of suicidal thoughts, and there is certainly a need to address and narrate such experiences in healthy ways. It is not my intention to invalidate stories like Bono’s, Jennings’, and Jenner’s or to dismiss the existence of dysphoria. Rather, major issues arise when such stories are taken as *the* master narrative for all trans people to the point where dysphoria becomes *the* defining feature of transness.

First, framing dysphoria as the lynchpin of trans experiences comes with pathologizing and medicalized baggage and no short supply of stigma. Furthermore, some trans people experience little to no dysphoria or understand their bodies in other ways besides the classic “born in the wrong body” trope found in many trans celebrity

narratives. After all, what would being born in the “wrong” or “right” body mean for someone who is nonbinary or genderqueer? Nevertheless, such stories of dysphoria have come to inform the general public’s understanding of what it means to be trans and what is expected of trans subjects in mainstream contexts. This also includes dysphoria’s remedy, the medical transition.

Medical transition, which includes hormone replacement therapies and gender confirmation surgeries, is a major and even life-saving part of many trans people’s narratives, including celebrities. For Bono taking testosterone and undergoing top surgery offered relief from lifelong dysphoria (205-206). In Jennings’ case, taking hormone blockers starting at the age of eleven allowed her to bypass an unwanted puberty altogether (91). Gender confirmation surgery and estrogen replacement therapy have been integral to Mock’s personal experience of womanhood (227). As educational and valid as these firsthand popular accounts and images of medical transition may be, they are limited in terms of representing the diversity of trans experiences. Medical transition is a unique experience for all trans people who decide to medically transition. Some trans people undergo hormone replacement therapy and gender confirmation surgery. Others only transition hormonally or surgically. Some choose not to medically transition at all and others do not have the resources to medically transition. Yet, with very few exceptions, the trans narratives that have become a part of the popular culture all center trans people who do have the resources to transition both hormonally and surgically, have the need to do so, and go through with it. Not only that, but much of the media representations of medical transition are laser focused on “the surgery” and highly

sensationalized with eye-catching headlines like “Trans Chaz Bono Eyes Risky Surgery to Construct Penis” (James). This means experiences of medical transition, or lack therefore, beyond the sensationalized headlines or that do not follow the expected steps from one side of the gender binary to the other are often completely obscured.

Yet some trans people in the public eye are resisting the sensationalized headlines and hyper-focus on genitals. Among the most notable of these voices is actress Laverne Cox, who has declined to discuss the details of her medical transition with the media to shift the conversation away from genitals and surgeries. As Cox explained in response to an interview question from TIME Magazine’s Katy Steinmetz regarding a moment when Cox explained to Katie Couric why focusing on genitalia and surgical interventions when representing trans stories is problematic:

That felt like a moment when things really shifted. I felt really good about it and I remember thinking, *As many people who have been on daytime TV, I’ve never heard someone push back and really talk about the homicide rate in the trans community and talk about the dipropionate discrimination and talk about someone like Islan Nettles, who lost her life just because she was walking down the street while trans. And to shift the narrative away from transition and surgery. But in the community, we’ve been talking about this and frustrated for years* (Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks”).

In short, in pushing back at the media’s tendency to frame trans narratives in terms of transition and medical transformation from one binary sex to the other, Cox is working to set the agenda on her own terms and push the narrative beyond the subject of transition. As important and valid as medical transition is, trans people face so many more pressing issues and experience than medical or even social transition. They face transphobic violence, street harassment, and wide scale discrimination from most sectors of society. All are issues that need to be discussed and addressed. At the same time, trans people have



dreams, failures, successes, loves, and hurts that have nothing to do their transitions, medical or otherwise, just like their cisgender counterparts.

In the end, through all the repetition of these particular themes, it is important recognize that trans people have so many stories to tell beyond the celebrity stories of transition, dysphoria, and essentialization that tend to dominate popular media representations. Furthermore, they also have their own narratives to tell apart from cisgender audiences and have the capability to narrate and theorize on their own experiences for themselves and one another other. It is to these narratives and theories that I now turn.

### *Alternative Narratives*

While historically mainstream representations of trans narratives produced for a general audience have focused on themes of essentialization, dysphoria, and medical transition, trans people have constructed alternative narratives for themselves that play with, subvert, and sometimes even outright challenge these themes. An example of such a narrative can be found in Susan Stryker's creative piece "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." Rather than attempt to normalize herself for a general audience and begin her narrative with an "I was born this way" statement followed by childhood stories of cross-gender expression as evidence, Stryker immediately confronts the at times uncomfortable reality of the medically constructed nature of her transsexual body with the statement, "The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again to a shape other than that in

which it was born” (Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein” 238). In making such a statement Stryker defies some major expectations of trans narratives in choosing to embrace the unnaturalness of transsexual bodily experience rather than normalize or essentialize her trans identity.

Not only does Stryker embrace the medically constructed nature of her body, she also goes so far as to express a deep affinity with the monster from Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*. In her own words, “Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from the human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist” (Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein” 238). Thus, Stryker takes the derogatory and transphobic association that has historically been made between transness and monstrosity, subverts it for her own purposes, and plays with the oftentimes sensationalized representation of trans bodies.

In a similar fashion Kate Bornstein plays with expectations of trans narratives in their now classic work *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. Combining theory with autobiographical elements, Bornstein takes readers into her life narrative from her time living as a heterosexual man who avoided the dilemma of gender as best he could (25) and through their social and medical transition to living as a lesbian only to discover living as a woman didn’t work for them either (16). Finally, we gain insight into their current life living as a gender outlaw, as someone who writes from the perspective of a “used-to-be-man, three-times-husband, father [...] bar mitzvahed, circumcised yuppy

from the East coast” and a “wannabe butch, dyke, phone sex hostess [...] maybe soon to be a grandmother, crystal palming, incense burning, not-man, not always a woman, fast becoming a Marxist” (182). In short, Bornstein’s narrative is one of a person who has traveled throughout the gender spectrum and offers a nonbinary perspective that challenges the idea that all trans narratives must end in a crossing from one side of the gender binary to the other. In Bornstein’s own words, “I know I’m not a man—on that much I’m very clear—and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m probably not a woman either, at least not according to a lot of people’s rules” (10). Such a statement stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned narratives presented in the media in which the focus remains on the crossing, particularly medical crossing, from male to female or from female to male.

Other narratives that challenge expectations of transition as gender-crossing from male to female or female to male, whether in a medical and/or social sense, can be found in Leslie Fienberg’s semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* and nonfiction work *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*. In particular, *Stone Butch Blues* challenges ideas of what it means to be trans and to transition in presenting readers with a protagonist, Jess, who self-identifies as butch, has a long history in femme-butuh spaces, modifies her body with surgery and hormones, passes as a man for years but never identifies as one and ultimately falls somewhere in between genders (Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*). Such a plot raises important questions concerning the boundaries of sex, sexuality, and gender: Is Jess still female? Is Jess a butch lesbian? Is Jess trans? Can Jess be both? What does the fact Jess modifies her body, passes as a man, and then

decides to stop doing so mean for her gender identity? Such questions challenge not only dichotomies of male and female, but also dichotomies of cis and trans, and engages in the simultaneous blurring, queering, and transing of the intersections between sex, gender, and sexuality for the audience.

A similar sort of challenge can also be found in *Transgender Warriors* in which Feinberg engages hir own narrative within the larger trans histories hir theory and research address. Examples of this narrative and historical strategy can be found in Feinberg's discussion of hir own experiences passing as a man alongside stories of other female-assigned people who passed and lived as men in the past (83-89) as well as how ze describes hir own transness as someone who "challenges sex and gender boundaries" (x). Thus, through both novel and history, Feinberg constructs alternative narratives of transness that encompass a vast array of identities and experiences in which boundaries are not always easily defined and being trans and transitioning does not necessarily mean crossing from one side of a binary to another. In doing so Feinberg challenges the dominate trans narrative that has been taken into the broader culture and offers an alternative that is more representative of certain trans experiences that often go unrepresented in the wider cultures conversation.

In offering these alternative narratives beginning in the 1990s, theorists and activists like Feinberg and Bornstein laid the foundations for the new trans politics in which trans people theorized about themselves for themselves. This new trans politics saw the introduction of the word "transgender" as an umbrella term, the bringing together of different groups of gender-variant people, and the construction of a "beyond the

binary” model. As Talia Mae Bettcher says of this broadening umbrella and the new models of trans politics that were constructed under it:

In this way, it was a story that aimed for unity in the face of hostility toward those who were gender nonnormative. The new vision 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 (384).

In short, regardless of the intentions of Feinberg, Bornstein, or any other theorists at the time, the new vision of trans politics they helped develop in its resistance to the gender binary created yet another binary: one between nonbinary trans people and binary trans people. Bornstein recognizes this binary notion of gender in their own work in a forward to the revised 2016 edition of *Gender Outlaw* as they look back on their thought process when the book was first written: “All I knew to express, all those years ago, was in today’s language: BINARY GENDER=BAD; NONBINARY GENDER=GOOD. Of course, that’s not true. It’s a binary notion that’s been targeted by critics of my ideas of gender. In this edition, I’ve done my best to break that binary with a more nuanced analysis” (xvii). This self-reflection on Bornstein’s part highlights how in binary thinking one category tends to be elevated as superior while the other tends to be denigrated as inferior. In the case of the nonbinary/binary gender dichotomy that developed within some trans political circles in the mid-1990s, nonbinary people were often framed as more politically conscious and superior in their resistance to cissexism than their binary counterparts. Trans men and women, on the other hand, were framed as complicit in their own erasure, problematic in their identification with the very gender binary that oppressed them, and, therefore, inferior to their nonbinary counterparts.

This situation left many trans women and men with only two viable narrative options: the “born in the wrong body” narrative with all its gatekeeping and pathologizing implications, or, the narrative of the new trans politics with its suspicion of anyone who identifies within the gender binary, trans or cis. For trans men and women like Talia Me Blettcher, neither the wrong body narrative nor the new trans narrative were particularly satisfying. Specifically, for Blettcher, “Back then, already, I felt deeply suspicious of the wrong-body account. For one thing, I disliked its pathologizing aspects. Yet I also worried about the new. For most of my life I’d felt problematically positioned with respect to the binary. This was a horrible feeling: what made me feel *well* was being recognized as a woman” (384). In other words, neither the narratives available satisfied Blettcher as a trans woman and left her in a state of ambivalence. Out of this ambivalence came a need to construct a more satisfying narrative, one free of the pathologizing elements of the popular “wrong body” narrative and not built on nonbinary/binary dichotomy of the new trans politics. It is this sort of narrative Blettcher presents in her theoretical work, informed by her own life experiences within trans subcultures in Los Angeles (384). In doing so Blettcher offers a kind of alternative to the alternative and opens up theoretical space for others who share her ambivalence regarding the “wrong body” narrative and the narrative of the new trans politics as presented by theorists like Bornstein and Feinberg since the mid-1990s.

In the end, it is important to acknowledge no one narrative will satisfy all trans people or exhaust or define all trans experiences, not even narratives constructed by trans people for trans people. For instance, some may find empowerment in Stryker’s portrayal

of trans monstrosity while others may find such images to be anything but empowering. Some may find the resistance to the gender binary as presented in the theories and narratives of Bornstein and Fienberg to be a refreshing alternative to the rigidness of the “born this way”/“wrong body” narrative of popular representations while others, like Blettcher, may experience ambivalence. Others still may find the “born this way” plot as seen throughout popular culture to be representative of their experiences and a valuable tool for gaining acceptance while others may not. Ultimately, these seeming tensions within trans communities and narratives speak to the diversity of trans experiences, identities, and narratives.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### *Oral History*

Being situated in the (inter)discipline of Women's and Gender Studies, this project employs a combination of qualitative narrative, analytical, and interviewing methods with the primary method being oral history. The Oral History Association defines oral history as "a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events" (The Oral History Association). Generally, oral history methods involve a semi-structured interviewing process in which the interviewer asks the narrator open-ended questions concerning pertinent historical events in which they were involved or about their past experiences more broadly. In turn, guided by the interviewer's open-ended questions, the narrator shares their personal narrative and knowledge of past events. In this way, the oral history interview is a collaborative process between interviewer and narrator in which the voice and subjectivity of the narrator is centered.

Given this emphasis on collaboration between interviewer and narrator and the centrality of the voices and experiences of the narrator, it is not surprising feminists have employed oral history methods in recent decades for the purposes of bringing the experiences and histories of women to light. Examples of feminist applications of oral history can be found in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai's *Women's Voices: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. Gluck and Patai present various ways feminists have used oral history methods to listen to and highlight the voices of a diversity of women



activists and document their persistence and organizing for women in the United States in the later half of the twentieth century (1-4).

At the same time, queer theorists have also utilized oral history methods to record the histories and experiences of gender and sexual minorities. Examples of the application of oral history methods within queer scholarship can be found in Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez's *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*. Boyd and Ramírez offer scholarly insights into the methods and concerns that shape lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer oral histories through a collection of essays by queer oral historians in which they address their methods (1-2). This project builds on these feminist and queer methods in oral history through the application of oral history techniques to the gathering of trans narratives and the exploration of trans identities, self-understandings, and narrative constructions.

### *Participants*

Seven participants shared their life narratives in this study. To participate in the study participants needed to be eighteen years of age or older and identify as trans, defined for the purposes of this study as an umbrella term referring to anyone whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The self-described gender identities of the participants included trans woman and trans man as well as nonbinary, genderqueer, demigender/demi-boy, and multigender. In this way, the participants were generally well-positioned to reveal narratives beyond the standard and highly binary "born this way" narrative. Specifically, they offer insights into the experiences of nonbinary people and of trans men and women who may not fit the expected profile.

As for assigned sex, five were assigned female at birth and two were assigned male at birth. As a consequence, the narratives they tell are limited in terms of exploring the experiences of trans people who were assigned male at birth. At the same time, however, they offer much needed insights into the experiences of transmasculine and nonbinary people who have historically been underrepresented in academic research.

In terms of sexuality, participants self-identified with a range of terms under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, including queer, bisexual, pansexual, demisexual, and lesbian. Thus, their narratives serve to further challenge the terms of heterosexuality trans people and their narratives have historically been held to and to shed light on the experiences of trans people who are not heterosexual. This is especially true when it comes to the sexual identities of nonbinary people whose sexualities tend to go unnamed and undefined.

Beyond matters of gender, assigned sex, and sexual identity, participants self-reported other demographic information such as race, ethnicity, education level, age, disability status, etc. This allowed for a more comprehensive view of their experiences not only as trans people, but as people who hold multiple intersecting identities. Specifically, along with being trans and falling somewhere under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, four of the seven participants identified themselves as members of the disabled and/or neurodiverse community. All had completed at least some form of education after high school. Their ages ranged from 19 to 67 with four of the seven participants being in their late teens or early twenties at the time of the interview. In terms of race and ethnicity, one was Black and six were white with one describing their ethnicity as Jewish. For more details on the demographics of the participants, please consult Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Participant	Assigned Sex	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Age	Race	Region	D/N*	Education	Household	
									Income	Size
Aidan	Female	Trans man	Bisexual	29	White	Upper Midwest	Yes	Some college	\$20,000-\$25,000 per year	2
Alex	Female	Trans man	Queer	19	White	Upper Midwest	No	Pursuing BA	Not specified	4
Elliot	Female	Demigender Demiboy Trans man	Demi-sexual	20	White	Upper Midwest	No	BA	\$18,000-\$19,000 per year	1
Evelyn	Male	Trans woman	Lesbian	67	White	Upper Midwest	No	2 years of college	\$12,000 per year (retired)	2
Ray	Female	Genderqueer	Queer Pansexual	22	White	Upper Midwest	Yes	AA Pursuing BA	Not specified	3
Reign	Female	Nonbinary	Pansexual Bi plus	19	White	Upper Midwest	Yes	Pursuing BA	\$100,000 or above	6 (M)** 4 (F)***
Zola	Male	Multigender Trans woman Genderqueer	Pansexual	43	Black	Upper Midwest	Yes	One month short of BA	Not specified	3

\* Disabled/Neurodivergent

\*\* Mother's household

\*\*\* Father's household

Given the small sample size and demographic makeup of the participants, this study is limited in terms of exploring the experiences of trans people of color as well as those who have not received some form of higher education and are not of traditional college age. However, the narratives shared in the process of this study can act as a starting point for better understanding the experiences of those who do not fit the typical profile of the neurotypical, able-bodied, heterosexual trans woman or man audiences are used to seeing represented in media.

### *Procedure*

Potential participants were initially brought to the attention of the researcher through mutual contacts in support, academic, and activist networks in northern Iowa as well as central and southeastern Minnesota with the only requirements being that they

identify as trans and are eighteen years of age or older. In each case potential participants were initially contacted via text or e-mail. In this initial contact participants were made aware of the purpose and topic of the study as well as the time commitment and procedure involved should they decide to participate. All potential participants were also provided with a copy of the informed consent form to consult for more detailed information. Once a potential participant indicated their willingness to participate arrangements for the interview were made.

For the sake privacy and ease of communication and recording, all interviews took place in a semi-private space such as a room reserved in a university or public library. The length of the interviews ranged forty-five minutes to two hours with the majority lasting approximately one hour. Each interview was recorded with the informed consent of the participant and began with a debriefing of the informed consent form, outlining the purpose of the study, what to expect from the procedure, and their rights as research participants. All participants were reminded of their right to decline their participation at any time and to decline answering any questions they did not wish to answer before any interview questions were asked.

Along with a series of basic demographic questions regarding race, sexual identity, age, etc., each participant was asked a series of experiential questions regarding their gender identity and expression such as: How would you describe your gender identity? When do you first remember being aware of your gender identity? If you experience gender euphoria, what have those experiences been like? What makes you happiest in your gender identity and expression? These questions served to guide the

participant in narrating their story and to give them an opportunity to explore various aspects of different trans experiences they may not have been asked to consider before such as gender euphoria.

Given the central questions of this study also deal with trans media representation and its effects on narrative processes, in addition to more personal experiential questions, participants were also asked about their views on trans representation. These questions included questions such as: What is your take on trans media representation? Are there any trans figures in the media who have informed your own journey? Are there any trans stories or parts of trans stories you feel are missing from the cultural conversation? If you were charge of trans representation, what kinds of stories would you want to make sure are out there? These questions served to give participants an opportunity to share their experiences with media representation as well as their thought on how trans media representation can be improved.

After the interview each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy and the interview was transcribed for the purposes of analysis. Over the course of transcription measures were taken to protect participants' privacy and the confidentiality of their personal information. All transcripts were encrypted with passwords. Potentially identifying information that was not necessary to the study (i.e. birth names and names of specific towns where participants live or have lived) were redacted. All potentially identifying information that was necessary to the study (i.e. gender identity, sexual identity, race, age, etc.) were recorded on note cards as opposed to electronically and only mentioned when relevant to the subject of study at hand.

### *Narrative Analysis*

Narrative analysis methods cut across disciplines and have seen a resurgence in popularity in fields ranging from literary criticism, folklore, and anthropology to psychology, sociology, and communication studies. In fact, it can be said researchers have taken a “narrative turn” when seeking to document and understand the discursive complexity of accounts (Holstein and Gubrium 1). Given the interdisciplinary nature of narrative analysis methods, it is not surprising there is no one method of narrative analysis since each discipline brings its own assumptions and commitments to the enterprise. Some scholars take a thematic approach to narrative analysis, centering their focus on the content of the narratives they analyze with an eye for major categories or “themes” (Reisman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* 53). According to sociologist and influential narrative analyst Catherine Kohler Riesman, this sort of thematic approach is “probably the most common method of narrative analysis” and has proven to be appealing in applied settings with prime examples to be found in the fields of nursing and health occupations (Reisman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* 53). Others, like Riessman in her research on divorce, focus on how narratives are constructed, paying close attention to the poetic structures of speech and highlighting the ways narrators organize their talk into lines and stanzas to form a meaningful and coherent narrative for the audience (Reisman, *Narrative Analysis* 43-50). Others still engage questions of how narrativity operates in and relates to the social environment, emphasizing the interplay between society and storyteller, content and process (Holstein

and Gubrium 8). Each of these various methods offer their own strengths and challenges for understanding narrative content, structure, and relationality.

Just as there is no one method of narrative analysis, there is also no one definition of narrative itself among researchers. Some scholars define narratives as topical stories about a particular event or specific character while others define narratives “as extended speech acts about substantial or compelling aspects of life—relationships, work, illness, trauma, or conflict, for example” (Holstein and Gubrium 1). For example, in the case of this project, narrators engage in extended speech acts about their gender identities as trans people, speech that then compromises a personal narrative. In the end, the definitions and methods a researcher chooses is always informed by the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, worldview, social position and context. For instance, there is my own social position as an intersectional queer nonbinary trans feminist conducting research in the post-modern era, an era that has followed a succession of major social movements, including the trans liberation movement. These theoretical interests and concerns inevitably inform the methods I engage in over the course of this project at an analytical level. This includes everything from the questions I pose to the theorists whose ideas I bring to the texts at hand. Then there is the influence of civil rights movements on narrative analysis on how researchers engage in narrative analysis.

In addition to a resurgence in popularity and an expansion in variety, narrative analysis methods have also seen the influence of liberation movements in recent decades. The civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, have played an important role in bringing attention to the experiences of those who have

traditionally been on the margins of narrative research both as researchers and as subjects, namely people of color and women. For instance:

Feminist scholars, in particular, have resisted the idea that personal narratives were merely informational. They instead became interested in subjects as active agents, exploring subjective meanings formally silent or unrecognized, opening new windows into historical, cultural, personal, and social processes (Holstein and Gubrium 2).

In other words, feminist interest in narrativity is not only for the sake of information, but also encompasses who is forming said information as active agents. It is out of an interest in human subjectivity as well as social liberation that feminists have brought attention to previously unexamined elements of human social and personal life. It is this feminist tradition this project aims to expand in bringing attention to the voices of trans people through an analysis of the interplay between media individual trans people as they construct their own narratives.

With an understanding of the importance of the interplay between society and individual narrators, I engage in textual analysis of various texts that feature trans narratives that are representative of the ways such stories tend to be presented in the United States. The first set of texts will include narratives in the trans celebrity genre, including the autobiographical works such as Chaz Bono's *Transition: The Story of How I Became a Man*, Jazz Jennings' *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen*, and Janet Mock's *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More*. Along with these autobiographical works, I also include entertainment news articles such as *Time Magazine* writer Katy Steinmetz's article on Caitlyn Jenner entitled "Person of the Year Short List No.7: Caitlyn Jenner" and interview with Laverne Cox



entitled “Laverne Talks to TIME About the Transgender Movement”. While these texts represent popular culture and are not scholarly, their inclusion is justified due to the insights they offer into how trans narratives are constructed for a general audience and the influence such representations have on cultural understandings of what it means to be trans. Furthermore, these celebrity trans narratives also offer useful insights into how trans people construct their narratives when compared alongside non-celebrity trans narratives. For this reason, the narrative analysis in this study is comparative, with the data from these celebrity narratives and non-celebrity narratives organized side-by-side in a data table. For the complete data table please turn to Appendix E.

Along with these more mainstream texts, I analyze alternative narratives, which are compared to the oral history interviews and stories from the trans celebrity genre. These texts include Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw: On Men Women and the Rest of Us*, Leslie Fienberg’s novels *Stone Butch Blues* and *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*, and Susan Stryker’s *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*. The inclusion of these texts is justified in how each presents a trans narrative beyond the trans celebrity genre as well as alternative ways of telling trans stories that in some way play with, subvert, challenge, and/or deconstruct our expectations of trans narratives. In doing so, they offer a useful comparison to the trans celebrity stories that tend to dominate the media landscape. Furthermore, beyond their narrative elements, Stryker’s creative work on trans monstrosity, Bornstein’s figure of the gender outlaw, and Fienberg’s theories on trans

history offer useful theoretical concepts for understanding and approaching trans narratives that may or may not fulfill societal expectations.

The analysis of these texts and interviews is also enriched by the incorporation of scholarship on trans narratives, historical “trans” narratives, trans history in the United States, oral history, and narrative theory and methods. Examples of scholarly texts on trans history in the United States include Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History* and Susan Reis’ “Transgender Identity at the Crossroads: A Close Reading of a ‘Queer’ Story from 1857.” In *Transgender History*, Stryker covers transgender history in the United States with a primary focus on the mid-to-late twentieth century and in “Transgender Identity at the Crossroads” Reis analyzes the anonymously written 1857 short story “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman.” Then there are also primary sources of historical “trans” narratives such as the press coverage of Christine Jorgensen’s medical transition in the 1950s (White). While one must be careful not to impose contemporary understandings of gender identity onto the past, the inclusion of scholarship on trans history and historical “trans” narratives like the aforementioned works serve to contextualize the more contemporary narratives at hand and trace the development of cultural expectations of trans people who share their stories in the present.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

*“Caitlyn Jenner’s Fine, But...”: Introducing Trans Narratives Beyond the Celebrities and Themes of Essentialization, Dysphoria, and Binary Medical Transition*

In this chapter I engage in a thematic analysis of the narratives participants shared over the course of the current study and put their voices in conversation with those portrayed in popular media representations of trans people in order to better understand trans narratives beyond the expected “born this way” plot. To this end, in the following analysis I pay particular attention to how the major themes within the narrated experiences of the participants differ from the expected trans narrative as represented most predominately in the stories of trans celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner.

Ultimately, while there were some commonalities between the narrated experiences of participants and those represented in popular media, mainly where the presence of gender dysphoria was concerned, there were also some major differences. Some participants even highlighted these differences directly when asked for their thoughts on trans media representation. In the words of one participant, “There’s not a lot of [visibility for] people that don’t have that luxury of getting surgery. Like, there’s a lot of exposure to Caitlyn Jenner, which is fine. She’s a valid trans person. That’s perfectly fine. But I also wanna see people who go through the same thing I do” (Elliot). In other words, people who do not have the resources to medically transition, are not well-known, and whose stories demonstrate their intersectionality rather than more stories that center those with privilege.

In contrast to the stories of essentialization, dysphoria, and binary medical transition as seen in popular media representations, participants also had stories regarding the fluidity of identities, gender euphoria, medical and social transition beyond the gender binary as well as the intersectionality of identities and experiences. In addition, participants also shared their own visions for the future of trans representation and the kinds of trans narratives they would like to see represented in the cultural conversation. It is to these narratives and their overarching themes I now turn, starting with the major themes: Fluidity of Identities, Use of Online Resources, Gender Euphoria, Gender Transitions Beyond the Binary, and Intersectionality, and ending with a discussion on the sorts of narratives participants wish to see represented in the wider cultural conversation.

*“You’re Full of Phases”: The Fluidity of Identities in the Narrated Experiences of Trans People*

Consuming the narratives of trans children and teens like Jazz Jennings, one may come away with the impression that all trans people somehow know their gender identity instinctually from birth, show signs of this identity from an early age, and wish to socially transition either from either male to female or from female to male. One might even expect younger participants in this study to tell narratives similar to that of Jennings, starting with a clear “born this way” statement followed by early signs of their transness and an early social transition (Jennings 1-29). It is true narratives of early social transitions like the one Jennings tells in her memoir have been made possible due to how recent increases in trans visibility and resources have empowered some individuals to come out at younger and younger ages. However, even with this increase in trans

visibility and resources, not all participants, including those of younger generations, in this study have stories of an early coming out and social transition to tell.

First, unlike Jennings, Ray does not begin their narrative with an early social transition. Rather they begin their narrative with a lack of language for their gender. As

Ray recalls:

So, I'm AFAB, assigned female at birth. As a child I was very much in opposition with this fact so I would often say I was a boy, because I only knew of the two binary genders, or I would say I was an animal or a mythical creature or a robot or something sci-fi, but I didn't really have gender, at least not in the way that people were thinking of it. It was sort of like my substitution for nonbinary identities (Ray).

Thus, Ray remembers being aware of their gender identity as a child, at least on some level, despite not having the language for it, and expressing this awareness through the limited means they had as a child. Also, in recalling they would say they were a robot Ray echoes Donna Haraway's theories on non-human identification as developed in her seminal work *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway). Given the lack of nonbinary representation and language within society at large, it is not surprising Ray did not socially transition at an early age like Jennings. In fact, due to a lack of information regarding what it means to be nonbinary, Ray did not come out to themselves as genderqueer until they were in community college after they heard another genderqueer person speak at a conference and connected with their experiences and definition of being genderqueer (Ray). It was only then that Ray began to tap into the resources of the internet to learn more about their gender identity and what it might mean for them going forward (Ray). As such, Ray's narrative speaks to how nonbinary people may become aware of their gender identities in

a world that insists on gender binarism and troubles the idea that *all* trans people are now coming out at younger ages.

Much like Ray, Elliot, a demigender (demigender in this case referring to someone who identifies partially as a certain gender) trans man, describes growing up not knowing what it means to be trans. As Elliot tells it, “As I said in the beginning, I was born female. I wasn’t really told there was this option. That once you’re born this way, you’re born this way” (Elliot). In other words, the only messages Elliot received regarding gender identity while growing up were gender is a fixed category and transition is an impossibility. Located in a small town in Iowa, there were few examples to challenge these messages and the few examples of open LGBTQ+ life that existed in the area were not encouraging to say the least. As Elliot recalls:

There were a few people who were out in my hometown, but the biggest thing is they were bullied for it and I didn’t want that. Like, we went on a high school trip and as we came back the people who were openly part of the LGBT community had their tires slashed. The openly transgender man in my grade, like I grew up with him as well, his deadname—which is the name you were assigned at birth and you no longer go by it—it was plastered all over his windows and so were pictures of genitalia. So, that did not give me confidence to come out so that’s why I waited until I came here [to college] to be more secure in my identity (Elliot).

In this way, despite there being at least some openly LGBTQ+ individuals in the school, including one trans man his age, Elliot’s experiences growing up of bullying and a lack of education on gender identity resemble more the experiences of older trans people who grew up not having the benefits of representation than younger trans people like Jennings who were able to name their identities and socially transition at an early age. Much like Bono and Jenner and other trans elders, Elliot spent most of his years growing up without

an understanding of what it means to be trans, could not articulate his identity as a consequence, and suffered bullying that forced him deeper into the closet (Elliot). Given all of this, it is not surprising Elliot did not come out, even to himself, until moving away to attend college (Elliot). Such experiences speak to the fact that not all young trans people have the benefit of an early social transition and the work that remains to be done to make society a safer place for trans people to live their lives openly.

Yet, as seen earlier in Ray's narrative, a lack of language and understanding of what it means to be trans does not necessarily mean a lack of awareness of one's gender identity, at least on some level. Despite experiencing bullying and a lack of trans representation and language, Elliot also recalls displaying signs of his transness from an early age. Examples of these early signs from childhood include refusing to wear dresses, expressing disinterest in "girl toys," and taking on male roles while engaging in games of pretend with other children at daycare (Elliot). In this respect Elliot's story most closely resembles Bono's, specifically in how both were perceived as tomboys during their childhoods and had some sense of being different from those around them from early on in their lives.

Here it must be acknowledged, while some participants, like Ray and Elliot, did recall having some level of awareness of their gender identity and displaying signs of their transness from an early age, others did not recall knowing their transness or displaying signs of their gender identity until much later. Yet, none of these participants saw this as an indication they are any less trans than those who did. As Reign put it, "I didn't know when I was three years old, four years old, five years old, ten years old, but

that doesn't make me any less trans" (Reign). Given how definitions of what it means to be trans are expanding to include people like Reign and how many in the trans community are expressing more fluid identities that may or may not present in early childhood, such narratives are important to recognize.

For some participants the process of becoming aware of their gender identity was one of adolescent experimentation. Such was the case for Aidan, who grew up having a typical gender expression for his assigned gender and did not realize his gender identity until high school. As Aidan recalls:

Growing up I didn't really—I had only really started presenting differently, like, in high school, but growing up I was I guess you would consider a girly girl, I guess. Like, maybe that's just how I felt I should have been presenting and at the time I didn't quite question it. [...] I don't know. Something had clicked in high school and I'm not entirely sure. I just suddenly started feeling weird presenting as female and questioning myself and the way I looked and I know getting into high school I was experimenting with different ways of presenting myself. I definitely had a punk goth phase. I was buying all my clothes from Hot Topic. I had the big combat boots and the fingerless gloves and black everything and all that and, like—I don't know. Something just clicked (Aidan).

Thus, for Aidan, his identity as a trans man was one he came to through a process of teenage experimentation rather than an aspect of himself he knew and expressed from an early age. Considering adolescence tends to be a time of experimentation and self-discovery for many, cis and trans alike, it is not surprising many trans people come into awareness of their gender during this time.

Much like Aidan, rather than beginning his narrative with a typical "born this way" statement and stories of gender variance, Alex also recalls first becoming aware of his gender identity as a queer trans man in his early teens. As Alex tells it:



I had boyfriends growing up in kindergarten and preschool and I was just very infatuated with boys. And so, then I think I saw the musical *Newsies*. [...] And then I asked my parents if we could go, 'cause I had seen the 1999 film. So, I asked my parents if we could go to New York for our summer vacation, because we decided we were gonna take a family vacation, and they said yes. So, I saw *Newsies* and I was, I think fourteen the first time I saw it live—fourteen, fifteen—and I had just finished the eighth grade. I think I remember that. And after seeing *Newsies* I didn't know if I wanted to be those boys or marry those boys. [...] And so, it was like, "Oh." So, I remember talking to my therapist, 'cause I'd been seeing a therapist since I was like twelve—end of sixth grade—and I told him, I said, "I don't know. I think I'm attracted to boys as a boy." And he was like, "Mmm. That's interesting." But he didn't wanna label me until I had really come to terms with what I was thinking so he gently led me on a course of self-discovery where I ended up, "Oh, like, I'm not straight. And I am definitely not cisgender." So, I think *Newsies* was it (Alex).

Thus, for Alex coming into awareness of his gender identity, and by extension his sexuality, was a process rather than something he simply had and expressed from his earliest memories. In choosing to begin his narrative this way, Alex presents a challenge to the typical "born this way" narrative and the idea that all trans people must be aware of their gender identity from their earliest memories to be taken seriously. In doing so he leaves room for discussing the process of moving through different phases of identity some trans people experience, particularly during the early stages of coming out to themselves.

In Alex's case, before coming out as a "female-to-male trans man," he self-identified as a butch lesbian and then as a genderqueer/gender fluid person (Alex). In some ways, this is not unusual. Bono, for instance, at one point in his life self-identified as a butch lesbian (Bono 113) and other participants in this study had also gone through multiple self-identifications by the time of the interview (Aidan, Elliott, Ray). For example, Ray also self-identified as a butch lesbian before learning about what it means

to be genderqueer (Ray). Yet Alex's narrative does divert from Bono's and the narratives of other trans men who spent time in lesbian circles in how the phases of self-identification Alex went through included identity options beyond man and woman such as genderqueer and gender fluid. He is also not alone in this experience.

In addition to self-identifying as a butch lesbian, Aidan also went through a period of identifying as a gender fluid (Aidan). Furthermore, Elliot also described identifying exclusively as nonbinary for a time before settling on describing himself as a trans man, demigender, or demi-boy—a term used to describe someone who identifies partly as male or masculine with, to use Elliot's phrasing, a "point toward nonbinary" (Elliot). Such experiences speak to how namable gender possibilities have increased over the past several decades and may not be an uncommon experience for today's young trans people. Furthermore, it may also speak to an increased recognition of the potential fluidity of identities in a postmodern context. However, even with this expansion of gender possibilities and increased recognition of the fluidity of identities, the cultural belief in fixed identities remains strong.

The continual strength of the cultural belief in fixed identities can be seen in how others responded to Alex's coming out as multiple identities over time. For example, when Alex came out to his parents as a trans man their reaction was dismissive, saying, "You're full of phases" (Alex). To them Alex's coming out as a trans man seemed to be just another phase—passing, unstable, unfixed, and, therefore, not worth taking seriously or respecting. Such a reaction speaks to the cultural belief in fixed identities, or in the essentialized, unchanging "true self" to use Mason-Schrock's terminology (177), that is

widely held within predominately individualistic cultures like the United States. While this belief in fixed identities and the existence of a “true self” may offer a great deal of meaning and comfort to many in these societies and has even offered many trans people validation and protection, it has also been a source of dismissal for those whose experiences of identity and the gendered self do not always fit neatly into in a fixed, essentialized narrative of gender identity. Such dismissals can have serious consequences in a society where civil rights claims are won by fixed, immutable identity claims. For this reason, theories that validate the fluidity of identities and expand narratives regarding trans origins beyond the “born this way” trope are needed to counter such dismissals. Furthermore, given the growing prevalence of online platforms as settings of self-discovery, these theories are also need to account for the role online spaces play in the community-building and self-discovery processes of many trans people.

*“Twitter and Tumblr Are Your Friends”: The Role of Online Platforms in the Gendered Self-Discovery Narratives of Young Trans People in the Early Twenty-First Century*

In the years since trans celebrities Chaz Bono, Laverne Cox, and Caitlyn Jenner came of age the invention of the internet has opened up new kinds of spaces where trans people can find each other, share information, support one another, and form communities. As Cox observed in an interview when asked for her thoughts on how it is different for trans children today versus when she was growing up, “There’s just so many resources out there now that it makes you feel like you’re less alone and gives some sense of, ‘*Okay, this is who I am and this is what I’m going through,*’ as opposed to ‘*What the f\*\*\* is wrong with me?*’ That was what I grew up with” (Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks”). In

other words, today's young trans people have the benefit of decades of trans activism and visibility as well as access to resources Cox and those of her generation never had, including online resources. In fact, some trans people today may first discover their gender identities in online spaces as much as offline spaces.

For several of the participants in this study, online resources featured prominently in their gendered self-discovery narratives. In fact, when asked what advice they would give someone who is exploring their gender identity, the first piece of advice Ray gave was access trans online spaces, saying:

Tumblr and Twitter are your friends. YouTube is your friend. There are a lot of trans advice blogs, for instance, on Tumblr. On Twitter you can kind of do the same thing by looking at, say, Jeffery Marsh's Tweets of positivity and being yourself. On YouTube there's a giant trans community telling their stories. There's great podcasts telling their stories. So, just sort of finding yourself in all these different places I think is really helpful. Just seeing that you're not alone (Ray).

This advice came directly out of Ray's experiences of coming to understand their own gender identity through exploring trans, and specifically genderqueer, online spaces hosted on platforms like Twitter and Tumblr and seeing themselves in others they met in those spaces. One person Ray cited as especially influential in their gender exploration and self-discovery process was Jeffery Marsh, a genderqueer social media personality whose YouTube videos and Tweets were among the first Ray turned to after becoming aware of the meaning of the word genderqueer (Ray). While such interactions with an individual's social media content are one-sided, simply seeing a person like one's self represented online can go a long way in making a person feel less alone and be a kind of education in gender identity in and of itself.

The value of online resources and relationships is also an important point in Alex's narrative as well. One person who did a great deal to help Alex understand his gender identity and what it means for him was an online friend he met on Tumblr. As Alex recalls:

I remember talking to someone online through Tumblr and that's how we had met and we just connected instantly and she was the first person I came out to and we ended up having this online relationship and she helped me find my name and she helped me figure out more terminology and that was December of that year, so December 2014 into January, February 2015. And it was a very secret relationship that my friends knew about but no else 'cause, like, whose gonna believe that an online relationship could have value? And she was like, "Oh, what pronouns do you want me to use?" And like, "How can I support you?" And so, she used my name as much as she could to make me feel like it fit me and she helped me realize that it did. And so, having that connection was really pivotal for my understanding what names I liked and what names I didn't like, pronouns (Alex).

In short, Alex's experience of finding a friend on Tumblr shows how such relationships can be a source of support for those who are questioning their gender identity. More specifically, Alex's experiences also demonstrate the value of online relationships to the process of learning about one's gender identity and what works and what does not work. Relationships like the one Alex describes are likely to become more prominent within trans communities as online spaces expand over time and should not be overlooked, especially when they play an important role in how some trans people come to understand their gender identities.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge the importance of online resources is not confined to those who are now of traditional college-age or younger. For instance, Zola (age forty-three) also discovered new terminology to describe her gender identity, such as genderqueer, during the early days of public internet access in the 1990s and

spoke to the importance of online resources and communities. In her own words, “The internet’s been great for us. It has allowed us to communicate in ways we wouldn’t be able to through snail mail. It’s also an interesting place where a lot of cattiness takes place, but I’m glad that people are able to communicate. The internet’s been great. It helps a lot” (Zola). Thus, it is important to keep in mind that online resources for trans people, including genderqueer people, are not new in the relatively short history of the internet and may play a part in the self-discovery narratives and community building of those who do not fit the expected profile of the teenager or young adult browsing Tumblr in the mid-to-late 2010s.

In the end, as seen in narratives shared in this study, some trans narratives may include online relationships and resources, especially when it comes to process of self-discovery. At the same time, one can also see not all trans narratives begin with an unequivocal “born this way” statement and may involve the trying on of different identities both offline and online. Not only may some trans narrative defy the expectations and conventions of the expected “born this way” plot and take place in online spaces as well as offline. Some trans narratives may even break with expectations regarding experiences of dysphoria and medical transition.

*“What Makes Me Trans is the Euphoria and How I Identify”: Trans People’s Narrated Experiences of Gender Euphoria and the Meaning of Transness*

Gender euphoria, the feeling of extraordinary happiness many trans people experience when their gender is affirmed or in alignment with how they perceive themselves, is generally not discussed directly in popular trans narratives. Yet the term

gender euphoria is currently gaining traction within some trans communities and the concept can also be found in a few popular media narratives. For example, in her memoir Jennings remembers experiencing gender euphoria when she officially came out as a girl to her community at her fifth birthday party, describing it as “the happiest day of the first five years of my life” (29). In addition, Bono remembers feeling gender euphoria when he began testosterone replacement therapy as part of his medical transition, describing the “incredible happiness” he felt at the beginning of the process as “the most significant change” he experienced as a result of the hormone (197). Although Jennings and Bono do not use the term gender euphoria itself, these experiences do fall under the definition of gender euphoria in the sense that these experiences involve feelings of extraordinary happiness when the trans-person-in-question’s gender was being affirmed or aligned with their self-perception.

Among the participants in this study, gender euphoria also appeared as a theme in their narrated experiences. Each of them had stories of gender euphoria to tell. For example, one participant recalled how they couldn’t stop smiling to themselves when they first saw their name on their student ID (Ray). Similarly, another recalled seeing the correct name on their nametag for a journalistic conference as well as the first time they wore a binder (Reign). For one participant the experience of witnessing the changes in her body during in the beginning stages of hormone therapy brought a great sense of happiness (Zola). Another described the happiness he felt when he went into the men’s restroom and, for the first time, no one told him he was in the wrong place (Alex). On the other end of the spectrum, another participant described the sense of happiness she felt

when she could start shopping for clothes in the women's section without comments from store employees or other patrons (Evelyn). On a similar note, another spoke of the moment when he first realized how good he looked in flannel (Elliot) and another participant described the feeling he had when those around him started assuming his gender correctly (Aidan). While all participants did describe experiences of gender euphoria, these experiences were more prominent for some than for others. For some gender euphoria featured in their narrative only briefly. This was the case for Elliot, whose stories of gender euphoria mainly revolve around clothes and being grateful for his ability to hide his small chest with relative ease (Elliot). Thus, gender euphoria is not a prominent theme in Elliot's narrative. However, this is not the case for everyone.

For others, gender euphoria is a major part of their narrative. In fact, Ray even went so far as to cite gender euphoria as a defining feature of their transness. In their own words, "What makes me trans is the euphoria and how I identify. It isn't just determined by the bad stuff" (Ray). In other words, in Ray's view, they are trans because of their experiences of gender euphoria and the fact that they self-identify as such, not because of their experiences of dysphoria. For Ray, personally, gender euphoria sounds like people calling them by their chosen name and pronouns, looks like their flat chest under a properly sized binder, and feels like when they talk about their gender honestly with others (Ray). It is these experiences of extreme happiness in bringing their gender into alignment with their presentation that are most defining for Ray's transness and are foregrounded just as much if not more in their narrative than experiences of dysphoria. In choosing to tell their narrative in this way Ray resists the idea that transness must be



defined by dysphoria and frames the meaning of transness in more positive experiences. This is arguably a more hopeful and positive outlook on what it means to be trans than what is presented in popular media representations in which transness is made out to be synonymous with dysphoria.

In many ways Ray's statements on gender euphoria and the meaning of transness can be seen as a response to a conversation that is currently taking place within many trans communities regarding dysphoria and what it means to be trans. Reign refers to this conversation specifically in our interview, saying, "And there's this debate right now as to whether you have to have dysphoria to be trans and you don't. You don't have to have dysphoria to be trans, but there is this very one-dimensional view of what transgender is and to expand that would be freeing" (Reign). In this way, Reign calls for an expansion of what it means to be trans beyond experiences of dysphoria and comes down on the side of arguing one does not need to experience dysphoria at any point in time to be trans. Such an expansion would be wide enough to include not only trans people who experience little to no dysphoria, but also those who are at a point in their transitions where they no longer experience dysphoria.

However, not all participants shared Ray and Reign's views concerning gender euphoria, dysphoria, and the meaning of transness. For example, at one point in our interview Alex expressed the view that a person needs to experience some form of dysphoria in order to be trans, but only because he did not know how a person could realize they are trans otherwise (Alex). Thus, for Alex, dysphoria is a more defining feature of his transness than gender euphoria and is, by extension, more prominent in his

narrative. Yet, once again, as Ray's take on transness and gender euphoria indicates, this is not the case for everyone.

One possible answer to Alex's question regarding how trans people who experience little to no dysphoria come know their transness can be found in Aidan's recollections on how he came to realize his identity as a trans man during high school. As Aidan recalls:

So, usually in discussions of transness they talk about how we have to stop assuming that you have to have dysphoria in order to be transgender and the opposite phenomenon there would be gender euphoria where you don't have to have dysphoria, but when you present a certain way you realize, like, "Oh, this actually feels right. You call me male or consider me male I feel like I'm realizing that feels good" (Aidan).

In other words, in Aidan's view, there is a need to stop assuming every trans person feels dysphoria or needs to feel dysphoria in order to be trans. Not only does Aidan argue against assuming every trans person experiences dysphoria and the notion that dysphoria is definitional to transness. He even goes so far as to suggest gender euphoria is just as a valid a way to know one's transness as gender dysphoria. In fact, Aidan himself first discovered his own gender identity through experiences of gender euphoria he had while experimenting with masculinity in high school. As he recalls, "It started with the gender euphoria where it was like, 'People are assuming I'm male in some spaces and I have this masculine presentation and that makes me feel good.'" (Aidan). In other words, he started to question and realize his gender identity as a man through noticing what made him happiest in his gender and how others perceived him, which in his case was presenting and being perceived as male.

Interestingly, it wasn't until later that Aidan began experiencing dysphoria. As Aidan tells it, "It was only after settling into wearing men's clothing and cutting all my hair off and everything, like, after that it was the dysphoria, where it was like, 'I'm not presenting enough. People are still thinking that I'm female or they're confused and everything.'" (Aidan). Thus, for Aidan, coming out to himself as trans was a process of experimenting with masculinity, finding being perceived as a man felt right for him, and then experiencing discomfort, a feeling of "not presenting enough," a need to go further the longer he presented as a man. In this way, many trans people may come to realize their gender through a combination of gender euphoria and dysphoria, if not primarily through gender euphoria.

Discovering one's gender identity primarily through experiences of gender euphoria may also be a path to self-discovery for trans people who experience little to no dysphoria. An example of such experiences can be found in nonbinary Youtuber Milo Stewart's account of their experiences of gender dysphoria and gender euphoria as written in Ashley Mardell's *The ABCs of LGBT*:

Discovering their dysphoria is a common way that transgender people figure out their transgender identities. It makes sense that they would realize they don't identify with their assigned gender by observing their discomfort with the part of their bodies that this assignment was based on. However, many trans people don't experience much (if any) dysphoria and must figure out their identity differently.

For example, I became aware of my gender through my experiences of gender euphoria, an emotion I feel when my gender is affirmed. I first experienced this when a child teased me for looking like a boy because I had short hair. Joke's on you, kiddo!

Even though I can describe specific experiences with gender, some people will still say that I'm "not really trans" or that I'm "just a trans-tender" because I don't experience a lot of gender dysphoria. Being told I'm not transgender

because I don't experience enough dysphoria is disheartening because people who tell me such usually assume I've had no struggles as a transgender person.

I believe all trans people face some struggles because of their identity, but I don't believe that transgenderism should be defined in such a negative way (or in any way that is gatekeeping). After all, gender is not defined by one's genitals, so why would it be defined by what genitals one feels comfortable having? While my feminine voice doesn't make me dysphoric, being called "she" does have that effect on me. But neither of those facts should open up my gender to public scrutiny (Hardell 93-94).

Milo's account is worth quoting at length here because it offers insights into the experiences of nonbinary trans people who do not fit the expected narrative of dysphoria and transition from one side of the gender binary to the other. First, it speaks to how some trans people, particularly nonbinary people who experience little to no body dysphoria, may come to understand their gender identities primarily through experiences of gender euphoria rather than dysphoria.

Second, Milo's account offers a nonbinary perspective on the aforementioned skirmishes over the boundaries of the trans community currently taking place when it comes dysphoria and the meaning of transness. In these conflicts, Milo, coming from their unique nonbinary perspective, challenges this view in presenting another way of viewing transness rooted in self-identification and self-discovery through experiences of gender euphoria. In this way Milo's views have much in common with those of Aidan, Ray, and Reign when it comes to gender euphoria and the meaning of transness.

Third, Milo also offers insights into how some nonbinary people may experience primarily social dysphoria and this social dysphoria may present itself over some aspects of how others gender them in social settings, but not others. Often social dysphoria is an element of trans experiences and narratives that goes unnamed and can even be lost in leu

of a focus on body dysphoria and medical transition. While body dysphoria and medical transition are undoubtedly important topics, narratives that only focus on these themes obscure other experiences of trans people may have to share. For example, such narratives obscure the experiences of trans people like Milo, who do not experience high amounts of body dysphoria, but do experience some degree of social dysphoria and can even be said to experience primarily gender euphoria. In addition, one must also consider the experiences of people like Ray, who do experience both social and body dysphoria, but do not see those experiences as necessarily definitional to their transness.

Here it must be acknowledged that, just as not all trans people agree in their views on gender euphoria, dysphoria, and what it means to be trans, they also do not all have the same experiences of gender euphoria. For some certain external factors can complicate their experiences of gender euphoria. For instance, Alex described experiencing a complex set of emotions alongside gender euphoria when he underwent top surgery. As Alex tells it:

I mean, a lot of people describe top surgery as being something like miraculous and gender euphoric, but I didn't feel comfortable feeling that way because my parents were there and I didn't want them...I don't know how to explain it. Like, I almost didn't want them to take part in my joy, because it was mine, and, like...I don't know how to explain why I didn't want them to take part in that with me, because I feel like all every queer person wants is just for their parents to love them, you know (Alex)?

Thus, for reasons that are difficult for him to articulate, gender euphoria after top surgery was a feeling Alex wished to keep private and not share with his parents and, therefore, had difficulty expressing and feeling fully at first when his parents were present. While

this experience may be particular to Alex and his family, other participants also narrated experiencing gender euphoria along with other conflicting emotions.

For instance, Ray also described at times experiencing a complex set of conflicting emotions alongside gender euphoria, but for different reasons. Specifically, Ray describes feeling some degree of gender euphoria whenever someone addresses them as “young man” or “sir” or refers to them using he/him/his pronouns since it means others around them are at least not reading them as the gender they were assigned at birth (Ray). At the same time, given Ray is a genderqueer person and not male, these forms of address and reference are still inaccurate and he/him/his pronouns do sometimes give them slight dysphoria because of this inaccuracy, albeit much less than she/her/hers pronouns (Ray). This mixture of gender euphoria and dysphoria speaks to possible differences in how nonbinary people experience gender euphoria and dysphoria compared to their trans men and women counterparts due to the absence of options outside of the gender binary genderqueer people like Ray are confronted with on a daily basis.

Not only were there differences in the complex emotions that can surface along with gender euphoria, there were also differences in what leads participants to feel gender euphoria. For example, for trans men and women like Aidan, Alex, and Evelyn, strangers assuming their gender correctly in public (Aidan) and entering gendered spaces such as the women’s clothing section (Evelyn) or the men’s restroom (Alex) without comment can be euphoric. Using the men’s room for Ray as a genderqueer person, however, has

not been a gender euphoric experience. In fact, using the men's room has been an experience of dysphoria for Ray. In their own words:

Right now a lot of places don't have gender neutral bathrooms, which is where I feel most comfortable and euphoric I guess, which is kind of weird when you think about bathrooms, but that's my ideal situation, but a lot of places don't have that so I started using the men's room a lot more because, since that tends to be how I'm perceived, it would be very uncomfortable for the women and dysphoria-wise I just couldn't do that anyway. So, that's been an interesting thing 'cause there's this using the masculine restroom because it's for men and it's still not technically accurate.

In short, for Ray using the men's room is a matter of choosing the option that induces the least amount of dysphoria rather than an experience of gender euphoria. As is the case for many genderqueer people, the option that would be the most comfortable and the most gender euphoric to Ray is nonexistent much of the time due to the prevalence of gender binarism throughout society. This situation then keeps many genderqueer people, like Ray, from experiencing gender euphoria and instead forces them to choose the lesser of two dysphoric options. This is very different from the experiences of trans women and men, like Alex, who tend to have more options that fit their gender identity since they at least identify within the terms of the gender binary. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge that, just as dysphoria differs from trans person to trans person, gender euphoria also differs from person to person depending on the details of their particular gender identity and the options available to them to live out that identity.

Yet, regardless of these differing views on and experiences of gender euphoria, all participants told stories of gender euphoria that are not unlike those described in popular narratives. In much the same way media figures like Jennings and Bono describe the extraordinary happiness they feel when their gender is affirmed and incorporate those

experiences into their narratives (Bono 197, Jennings 29), all participants in this study describe having feelings of gender euphoria and incorporate these experiences in their own narratives, albeit to differing degrees. In this way, gender euphoria may be a more common experience across various gender identities under the trans umbrella than even dysphoria or medical transition, which not all trans people desire or can access. For this reason, trans people's narrated experiences of gender euphoria is a topic worthy of further research if we are to have a more complete understanding of the subjective experiences of trans people and what it means to be trans than what a hyper-focus on dysphoria can reveal. This also applies to medical transition as historically understood and narrated.

*“It's Different for Everyone”: Gender Transition in the Narrated Experiences of Nonbinary People and Their Trans Men and Women Counterparts*

Often gender transition is framed in terms of crossing from one side of the gender binary to the other, from male to female or female to male, with a focus on medical transition understood as a series of steps beginning with hormone blockers or “cross-hormone replacement therapy” and culminating in gender confirmation surgery. It is not uncommon for trans celebrities like Chaz Bono and Laverne Cox to be publicly asked if they've had “the surgery” or if they plan to “go all the way,” referring specifically to genital surgery (James, Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks”). While in recent years trans people in the public eye, like Laverne Cox, have challenged this narrow narrative regarding the process of transition, nonbinary people's experiences and understandings of medical transition are not well understood. To correct this gap, in this study nonbinary



participants offer their insights into what it means to medically and socially transition through the narration of their own unique gender transition processes.

For example, Ray offers insight into how some genderqueer people like them conceive of medical transition in nonbinary terms. First, rather than describe a medical transition plan that moves through the expected steps of someone transitioning from female to male, starting with testosterone replacement therapy and ending with bottom surgery, Ray outlines an individualized medical transition with the sole aim of making them feel more comfortable in their own skin. Specifically, the transition plan Ray describes involves a series of surgeries to flatten their chest and lower their voice and does not include any sort of hormone replacement therapy or bottom surgery (Ray). The reasons for this stem largely from Ray's conception of themselves as genderqueer. In Ray's own words:

And my journey will be a bit more complicated because since I am genderqueer, despite leaning kind of masculine in my presentation, I don't think I would ever want T (testosterone) or that kind of hormone replacement things 'cause I don't wanna be too much in one of the binaries, but a lot of doctors really prefer that before any surgeries take place.

In other words, being genderqueer, Ray does not want all of the changes testosterone brings because such changes would, in their mind, place them too firmly on one side of the binary, only this time on the male side of the binary. While every genderqueer person is different, as Ray stated multiple times in our interview, concerns over being "too much in one of the binaries" as the result of the medical transition as currently conceived may not be uncommon among genderqueer people considering medical transition. This is likely due to how the process of medical transition has historically been understood in

binary terms, as a crossing from male to female or male to female, with little to no conception of other possible trajectories.

While such historical understandings of medical transition as gender crossing have been useful for narrating the experiences of some trans women and men, it may not be entirely accurate when describing some of their experiences of transition either. For instance, the dominant narrative of medical transition as a process that goes from hormone replacement therapy to top surgery to bottom surgery may not fit the experiences of trans men who do not wish to undergo the risks of bottom surgery. For example, in reference to dysphoria and medical transition Aidan expressed the following emotions:

I'm pretty disconnected from my gender assigned at birth, but body dysphoria is a weird thing to navigate because I'd love top surgery, but bottom surgery scares me. Like, that's such an intimate place and I don't wanna just go and get a bunch of surgery done that may or may not just make everything so different and just weird. It's easy to just hide that. That's a lot more intimate than trying to make sure I'm flat chested (Aidan).

Thus, for Aidan, the possible benefits of bottom surgery do not necessarily outweigh the risks of bottom surgery. As Aidan points out, bottom surgery takes place on "such an intimate part" that is hardly ever on display and easily hidden and changes the genitals to a degree he does not necessarily feel prepared to experience. Then there are additional considerations regarding pain, financial cost, and recovery time to consider (Aidan). Taking all these factors into account along with the fact that he experiences more top dysphoria than bottom dysphoria, one can easily imagine why Aidan and others in his position may chose forgo bottom surgery.

On a similar note, Alex also expressed some ambivalence toward undergoing bottom surgery, describing it only as a possibility he is considering (Alex). In this regard, Alex's narrated experiences of medical transition so far differ from what is expected of trans men. Furthermore, even though his narrative does fit what is considered typical on most other counts, he is not a proponent of the argument that one must go through medical transition in a certain way, or even at all, to be authentically trans and even spoke strongly against it at length in our interview. In his own words:

There's this movement called like "trans-med" or "trust med" or "truscmed"—I don't know what it's called—but it's this big movement where people are like, "If you don't medically transition or you don't want to medically transition you're not trans." And I believe that that is fucking bullshit. Sorry for my profane language, but it pisses me off (Alex).

Rather than frame medical transition as an absolute defining feature of transness, Alex understands medical transition as the process of "changing your body or changing your appearance to whatever extent you desire" and, as such, "is different for everyone" (Alex). In this way, Alex's understanding of medical transition is inclusive of genderqueer people like Ray and others whose medical transitions may be different from his own, may not desire medical transition as typically conceived, or may not desire to medically transition at all. This also means being expansive enough to encompass the experiences of trans people who may want and need to medically transition, but do not have the social or economic resources to do so.

One issue that is often neglected in the wider cultural conversation on trans people and medical transition is the effects of socio-economic status on trans people's access to transition-related within a system in which healthcare is not treated as a basic

human right. As noted earlier, with the exceptions of Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, representations of trans people tend to be of those born to white and class privilege. A prime example of this is Caitlyn Jenner who could afford to go “all the way” in her medical transition and appear on the cover of *Vanity Fair* having undergone much of her desired medical transition (Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner”). This narrative ignores the fact that the average trans person does not necessarily have the financial resources to achieve such a medical transition even if they wish to do so. Elliot, a fresh college graduate living on \$18,000-19,000 a year at the time of our interview, was quick to point this out when asked about his take on trans visibility, saying:

There’s definitely not a lot of people that have the luxury of having surgery. There’s a lot of people that don’t have that luxury of getting surgery. Like, there’s a lot of exposure to Caitlyn Jenner, which is fine. She’s a valid trans person. That’s perfectly fine. But I also wanna see people who go through the same thing I do (Elliot).

Here, Elliott speaks to issues of socio-economic status when seeking to access transition-related medical care. Often procedures such as gender confirmation surgeries and hormone replacement therapies are not covered under insurance, leaving individual trans people to shoulder the cost. This makes it extremely difficult to impossible for those who are of lower socioeconomic status to seek out such care even when wanted and needed.

At the same time, some trans people may not wish to undergo medical transition or forego steps in the process entirely for a variety of reasons aside from the economic.

For example, when asked about his own individual transition Elliot responded:

Right now, I don’t see it in my future. And, not that I’m against it by any means. If a person wants to get it that’s fine. I just feel like my chest is small enough that I can bind for the rest of my life and plus once I start testosterone the fact that my body will redistribute it will get smaller and so I feel like all the problems I

currently have with dysphoria—they won't go away permanently—but they will be—I don't want to say better—they won't be as significant (Elliot).

Thus, Elliot speaks to how some trans people may not feel the need to medically transition for a variety of reasons. For instance, a transmasculine person, like Elliot, may wish to undergo hormone replacement therapy but not feel the need to go under the knife for top surgery because his chest is already small and the dysphoria is not great enough to justify surgery. A trans woman might not feel great enough dysphoria over her genitals to justify the risks of gender confirmation surgery. Or, a nonbinary person may experience primarily social dysphoria and therefore not feel the need to undergo any form of medical transition and instead focus exclusively on their social transition. In this way, while medical transition has often been framed as synonymous with transness itself, medical transition can better be conceived in terms of a diversity of experiences and needs rather than as a central theme in a singular trans experience. To quote Alex again, “[Medical transition] is different for everyone” (Alex). One trans person's experience of medical transition may be very different from another. Furthermore, medical transition is not the only part of gender transition trans people experience.

Beyond medical transition, participants also described their experiences with social transition. Generally, participants described social transition as involving steps like changing one's name and pronouns, clothes, hair style, etc. (Alex, Elliot, Evelyn, Ray, Reign, Zola). For example, Ray's social transition so far has involved introducing themselves with their chosen name and pronouns and leaning into a masculine appearance as to not be mistaken for the gender they were assigned at birth. In Ray's own words:

And then sort of presentation-wise, like I've kind of been saying, I tend to go more masculine sort of trying to lean into that as to not be assumed my AGAB, assigned gender at birth. So, I sort of try to lean away from it as far as possible even though I do have connections to it in my identity. I just don't want that to confuse people, I guess. So, I sort of lean into presentation in masculine ways I can do (Ray).

Specifically, for Ray, this means wearing hats with pronoun pins to signify to others how they wish to be referred, keeping their hair short, wearing neckties, dress shirts, and vests, and binding their chest. In this way, Ray presents common issues many genderqueer people may experience when seeking to socially transition in a world in which there is no widely recognized way to "pass" as genderqueer or any other nonbinary gender as well as a possible solution. If you can't pass as your own gender then pass as the binary gender that is at least not the one you were assigned. In Ray's situation, as someone who was assigned female at birth, this means leaning into a masculine presentation in order not to be read as a woman in social situations. In some ways this is not all that different from Alex's experiences as a queer trans man who wishes to be more feminine in his gender expression.

If medical transition in the popular imagination is framed in terms of crossing from male to female or female to male, then social transition is framed as crossing from masculine to feminine or feminine to masculine. In other words, trans men are expected to become more masculine over the course of their social transitions and trans women are expected to become more feminine. While such shifts are accurate for many trans people, such expectations do not account for nonbinary people or even masculine trans women and feminine trans men. The strength of these expectations and who they exclude can be seen in the social gatekeeping Alex experienced as a feminine trans man. For instance,

shortly after coming out as trans in high school Alex met another trans boy who he describes as “very gatekeeping” and remembers telling him he was not really trans whenever he did something this boy perceived as feminine (Alex). In other words, Alex did not fall in line with this boy’s expectations of how a social transition from female to male is supposed to unfold and for this reason he cast Alex out of the group.

Historically, such gatekeeping behavior on the basis of gender expression has been prevalent when drawing the boundaries of who is considered trans and who is not considered trans. A prime example of this can be found in experiences of Lou Sullivan, a gay trans man who was refused mental health and medical services related to transition for years during the 1970s and 1980s due to his being a feminine gay man (Smith 50-54, 69-82, 101-102). In this way, historical narratives like Sullivan’s and contemporary narratives like those of the participants in this study offer insights into the intersections of not only gender identity and gender expression, but also into the intersections between gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as well as race, class, ability, and mental health status.

*“My Blackness Informs My Transness”: Intersectionality in the Narrated Experiences of Trans People*

While most representations of trans people have been far from intersectional, there are a few notable trans women of color who have gained media attention, particularly Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, who are conscious of intersectionality. In their writing both these women have shared stories demonstrating the intersectionality of their identities and experiences as trans women of color. For instance, in *Redefining Realness*

Mock tells the story of the first twenty or so years of her life growing up multiracial, poor, and trans in the United States (Mock). Given how each of these identities come together to inform her experiences, any understanding of Mock's narrated experiences that does not acknowledge all of her identities and associated simultaneous experiences of racism, classism, sexism, and cissexism will be incomplete.

The same can be said of Laverne Cox, who demonstrates how she experiences intersectionality at a microlevel in describing her experiences of street harassment, which often with a thick layer of homophobia, transphobia, and racism as well as the expected brand of misogyny. This is the same homophobia, transphobia, racism, and misogyny that has led to the deaths of other Black women like Amanda Milan, who was murdered in 2001, and Islan Nettles, who was murder in November, 2013—just one month before Cox wrote of her own experiences with the kinds of violence that escalated to her murder (Cox). In Cox's own words:

Our lives are often in danger, simply because of who we are, when we are trans women. There are a lot of intersecting identities and intersecting oppressions that make that happen. That moment when I was called the b or n word, it was a moment where misogyny was intersecting with transphobia, was intersecting with some racist stuff" (Cox).

The fact that even a celebrated actress such as Cox still finds herself to some degree vulnerable to racist, sexist, and cissexist violence demonstrates just how deeply rooted these interlocking systems of oppression are within society and why it is important to consider how they intersect if we are to gain a fuller understanding of trans experiences. For this reason, it is important to recognize the ways the identities of the participants in this study intersect as well.



While there were a few participants who did not see their identities as intersecting (Aidan, Evalyn), most did view their identities in intersectional terms and were able to share stories demonstrating their own intersectionality. For example, at one point in our interview Zola spoke to the intersections between gender and race, saying:

I usually say something to the effect of, “My Blackness informs my transness.” It’s not that one is better than the other or that one’s bigger than the other, but my Blackness is has been through some stuff that my transness has seen. Like bathrooms—speaking of intersection—my trans side’s like, “Oh my god, bathrooms!” And my black side is like, “We’ve been here, honey. We’ve been here with the bathrooms. They don’t like you. ‘You can’t use the bathroom.’” You know? (Zola).

Narrating her experiences of intersectionality at the microlevel in the form of a dialogue between her Blackness and her transness, Zola makes connections between her experiences of simultaneous racism and cissexism at the microlevel to macrolevel systemic issues and larger histories of race and gender in the United States. In this case, she makes a connection between current battles over trans people’s, especially trans women’s, access to gender-segregated restrooms and the history of racial segregation in the United States, both of which have received justification in the name of protecting (white) women and girls. It is these parallels between Black and trans experiences as seen from the intersection of race and gender that inform Zola’s understanding of current struggles facing the trans community.

In the case of many white participants, white privilege and the ways their whiteness impacts how they experience their transness differently from trans people of color was a major point of intersection. For example, Reign was quick to acknowledge their whiteness and white privilege and how “it makes all this [being nonbinary] a lot

easier” (Reign). One way this white privilege manifests is how white trans people can move through the world in greater safety and confidence knowing they are not vulnerable to racist violence. As Elliot put it:

And one thing I forgot to mention is with my race I do have the privilege of being white and being trans. I do know that there are a lot of trans people of color who are murdered everyday and I am fortunate that I am in a safe place that sometimes doesn't feel safe, but I have people that are willing to help me and protect me when there are some people who don't have that” (Elliot).

In short, even though Elliot still faces transphobia and does not always feel safe in their everyday life, he is still able to move through the world knowing he is not vulnerable to violence on account of his race and is safer than many of trans people of color. In other words, unlike trans people of color, like Zola, white trans people, like Elliot, do not experience racism and cissexism simultaneously and can move through the world much more safely because of this fact.

Along with race and gender, another point of intersection participants discussed was class and the unique challenges trans people who have little financial support or are of a lower socio-economic status face. As Reign pointed out, “It costs money to change your driver's license. It costs money to change your passport. And, while I would love to do all of those things, I can't afford to. There's no way” (Reign). Such barriers are often left undiscussed in media representations, especially in those of celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner and Chaz Bono who have the necessary financial resources to change their driver's license and passport and then some. Also, as pointed out earlier in the discussion on medical transition, similar issues also apply to trans people's access to healthcare since not everyone has the financial means of Caitlyn Jenner or Chaz Bono to pay for

transition-related care (Elliot). Thus, the narratives participants had to tell differ dramatically from some of the more popular media representations in how gender and class intersect to bar access to transition-related care to those of lower socio-economic status. Considering how trans people are generally more likely to live in poverty than their cisgender counterparts, this is a pivotal intersection to discuss and have represented.

Another pivotal intersection participants discussed was neurotype and mental health status. Considering four of the seven participants self-identify as members of the disability and/or neurodiverse community, it is no surprise this was one of the more extensively discussed points of intersections among participants. For Reign, being both a nonbinary person and a person who lives with anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, gender and mental health status is a major point of intersection they must carefully navigate with their therapist. At times this has meant being forced to choose between prioritizing their trans identity or their status as someone who lives with mental illness. Reign describes their current situation this way:

And I guess one thing that comes to mind is I live with anxiety, depression, and obsessive compulsive disorder as well as post-traumatic stress disorder so navigating that in terms of also navigating gender identity is difficult, because as I go to even therapy making that choice to come out to my therapist or not is very difficult and as of now I've not, because the effects of my PTSD have been more difficult than the effects of my gender so I've sort of prioritized that just in case she wouldn't be accepting or that that would color her idea of me and I think that that's a concession that a lot of queer people have to make (Reign).

Such experiences with mental health professionals are likely not uncommon for trans people, especially for nonbinary people, considering many mental health professionals are either uneducated on trans identities and issues or their education on such matters is outdated. Mental health professionals not having a proper understanding of what it means

to be nonbinary was also an intersectional issue within Ray's narrative as well as others speculating whether or not their "mental health issues" caused them to be genderqueer (Ray). Such speculation plays into the idea that transness is best understood in terms of mental illness, an assertion Ray finds distracting and not in alignment with their understanding of what it means to be trans or of their mental health (Ray).

Finally, along with intersections of gender, race, class, neurotype and mental health status, more specific and personal intersections were also discussed. For instance, in addition to the intersections of race and gender, Zola also spoke to a variety of other intersections ranging from religious or secular perspective to even one's interests and lifestyle. In her own words: "I have a lot of intersections. My friend calls me the intersection queen, because here you have—Of course you see I'm black. I'm trans. I'm also a furry. I'm also a Satanist, which that's interesting. Let's see. I like heavy metal. I'm all over the place" (Zola). Thus, for Zola, intersectionality is not solely confined to intersections of gender and race. It also encompasses more individual aspects of a person's identity that overlap to shape their experiences. In Zola's case, her gender and race also intersect with her interest in heavy metal music as well as her being a furry and a Satanist to create a unique experience. This means she often finds herself being a token of some kind or another in a room. In Zola's own words, "I'm usually the only one of something so that I'm just sitting there, this walking intersection. I don't know. People don't know what to do with it" (Zola). Such experiences are likely not uncommon for those who hold multiple marked identities, including membership in certain subcultures. While it is true Kimberlé Crenshaw did have Satanists, furies, or fans of heavy metal

when she coined the term intersectionality in 1989, these factors still represent important elements of a person that can intersect with other identities they hold such as gender and race in ways that can further marginalize or tokenize them, as often happens to Zola.

In the end, while not all participants understood their identities in intersectional terms, most were conversant on matters of intersectionality and had stories to tell that demonstrate how their various identities intersect. Specifically, they spoke on intersections of gender, race, class, neurotype and mental health status as well as other elements of identity, such as interests or lifestyle, that can intersect with one another. Interestingly, none discussed age as a major point of intersection apart from brief mentions of being trans parents, married or divorced (Evelyn, Zola). However, there was no shortage of comments on the intersection of gender and sexual identity, which stood out as the most discussed point of intersection among participants.

*“None of These Labels Work Anymore”: The Intersections of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation, Heteronormativity, and Gatekeeping in the Narrated Experiences of Trans People*

Historically, there has been a conflation of sex, gender, expression, and sexuality within much of mainstream U.S. culture. This conflation has been most evident in the expectation that all these elements must “line up.” For instance, all men by default are thought to possess certain anatomy, present as masculine, and be attracted to women and all women are assumed to be the opposite of all men until proven otherwise. In relation to trans narratives, this kind of conflation of sex, gender, expression, and sexuality can be seen in how trans people have historically been treated in medical settings. Beginning in

the mid-twentieth century, medical professionals have seen themselves as “pioneers administrating a great service to a dysphoric population forced to live homosexual lives” (Smith 97). In other words, transitioning one’s gender was seen as a solution to same sex attraction and it was generally not understood why someone would transition to living life as a gay man or lesbian. This form of heteronormative bias can be seen in Stanford’s gender program’s refusal to admit Lou Sullivan in 1980, claiming that “[t]he history which [Lou] presented was not typical for the majority of persons who, in our program, have made successful adjustments with gender reorientation and who have been helped, not harmed, by sex reassignment,” specifically by virtue of his being a gay man (Smith 102). In this way, a particular heteronormative narrative in which the trans subject transitions genders to become a heterosexual woman or a heterosexual man played a major part in medical gatekeeping, determining whose gender was validated and whose was not and, by extension, who received services and who did not. At the same time, such gatekeeping based on heteronormative ideals could go beyond just the medical and take on a social form, determining not only who received services and who did not but also who could claim membership in the transgender community.

While much has improved for queer trans people since Sullivan’s experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, heteronormativity and its conflation of gender, expression, and sexuality still hold a great deal of power over how trans narratives are understood (or misunderstood) within certain spaces. This continued reality was evident in some participant’s narrated experiences. An instructive example of this can be seen in an

experience of social gatekeeping Alex had while participating in his university's common read of Lou Sullivan's biography. As Alex recalls:

I'm doing the president's common read this year and they're reading about Lou Sullivan. Like, *Daring to be a Man Among Men* is the book title. So, it came up in our discussion about, "How can someone who is trans be gay?" And I was like, "Because they can." [...] And one of my professors who's in my group is like, "Oh, you can't be gay and trans because you're just being heterosexual." And I'm like, "I'm not though. Just because I have a vagina doesn't mean that, like—No." So, it's been an interesting thing, because even my professor is gay, very open about it, very loud about it, but won't accept that gay and trans can be inclusive. Like, I love him very dearly, but he's very much a gatekeeping gay, which is problematic and I'm trying to school him (Alex).

As the response of Alex's professor to the idea of a trans person being gay demonstrates, the same heteronormative ideas that were a barrier to Sullivan's transition in the past persist today even among those who are a part of the wider LGBT+ community.

According to these heteronormative ideas, what makes someone gay, lesbian, or heterosexual is one's gendered embodiment in combination with the gendered embodiments of one's partners. For instance, under this logic, a person like Sullivan would be considered heterosexual, regardless of his being a man, because he has a vulva and engages in sexual activity with men who have penises. Such logics of gender and sexuality are problematic since they ignore the social identities of trans women and men like Alex and Lou and disregard nonbinary people entirely.

Given how sex, sexuality, gender, and gender expression are still often conflated, it is no surprise the intersections between sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression were major topics in participants' narrations of gender transition, especially for those who are nonbinary. Even many of the major words available to describe one's sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, etc.) invoke one's own gender along with the gender(s)

of one's partner(s) and come with stereotypes regarding gender expression as well as powerful expectations regarding one's own sexed/gendered embodiment and that of one's partner(s). This is most evident in the experiences of genderqueer people who primarily experience sexual attraction toward people of one gender and do not wish to misgender themselves in their sexual orientation label. For example, when Ray came out to themselves as genderqueer the experience not only raised questions about their gender. It also raised questions about their sexual orientation, both for them and any current or future partners. As Ray explains, "So, I like women and I didn't know of a word for that wasn't controversial in its beginnings and how sex focused some of the terms that were coming out for people who were attracted to femininity and/or women" (Ray). In short, there were no words inclusive of nonbinary people who are attracted to women and femininity that did make assumptions about the gender/sexed embodiment of one's partner or potential partners or one's own gender identity.

Even as Ray became more comfortable in their own gender and started to realize they have attractions for people of other genders besides women, specifically other nonbinary people, they still found most multi-attraction labels did not fit either. Pansexual, when defined as attraction to all genders, was too broad and, as Ray points out, "There's no way to know all genders so there's not really a way to know if you're attracted to them all" (Ray). At the same time, bisexual in most contexts carried with it inaccurate connotations of being attracted to "both men and women" (Ray). Once again there were no accurate sexual orientation terms for nonbinary people like Ray who are attracted to women and nonbinary people. Such an absence of sufficient language



demonstrates the limits of current cultural understandings of sexuality and gender, especially when it comes to the sexual identities of nonbinary people.

On another level, there is also the kind of heteronormativity and medical gatekeeping nonbinary people can still experience despite changes to the Standards of Care aimed at being more inclusive of their identities and needs. For example, when discussing access to services that would allow them to medically transition Ray expressed concerns about gatekeeping, saying:

I don't think I would ever want T, testosterone, or that kind of hormone replacement things 'cause I don't wanna be too much in one of the binaries, but a lot of doctors really prefer that before any surgeries take place. [...] I think it's mostly, from my understanding, part of the gatekeeping thing that happens to us a lot. That you have to prove you're really trans almost. So, if you're not "committed," in quotes, enough to go on hormones then you're probably not "committed enough," in quotes, to go through with surgeries (Ray).

In short, in Ray's experience, gaining access to transition services may be more difficult for them as a genderqueer person due to the fact that their narrative does not fit the heteronormative and highly binary narrative mental health and medical professionals have in mind when diagnosing dysphoria and deciding whether or not to administer services. Thus, as seen in Sullivan's experiences of seeking transition-related care in the 1970s and early 1980s and the medical gatekeeping nonbinary people like Ray experience today, the dominance of heteronormative, binary narratives as presented in research and the wider society has real consequences for trans people seeking essential health and mental health services. Given these consequences, it is not surprising that participants had concerns regarding questions of representation as well as suggestions for how to improve representations of trans people.

*“If I Were in Charge...”: Future Directions for Representation as Conceived by Participants*

Toward the end of the interview, each participant was asked, “If you were in charge of trans representation, what sorts of stories would want to make sure are told?” One common theme in their answers was intersectionality, especially for trans women of color (Alex, Zola) and those living with mental illnesses and disabilities (Ray, Reign). Such intersections are important given the issues trans women of color face at the intersections of gender and race and the number of trans people who live with mental illness and/or disabilities. Furthermore, increasing intersectional representation would also give much needed attention to trans people who do not fit the expected white, heterosexual, cis-passing image presented in popular media and elevate the most marginalized within the trans community. In addition, such intersectional representation would also serve to better represent the multiplicity of trans lives.

Another related theme that emerged in the types of narratives participants would tell is the diversity of gender expressions among trans people and depictions of trans people as whole people who are more than just their transness. As Ray put it:

I would want it to be intersectional and very much the story is not only about transness. And then, of course, having people who aren’t binary as well or who are in the binary, but aren’t the stereotypical overcompensating binary, so some feminine trans guys or some masculine trans women or nonbinary people who aren’t that stereotypical androgynous look, that there’s diversity there and there’s more well-roundedness (Ray).

Thus, in speaking to their desire for more diverse and well-rounded representation, Ray speaks to the stories that are not being told—stories that include nonbinary people and go beyond stereotypes of trans men and women as hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine and

nonbinary people as perfectly androgynous. In other words, stories that show feminine trans men, like Alex, and genderqueer people who do not present androgynously, like Ray. Furthermore, participants also called for representational diversity not only in terms of intersectionality and gender expression, but also in terms of presenting characters who are more than just their transness and experience more than just the struggles that may come with being trans.

To this end, another common theme was the inclusion of trans people as major characters and protagonists who “just happen to be trans” (Alex, Ray) as an antidote to the predominance of stories in which a character’s transness and their struggles with being trans dominate the entire narrative. In Ray’s words: “And if you see a trans person its usually just being trans that is their (quote, unquote) ‘problem,’ which I would make it 1) not a problem. 2) They would be more than just trans and their story would be more than just them coming out as trans or surviving being trans in a relationship or whatever trans-centric narrative” (Ray). In other words, for Rich, ideal trans representation would not frame transness as a problem and would instead focus on trans people simply living their lives with transness just being one part of a much more complex and well-rounded character.

Specifically, Ray envisions trans representation that focuses on other aspects of trans people’s lives beyond their transness. Ray goes on, “I don’t want transness to be the focus of the plot. Yes, that is needed in some cases ‘cause coming out stories are important and some of that victimization stuff does happen, but I would like that not to be the only representation” (Ray). Thus, for Ray, ideal representation would go beyond

stories of coming out and struggle to present trans people as human beings with full lives. Stories like “just another rom-com only one of them happens to be trans” or “an action movie where one of the characters just happens to be trans” (Ray). In other words, stories that serve to emphasize the fact that trans people are more than just their transness and their struggles with cissexism. Stories that show trans people can be romantic leads and action heroes as well as have struggles and exist in ways that have nothing to do their being trans.

Also tired of the “it’s difficult stories,” coming out stories, and other narratives where a character’s transness is the main focus, Zola concurred with Ray in calling for greater variety. In her own words:

We have all the coming out stories, we have the “it’s difficult stories,” but sometimes I wanna see stuff where we’re just being us and it’s not the main focus. I want science fiction stories with us. I want a variety of things. I want drama with us in it. I want comedy. We have to laugh. I would love to see some trans people that are humorous, not self—What is it? Self-deprecating? [...] That type of thing. Nothing wrong with that humor, but I would just like more. I wanna laugh and I want that to come from trans people ‘cause I feel like we have a different way of looking at things because we step outside the norm (Zola).

In other words, Zola’s vision for trans representation has space for trans people just being themselves as well as drama and comedy, especially comedy that is not self-deprecating and comes from trans people’s unique perspective living outside the norm. It is a joyful vision of laughter that showcases the humor of trans people, goes against the grain of narratives of suffering and oppression, and resists the idea that trans people can only be trans. On this point, Zola also calls for more stories about being a trans parent and a person of color that are more reflective of the lives of actual trans people like her and go beyond simply depicting the struggles that can come with being trans (Zola).

At the same time, however, some participants, like Elliott, called for representations that delve into precisely those struggles as part of the full spectrum of trans experiences. In Elliott's words when asked what was missing from the cultural conversation:

The good, the bad, and the ugly is the easiest way to put it. Those good parts when you have those euphoria moments, when you've realized who you are, when you've had this, "Uh, hah!" light bulb moment, but then also the parts it took to get there. Those nights crying, because, "I don't know who the hell I am." Those nights when you're like, "Is this really a thing. I don't know what to do with these thoughts that are going through my head." And those nights that are so unbearable you don't know if you want to wake up the next day. It's the good, the bad, and the ugly of being trans. I would want that to be out there (Elliott).

Thus, for Elliott, there is a real need for more honest representations of the full spectrum of trans experiences from the heights of gender euphoria and self-discovery to the valleys of cissexism, confusion, isolation, and depression, and everywhere in between. This need mostly comes out of the limitations of major media representations of trans narratives that tend to gloss over some of the more difficult parts of being trans, especially after one has come out and started transitioning.

Along this vein, when asked which trans stories or parts of trans stories he felt were missing from the cultural conversation, Elliot observed, "The bad parts. You don't hear much of the gray area. You hear of people doing so well, but you don't hear about the trans people who are murdered, who are going through hell transitioning, all those things" (Elliott). Not only are the "bad parts" missing from the conversation, but many trans stories are being erased entirely, most notably whenever a trans person is misgendered in the news after being murdered (Elliott). Such observations speak to the privilege inherent in dominant trans narratives within popular media and the need for

more honest and intersectional portrayals of what it means to be trans. This means not only depicting the ordinary and euphoric, but also the difficult and even oppressive within trans experiences without sensationalizing or to the exclusion of all else.

Along with visions of intersectionality, diversity in gender expression, stories that include characters who “just happen to be trans,” comedy, and unflinching representation of the “good, the bad, and the ugly” in trans experiences, some participants also shared visions of narratives that go beyond the tropes of the expected “born this way” narrative. For example, Reign, from their perspective as a nonbinary person, stated:

I'd go with trans children and sort of breaking this myth that you know at three years old, because transness sort of is throughout your life and I didn't know when I was three years old, four years old, five years old, ten years old, but that doesn't make me any less trans. And so, I guess I would seek to understand what this very one-dimensional idea of trans is and do everything that I can to showcase and give a voice to everyone that isn't represented by that one view and so people of color, poor people, mentally ill people (Reign).

In short, for Reign, tackling the myth that every trans person must know their transness by the age of three, like Jazz Jennings, in order to be valid is important for making room for other forms of trans experience that are more akin to their own. In addition, busting such myths would also serve to give greater dimension to what it means to be trans as well as be a starting point for giving voice to others who do not fit into one-dimensional understandings of transness.

Such sentiments concerning the idea all trans people must know their gender identity at an early age were not confined to only nonbinary participants. For example, Alex, from his perspective as a feminine queer trans man, stated:

And then I think there's this whole trope that you have to know something is wrong when you're born or that you have to know that you're not like other

people and I think that trope is totally harmful to everyone. It romanticizes the idea of thinking that you're wrong and I can't vibe with that. Maybe it's just because I didn't know, but I don't believe that everybody knows. Like, I didn't know until I saw Newsies and I thought, "I think I'm attracted to men as a man" (Alex).

Thus, for Alex, the trope that a person must know they are trans from birth is problematic in the sense that it romanticizes thinking of one's self as inherently wrong and excludes people like him who were not aware of their gender identity until adolescence or later. Not to mention those who come out as multiple identities over the course of their lifetime, as Alex has done, given how the "born this way" trope is often built on the cultural belief in a singular, fixed identity that leaves little room for change.

Not only does the "born this way" trope exclude certain trans people, like Alex, who do not necessarily know their gender identity from an early age and, perhaps, experience multiple identity phases over time. It also excludes trans people who do not conform to stereotypes associated with the gender with which they identify given how cross-gender expression is often used a sign that one is born trans. Alex goes on:

And I just hate that trope that you have to know or that trans men can't wear dresses or trans women can't wear—Well, trans women it's not—I don't know if it's that big of a stigma. I don't know a lot about trans woman experience. I would be interested to learn. [...] But I know that trans men get stigmatized whenever they wear dresses or leggings or whatever. So, changing that narrative would be important to me (Alex).

In this way, Alex shares Ray's concern for representing the wide diversity of gender identities and expressions within trans communities and expanding gender categories to encompass a variety of embodiments and expressions. On an individual level, such representation is important for including trans people like Alex and expanding the narrative and expressive possibilities available to them. Simultaneously, on a macrolevel,

such representations also serve to displace and de-essentialize gender stereotypes in general as they demonstrate one does not have to conform to gender stereotypes to be a man, a woman, or nonbinary person regardless of one's assigned gender.

In summary, according to the participants in this study, ideal trans representation is inclusive of trans people of a variety of gender identities and gender expressions and is not rooted stereotypes of trans women and men or nonbinary people. It challenges limiting tropes and expands what trans narratives and experiences can be like as well as what it means to be trans and, by extension, a gendered being. It also showcases the multi-faceted nature of trans lives and does not focus exclusively on coming out and the struggles that may come with being trans while still being honest about those struggles. Finally, it is intersectional, especially for the most marginalized in the community such as trans women of color, those experiencing mental illness, and those living with disabilities. In many ways, these alternative narratives to the usual representations resemble participants' own life narratives in their variety of expressions and gender identities. This is especially true when it comes to their intersecting backgrounds, variety in gendered self-discovery journeys, diversity in personal experiences of gender euphoria and dysphoria, variety in transition processes, and irreducibility to just stories about transness. While these narratives may be personal and not generalizable to all trans people, they contain valuable knowledge concerning trans identities, experiences, and how trans narratives are constructed beyond the expected "born this way" narrative of popular media and much of the research thus far. In doing so they point to future directions for future research and media representation.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Over the past decade trans visibility has increased in the United States with high profile figures such as Chaz Bono, Jazz Jennings, Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Caitlyn Jenner gaining mainstream media attention. In many ways this a welcome development. Such representations have raised awareness through exposing a portion of the general population to trans individuals when they likely would not have learned about trans people otherwise. However, as valid as these narratives may be in and of themselves, not all trans people benefit equally from these representations or can find themselves represented in these stories. For instance, such representations tend to leave out the experiences of trans people who do not understand their transness in terms of being born in the wrong body or do not have the desire or resources to medically transition from one side of the gender binary to the other. Most of all, they tend to leave out nonbinary people, people of color, those of lower socio-economic status, disabled people, and others whose intersectional identities do not fall in line with the privileged few who receive the most media attention, namely those with white and class privilege. This leaves the average trans person with little to no representation within the wider culture and the representation in scholarly research is not much better with most of the research so far focused almost exclusively on certain groups of trans men and women.

Over the course of the oral histories conducted in this study, some participants commented on this situation within trans representation directly. In the words of one participant, Reign:

I would say that Caitlyn Jenner is a really interesting figure to have come out right before my sort of gender journey, because obviously she was an Olympic athlete. Like, she is this super prominent figure in a family of very affluent people. And so, then for her to come out and say some things that are not necessarily correct or representative of our community, it sort of felt like being cheated out of representation. We have this awesome opportunity, someone who is so famous and so influential and so well-known across the world and there are things that she said that weren't correct or weren't very intersectional. Whereas I feel like, in terms of media, unless you seek it out you're not gonna get queer content (Reign).

In short, as important as figures like Caitlyn Jenner may be for visibility, they are not representative of the general trans population or entirely accurate in their commentary on trans issues. In the case of Jenner and other prominent figures like her, this is particularly when it comes to intersectionality. This often means those who wish to see other forms of trans representation must seek (or make) it for themselves. With all this in mind, it is the goal of this study to shed light on the experiences of trans people, like Reign, who do not fit the extremely narrow profile of the privileged few who receive the most media attention and add to the conversation on trans narratives.

Through incorporating the voices of those who have historically been underrepresented in media and in past research, especially those who are nonbinary, the findings of the current study begin to demonstrate the variety of trans narratives beyond the expected "born this way" narrative. Thematically, the narratives shared over the course of this project offer insights into the fluidity and intersectionality of identities, experiences of gender euphoria, and nonbinary medical and social transitions. Most importantly, the stories participants share indicate the conventional wisdom that trans people understand themselves as having been born in the wrong body does not apply to everyone. Given how prevalent the theme of being born in the wrong body has been to

our shared cultural understanding of what it means to be trans, the narratives in this study challenge researchers and others to reconsider the narratives they hear and tell about trans people. Most of all, their narratives prompt the creation of new theories regarding transness that account for the variety of trans experiences, ranging from the genderqueer person concerned testosterone replacement therapy will place them “too much in the binaries” (Ray) to the queer trans man who went through multiple labels before settling on his current gender identity (Alex). More specifically, the stories they tell point toward new theories regarding the fluidity of identities and the cultural belief in fixed identities, what it means to transition, and the role of gender euphoria in the narration of trans experiences of coming out and defining what it means to be trans.

Other themes that come up in the interviews but fall out of the scope of the project at hand include what it is like to be a trans parent (Evelyn, Zola) and have a spouse or long term partner (Elliot, Evelyn, Zola). These themes may be outliers due to the fact that most participants in this study are their twenties and members of a generation who tend to marry and have children at a later age. Other outlying themes apart from these milestones is the experience of being trans and growing up in a rural area (Evelyn) as well as being trans and autistic (Aidan). Even though these themes may be outliers in the sense they are beyond the scope of the current study, they are important to acknowledge and are worthy of further investigation if we to have a more complete and intersectional understanding of trans experiences.

Along with these findings and outlying themes, the limitations of the current study must be also acknowledged, namely the fact that the findings are not generalizable

to all trans people. For instance, given the small sample size, questions remain regarding the experiences of those whose intersectional identities are not adequately represented in the sample at hand. This includes people of color, transfeminine people, people with visible physical disabilities, those of older generations, those who have not received any form of higher education as well as those who live outside of the Upper Midwest or outside of the United States entirely. In addition, since all participants in the current study experience or have experienced both gender euphoria and dysphoria, the theories presented in this study may not apply to trans people who do not have these experiences or do not understand their experiences in terms of gender euphoria and dysphoria.

Considering the findings, outlying themes, and limitations of the current study, there are several possible directions for further research. First, the fact the majority of participants articulated intersectional understandings of their identities indicates there is indeed a need for further intersectional research. This especially true when it comes to intersections of gender, race, and class as well as sexual identity, neurotype and mental health status. These points of intersection, however, only represent the most discussed among participants in the current study. Other important points of intersection that were not addressed due to the small sample size but are no less in need of investigation include education, age, and generation. This leaves room for further intersectional research into questions regarding how gender and educational background may intersect in the experiences of trans people as well as how trans experiences may differ across generations and age groups.

Second, given the prevalence of gender euphoria as a theme in many of the narratives shared in this study and current debates within trans communities regarding gender euphoria, dysphoria, and the meaning of transness, it is important for future research to consider not only dysphoria, but gender euphoria as well. For instance, qualitative researchers would do well to consider questions of gender euphoria when analyzing the narratives of trans people. Simultaneously quantitative researchers could measure more general patterns of gender euphoria and dysphoria within the trans community at large. Such investigations would give us a more complete picture of trans people's experiences of gender euphoria and dysphoria, potentially expand what it means to be trans beyond narratives of dysphoria, and open up new questions concerning how individuals and groups, both cis and trans, experience gender.

Third, with the increasing visibility of nonbinary people, more research is needed to better understand their identities, experiences, and narratives. Such studies would further contribute to our understanding of what it means to be nonbinary specifically as well as our understanding of human diversity more generally. Taking the narratives nonbinary participants shared in the current study as a starting point, possible subjects for further inquiry on the narrated experiences of nonbinary people include how nonbinary people experience medical and social transition, how they come to understand their gender identities, and how they express and develop these identities.

To this end, researchers interested in conducting qualitative interviews, specifically, with nonbinary participants would do well to be aware of the challenges they may encounter when seeking to access nonbinary people and establish trust. As learned in

the process of this study, networking through those already established within local trans communities can help to alleviate challenges in gaining access to participants in a respectful and trustworthy manner. Other important steps one can take when establishing trust include consistently respecting pronouns and identity labels and being sensitive to the fact that certain questions may be difficult for some participants, particularly those dealing with dysphoria. Also, given research on nonbinary people is relatively new, investigators would do well to initially consult nontraditional sources such as vlogs, blogs, zines, books, and other relevant non-academic texts written and produced by a diverse set of nonbinary people throughout the research process. Such research is useful for learning more about nonbinary communities and keeping up to date on current conversations and terminology therein, as well as informing research topics and interview questions and easing communication with participants.

Ultimately, while the narratives shared over the course of this project are not generalizable to all trans people, they do offer insights into trans narratives beyond the expected “born this way” narrative of popular media and research thus far. Many of these narratives include themes regarding the fluidity and intersectionality of identities, gender euphoria, and the various ways medical and social transitions can take shape. In doing so, they begin to demonstrate the variety of trans experiences, point toward new theories regarding the meaning of transness and gender euphoria, suggest new directions for further research, and offer visions for what trans representation could become when trans people represent themselves at every stage of the process.

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APPENDIX A:  
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Agender: Genderless; to be without gender

AFAB: Assigned female at birth

AMAB: Assigned male at birth

Androgyny: A form of gender expression that blends traditionally masculine and feminine aesthetics, falls between masculine and feminine, or is neither masculine nor feminine

Asexual: Refers to those who experiences little to no sexual attraction

Bigender: Someone who identifies as two genders; most commonly associated with those who identify as man and woman, but can refer to other gender combinations

Bisexual: Refers to those who are attracted to two or more genders

Cisgender: Refers to those who identify exclusively with the gender they were assigned at birth

Cisgender man: A man who was assigned male at birth

Cisgender woman: A woman who was assigned female at birth

Cissexism: A system of institutionalized discrimination against people on the basis of gender identity, generally directed toward trans people

Demigender: Refers to those who identify partially with a certain gender. More specific terms include demiboy (someone who identifies partially as a boy) and demigirl (someone who identifies partially as a girl)

Demisexual: Refers to those who only experience sexual attraction after an emotional connection has been established

Essentialism: The idea there is a universal, core way of being a certain thing complete with a fixed set of characteristics that is true across time, space, and social context (e.g. “Trans people have existed in every society and time period.”)

Feminism: The promotion social, legal, economic, and political equality among all genders; historically centers the experiences of women

FTM: Female to male

Gay: Refers to those who are attracted to people of the same gender; tends to be associated most with men who attracted to other men

Gender: A combination of identities, roles, behaviors, socialization, discourse, and other factors societies code as masculine or feminine; traditionally categorized along binary lines consisting of male and female, man and woman, masculine and feminine and assumed to be related to the division of labor along the lines of sex

Gender dysphoria: The distress many trans people experience due to an incongruence between their gender identity and the gender they were assigned at birth

Gender euphoria: The feeling of extraordinary happiness some trans people experience when their gender identity is affirmed or in alignment with how they perceive themselves

Gender expression: The various means people use to communicate their sense of gender to others

Genderfluid: Refers to those who’s gender identity changes or shifts over time; a genderfluid person may have a gender identity that changes or shifts between woman and man, woman and nonbinary, man and nonbinary, or among more than two genders over time just to name a few possibilities

Gender identity: A person's psychological sense of being male, female, and/or nonbinary

Gender non-conforming: An umbrella term covering those who do not conform to the expectations associated with their gender

Genderqueer: 1) Refers to those who queer gender and whose gender identity defies definition 2) Refers to those who identify as in between man and woman or neither 3)

Synonym for nonbinary

Homosexual: Refers to those who attracted to people of the same gender (i.e. men who are attracted to other men and women who are attracted to other women); considered by many in the community to be out of date

Heterosexual: Refers to those who are attracted to people of the "opposite" gender as defined by the gender binary

Intersectionality: An analysis of identity that demonstrates individuals always occupy more than one identity at time, recognizes the different knowledges that come from these intersecting identities, and examines how oppressions interlock and can be experienced simultaneously (i.e. "A Black woman is never Black or a woman separately. She is always both. The racism she experiences is sexualized and the sexism she experiences is racialized.")

Intersex: An umbrella term that covers those born to bodies that do not fit what is considered standard for male and female bodies

Lesbian: Refers to women who are attracted to other women

MTF: Male to female

Multigender: Refers to those who do identify with more than one gender

**Neurodiversity:** The concept that neurological differences are to be recognized and respected as any other human variation; these neurological differences can include those diagnosed with Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Disorder, Dyscalculia among others but is most commonly associated with the Autistic community

**Nonbinary:** An umbrella term covering those who do not identify strictly within the male/female binary; while nonbinary can fall under the trans umbrella, some binary people identify as nonbinary without identifying as trans

**Oppression:** The relationships of domination and subordination between categories of people in a society in which dominate groups benefit from the systemic abuse, exploitation, and injustice toward subordinate groups

**Performativity:** The idea gender is a continuous and repetitious series of improvisations within a scene of constraint rather than a stable identity

**Privilege:** Unearned advantages gained through belonging to a certain social group or category as a result of power differentials within society and not personal effort

**Queer:** 1) An epithet for gay men and lesbians or anyone perceived as gay or lesbian; reclaimed in 1990s by queer activists 2) A verb meaning to reevaluate a subject with attention to sexual identity and/or gender identity 3) Describes a transgressive, revolutionary, anti-assimilationist stance in relation to issues of sexual and gender identity 4) An umbrella term for LGBT+ people 5) Non-heterosexual 6) Refers to people attracted to more than one gender

**Sex:** Biological features society classifies as male, female or intersex, including primary sex characteristics (i.e. chromosomes, hormones, genitals, etc.) and secondary sex characteristics (i.e. facial hair, breasts, muscle/fat distribution, etc.)

**Sexual identity:** A person's self-understanding in terms of to whom they are sexually attracted, whether men, women, nonbinary people, those of all genders, etc.; usually described in terms of if a person is attracted to those of a different or similar gender from their own (examples—heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.)

**Sexual orientation:** The tendency to be sexually toward those of a different, similar, or any gender in relation to one's (examples—heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.)

**Sexuality:** A person's capacity for sexual feeling

**Social constructivism:** The idea ways of being are constructed contextually by the time, place, and culture in which a group, person, or thing exists (e.g. "There were no homosexuals until the 1869 invention of the word 'homosexual.'")

**Strategic essentialism:** The employment of essentialist ideology for strategic purposes (e.g. "I was born this way. No one would choose this." See essentialism)

**Trans:** An umbrella term covering those who do not identify exclusively with the gender they were assigned at birth, including those who do not identify strictly within the male/female binary

**Transgender:** 1) Refers to those who transition from male to female or female to male 2)

An old umbrella terms that used to do the same work that trans does today

**Trans man:** A man who was assigned female at birth

**Trans woman:** A woman who was assigned male at birth

Transition: The processes many trans people undergo to be more comfortable and affirmed in their gender identity; these processes can be medical (hormone replacement therapy, surgery, etc.) or social (changing one's name, pronouns, clothes, etc.); a person does not need to transition to be trans

Transmisogyny: The intersection of sexism and transphobia trans women and other non-cis feminine people experience

Transphobia: Prejudicial attitudes against and/or irrational fear of trans people



APPENDIX B  
RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Dear [potential narrator's name],

I am a student in the University of Northern Iowa Women's and Gender Studies Master's Program and I am writing to invite you to participate in my thesis project on trans representation in society and how trans people construct their own narratives and identities. As part of my thesis, I am conducting interviews with trans people on their life experiences and gender identities. Each interview will last up to one hour and take place in a private room on campus, at the Cedar Falls Public Library, or another quiet location of your choice. If distance is an issue, a video interview can also be arranged. Please note, there is no compensation for participation. If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the project, please contact me either at [meyerabs@uni.edu](mailto:meyerabs@uni.edu) or (763) 381-1586. A letter of informed consent is attached.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Ashley Meyers

they/them/theirs and she/her/hers

APPENDIX C  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM  
**UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA  
HUMAN PARTICIPATION REVIEW  
INFORMED CONSENT**

Project Title: Beyond “Born This Way”: Reconsidering Trans Narrative

Name of Investigator: Ashley Meyers

**Invitation to Participate:** You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

**Nature and Purpose:** This research project is an MA Thesis conducted as part of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program, University of Northern Iowa. The purpose of this research project is to examine how trans people construct their narratives and the state of trans representation in society. As such, this research project is designed to address questions concerning trans identities and narratives, their construction and analysis, as well as their visibility and impact on culture.

**Explanation of Procedures:** The procedure for this research, should you decide to participate, involves a private, one-on-one, one-hour interview focused on questions concerning your life narrative and gender identity. The interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed as part of a series of case studies for this research project as well as for future research.

**Discomfort and Risks:** Risks of participation are minimal and similar to those experienced in day-to-day life. Possible risks of participation could include feelings of discomfort with some of the questions asked in the interview process, particularly those that pertain to experiences and medical transition. However, you may decline to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

**Benefits and Compensation:** Participation in this research project does not involve compensation or direct benefits to individual participants.

**Confidentiality:** Your confidentiality will only be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data transmitted electronically. To ensure your confidentiality as much as possible the following measures will be taken: The interview will *only* be audio recorded with your express permission. Otherwise the interview will be documented in the form of handwritten notes taken by the primary investigator. All electronic notes, audio

recordings, and transcripts pertaining to the interview will be stored on password protected files only the investigator can access. The interview will be conducted in a private space such as a reserved library study room where it is unlikely the interview will be overheard, or someone will inadvertently walk in on the interview process. Your name will not be recorded nor used in the analysis nor will the location be recorded. Only a pseudonym and a general description of the region where the research took place will be used. The only direct identifiers that will be recorded for the purposes of research will include markers such as your gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, region, and other similar identifiers.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:** Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, you will not be penalized or lose benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You are also free to decline to answer any question you do not feel comfortable answering.

**Questions:** If you have questions about the study or desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study generally, you can contact Ashley Meyers at [meyerabs@uni.edu](mailto:meyerabs@uni.edu) or (if appropriate) the project investigator's faculty advisor Dr. Carolyn Hildebrandt at [carolyn.hildebrandt@uni.edu](mailto:carolyn.hildebrandt@uni.edu). You can also contact the office of the IRB Administrator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

**Agreement:**

**I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed name of participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of investigator)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of instructor/advisor)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

APPENDIX D:  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Beyond “Born This Way”: Reconsidering Trans Narratives

University of Northern Iowa  
Department of Women’s and Gender Studies

Thank you so much for talking to me today. I’m going to ask you several questions about your personal experiences involving gender identity and expression.

Before we get started, I need to ask if are you comfortable having our conversation recorded? If so, I will turn it on now. If not, I will take notes during the interview. [If yes, then turn on the recorder].

Next, let’s review the informed consent form that was e-mailed to you. [Review the document with them] Do you have any questions? [Once all questions have been addressed...] Ok, so after reviewing the form, do you consent to continue with the interview at this time? [If yes, then continue. If not, end the meeting]

Also, just a reminder that if any time you do not feel comfortable answering a particular question, please let me know and we can move on to the next one.

Ok, then let’s get started!

1. To begin, first I have some demographic questions:
  - a. How old are you?
  - b. What is your household income? How many people are there in your household?
  - c. What is the last level of education you have completed?
  - d. What is your race?
  - e. What is your ethnicity?
  - f. What is your sexual identity?
  - g. In what part of the country do you currently reside? (e.g. West Coast, Midwest, East Coast, Southwest, etc.)
  - h. Do you consider yourself a member of the neurodiverse and/or disabled community?

2. Thank you. Now, I have some questions for you about your personal experiences with your gender identity and expression:

- a. How would you describe your gender identity?
- b. Which labels, if any, do you use to describe your gender identity and what do those labels mean to you?
- c. Which gender were you assigned at birth? How has this assignment related to your gender identity?
- d. When do you first remember being aware of your gender identity? Who or what do you think prompted that awareness and why?
- e. Can you tell me about your childhood? For instance, where did you grow up? What was your family like in terms of values, communication style, cultural background, etc.?
- f. Do you have any meaningful memories from childhood that stand out regarding your gender identity? Can you tell me about those?
- g. What can you tell me about your teenage years and gender identity exploration? For example, can you share any stories about your gender identity that occurred in high school with friends and/or family?
- h. If you have come out to friends and/or family regarding your gender identity, can you tell me about those experiences? For instance, how old were you when you first came out? Who did you come out to and what happened?
- i. Have you ever come out to others in a classroom or workplace setting? If so, why did you decide to come out and what happened?
- j. What are your thoughts on social transition? For instance, what does it mean to you to socially transition? If you have started or plan to start socially transitioning, what does that process look like for you?
- k. How does your gender identity relate to your gender expression?
- l. How does your gender identity relate to other identities you hold (i.e. sexual identity, race, class, ability, etc.)? Can you think of any experiences you've had that demonstrate your intersectionality (the ways your identities intersect or are experienced simultaneously)?

- m. If you experience gender euphoria, what have those experiences been like? What makes you happiest in your gender identity and expression?
- n. To the extent you feel comfortable answering, if you experience gender dysphoria, what have those experiences been like for you?
- o. To the extent you feel comfortable answering, what are your thoughts on medical transition? For instance, what does it mean to you to medically transition? If you have started to medically transition, what does that process look like for you?
- p. What is your take on trans visibility and the future of the trans community and activism in the United States?
- q. What is your take on trans representation in the media? Are there trans figures in the media that have informed your own journey?
- r. Are there any trans stories or parts of trans stories you feel are missing from the cultural conversation?
- s. If you were in charge of trans representation, what sort of stories would want to make sure are out there?
- t. Just one final question for you – what advice would you give to someone who may be exploring their gender identity?

That concludes my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you so much for chatting with me. (Turn off recorder)

Before we go, I wanted to ask if it would be okay if I contacted you again in the future to go over what we talked about today if I happened to have any follow-up questions or need clarification on something.

Again, thank you so much for your time – I really appreciate it!

APPENDIX E:  
DATA TABLE

Question 1: When do you first remember being aware of your gender identity? Who or what do you think prompted that awareness and why?

<p>Participant 1: Aidan It had to have been just getting high school ten years ago I noticed I wasn't comfortable with presenting or identifying female, but I did not have the language to identify as anything but that so it was mostly confusion starting out. That was probably the biggest factor, just that confusion.</p>	<p>Participant 2: Alex I don't want to sound silly (laughs). I think from a very young age I was very romantic. I had boyfriends growing up in kindergarten and preschool and I was just very infatuated with boys. And so, then I think I saw the musical <i>Newsies</i>. I don't want to sound stupid. And then I asked my parents if we could go, 'cause I had seen the 1999 film, so I asked my parents if we could go to New York for our summer vacation, because we decided we were gonna take a family vacation and they said yes. So, I saw <i>Newsies</i> and I was I think fourteen the first I saw it live—fourteen, fifteen—and I had just finished the eighth grade. I think I remember that. And after seeing <i>Newsies</i> I didn't know if I wanted to be those boys or marry those boys. [...] Right. And so, it was like, "Oh." So, I remember talking to my therapist 'cause I'd been seeing a therapist since I was like twelve, end of sixth grade, and I told him, I said, "I don't know. I think I'm attracted to boys as a boy." And he was like, "Mmm. That's interesting." But he didn't wanna label me until I had really come to terms with what I was thinking so he gently led me on a course of self-discovery where I ended up, "Oh, like, I'm not straight. And I am definitely not cisgender." So, I think <i>Newsies</i> was it. [...] And there was also a boy at school. When he came out as trans it gave me the gateway terminology. I wouldn't say he was a positive experience for me 'cause he then later whenever I would wear more feminine clothing to school he would text me and say, "Hey! You can't be trans, because you're wearing this." Very gatekeeping and so I don't like to give him credit for any of my queer journey, but I think <i>Newsies</i> and having him to say, "Oh, yes. I am definitely some kind of gender diverse," was, like, the big signifier to me.</p>	<p>Participant 3: Elliot It just kind of hit me like a bus. I think that's the best way to put it. You saw those lights and you're like, "What is this?" And then its coming closer and you're like, "Okay. I still don't know what the fuck that is." And so, it's still coming at ya and next thing you know you're under it and you're just sitting there being like, "This is a thing." And, the bus like being transgender, its like, "I'm under this bus. Okay. I need to examine this now. I can't keep putting it off. Its not always gonna be in the distance. Its now on top of me, over my head. I need to go through this." And that's when you start digging. You start Looking through the parts. You start looking through everything. You're just like, "What does this mean? What does it mean for me? What does it mean for other people? Why does it mean different things?"...But...Sorry. It's difficult to process, because being told you can't be this for so long and then to have it hit ya and be like, "Well, news flash. This is what you are." Its like, "Well, shit." So, like, I guess it took me years. It took me until last year to be like, "Hey. You want to be happy." Because for the longest time I was not happy with who I was and I could never figure out why. I'd done X,Y,Z. Done everything I thought imaginable, but then this bus hit me and now I never want to go back. I don't care if this bus hit me. And there might be some bruises. There might be some scrapes, but I'm very thankful that if finally did hit me...I guess. It's a weird metaphor, but it's the easiest way to describe what it is 'cause you don't know when its gonna to hit you. Like, some people talk about how they've known all their life. Well, I pretty sure that I knew, but I didn't want to acknowledge it so I just kind of was like, "Okay. Go away. I don't wanna redeem my bus ticket yet" kind of thing. And, low and behold, here's the due date for that ticket and its hitting ya. You gotta face it. And some people I know go their whole lives until its almost too late. I mean, it never too late, but you only get so old, I guess. And so, like—I don't know. Its just—I don't know if I'm even answering your question, but it's a process that people can't describe and its very hard to describe. When it hits you it hits you hard. You have to start thinking about you and just you for a bit, which is very hard to do.</p>
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<p><b>Participant 4: Evelyn</b></p> <p>I know I was about eight years old, but I don't know what made me aware. I just knew things weren't write. I liked little soft silky items and I just in a way I kind of did girly things more than guy things. [...] I got invited to a lot of tea parties. Guys don't go to tea parties, but if you like tea parties. I actually had a nice collection of stuffed animals and dolls. Mom and Dad didn't care. They thought neutrally. So, making a good grandma cook, I always wore aprons... And then I guess when I was in mid-to-late forties when I was living alone I cross-dressed and finally the decision was made to do the transition.</p>	<p><b>Participant 5: Ray</b></p> <p>So, I'm AFAB, assigned female at birth. As a child I was very much in opposition with this fact so I would often say I was a boy, because I only knew of the two binary genders, or I would say I was an animal or a mythical creature or a robot or something sci-fi, but I didn't really have gender, at least not in the way that people were thinking of it. It was sort of like my substitution for nonbinary identities. But I learned pretty quick in school and stuff that there are different separating boys or us girl games and stuff that no one else understood this so I pretty much sort of just ignored it for a long time, but then puberty is a thing.</p>	<p><b>Participant 6: Reigen</b></p> <p>Transness sort of is throughout your life and I didn't know when I was three years old, four years old, five years old, ten years old, but that doesn't make me any less trans.</p>	<p><b>Participant 7: Zola</b></p> <p>Mm. Okay. So, like I said before, I grew up overseas and also it was during '80s, which was awesome, because music-wise everyone was androgynous. Like, you had your Prince and your David Bowie and then, because I was close to the UK, that whole dark wave synth thing was goin' on so everyone had the teased up hair and there was all this gender play goin' on. I felt different at that time, but I didn't know because had nothin' to compare it to. I was just like, "Well, I know something." But then when I moved back to the states—more particularly in the south part of the states—then that's when the fine roles started to wanna intrude, you know? And then that's when I knew, "Well, I don't match up with everyone else."</p>
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Question 2: Can you tell me about your childhood? For instance, where did you grow up? What was your family like in terms of values, communication style, cultural background, etc.?

<p><b>Participant 1: Aidan</b> I was born in [redacted] New York, and when I was four I was adopted—my mom's my biological mom. I was adopted by her new husband—well, her first husband, because my dad didn't marry my mom. But when I was four I was adopted and [redacted] Massachusetts—so, right dead center of Massachusetts. And I lived there for twenty and that's all I knew. I don't know where my family came from, but I know that both my parents kind of had not very bigoted views, just they were unaware of a lot of things and they didn't think they would have understood if I tried to explain being transgender if I had the language to do that in the first place. But I never learned that it was normal or okay to date people of the same gender or to present differently than you assigned gender so I just—I don't know. I, like, I don't how to explain it 'cause I was just presenting differently on my own just as an experimental thing without really questioning why I might be doing that and I didn't have any parental figure to talk to and I don't know if they would have understood what it was all about. But they weren't really religious. I used to go to church with them every Sunday, but then we had stopped going regularly. But it was never very strict religious household. It was pretty open with that sort of thing. I don't really think I grew up with a faith, only vague understandings of Christianity.</p>	<p><b>Participant 2: Alex</b> So, I grew up here in [redacted] Iowa. And my family was, from what I remember of early middle childhood, it was very busy because we were all involved theater and so by the time I was six there was rarely a time where none of us were in a show and my parents would get involved in shows we were in so we would still get to see them. It was a very, like, while it made us spend time away from each other, it was a very bonding experience, because we all loved theater. Our communication as we got older, I'm thinking like early twelve on, was very clashing. Like, I yelled at my parents. I would lie to my parents. I spread lies about my brother around the school. So, like, our communication styles when we were younger were great, but as we got older my parents didn't know how to enforce things without us yelling at them and so our communication styles dwindled. And so, I became very close with my dad, but I really detached from my mom, emotionally, and I think that also had to do with me starting to realize I didn't feel like a woman, but I don't think I realized that then. Looking back it kind of makes sense. [...] Right. My mom was the primary source of income. My father never finished his collegiate degree. He has an Associate's degree in photography from Hawkeye, but after he was drafted—Well, not drafted. He enlisted in the Vietnam War, because his draft number was so low that he had no chance if he was drafted. So, when he came back he didn't have the motivation to go back to college, which I get (laughs). And so, when he didn't work he stayed at home and he did laundry and stuff and my mom was the primary breadwinner. And I don't remember us being financially insecure or anything. My dad's side of the family is really close so I have memories of growing up around my cousins. My brother and I were close for a while until in high school I spread rumors about him, because I was jealous of him and looking back it all makes sense, but I was jealous because I wanted to be liked like he was and I wanted people to see me like he was. And so I spread rumors about him and people believed them because, you know, if you tell someone something so many times they start to believe it. [...] Right. So, me and my brother are not too close today because of that. In mid-high school we tried doing family therapy and that's how I found out that my mother had a miscarriage before she had my brother.</p>	<p><b>Participant 3: Elliot</b> I was born and raised in [redacted] Iowa. My parents were basically like, "You can date anybody that's white and cis." So it was very much a homophobic, transphobic, racist household and I'm glad I don't hold ideals today. That's putting that out there (laughs) [...] And my dad was raised Mormon. My mom was raised with no religion. And they didn't want to raise me and my brother in any form of religion. They wanted us to take it upon ourselves but saying that I also went to a religious daycare so it was kind of forced down my throat a little bit. There were other daycares in the area, but they chose that one. I don't know what the story is behind that, but yeah. And I guess that was basically the demographic of how my family was set up. It was made very clear to me as a person in my grade came out as trans and all these were coming out as gay, they were like, "We don't care who you date, but if you"—and this is not the language I agree with—"but if you mutilate your body the way he's doing"—and was just binding and stuff at the time—"if you mutilate your body like that and stuff like that don't think that you have a home to come to." So that's why my parents don't know about my transition and probably won't until later on in life when I have a steady income, I have steady housing situation, and I'm on my own feet and I'm not relying on them.</p>	<p><b>Participant 4: Evelyn</b> Okay. Grew up in northwestern, central Illinois. Maybe about forty miles from Chicago proper. Farm... Our values were very, very strong. I was taught good work values, respecting people. Communication style... I don't how to answer that.  <i>Yeah. Well, one way to think about it is, for instance, like, how did your parents communicate with you?</i>  Not really like I was child, but on a level that we were equals. Well, when I was little baby, baby, you know? Not then. But it was more like... treating me like I am a human and that... they were looking at the fact that as I grew old enough to understand conversation better. [...] Cultural background... I guess it was of Russian ancestry and Jewish... We celebrated a lot of Jewish holidays and a lot of holiday that were just particular to Russia. My great grandma, she could speak and understand English, but she spoke Russian and I spoke Russian with her... My dad was a professional truck driver. I had an uncle who was a foreman on a railroad... Grandpa ran the farm so I learned how to do trucking, farming, working on the railroad.</p>
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<p><b>Participant 5: Ray</b></p> <p>I was born in [redacted] and there were a lot of complications with my mother and her mental health not being treated so I got abused a bit when I was little so then we were in foster care, my sister and I, for a spell while they all figured out the court system, because as soon as Dad brought anything up our mother would say it was all him and he was doing all this bad stuff so it was just big he said, she said thing. And then also because my dad is a man it was harder at that time, because a lot of family courts it seemed like wanted to side with the mother a lot of the times so that was a lot of interestingness. Eventually our dad did get us and our mother had visitation for a little while, but then she tried to attack the supervisor of the visitation and because I'm me I tried to save the supervisor and got my arm slammed in the door again so they decided she shouldn't get visitation rights until we're eighteen and we can make those decisions. So, I sometimes still talk to her, but it's definitely an odd relationship. [...] I'll usually let her initiate any contact that she can now. And I'll respond because I've got my own mental health stuff and I understand that it's not all her thing. So then after that it was Dad and my sister and his girlfriend-at-the-time and it was going really well and then the girlfriend-at-the-time's family's house burned down so a bunch of her family moved into our house and we were trying to help 'em out, but it turned into very much a mooching kind of situation. They pretty much destroyed our house, were saving money but making us pay for all the groceries and stuff and didn't tell us they had all this money stowed away. So that was fun. So, we kicked them out eventually, but then we were owed a lot of money and our house was kind of destroyed and then the girlfriend got into an accident. [...] She got into a car accident so she suffered brain damage and her family that had mooched off of us didn't want to help her at all and said that the only thing they would do was put her in some sort of home, which we didn't feel like was fair so we just took care of her at our house for a while and helped her with the physical therapy and her memory loss and the moodiness from said memory loss, but we didn't really have the money to be doing any of this since they had already mooched off of us so it was very difficult. And eventually she made the decision that she wanted to leave so I think she did end up in a home eventually for a little while, which is unfortunate but it was her decision at least and not the family forcing her into it. [...] During all that I also was bullied almost my entire life so that didn't help. And then Dad was taking care of us and everything and trying his best, but then we got foreclosed on so we moved closer to his side of the family. We lived with friends for a while and then eventually got our own place, but unfortunately for me it was a small town and right around the time when all my mental health was being diagnosed and I was coming out, at least as liking women. That all happened in this very small town as soon as moved there so the bullying I had already been experiencing increased tenfold. [...] So, they really didn't like me voicing my opinion as much as I did. A lot of my English papers were LGBT related. If you could choose the topic that's what I would do or mental health almost every time. [...] So, I was very vocal about it, which didn't help my bullying situation, but because I was already getting bullied I attempted to have a GSA at this high school and it worked pretty well for a few months. It was bigger than some of the other clubs I was in, but it sort of stated getting more attention from a lot of the teachers and some of the parents so they started sort of fear mongering people from going to it. They didn't announce any of our events anymore and everything so they basically illegally shut it down, unfortunately. [...] And then I went to community college and figured out gender stuff from doing a GSA over there and then I'm here trying to figure out what to do, because my mental health has been affecting me more and I haven't been able to see a gender therapist.</p>	<p><b>Participant 6: Reign</b></p> <p>Sure. I grew up in the [redacted] area. [redacted] is, like, thirty miles outside of Milwaukee. And I went to a great school district. Three of my four parents are educators so that was a really important part of that. Yeah. I mean, for the part, I was one of the more privileged people where I grew up. Not that we had a lot of money 'cause most of the time we didn't, but I would say that my parents are very well-educated and I have a lot of resources at my disposal so there's definitely that aspect playing into it. [...] Yeah. So, communication style... My mother is a very strong woman, like I said before. She is not an emotional communicator. So, you know, you just got stuff done, because you had to do it. [...] It's what you do. She's first-generation college student, second-generation American—first generation American. Her parents were immigrants so it was very important to just shut up and get it done because that's just what you do. And so that's an interesting communication styles that's come out of and progress. [...] Her mother came from India and her father came from Germany.</p>	<p><b>Participant 7: Zola</b></p> <p>It—Let me see. Let's see. Okay. I grew— So, okay. I grew up in Tampa Bay, Florida, which was the air force base there. And when I was five we moved to Spain and I stayed there for four years. And my family... Let see. My mom was sweet and my dad, he could be fun but he usually was working all the time and everything like that. My little sister was a little sister. She was really smart. It was just regular home life. It was fun. I didn't have anyone to compare to coming back from the states. I really didn't have anyone trying to dictate what to do so it was cool. [...] Let's see. I used to be raised Christian. My mom was one of those different kind that was really kind to people who had piercing and colored hair and everything else so she was really like a liberal Christian. [...] Me and my mom back in the day were super close. I could tell her anything even the stuff that made her uncomfortable and she would like, "Oh, okay?" You know? Just roll with it. [...] My little sister was a little sister. She was going through her growing up and everything like that and kind of going through her own thing and so we kind of butted heads for a little while. [...] And my dad, well, he stayed overseas so he was kind of like phantom dad, so.</p>
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Question 3: Do you have any meaningful memories from childhood that stand out regarding your gender identity? Can you tell me about those?

<p><b>Participant 1: Aidan</b>          Growing up I didn't really—I had only really started presenting differently, like, in high school, but growing up I was I guess you would be considered a girly girl, I guess. Like, maybe that's just how I felt I should have been presenting and at the time I didn't quite question it.</p>	<p><b>Participant 2: Alex</b>          So, like, [my family's] communication styles when we were younger were great, but as we got older my parents didn't know how to enforce things without us yelling at them and so our communication styles dwindled. And so, I became very close with my dad, but I really detached from my mom, emotionally, and I think that also had to do with me starting to realize I didn't feel like a woman, but I don't think I realized that then. Looking back it kind of makes sense.</p>	<p><b>Participant 3: Elliot</b>          I guess the biggest is I was very much a tomboy. I hate that term, but that's what people called it. And the fact that I didn't really want to dress feminine. I didn't wear dresses. I didn't want to wear X, Y, Z and be a girl essentially. At daycare I'd always be the guy whenever we played house. I'd always take on those more masculine and boy-like tasks, I guess. My parents would to buy me dolls, try to buy me dresses, try to buy me makeup, things like that. And I was like, "No. I'm good." And so it took them a long time to just kind of let me do my own thing. And then going into middle school kind of thing it was like, "Oh. I need to go back and do this girl-thing if I want people to like me." Which is very sad that that's pushed on people. So, yeah.</p>	<p><b>Participant 4: Evelyn</b>          In a strict male role, learning how to drive farm equipment, driving trucks, working on a railroad, learning how to lay a railroad track, how to work with horses and cattle. Other than being invited some of the girlfriends I felt the only other, like, the tea parties and dressing up. I played the daddy. She'd play the mommy. That kind of thing. [...] We'd sit there drinking our tea, pretending to drink the tea and, you know, "Oh, the baby's crying. Let's see what's wrong with it."  <i>Right. That kind of play.</i>          There really wasn't pressure to go away from it. It was more I got involved with learning how to work on a railroad and all this and it got really boring as I got older. More and more on farming and how to take care of the animals.</p>
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<p><b>Participant 5: Ray</b></p> <p>So, in hindsight there was kind of that stuff I was talking about that I would always say I was a boy or a robot or a dog or a dragon or whatever the case was that day to sort of fill in for sort of nonbinary identities 'cause I didn't know what those were obviously 'cause that's not really taught. I didn't know until community college that was a thing. So that stood out quite a bit. And I fought a lot about what I was allowed to wear and play with. It became such thing I fought so much against wearing dresses that those were pretty much out by the time I talked and then it was a fight on skirts for a really long time, or a least it felt like a really long time to little me. They eventually compromised with me and had me do skirts, a very nineties kind of thing where there was a shorts and then a skirt over said shorts. [...] So, little me could kind of pretend that it was just shorts. I don't have clear memories of this, but some of my siblings have memories of me not liking to wear shirts a lot 'cause the boys never did.</p>	<p><b>Participant 6: Reign</b></p> <p>Yeah. When I was told that I was gonna have a brother—he's four years younger than I am—I remember being jealous 'cause I didn't wear dresses as a kid and I thought, "No one's gonna have to tell him to wear a dress. This is stupid. This is ridiculous." And I—Let me see. My brother always had a better relationship with my dad. My dad and I have very similar qualities in areas that I'm not always proud of, but we don't communicate well at all and so we don't have a great relationship and so, I guess that's—I remember being jealous of my brother because I felt like he could talk to my dad better and I didn't know how to do that and I thought for a while that was because of my gender and it didn't turn out to be that. But it's this sort of interesting dynamic and I would also say it's a little bit of an Indian thing. They're a lot less hard on their sons as they are on their daughters only because when it comes to history you had to pay a dowry in order to get married and so you had to have marketable daughters whereas your sons were less so. And did doesn't carry through in a lot of obvious ways, but it does carry through in the ways that are communicated between my brother and I. Yeah. I do also have a memory of being in elementary school and I was bullied and these girls wouldn't let me into the bathroom 'cause they said, "Only real girls can go in here." And I said, "Well, I'm a real girl." And they were like, "No you're not." Which I guess is kind of ironic now (laughs).</p>	<p><b>Participant 7: Zola</b></p> <p>Okay. Going back to the music thing, being excited about that. I look back on it now as like, "I wanna do that when I grow up!" It just, priting! My queer soul's like, "That's it!" This is foreshadowing, but we'll have to wait a while. It was more of a conglomerate of just watching the performers that were out then. I mean, even Michael Jackson has that androgyny. Everyone was doing androgyny and gender play and it was so like, oh, so wonderful. [...] I noticed a hypocrisy. That if you are an entertainer you can do anything you want, but if you're (quote, unquote) "average person" then you have to step in line. Yes. [...] Yeah, this was for celebrities. So, Prince got a go, but, you know, I start doing it its off.</p>
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Question 4: What can you tell me about your teenage years and gender identity exploration? For example, can you share any stories about your gender identity that occurred in high school with friends and/or family?

Participant 1: Aidan	Participant 2: Alex	Participant 3: Elliott	Participant 4: Evelyn
<p>During high school, those later couple of years, like, junior and senior year, I was experimenting with different forms of presentation and not considering myself male, but specifically being aware of my mannerisms and the way I just presented myself in general. Like, I didn't tell myself like, "Don't sit with your legs crossed." Or, like, you know, square my shoulders up, try to wear looser-fitting clothing to try to hide everything, my physique and all that. But I didn't know what transgender was so I just thought that I was just presenting differently than people would expect. And I couldn't use the female bathroom anymore at my school, because it was confusing people and they didn't think I should've been. Like, some of the students were concerned I was going in there. Some of the teachers didn't realize I could go in there because I considered myself female. So, I used to use the bathroom at the nurse's office.</p>	<p>I think one of the times that stands out to me is—It was November of 2014 or 2015. 2014, and I had found some old clothes my brother was too big for and so I was like, "Oh, I can try these on. These look really cool." And at this time I wasn't really aware that being trans was a thing. I knew there were butch lesbians, but I don't know anything about, like, gender gray-area (little laugh). And so, I put it on with jeans—no, athletic shorts. It was a Vans Skater t-shirt with mesh sports shorts, converse, and I wore my <i>Newbies</i> hat, but backwards. And I have a picture on my Instagram and it has the picture and it says, "I'm such a cool dude," or "I'm such a hot dude," or something like that. And wearing that is a big—I don't remember that day very well, but I remember that Instagram post 'cause it's still on my profile and I didn't think anything of it but looking back on it now... And I remember my brother being so pissed that I borrowed his clothes even though they didn't fit him anymore. It was just irrational. I remember talking to someone online through Tumblr and that's how we had met and we just connected instantly and she was the first person I came out to and we ended up having this online relationship and she helped me find my name and she helped me figure out more terminology and that was December of that year, so December 2014 into January, February 2015. And it was a very secret relationship that my friends knew about but no else 'cause, like, whose gonna believe that an online relationship could have value? And she was like, "Oh, what pronouns do you want me to use?" And like, "How can I support you?" And so she used my name as much as she could to make me feel like it fit me and she helped me realize that it did. And so, having that connection was really pivotal for my understanding what names I liked and what names I didn't like, pronouns. With family I remember coming out to them in the car on the way home from something. My parents—I don't know if John was there, my brother—but they were just kind of like, "It's a phase. You go through these phases. Everything you do is a phase. This will blow over." 'Cause before then I had come out as lesbian and then it was gender fluid and then it was trans man and so they were like, "You're full of phases." So, they didn't really take me seriously until—I don't think they took me seriously until after surgery, honestly, so.</p>	<p>I would definitely say they were nonexistent. It was very much shoved down my throat that if you want a cis guy to like you that you have to dress this way, you have to act this way, you have to do this, this, and this. And while I knew kind of in the back of my head that I really don't like cis guys. I didn't 'cause a lot of them have been nothing but poor to me and I'm all about wanting to get to know a person before doing anything even if it was just going on a date, things like that. And I guess it wouldn't be until I got out of high school, started my associate's career at Indian Hills that I was just like, "You know, I'll download Tinder and say I'm interested in both guys and girls and see what happens and see how this goes." And I felt like I could talk easier with people that were any—anyone who wasn't a cis dude I felt like I did better with. So I guess that's the only really exploring I did. I didn't really do any—that's more like my sexual orientation. I didn't really do gender identity exploring because I didn't feel I was safe to do so.</p>	<p>I know didn't like gym... I just didn't like changing around everybody... The only things I went out for in high school were four years of fencing, four years of debate, and four years on the bowling team... That was that... other than, you know? Because if it was harvest season or planting season or something like that I was either on the farm or if there was extra work that needed to be done on the railroad tracks, you know, there. So, I didn't go out for baseball or football or basketball, the macho stuff—Well, fencing kind of macho. [...] There were a lot of good of good female—"Oh, wow! She beat the pants off of me." They're good. There was one gal... Oh, was good. And as hard as I tried to beat her in a march I could never beat her. She was good. Oh! [...] And then bowling I did 300s. [...] I liked bowling 300s. Debating, eh, sometimes our team might win, sometimes not. You know? It's how it went.</p>

<p><b>Participant 5: Ray</b></p> <p>So, in hindsight there was kind of that stuff I was talking about that I would always say I was a boy or a robot or a dog or a dragon or whatever the case was that day to sort of fill in for sort of nonbinary identities 'cause I didn't know what those were obviously 'cause that's not really taught. I didn't know until community college that was a thing. So that stood out quite a bit. And I fought a lot about what I was allowed to wear and play with. It became such thing I fought so much against wearing dresses that those were pretty much out by the time I talked and then it was a fight on skirts for a really long time, or a least it felt like a really long time to little me. They eventually compromised with me and had me do skirts, a very nineties kind of thing where there was a shorts and then a skirt over said shorts. [...] So, little me could kind of pretend that it was just shorts. I don't have clear memories of this, but some of my siblings have memories of me not liking to wear shirts a lot 'cause the boys never did.</p>	<p><b>Participant 6: Reign</b></p> <p>Yeah. When I was told that I was gonna have a brother—he's four years younger than I am—I remember being jealous 'cause I didn't wear dresses as a kid and I thought, "No one's gonna have to tell him to wear a dress. This is stupid. This is ridiculous." And I—Let me see. My brother always had a better relationship with my dad. My dad and I have very similar qualities in areas that I'm not always proud of, but we don't communicate well at all and so we don't have a great relationship and so, I guess that's—I remember being jealous of my brother because I felt like he could talk to my dad better and I didn't know how to do that and I thought for a while that was because of my gender and it didn't turn out to be that. But it's this sort of interesting dynamic and I would also say it's a little bit of an Indian thing. They're a lot less hard on their sons as they are on their daughters only because when it comes to history you had to pay a dowry in order to get married and so you had to have marketable daughters whereas your sons were less so. And did doesn't carry through in a lot of obvious ways, but it does carry through in the ways that are communicated between my brother and I. Yeah. I do also have a memory of being in elementary school and I was bullied and these girls wouldn't let me into the bathroom 'cause they said, "Only real girls can go in here." And I said, "Well, I'm a real girl." And they were like, "No you're not." Which I guess is kind of ironic now (laughs).</p>	<p><b>Participant 7: Zola</b></p> <p>Okay. Going back to the music thing, being excited about that. I look back on it now as like, "I wanna do that when I grow up!" It just, priting! My queer soul's like, "That's it!" This is foreshadowing, but we'll have to wait a while. It was more of a conglomerate of just watching the performers that were out then. I mean, even Michael Jackson has that androgyny. Everyone was doing androgyny and gender play and it was so like, oh, so wonderful. [...] I noticed a hypocrisy. That if you are an entertainer you can do anything you want, but if you're (quote, unquote) "average person" then you have to step in line. Yes. [...] Yeah, this was for celebrities. So, Prince got a go, but, you know, I start doing it its off.</p>
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Question 5: What are your thoughts on social transition? For instance, what does it mean to you to socially transition? If you have started or plan to start socially transitioning, what does that process look for you?

Participant 1: Aidan	Participant 2: Alex	Participant 3: Elliott	Participant 4: Evelyn
<p>Social transition for me, definitely asking people to refer to me with different pronouns and a different name or to see me as certain gender and sometimes you're in certain circles where you're safer also acting more like a man, I guess. I mean, not as far as locker room talk. Those kind of circles are usually—Like, I experience that at work where they try to get me in on talking about girls and talking about all kinds of gross stuff. I'm not into that, but I know there are certain social expectations when you're a guy that's in a group of guys. So, sometimes it's trying to fit in, trying to blend in without, like, really, you don't wanna go outside of who you actually are. You don't want to get into that toxic masculinity. So, to me it's fitting in. Its feeling like you belong in other groups of your gender, I guess. [...] had mentioned just little by little I was asking people to refer to me with he/him pronouns and consider me male and using my name and everything and I didn't have to do that for every single person. Some people had already assumed I was male and they didn't previously know me by any other name or pronouns so it was more just, "Hi. My name is [Aidan]." And that's just kind of it. Maybe they made the assumption that I'm male and I kind of leave it at that. I'm okay with them assuming so I don't have to go through the whole asking them to refer to me a certain way or anything.</p>	<p>I don't know if I'm familiar with what social transitioning is. I mean, from what I understand, socially transitioning is letting people know your new name and pronouns and letting people know this is the space I currently exist in and I think I've already socially transitioned, like mostly. Like, I don't hear anyone using my deadname or my incorrect pronouns. I don't really hear that very often, pretty any, because I've legally changed my name as well. So from my understanding of socially transitioning I believe I've already done that. I think that's, like...I don't know. Like, from my understanding I've already socially transitioned. I don't think that there's a setting in which I feel that I will have to go over the basics of that again.</p>	<p>I definitely am gonna stay with the name [Elliott] and stay with he/him/his pronouns. I mean, from last may until now I—Well, two Mays ago technically. Its fine. Like two years ago I had hair down to my ass and now I've chopped it all off. Yeah. Hair is the biggest thing. Other than that I just, clothes are clothes. I wear what I want. I don't care what people think and I used to long while to get over that.</p>	<p>Oh, yeah, yeah. I'm the process of getting my name legally changed, my birth certificate legally changed. We're also in the process, because of total anonymity, of trying for a new social secretary number and have everything changed so my identity will not be known again. At least for me we're going to drop the [old name] and it's just going to be [new full name] and nobody's gonna know the difference. And we're looking at my veteran's support. We're down the wire now, but in another thirty or so days we should know what's going on and we should have it completed. And Ben, he's gonna help me with the processes of getting all my identification and stuff changed. I'll get within thirty days or so many days after the court orders I'll get a new birth certificate saying female and I can officially, <i>officially</i> be [Evelyn] instead of just—So many people have accepted me this way. My bank, for legal purposes, has me under [birth name], but they have on the screens, the person calls me, "[Evelyn]." The VA's the same way. "She prefers to be called [Evelyn]." And in different places I go, my new VA chapter, they know me as Ellie 'cause I had it officially changed with them 'cause they said, "We don't need any court order or anything. If that's your new name that's your new name." So, I got that. The VA on my volunteer and my card that gets me in to see the doctors, the ARB, so on, I'm in women's clothing. The DOT allowed me to be dressed like this. I felt good. I felt good. And so many people say, "We don't need that legal stuff right now." You're—You know. At church I'm [Evelyn]. And who's Jack? (Laughs) And I've had a wonderful time, especially—Well, I had a few friends down in the Coralville area, but since I came up here I've found so many more transgenders. I've got several that were really good friends. One that I'm her hero, her idol, her inspiration, because of my age and coming out like I am. She's been toying with it, because she gonna go full speed. And I love going clothes shopping. Oh! I love going clothes shopping. We found some sandals today. It's been hard finding footwear for me, but we've found out that a 10 ½ extra wide or an 11 women's footwear fits me. Sometimes we still have to try on the dresses and skirts and stuff, but that's not a hassle. I love going shopping!</p>

<p><b>Participant 5: Ray</b></p> <p>So, I've already kind of socially transitioned quite a bit. I always introduce myself with my actual name as opposed to what legal documents say. I try to also always introduce myself with pronouns even though maybe I'm the only one doing that and I tend to wear pronoun pins with my pronoun buttons on my hats. And then sort of presentation-wise, like I've kind of been saying, I tend to go more masculine sort of trying to lean into that as to not be assumed my AGAB, assigned gender a birth. So, I sort of try to lean away from it as far as possible even though I do have connections to it in my identity. I just don't want that to confuse people, I guess. So I sort of lean into presentation in masculine ways I can do. So, I also bind whenever I'm out in public and I wear hats a lot, because—I don't know—growing up hats just seemed very masculine to me. And hair has always been weird to me, because I've always really liked it short but I feel like even when it is short it looks pretty feminine in my head because of dysphoria and things so I try to keep my hair as short as possible, but I also tend to always wear a hat so even if my hair is longer its not as big of a deal and plus since I wear my hat all the time it's an easy way to have my pins all the time without having to put holes in my stuff. [...] So that's a lot of my social transitioning. I still have a bit to go such as legally getting my name changed and maybe doing something with my gender marker, but since currently there's not really a correct marker for me as of where I stand right now I'll probably change the "F" to an "M," because that's my options right now and because I tend to lean into more masculine that would be a lot less dysphoria inducing and a lot less complicated with the name as well, because to me it seem very masculine and very odd when you use that with an "F," or that with feminine language. [...] So that's been my goal for the social stuff. And I want to try and advocate for other people like I have a lot in the past just through school and things. So I want to always share my story and I think that, at for me, is part of my social transitioning. I'm not ashamed of being trans. I'm extremely open about it. Like, I can easily talk about my deadname. I can talk about life before. Like, its not fun, but I'm very open about it and I'm open about a lot of difficulties I've had and things and, at least for me, that's very much a part of my social transitioning because to really be comfortable in myself it makes sense to me that I should be comfortable with every/body else knowing myself, if that makes sense. So, for me, that's a bit part of my social transitioning is just talking about it.</p>	<p><b>Participant 6: Reign</b></p> <p>Yeah. So, to me socially transitioning looks like changing your name, changing your pronouns, coming out to friends, family, coworkers, changing your appearance if you want to sort of things—No. Appearance is like a physical change. Never mind. So, that is an interesting thing to socially come out, because it's less concrete than physically transitioning and people can choose to see it or not. People can't really choose to see that I have short hair. People can't really choose to see that I wear button ups or whatever, but people don't have to use my pronouns if they don't want to so that I would say is challenge of socially transitioning is people can ignore it.</p>	<p><b>Participant 7: Zola</b></p> <p>Okay. Well, imagine one of the holes in a belt and that's Waycross. It's like, oh, gosh, its deep south. No one knew who I was. I was in twelfth grade. When I graduated finally, like, "I thought you were in ninth grade." I didn't have any friends. The one friend I did have he stopped being my friend when he got a job at Taco Bell. I got dumped for Taco Bell and everything so it was pretty ridiculously tragic. It just—yeah. [...] I was kind of in my deep south school, you know. Everyone knew each other from jump and I just show up, you know? [...] Yeah. No nickname. Just, here you go. [...] Yeah, it was me trying to fit in the role and failing. It was me having my mom—My sister was picking on me real bad one time and my mom was like, you know, using my old pronouns, "Leave him alone. You know he has a problem with his manhood." And I was just like at that point (laugh), I was like, "Thanks. It sounds like broken toy, like something that broke. My manhood needed to go and get installed again." And, I mean, I lived in an all-female universe so I had feminine traits. It just didn't express itself in the same way, you know? And I had way more feminine stuff about me. It was just the way I was treated was all.</p>
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Question 6: To the extent you feel comfortable answering, what are your thoughts on medical transition? For instance, what does it mean to you to medically transition? If you have started to medically transition, what does that process look like for you?

Participant 1: Aidan	Participant 2: Alex	Participant 3: Elliot	Participant 4: Evelyn
<p>Well, I've been on testosterone for three years so that's just gonna be a constant I'm always gonna be testosterone. That's kinda the reality of getting hormones. This is medication I'm taking for the rest of my life to alleviate gender dysphoria and make sure that I remain presenting the way that I need to. And I had touched on the bottom surgery, top surgery thing. Bottom surgery, that's a lot to consider so that's something its kinda on the backburner that I'll deal with another time if I really feel the need to think on it 'cause it doesn't matter if I'm in public. It doesn't help me either way. And I do not have—Usually when you have body dysphoria sometimes there is a split where you may not have bottom dysphoria and you may only have chest dysphoria or vocal dysphoria. Its kind of a mix of pieces in that regard. And I've considered top surgery if I'm able to afford it and just find the will to take that big step, because that's still serious surgery and everything so there's different pieces of those things that I've considered and I have different feelings about it depending, different feelings between the bottom and top surgery stuff. That's kind of where I am now where I'm considering one thing. Other things I'm not as worried about.</p>	<p>Well, I think obviously, and why you said, "for you," is because its different for everyone. There's this movement called like "trans-med" or "trust med" or "truscmed"—I don't know what it's called—but it's this big movement where people are like, "if you don't medically transition or you don't want to medically transition you're not trans." And I believe that that is fucking bullshit. Sorry for my profane language, but it pisses me off. I do believe that you need to feel gender dysphoria to be trans. I feel like you need to, even if it's just emotional or like, you know, I don't how to explain it, but just because then how else would you know that you're not the gender you were assigned? But, for me, medically transitioning means going through the steps to acquire hormones. Going through the steps to acquire surgery. Going through the steps to—I mean it depends on your identity, because some identities don't necessarily desire too much surgery or they're okay with just hormones. But to me medically transitioning means changing your body or changing your appearance to whatever extent you desire. And for me that looks like hormones, top surgery, possibly bottom surgery.</p>	<p>Right now I don't see it in my future. And, not that I'm against it by any means. If a person wants to get it that's fine. I just feel like my chest is small enough that I can bind for the rest of my life and plus once I start testosterone the fact that my body will redistribute it will get smaller and so I feel like all the problems I currently have with dysphoria—they won't go away permanently—but they will be—I don't want to say better—they won't be as significant.</p>	<p>I started on medication to lower the testosterone, which last reported I'm in the very good range. I'm low enough that it should not affect anything. My estrogen levels are getting up there. My goal is to get up into the 200s, which is a good level they said—give or take a little. And that is with a patch and lowering my testosterone with pills. We are seriously thinking of having the surgery done. I did have—Honey what month was that I had my mammogram? Was it in November? Or was it in December? ...Honey? ...She's out. I think it was in November. But I had my first mammogram and I loved it. It was great... Until my nose slender out I was also considering having it slender out, but its slender out nicely. But we are considering looking into finding ways of getting funding to have the surgery done. Its going to be done well after she's taken care of. Blaire, my legal aid, is looking into some possible fundings for that. His group works with LGBTs so I'm in good hands with him. I have two wonderful transition nurse practitioners and my general nurse practitioner I've not seen her yet, but she said I will be treated as female and will also—She's not really familiar with transgending, but will also help with the monitoring of my levels and stuff. And maybe do some more voice lessons. Jesse is gonna help me with vocal lessons with singing. It's gonna be fun. And then we're gonna maybe eventually learn how to walk with heels about like this. Maybe about this height. No stilettos, but a decent heel that you gotta learn how to walk in heels just for the hell of it. And that's all on the medical part.</p>

<p><b>Participant 5: Ray</b></p> <p>Really the only physical things about any of that are just shank week and that horribleness, but I definitely have a lot of top dysphoria and would like—I'd probably go for inverted tee as opposed—Since I'm bigger chested I can't do keyhole, which is there they kind of stick something and kind of suck everything out. And there's the sort of stereotypical transmac, which is double incision where they do two lines under your chest and pull and move everything and stuff, but with that they tend to also do a nipple graft so they sever a nerve whereas in inverted tee they don't sever the nerve so they go around the nipple down and then do the sort of typical scar and then sort of your nerve is kind of a string attached to the nipple and you just move the string over. And since I probably don't want T because I don't have much bottom dysphoria and that would affect things and even though I don't like being shaven I don't want facial hair so I wouldn't like that affect and it would probably give me dysphoria too. Really the only things I would want from T would be the lower voice, but I've found ways I can do that through surgery and I would like shark week stopping, but you can do that through surgery. And so, the only thing I can't really get done is the weight redistribution I would really like so my hips aren't as pronounced, but since I don't have bottom dysphoria anyway my hips aren't as a big of a deal to me either. So, yeah, I'm just gonna get a lot of surgeries and because of that it's gonna be a bit more complicated because of a lot of doctors liking you to be on testosterone before any surgeries because a lot of that gatekeeping stuff.</p>	<p><b>Participant 6: Reign</b></p> <p>Yeah. So, to me, medically transitioning looks like hormones, surgery, any sort of alteration to your body. And I don't plan on medically transitioning. Men in my family or people with higher testosterone levels don't live as long. They generally live less healthy lives. They lose their hair. And hair loss is—That would freak me out. Cutting my hair was even a big deal, because hair is a big deal in my family. And so, bringing testosterone to me that isn't preferable. That also me to a lot more diseases and potential issue in the future just because people with higher testosterone levels in my family generally do experience more, um...oh, my gosh...diseases...like, diseases that don't go away. Yeah. I couldn't think of the word. Whereas people with higher levels of estrogen generally don't. We generally get cancer, but that's okay. Take some simulants, whatever. I would also say, for the profession I'm going into looking feminine is probably in my best interest. It's not what I would prefer, but it is more acceptable.</p>	<p><b>Participant 7: Zola</b></p> <p>It's the goal that you want and it's what you can do in sites that won't compromise. I know that I couldn't do everything I wanted to do due to money or anything, but I've already taken hormones. I got my boobs. I'm happy about that. I got the smooth skin. So, for me, that was the simple goal, or it seemed like it was.</p>
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Question 7: If you experience gender euphoria, what have those experiences been like? What makes you happiest in your gender identity and expression?

<p><b>Participant 1: Aidan</b> Like, I'm never supportive of assuming someone's gender identity, but does make feel a lot better when someone just automatically sees me and they'll call me sir or they'll automatically assume that I'm male and that how I'm presenting and makes me realize that I'm finally approaching that point of fitting in socially in my gender presentation and everything. So, its definitely moments like that and even more so in the moments where I was kind of in between transitioning and people would make that assumption or they'd be totally okay with using a new name or pronouns with me and everything. That always felt nice.</p>	<p><b>Participant 2: Alex</b> I think maybe the first time I went in a men's bathroom and no one looked at me weird. I mean, not that people are looking at the doors and like, "Oh, who's going into the boy's bathroom?" But like, I mean, you hear these horror stories of people going into the bathroom and being looked at weird and feeling comfortable going again and I think that was probably the first moment of gender euphoria that I really felt. I mean, a lot of people describe top surgery as being something like miraculous and gender euphoric for them, but I didn't feel comfortable feeling that way because my parents were there and I didn't want them...I don't know how to explain it. Like, I almost didn't want them to take part in my joy, because it was mine, and didn't want them to explain why I like...I don't know how to explain why I didn't want them to take part that with me, because I feel like all every queer person ever wants is just for their parents to love them, you know? But I wanted this to be a private—I mean there was someone there, one of my closest friends and I wanted to share it with her, but I didn't want to share it with my parents and I couldn't express that joy because my parents were there. But I feel like I felt it inside, but I put it down so far that I couldn't even feel it.</p>	<p><b>Participant 3: Elliot</b> The fact that I look really good in flannels, honestly. [...] And the fact that I am fortunate that I was matured with a smaller chest so I have the luxury of being able to hide my chest unlike some trans people that wish they wouldn't have go through surgery just to get what wanted kind of thing whereas I am fortunate that I can wear a binder and get the results I want. I'm trying to think. What else? You said gender euphoria, right? [...] Okay I mean, I guess that's my biggest thing. I would just say definitely I did not realize how good I look in these clothes that feel more natural to me than wearing some dress or anything. I guess being comfortable is the biggest thing.</p>	<p><b>Participant 4: Evelyn</b> Going shopping, putting on frilly things, buying makeup. The one I'm really excited over is my real hair is really growing! I mean it is—I mean look. I got hair! I'm getting hair. And I had a hair like that originally. We redid our third year vows for our third anniversary and we were getting ready. Our friend, she was helping to make this beautiful wedding gown for her. She never had a real wedding. It was just pieced together and that was the way it was with us. We got married by our Chaplin at the VA hospital. And we started thinking about us redoing our vows. And it was at the Iowa City, Coralville UU church that we really were starting to talk about it. And she had a mother of the bride, father of the bride, I had a best man. We had our friend Elaine with our help made this gorgeous wedding gown and if you're at church on Sunday I'll show you. There are some beautiful wedding pictures. My hair was a little bit long and I was gonna my—I knew when I put it on it was going to be the last time I wore a man's military uniform. And I was gonna trim my hair up a little bit... Elaine's tiny gray African parrot flew in the bathroom at—What was it four or five o'clock in the morning? And it scared the daylight out of me! Eeek! With the clippers. So, I had to chop it down. If hadn't chopped it down and if I wouldn't have tried having it styled I would have had probably like yours is right now. But it's getting there now! And I get emotional. I'm not afraid to cry. I see crying at times as a cleansing. You got to do it sometimes. And there are times we're out and see something that's a nice looking or something I just get all, "Eeek!" about it. And I took Tina last night for dinner I because she was coming home and 2) because I wanted to celebrate her birthday. We got corsages and had really nice outfits on and I just felt so, so good. I mean even the guys that we've seen there every Wednesday for this group we go to, "Girl, you look good." And I got her good! "Cause I thought when I was letting 'em we were going to sing the "Happy Birthday" song to her and that she was gonna find out. I was surprised her! I surprised her! And I felt really good about it. And I guess just doing things that would be considered a women's thing to do. I just love going shopping. Even if we don't buy anything I just love going shopping and not having people look at me. You know? "Why is this guy in the women's section looking at clothes?" Even more so when I'm by myself, but a lot of times Tina and I would be looking at things and now it doesn't really bother me. I go in the women's section all the time and nobody bats an eye on me.</p>
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<p><b>Participant 5: Ray</b></p> <p>So, even before I really knew much about my gender, how I got my name was very much like a euphoria moment 'cause it just happened because one of my friends couldn't pronounce my name so they basically cut off the end and that gave this (quote, unquote) "nickname." And I didn't know this at the time, but looking back on it was very much a euphoria moment that I wasn't being called this name that I didn't feel was mine so that was my first probably euphoria moment. And then once I finally decided that all the misinformation about "they" not being singular and things was inaccurate, when one of the people started using that it was very much a euphoria moment. But before that, like when I was a kid before I knew of my gender stuff, a lot of waiters and stuff would call me, "Young man" or, "Hello boys. What do we want eat?" and stuff. And that was always kind of a little euphoria spike, because, yeah, it wasn't accurate, but it was sort of the closest people could get and the closest I understood at the time. But, yeah, once I did come out and first went by my name it was really great. And I know that they/them pronouns can be complicated to some people so that was always really cool. Just seeing my actual name on forms and stuff was really fun and I didn't expect to get a big euphoria spike. For instance, I had my hometown library on our library card, the family's library card. I just did the old one and I was like, "Can you put it as this instead?" So just getting the little receipt that tells you when your books are due and stuff, just seeing the actual name on that was a big euphoria spike and it was just a weird receipt to tell you when to return a book. [...] So, that was always really cool. When I was still able to go to school some weird loop whole happened that despite student IDs being technically a legal document for some reason in how things worked out I was able to have my actual name on it despite it not legally being my actual name. So, I would always be looking at my ID when I was going to classes or something and just smiling like an idiot to myself, because that was my name, my full name, how I wanted it and knowing that it was through this weird loophole so that it was technically a legal document without me having had changed my things it was almost more euphoric 'cause technically this is a legal document and it has my actual name. So, that was a really big euphoria spike. When I got my first binder it was—So I had a lot of trouble just getting my binders through the one company I used and there was a lot of sizing issues and things, but when I finally got the one that fit just right and I figured out how to manipulate my chest to best work in a binder and make it most masculine that was a big euphoria spike just looking in the mirror and being as flat as I was. And just sort of—I talked about how part of experience with social transitioning is talking about it so whenever I talk about it I also get quite a nice euphoria spike, usually, 'cause I'm being open about I can talk about how I actually feel and am without being perceived as all these other things.</p>	<p><b>Participant 6: Reign</b></p> <p>That's a great question. The first experience in gender euphoria that I can remember is binding my chest with a proper binder and having that sort of smooth line down my body and just feeling powerful, but at peace. Because I can feel very powerful without a blazer—or without a binder on—with a blazer, never—But just this feeling of this makes sense to me. I feel comfortable and I don't feel like I'm hiding or that I have to constantly adjust my clothes. And so, yeah. I mean, it's indescribable. It is ultimate comfort. Yeah. And when I went to some queer conferences last year as part of our Full Spectrum group and it was so empowering to have my name on a nametag that I choice and, like, now I go to journalistic conferences and they always have [my birth name] and so I have to correct or just scribble it out. But just to have that and then my pronouns and then for people to ask me what my pronouns are, that's telling me that you don't just see my body and assume and that's incredible. It's so empowering. Even when people started using [Reign] for the first in college, 'cause that's how I introduced myself, and there were no questions. It was just, "Yeah. Okay." That was incredible. It just felt like being seen without being stared at.</p>	<p><b>Participant 7: Zola</b></p> <p>Looking at my body. I mean, this is the first time in my life that actually like the way it looks and I don't care about anybody else's opinion. Like, I wake up and I have my parts and I'm like, "Yes." It's what I've dreamed of. I've literally dreamed about this. I've literally said, "Hey. This particular form is amazing." And I actually achieved that form through hormones and everything else and that made me super happy.</p>
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Question 8: To the extent you feel comfortable answering, if you experience gender dysphoria, what have those experiences been like for you?

<p><b>Participant 1: Aidan</b> Well, I had mentioned that it had first started with the gender euphoria where I was being referred to with a different name and pronouns and that felt very comfortable and very fitting for me and it was only after starting transitioning and everything that the dysphoria kinda starts where I felt that I wasn't passing enough and started feeling weird about my body and the way it looked to other people, like, I was hyperaware of just the way that my face shape might have been and the way maybe I'm not hiding my curves enough and stuff like that. So, that's mostly been my experience with dysphoria. Testosterone finally caused some facial hair to grow in and starting out I would refuse to cut any of it, because I wanted to keep it there so that it just kinda just obscured having a rounder face or more feminine facial features. I'm a little more comfortable with the face thing 'cause my facial hair grows in like any cis guy's facial hair. I can't grow a full beard, but its starting to come in, like, I have to regularly shave it now because it gets pretty out of control, but there was mostly navigating that. Sometimes I have vocal dysphoria, especially starting out with testosterone it took a while for my voice to really reach a point where I felt comfortable and there are days when I feel pretty dysphoric about my speaking voice and everything, yeah.</p>	<p><b>Participant 2: Alex</b> And the worst experiences were when people would say, "All right. Boys on this side. Girls on this side." And you don't know where to go 'cause while I know who I am I don't want people to look at me and not be able to tell, if that makes sense. 'Cause I know who I am and that's what matters, but as soon as other people question it I'm like, "Oh, Okay." So it's like... It was like this pit in my stomach where I didn't know if I was supposed to go in the girls' line or the boys' line or whenever I would look at myself in the mirror. And I had this adoration for my breasts, because people had taught me that they were sexual and I could use them to get what I wanted. And so, I didn't have as bad of dysphoria with my breasts as a lot of people do, because I had been taught by the internet that, "Oh, these are sexual things that you can use to get what you want." And I did feel dysphoria with them sometimes, but I didn't feel dysphoria with them as much as lot of people say, but when I did feel dysphoria it was very much like a knot in my stomach and very much like, "Himm. I'm not being read the way I want to be read and that sucks and I can't do anything to change it."</p>	<p><b>Participant 3: Elliot</b> Okay. With that chest dysphoria is not my top one, but it's definitely—Ha. Funny (both laugh). Sorry. I just made a joke. Its okay. [...] It was right there. Yeah. I just sometimes feel like even most compressive sports bra is not enough and sometimes I can't bind because I work all the time and so I feel like that would help with my presentation, but I also don't want to hurt myself in the process by binding too long. [...] Yeah. Another thing would be voice dysphoria. I feel like my voice is still too high for me and I'm pre-T (pre-testosterone) and so I guess that's my biggest form of dysphoria. I feel like I would pass more if I had a deeper voice. And I sometimes, but not a lot, get bottom dysphoria and sometimes I don't want to buy a packer because they're really expensive. [...] So, I usually, like some people—one of my friend actually taught this. You can stretch out folded socks, you know what I mean? Like, packing them and just like—Ah! I keep making jokes! (Laughs.) [...] Anyway, you put them in your pants and a bulge-kind-of-thing. So everything that I have as dysphoria can be fixed and can be solved, but its having the resources to have it solved.</p>	<p><b>Participant 4: Evelyn</b> Actually, I was diagnosed with that too earlier on, but... I was seeing myself as a woman trapped in a male's body. I knew I was longer happy being a guy and the more I dressed feminine, acted feminine, the happier I was. Fortunately I was able to get through it with the medications I was on and having people I can talk to. I don't feel comfortable in men's clothes anymore and things like that. I actually felt it more once I started the transitioning, but we've touched it a few times in my subject sessions. I just didn't feel good in this body anymore. Its not me.</p>
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<p><b>Participant 5: Ray</b></p> <p>So, my dysphoria is a lot of social stuff knowing that for at least a good part of my lifetime most of society is not going to be really aware of people like me. It's upsetting and unfortunate. So, I sort of have to live with the slight dysphoria that he/him gives me 'cause it's a hundred times better than if they did she/her, but there is still dysphoria there even if it is minor. And bathrooms are sort of the same deal. Right now how a lot of places don't have gender neutral bathrooms, which is where I feel most comfortable and euphoric I guess, which is kind of weird when you think about bathrooms, but that's sort of my ideal situation, but a lot of places don't have that so I have started using the men's room a lot more because since that tends to be how I'm perceived it would be very uncomfortable for the women if I did the other choice and I just dysphoria-wise couldn't do that anyway. So, that's been an interesting thing 'cause there is this dysphoria with using the masculine restroom because it's for men and it's still not technically accurate. So, there's a lot of social stuff that I have to sort of be resigned to the fact that I'm always going to be a little bit dysphoric 'cause they're gonna assume me in a certain way, because most of society doesn't really know much about nonbinary identities. As for physical dysphoria, I very much don't like my voice, which a lot of people say I already have a very low voice so they don't really understand how that works, but it's something about dysphoria that makes you sort of exaggerate anything that is going on so, like, when I get really excited my voice definitely goes higher so in my head my voice sounds like it's in that higher range despite the fact that is kind of lower supposedly. And then shaving was always really weird to me so I've done it maybe twice in my entire life 'cause being shaven is just very dysphoria inducing. It's like too soft plus I have sensory issues too anyway so it's also kind of partly that. I don't have much bottom dysphoria right now or in the past. I do have it occasionally, but I don't think it's enough to care about. Really the only physical things about any of that are just shark week and that horrible, but I definitely have a lot of top dysphoria and would like—I'd probably go for inverted tee as opposed—since I'm bigger chested I can't do keyhole, which is there they kind of stick something and kind of suck everything out.</p>	<p><b>Participant 6: Reign</b></p> <p>So, the funny thing is I feel dysphoria in a lot of queer places. [...] Yeah. Well, because I think that our community is still very focused on sexuality and so you have queer people that have newly come out and are newly involved in the community. I think there is still a lot of assuming of gender. And so, I sort of let my guard down in queer spaces and then to be misgendered is really difficult for me. And it's...I'm trying to find the words to describe it... It is like an inch. It's like an inch on my body that I can't quite scratch. And, having OCD, I can understand the ticks. And so, it's like "she." Ugh. "She." Ugh. It kind of gets into your brain and it wraps itself around and pulls you down and at that time I'm like, "I just want to be in my bed in a giant sweatshirt, like, I don't know, watching a TV show or whatever." It is so uncomfortable and you feel invisible, but also looked at all wrong and so it's all of this swirling in a big pot of grossness. It feels wrong. Everything about it feels wrong. You just feel very off. Like something's not right and then you have to somehow bring yourself back. It doesn't matter what happened. This, this, or this, you have people see this way. You know what you are. You know how you are, but it takes a while to get back from that feeling of dysphoria. [...] I know when I was younger I felt of physical dysphoria, but after being around more trans people that have bodies like mine its empowering to understand that I can be a person with a prominent chest and be nonbinary and that's okay. I can be a short person and be nonbinary. That's okay. And that's a really empowering experience to see other trans people and to realize I don't have to look this anymore in my head, because whatever I am that is nonbinary. That is what nonbinary looks like.</p>	<p><b>Participant 7: Zola</b></p> <p>Okay. It's like, "Well, I know that people tell me about being a boy, but there's some strong thing underneath." It was, like, my self-image. The way I saw myself and imagined myself was always feminine. Like, I look back over my fantasies and I was rarely a dude. 'Cause when people dream they're like, "I'm a cowboy!"; or, "I'm a super hero!"; or something like that. But mine, regardless of what it was, always had the femme element so...you know? That's...mmm... [...] Yeah, that clash. And when I'm in relationships there's expectations for certain things, because I'm supposed to fit the male role so I'm supposed to fit this, this, this and I'm like, "That doesn't feel right." [...] Yeah. For me personally, I found out what it was and since it was such a strong nagging for so many years I'm satisfied. I got the answer. But the social, the dealing with other people has been the real thing.</p>
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Question 1: When do you first remember being aware of your gender identity? Who or what do you think prompted that awareness and why?

<p><b>Celebrity 1: Chaz Bono</b></p> <p>“Many people may not understand how, being born female, I can state with total clarity and certainty that as a child I felt like a boy. That’s mainly because most people don’t know the difference between gender and gender identity. Gender is the sex that one is born as, and for most of us that sex is either female or female. Your gender identity, however, is based on feelings and not biology. I like to say that your gender identity is between your ears, not between your legs. I am here to attest to the fact that you can be born one sex and yet feel with every fiber of your being that you really are the opposite. And as a kid, it was no more complicated than this: I felt like a little boy.”—Chaz Bono, <i>Transition</i> 120</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 2: Laverne Cox</b></p> <p><b><i>“Is there a moment or time you remember first feeling like you might be transgender?”</i></b></p> <p>I tell this story about third grade. My third grade teacher called my mom and said ‘Your son is going to end up in New Orleans wearing a dress.’ Up until that point I just thought that I was a girl and that there was no difference between girls and boys. I think in my imagination I thought that I would hit puberty and I would start turning into a girl.</p> <p><b><i>How did your thinking change after that moment in third grade?</i></b></p> <p>Going to a therapist and the fear of God being placed in me about ending up in New Orleans wearing a dress, that was a profoundly shaming moment for me. I associated it with being some sort of degenerate, with not being successful. My mother was a teacher. She was grooming my brother and me to be successful, accomplished people. I didn’t associate being trans, or wearing a dress, with that, or wanting to be a girl with being successful. So it’s something I just started to push down. I wanted to be famous, I wanted to perform. Those things I really, really wanted more than anything else.”—Katy Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks” TIME Magazine</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 3: Caitlyn Jenner</b></p> <p>“I have struggled with identity all my life. It’s not like something that just happened last week.”—Katy Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner” TIME Magazine</p> <p>“In her book, [transgender author and friend Jennifer Finney Boylan] had this one line: ‘I never felt feminine, but I always felt female.’ Now, for me, that hit home. See, I wasn’t an effeminate guy and I could play the male role. I played it very well, and there was a way to hide there. Other people, when they’re 5 years old, they say to their parents, ‘I’m not a girl, I’m a boy. And some people can go their whole lives and not do anything.’”—Katy Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner” TIME Magazine</p>
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<p><b>Celebrity 4: Jazz Jennings</b>  <i>“When did you first know?”</i>  I get asked a lot of questions about my life, and that’s the one that comes up the most. The answer is easy. Ever since I could form coherent thoughts, I knew I was a girl trapped inside a boy’s body. There was never any confusion in my mind. The confusing part was why no one else could see what was wrong.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>My Life as a (Transgender) Teen 1</i></p>	<p><b>Celebrity 5: Janet Mock</b>  <i>“When I look back at my childhood, I often say I always knew I was a girl since the age of three or four, a time when I began cataloging memories. No one—my mother, my grandmother, my father, or my siblings—gave me any reason to believe I was anything other than my parent’s firstborn son, my father’s namesake. But it was first my very first conviction. When I say I always knew I was a girl with such certainty, I erase all nuances, the work, the process of self-discovery. I’ve adapted to saying I knew I was a girl as a defense against the louder world, which told me—ever since I left my mother’s body in that pink hospital atop a hill in Honolulu—that my girlhood was imaginary, something made up that needed to be fixed. I wielded this ever-knowing, all-encompassing certainty to protect my identity. I’ve since sacrificed it in an effort to stand firmly in the murkiness of my shifting self-truths.</i>  <i>I grew to be certain of who I was, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t a time when I was learning the world, unsure, unstable, wobbly, living somewhere between confusion, discovery, and conviction. The fact that I admit to being uncertain doesn’t discount my womanhood. It adds value to it”</i> —Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Redness 16</i></p>
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<p>Question 2: Can you tell me about your childhood? For instance, where did you grow up? What was your family like in terms of values, communication style, cultural background, etc.?</p>	<p>Celebrity 1: Chaz Bono</p> <p>“Growing up with super start parents isn’t easy. As any child of famous parents will tell you, parents come first. Their careers dominate everything and everyone around you. There is a lot of money involved in everything your parents are doing, and people are paid to attend to celebrities’ needs so that the work—the TV show, recording session, concert, or movie—gets done perfectly. In the midst of all of those commitments, kids can become an afterthought, a person to play or spend time with after everything else is done.</p> <p>In the absence of royalty, Americans have celebrities.</p> <p>In my case, I felt kind of lost in the shuffle. Linda was there to ground me, and I knew my parents adored me, but in a general way their celebrity eclipsed everything, including me. As a result, I developed an overwhelming drive to avoid having any emotional needs because they would get in the way of my parents’ careers and priorities. This isn’t an indictment of my parents, or even celebrity itself; rather it’s the reality of the business of celebrity.”—Chaz Bono, <i>Transition</i> 11-2</p>	<p>Celebrity 2: Laverne Co</p> <p><b>“Who was in your house growing up?”</b></p> <p>My twin brother and my mother, just the three of us. I never knew my father. He was never married to her mother, he was never a part of my life. It was just my mom, my brother and me.</p> <p><b>And what were you like as a child?</b></p> <p>I was really creative. I started to dance very young. I loved to dance. I begged my mother to put me into dance classes and finally, in third grade, she did. Tap and jazz but not ballet. She thought ballet was too gay ... Throughout all of that, I was very feminine and I was really bullied, majortly bullied. There was this side of me that was this over-achiever that loved learning. But then I was also taunted at school. I was called names. I was made fun of.</p> <p><b>Are there any particular instances of bullying that stand out in your memory?</b></p> <p>There was this one instance in junior high when I had gotten off the bus and I was chased by a group of kids, which was, you know, pretty normal. They couldn’t really bully me on the bus because the bus driver could see in the rearview mirror, and that wasn’t allowed. But the second we got off the bus, they would try to beat me up. So I’d have to start running, immediately. So that day I was running for my life, basically, and four or five kids caught me. They were in the band. And I remember being held down and hit with drumsticks by these kids. And a parent saw it, the parent of some other student, and called the principal and the principal called my mother and my mother found out about it.</p> <p><b>Otherwise you wouldn’t have told her?</b></p> <p>No. And I remember being yelled at, because I didn’t tell her and then because I didn’t fight back. I never wanted to fight back. I was scared. I also thought I was above duking it out in the schoolyard with kids. I remember being blamed for having been attacked by a group of kids.”—Katy Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks” TIME Magazine</p>	<p>Celebrity 3: Caitlyn Jenner</p> <p>“When Jenner’s sister Pam was a young girl she noticed something puzzling one day on the bookshelf of the family’s house, in Cornwall, New York. It was the mid-1950s, and like millions of other American families in the 50s the Jenners had a set of encyclopedias. What was odd to Pam was the way in which her brother Bruce, 16 months younger, had arranged them: from A to Z, right to left. She noticed how her younger brother spelled “saw” as “was” and “was” as “saw.” Pam concluded, as would just about any older sibling caught up in her own world, that Bruce was just “a stupid younger brother.” Their mother, Esther, was puzzled. When she worked on spelling with her son she noticed that he spelled every word right one day and then completely forgot the next. “Bruce, you’re not concentrating. You’re daydreaming,” she said to him. In second grade, since he still could not read, he was held back. Teachers thought that the child, whose father, William, was a tree surgeon, was just lazy.</p> <p>It was only later that Jenner was diagnosed with dyslexia, a learning disability marked by difficulty in processing language. He wasn’t lazy or stupid. He could spell every word right the first time because he had memorized them. His self-esteem as a child was understandably poor. Dealing with his dyslexia was enough of a challenge for Bruce Jenner. It was enough for any young boy trying to navigate the rock-rimmed shore of peer acceptance. Jenner is fond of invoking God in setting out the challenges of his life. If that is the case, then God had a daily double in store.”—Buzz Bissinger, “Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story” <i>Vanity Fair</i></p>
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<p><b>Celebrity 4: Jazz Jennings</b></p> <p>“My parents have known each other almost their entire lives—they were neighbors growing up in upstate New York, and met when my mom was five years old and Dad was four! Their fathers were doctors who worked at the same hospital, and their mothers were good friends, but when Mom was little she just thought of my dad as the annoying kid who lived a few houses down, and she wanted nothing to do with him. As he got older he became kind of a troublemaker with a loud mouth, but he finally calmed down around age ten when his parents threatened to ship him off to military school if he didn’t get his act together.</p> <p>All the time my mom was ignoring him. Dad had a crush on her from afar, despite knowing they weren’t each other’s type. He’d sneak glances at her at the local pool, and when they were older and in high school he even loaned her his jacket one night when he saw her shivering at a soccer game.</p> <p>They didn’t get together until years later when Dad’s brother proposed to one of Mom’s friends. My mom’s parents were invited to the engagement party along with Mom, and both of their mothers sat Mom and Dad down at a table to look over a photo album with pictures of the spot in Europe where the proposal had happened. One by one, everyone got up from the table and left, leaving Mom and Dad alone. Mom was impressed that he’d finally shaved off the mustache she’d never liked, and it was obvious he had been working out—he no longer looked like the scrawny kid next door. They went on their first date that very same night after the party ended, and saw <i>Bride of Chucky</i>—the fourth and most romantic installment of the Child’s Play killer doll film franchise. The movie must have worked its magic, because they moved in together not long after. When Dad got into law school in Columbus, Ohio, Mom agreed to move there with him, but only if he proposed first. So he did!</p> <p>When I finally came along seven years later, they named me Jaron—a compromise between Jordan and Aaron. Dad was pushing hard for Jordan, but my mom had once dated a guy with that name, so she shot that down. For a while they settled on Owen, but then they switched to the Jordan and Aaron combo. It was conveniently gender neutral, which would come in very handy down the road.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 4</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 5: Janet Mock</b></p> <p>“It’s the only memory I have of my parents in the same room. Mom told me later there were other women and other suicide attempts. Dad told me she was possessive and wasn’t afraid to confront his other women. It would take decades for those disparate memories of my parents to fuse: Dad’s secret visits to Dara; Mom’s anguished slashes through her veins; Dad being kicked out shortly thereafter. Mom said that Chad and I spent a lot more time at Dad’s mistress’ town house than I remember.</p> <p>‘While I was at work, you guys were at her house playing with her kids,’ Mom told me, and she wasn’t wrong. Years later, when I was well into adulthood, I finally met my younger sister, the product of Dad’s affair with Dara. She showed us a video of Chad and me at a playground with her other two half-siblings, in which Dad and Dara’s voices call out our names from behind the camcorder.</p> <p>When our parents split, Mom returned to Grandma’s house with me, Cori, and Chad. Dad protested that he wanted his boys back, and they agreed that Chad would live with him; I’d stay with Mom. Chad, whose skin was as yellow as the corn bread on the Jiffy box, says he remembers crying every time he saw a plane in the California sky, hoping I was on it to be with him and Dad. I imagined his big black eyes swollen with tears as he looked up in hope.</p> <p>Selfishly, I wasn’t mourning our separation, because I had Mom all to myself. I was the only baby now. Being beside Mom as she read her paperbacks and snaked on canned tuna spread over Hawaiian soda crackers and crunched on cups of ice—that was home. But Mom wasn’t all mine for long. She found another name, one she moved in with, leaving me at Grandma’s.</p> <p>Sitting on Grandma’s couch, I meditated on Mom’s belly, which carried my baby brother. I was excited to have another sibling and assumed that, with his birth, she would get a place big enough for all of us. When Jeffery was born in August 1989, Mom and Dad made plans to send me to Oakland to be with Chad. ‘We never should’ve separated the tow of you,’ Mom later told me.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 26-27</p>
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Question 3: Do you have any meaningful memories from childhood that stand out regarding your gender identity? Can you tell me about those?

<p><b>Celebrity 1: Chaz Bono</b></p> <p>“One of the clearest memories I have from early childhood is this: I felt like a boy. I may have buried those feelings later, but as a child, they were there.</p> <p>As soon as I was able to dress myself, my self-image was clear: I chose boys’ clothes, boys’ shoes and sneakers, and was interested in boys’ toys, games, and other preferences. When clothes began to matter more to me, my outfit of choice was usually jeans or cutoffs, sneakers, and football shirts or T-Shirts.</p> <p>At this time, around the age of five or six, my mom and I were living in a big rambling house on Carolwood Drive in Beverly Hills. I went to a nearby school, the Center for Early Education, where all of my friends were boys. At school, I was accepted as a boy—by both the boys and the girls in class. If a game of tag broke out on the playground, I was always on the boys’ team. I thought of myself as a boy among his mates. I dressed like them, ran like them, smelled like them, and ate like them. I didn’t really pay attention to girls; at this point, they just didn’t matter to me. I was part of a miniature rat pack of roughhousing boys and I loved every minute of it.”—Chaz Bono, <i>Transition</i> 13</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 2: Laverne Cox</b></p> <p>“<b>And what were you like as a child?</b></p> <p>I was really creative. I started to dance very young. I loved to dance. I begged my mother to put me into dance classes and finally, in third grade, she did. Tap and jazz but not ballet. She thought ballet was too gay ... Throughout all of that, I was very feminine and I was really bullied, majorly bullied. There was this side of me that was this over-achiever that loved learning. But then I was also taunted at school. I was called names. I was made fun of.” —Katy Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks,” <i>TIME Magazine</i></p>	<p><b>Celebrity 3: Caitlyn Jenner</b></p> <p>“When I was eight years old, I was running into my mom’s closet, nobody would know. I was also very good at hiding it. I got into sports because that was a way to prove your masculinity. I was good at it. And I just kept going and going and going and going. Until eventually you reach the top—and I still have the same old issues. I would look at a guy and think, ‘Oh my god, wouldn’t it be great to be comfortable being a guy? How lucky is he? He doesn’t even think about gender.’ The girls, same way. ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to be like that and not stuck in the middle?’” —Katy Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner,” <i>TIME Magazine</i></p>
<p>“My father treated me like the boy I felt myself to be. When I was in his house, I wore boys’ clothes, played with boys’ toys, and went by the nickname Fred. I became Fred because one day when we were in Uncle Don’s, my favorite toy store in Palm Springs, I was looking for a mug or key ring with my name on it, knowing I was never going to find something that said “Chaz,” my dad saw my frustration and said, ‘Let’s pick out a name you like. What about Fred?’</p> <p>So ‘Fred’ it was, and it stuck. Incidentally, I just found out from my aunt that my nanny Linda also used to call me Fred—clearly I was eager to use my boy name!”—Chaz Bono, <i>Transition</i> 15</p> <p>“As far back as I can remember, my mother always seemed to want me to look and act more like a girl. She made it very clear that she didn’t like my masculine style or my preference for only male friends. She often reminded me that she, too, had been a tomboy, as if trying to convince me that I didn’t have to stop running around the neighborhood or playing sports, but that I should just choose times and ways to be more feminine.”—Chaz Bono, <i>Transition</i> 16</p>		<p>“When Bruce was around 10, he would sneak into his mother’s closet, sometimes his sister’s. He would put on a dress and maybe wrap a scarf around his head and walk around outside. Without knowing the clinical term for what he was feeling—gender dysphoria—he found himself “fascinated by it all,” just as he felt “scared to death somebody was going to find out.” Because there was nobody he could talk to about it. He didn’t tell anyone until the early 1970s, when he told his first wife, Chrystie. [...]</p> <p>In fifth grade Jenner ran in a race, perhaps the most important sporting event in which he ever participated. He turned out to be the fastest kid in school. His athletic ability led him to football and basketball at Sleepy Hollow High School, and then Newtown High School, in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, after he moved there in the middle of 11th grade. It also exhibited itself out of school when he won the Eastern States water-skiing championship. “Sports saved my life,” Jenner said. He became popular because jocks are always popular. He became determined in sports because he was gifted, but also because it helped to prove his masculinity, since, as he told me, ‘that’s what everybody wants to believe.’” — Buzz Bissinger, “Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story,” <i>Vanity Fair</i></p>

<p><b>Celebrity 4: Jazz Jennings</b></p> <p>“When my mom, Jeanette, got pregnant with me, she was convinced she was going to have a girl. At her baby shower, her friends all crowded around her belly and did the necklace test—that old-timey trick that’s supposed to predict what kind of baby a woman is going to have. You hold a necklace with something heavy attached to it, like a pendant or a ring, over a pregnant belly, and if it swings back and forth it means she’s having a boy. If it moves in a circle, a girl is supposedly on the way.</p> <p>This witchy little version of a gender-test ultrasound nailed it with every single one of my mom’s pregnancies. It just took a little longer for everyone to realize the fetus fairies actually got it right with me.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>My Life as a Transgender Teen</i> 1-2</p> <p>“The more words I learned, the more I started to verbalize my feelings. Whenever my mom or dad would compliment me by saying something like “Good boy,” I’d immediately correct them.</p> <p>“No. Good girl.”</p> <p>When I was around 2 years old, I had what I now refer to as the Good Fairy dream. After a long morning of playing with Ari’s dolls, dressing them up and staring enviously at the smooth area between their legs, I took a nap in my sister’s bed. I had no idea that I was asleep—the world seemed crystal clear as a grown woman wearing a blue gown floated into the room. She wasn’t quite like the imaginary creatures you see in cartoons, but I knew instinctively that she was a fairy, thanks to her gossamer wings, the glowing light all around her, and the magic wand that suddenly appeared in her hand. Other than those fantasy details, she looked and acted like an adult, full of purpose and authority.</p> <p>I don’t remember her exact words, or even if she spoke out loud at all, but I knew why she was there. She promised to use her wand to turn my penis into a vagina.</p> <p>I was ecstatic when I woke up. I felt like all the answers to my prayers were possible. The dream had felt so true, so real, that I knew it was just a matter of time before the fairy would appear again and do what she’d said she could do.</p> <p>I ran downstairs and found my mother sitting in our living room.</p> <p>“When is the Good Fairy going to come with her magic wand?” I asked.</p> <p>“The who?”</p> <p>“The Good Fairy, who will turn my penis into a vagina!” My mom tells me now that this was a huge turning point for her, the first time she truly began to realize that what I was going through probably wasn’t a phase. I remember being crushed when she said no fairy was going to come for me. I had been filled with so much hope when I’d woken up, and it was destroyed within a matter of minutes.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>My Life as a Transgender Teen</i> 6-7</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 5: Janet Mock</b></p> <p>“In adulthood, Mom nonchalantly told me she wasn’t surprised about me becoming her daughter. “You were always like that. Very sensitive, very mischievous, too smart for your own good, and always into things,” she said, reminiscing about early childhood, particularly the time her earring landed me in the emergency room.</p> <p>Mom and Dad were still married at time. Living with them were Cori and me and our brother, Chad, a year younger than I. Cheraine didn’t come with us when we moved to Long Beach, California, my father’s naval duty station. She stayed with Grandma and Papa in Hawaii. At age three, I was playing with my mother’s jewelry and placed one of her earring backs in my ear. The backing wasn’t secure, so it slid inside my ear, beyond a finger’s reach, and as a result of the discomfort I screamed. I can still hear the suction from the tube the doctors put down my ear, which pulled out the gold pretzel-shaped backing and I can still taste the sweet vanilla ice cream I got to eat for weak.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 22</p> <p>“Wendi’s first words to me were ‘Mary! You <i>mahu</i>!’</p> <p>I was sitting on a park bench as Jeff ran around with his friends on the lawn that separated my school from his. Wendi was passing by with her volleyball in hand, her backpack bouncing on her butt, and her drive-by inquiry in the air. Though there was definitely a question mark floating around, her direct yet playful approach made me internalize her words as a statement. <i>If she’s asking—even kiddingly—then I must be suspect</i>, I thought.</p> <p>Everyone took notice of Wendi. She was hard to miss, prancing around Kalakaua Intermediate School in super-short soccer shorts with her green mop of hair vibrantly declaring her presence. Subtlety was not—and still isn’t—her thing. Her irritated red skin peppered with acne, glistened with sweat as she played volleyball on campus. I’d never been this close to her, and her scrutinizing stare was intimidating.</p> <p>Jeff, whom I picked up every day after school while Chad was at basketball or baseball practice, wasn’t paying attention, but I remember feeling self-conscious. I was afraid that if I got close to Wendi or someone saw me interacting with her, I would be called <i>mahu</i>—a word that I equated to <i>sissy</i>. In my playground experience with the term, it was an epithet, thrown at any boy who was perceived to be <i>too</i> feminine. Until Wendi crossed paths with me, I was under the impression that I was doing a good job at being butch enough that such words wouldn’t be thrown my way.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 101-102</p>
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Question 4: What can you tell me about your teenage years and gender identity exploration? For example, can you share any stories about your gender identity that occurred in high school with friends and/or family?

<p><b>Celebrity 1: Chaz Bono</b></p> <p>“So even though I was into my own in term of my sexual orientation, I still felt some of societal pressure to be ‘normal.’</p> <p>Later that summer, I was in Palm Springs visiting my dad and I met the son of a bookkeeper for my dad’s restaurant. We immediately hit it off and seemed to have a lot in common. He ended up asking me out on a lunch date, and I accepted his invitation. Unfortunately, I can’t remember the kid’s name, but I remember that he was an art student home from college. He seemed intelligent and interesting—a nice-looking guy with shoulder-length hair and an artsy/hippie kind of vibe. I remember thinking at the time that if it was possible for me to be interested in a guy romantically, it would be with somebody like him. We went to lunch at a local Mexican restaurant and then to see the movie <i>About Last Night</i>, with Robert Lowe and Demi Moore. All through the movie I sat there thinking about my ex-girlfriend, who I was still in love with....And it was completely clear to me at that moment that I just wasn’t sexually attracted to men.</p> <p>I see this time in my life as one of experimenting. Like most teenagers, I was exploring myself and my options in a fairly mindless way. I thought these encounters with men led to only one conclusion: I must really be a lesbian. But my need to experiment at all perhaps speaks to the idea that lesbian identity was not quite right, either. Looking back and digging deep, I actually think that this interest in men was not about sex, but about my unconscious desire to be a man. My attraction to the art student was not about wanting to be a man. My attraction to the art student was not about wanting to be <i>with</i> him, but wanting to be <i>like</i> him.”—Chaz Bono, <i>Transition</i> 65</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 2: Laverne Cox</b></p> <p>“<b>How did things change as you got older?</b>”</p> <p>I started trying to find a compromise in terms of gender in high school. I started embracing androgyny. I was just really scared and in a lot of denial. And I wanted to make everybody proud and happy and find a place for myself in the world. The funny thing is being in this androgynous space really wasn’t any better, in terms of perception or reception from people. It was part of my journey that got me to where I am now.” —Katy Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks” TIME Magazine</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 3: Caitlyn Jenner</b></p> <p>“I got into sports because that was a way to prove your masculinity. I was good at it. And I just kept going and going and going and going. Until eventually you reach the top—and I still have the same old issues. I would look at a guy and think, ‘Oh my god, wouldn’t it be great to be comfortable being a guy? How lucky is he?’ He doesn’t even think about gender.’ The girls, same way. ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to be like that and not stuck in the middle?’” — Katy Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner” TIME Magazine</p>
<p>“The spring Drama Festival was the only time in four years that you actually got to perform in front of a real audience, not just your teachers and peers. It was a big deal. [...] I cast in <i>Midsummer Night’s Dream</i> directed by James Moody, a working actor who often taught at my school. I played the male character Peter Quince. In the play, there is a group of laborers, usually referred to as the rustics, who decide to perform a play for a duke’s wedding reception. Peter Quince is the rustic who organizes the production—the director of the play within the play within the play. I nailed the part, too. Playing Peter Quince felt like what I thought acting feel like. I felt comfortable and real on stage though I was clearly playing a character that wasn’t like me. As any actor does, I made certain choices about how to approach the character, deciding to play him as an older man, in his fifties or sixties, with a somewhat stiff physical demeanor and a slightly conceited way about him. [...] This character was probably the one the least like me that I had ever portrayed, and yet the simple fact that he was male completely eradicated that strange, uncomfortable, out-of-place feeling that I felt whenever I was portraying a female character.”—Chaz Bono, <i>Transition</i> 68</p>		

<p><b>Celebrity 4: Jazz Jennings</b></p> <p>“When Ari first went to middle school, my mom had entered her in a lottery for our town’s best charter school, which offered a much more progressive education than any of the other nearby options. Ari got in, and once one family member is accepted, all of their siblings get an automatic ticket, too. The school runs sixth through twelfth grade, with sixth through eighth as middle school. When my mom first went to talk to the administration to find out if it would be a safe place for me, she immediately felt relieved when she saw a poster in an office window advocating transgender rights. Score! Best of all, the principal promised her that I’d be allowed to use the girls’ bathroom, so we didn’t have to worry about that at all.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 133</p> <p>“He wrote back that he accepted me for who I was, so I thought everything was going to be okay, but he suddenly stopped talking to me. I tried to shake it off and not let it get to me, but not long after I told him, a girl I was friendly with named Julia stopped me in the hallway between classes.</p> <p>‘Listen, I think you should know something,’ she started to say, but then began squirming and looking uncomfortable. “What?”</p> <p>‘I...I overheard Sam talking about you with some of the other boys. He called you...’ She lowered her voice. ‘A chick with a dick.’ That nasty, horrible phrase again. I thanked her for letting me know, and as I walked down the hallway I realized that the boys who usually smiled at me or said hi were all turning away from me fast, pretending to be absorbed with something really important deep inside their lockers.</p> <p>I was so hurt, and I wasn’t used to feeling bruised by insults. My usual defense—confidence—deserted me, and I felt vulnerable and alone. Along with some girls, every single one of my male friends, including Jason, deserted me within a day. They were scared that if they were seen with me, or God forbid dated me, they’d be considered gay. Realizing that that kind of ignorant thought process was behind Jason ditching me was what got me back on my feet. If a boy doesn’t like me because I’m transgender, I know he isn’t right for me to begin with. End of story.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 136-137</p> <p>“About six weeks after eighth grade started, Time magazine named me one of the 25 Most Influential Teens of 2014. I sat here for a while trying to figure out how to write that sentence, and decided that being direct was the way to go. It still doesn’t feel real. (Even though it happened again, just this past year!) With all the media stuff I’d done, I’d been able to keep the spotlight at a healthy distance from my real life and not let it affect me. The Time honor hit particularly hard, though. Not because it was about me, but because of the company I was in. The thought that anyone would include me on a list with Malala Yousafzai blew my mind. She’s one of my idols! When I found out, I couldn’t stop jumping up and down. Flattered doesn’t even begin to describe the feeling, and my parents were out of their minds with excitement.</p> <p>Not long after that, I received the Florida Voice of Equality Award, the highest honor given out by Equality Florida, a statewide LGBTQ civil rights organization. It’s often given to politicians, and I was the youngest person to ever receive it. It meant so much along with me. It was the first time they had ever seen the public version of me, and having them there made me feel much more relaxed than normal. I felt like I could be goofier and funnier in front of the crowd because my friends were there. That’s not to say I didn’t take it seriously, and because the award was coming from my state, it was the first time I ever mentioned my home’s location in a media appearance.</p> <p>The accolades were starting to feel like too much, though. Inside, I still wasn’t sure if I felt worthy of these huge honors. All I did was talk about love and acceptance, and isn’t that just what being human is about? Why was what I had to say so special? Did speaking out even make a difference? Would things ever actually get better?”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 189-190</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 5: Janet Mock</b></p> <p>“‘Good morning, Class of 2001!’ I shouted from center stage in our school’s cafeteria. “I’m Janet, your class treasurer, and I just want to thank you for your votes and your support!’ More than three hundred sophomores applauded as I unwrapped my blue-polished nails from the microphone. The riotous reception signaled my successful reintroduction, and the sight of my fellow elected leaders standing with me at our back-to-school assembly emboldened me. The majority of the people in the cafeteria were aware that they had elected Charles to office the previous semester, but I had known Janet would reign.”—<i>Redefining Realness</i> 143</p> <p>“Mom allowed me to spend my back-to-school clothing allowance on skirts, dresses, tight denim jeans, and tops. As long as I brought home good grades, I was in the clear. That was our informal, unspoken agreement.”—<i>Redefining Realness</i> 144</p> <p>“My presence as a fifteen-year-old trans girl must’ve been radical to many, but to me it was the truth, and my truth led me to form a womanhood all my own. What I failed to realize was that the people outside my home, specifically the school’s staff, weren’t equipped with the resources and experience to help a student like me. Some of them were unwilling to seek that knowledge and chose to view my presence as problematic. I admit my approach may have been abrasive to some, but I was unapologetic about who I was and never felt the need to plead for belonging in school.”—<i>Redefining Realness</i> 146</p>
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Question 5: What are your thoughts on social transition? For instance, what does it mean to you to socially transition? If you have started or plan to start socially transitioning, what does that process look for you?

<p>Celebrity 1: Chaz Bono</p> <p>“In most ways, my decision to transition turned my life around. My relationship, my health, my decision to return to school all followed, moving in a positive direction. I knew without a doubt that I had made one of the beset decisions of my life.”—Transition 187</p>	<p>Celebrity 2: Laverne Cox</p> <p><b>“One example of setting the agenda is <i>the off-referenced interview you did with Katie Couric earlier this year, when you explained why focusing on genitalia is misguided.</i></b></p> <p>That felt like a moment when things really shifted. I felt really good about it and I remember thinking, <i>As many people who have been on daytime TV, I’ve never heard someone push back and really talk about the homicide rate in the trans community and talk about the disproportionate discrimination and talk about someone like <i>Islan Nettles</i>, who lost her life just because she was walking down the street while trans.</i> And to shift the narrative away from transition and surgery. I’ve never seen someone challenge that narrative on television before. But in the community, we’ve been talking about this and frustrated for years.”—Katy Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks” TIME Magazine</p>	<p>Celebrity 3: Caitlyn Jenner</p> <p>“I thought I would transition in the ‘80s and all this and all that. Never did it. It’s not like you can take two Aspirin, get plenty of sleep, wake up the next morning and you’re fine. When you look in the mirror, when you go out, when you get dressed, it’s with you all the time.” —Katy Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner” TIME Magazine</p> <p>“He stopped transitioning in the late 80s. He was scared of what the reaction would be. He decided he could not do this to his four children, Burt, Cassandra, Brandon, and Brody. He needed to jump-start his career. He needed credibility to squelch the rumors, and he told me marrying Kris Kardashian, in 1991, helped give him that along with compatibility and love.”—Buzz Bissinger, “Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story” <i>Vanity Fair</i></p>
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<p><b>Celebrity 4: Jazz Jennings</b></p> <p>“The first step was to tell my siblings. Dad and Mom sat my brothers and sister down to explain to them that as a family they were all going to start recognizing me for what I was—a girl. The twins, who were seven by then, took it with their usual “sure, cool” attitude. I think because they were so young. It wasn’t like they were losing anything, since they’d never really thought of me as a little brother to begin with due to my lack of interest in boy stuff.</p> <p>Ari took it a little harder. She really liked being the only daughter. She was nine at the time and wasn’t too happy to suddenly have to share the family princess status. But after my dad explained to her that many transgender kids have really difficult lives and that more than 50 percent try to kill themselves at some point because they aren’t loved and accepted, she started to cry and promised him she’d be the best big sister ever. She has been ever since, even when I’d get super annoying and copy her every move. If she got a purple hair bow, I had to have a purple hair bow, too. It got so bad that Mom would sometimes buy us matching outfits so I wouldn’t be tempted to sneak things from Ari’s closet. (It didn’t work.) I think Ari was flattered, but I’m sure it also bugged her at times. If it did, she never let on. She’s just that great.</p> <p>Grandpa Jack and Grandma Jacky definitely had their concerns about how the world might treat me, but they’d witnessed so much of my behavior growing up that they knew the right thing was to go along with what made me happy. Mom was friendly with my preschool teacher, and even though I didn’t know it, they had been in constant contact. Mom let her know what I was going through, and while I still hadn’t started socially transitioning by changing my pronoun and wearing dresses outside the house, the two of them were able to convince the school’s director to ease up on the dress code for me.</p> <p>Eventually, I was allowed to wear shirts that had pictures of things like butterflies and Disney princesses. My absolute favorite was purple, with a big picture of Ariel from <i>The Little Mermaid</i> on it. The administration drew the line at these tops, though. When kids asked questions about why I could wear girly shirts, I told them it was because I was a girl. If they kept asking about it, the teacher would tell them I was allowed to be whatever I wanted to be. In the end nobody else besides me wanted to dress differently, so it didn’t upset the balance too much.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 20-21</p> <p>“Still, they waited about six months, until my fifth birthday, to have my coming-out party. [...] because Mom had invited my entire preschool class. By that point I’d collected a pretty huge girly wardrobe by sneaking Ari’s old clothes out of her bedroom, and since it was a pool party I narrowed down my choices to two different brightly colored one-piece bathing suits that no longer fit my sister. One had rainbow stripes with an almost metallic, sparkly sheen all over it, and the other one was tie-dyed. Of course, I chose the sparkly option! I felt like it was the one that best represented me. Not that I was using words like “represent” back then. It was more like I grabbed it and yelled, ‘MINE! MINE! MINE!’</p> <p>“The next big step in my social transition was going out in public dressed like a girl. We waited for the school’s holiday break, and my parents decided Disney World would be a good place to start, since it was nearby and so packed with all kinds of people that no one was going to be looking out for a kid dressed in a way they didn’t agree with. I’m sure no one would have noticed, but Mom and Dad wanted to make sure I was completely free of scrutiny. I mean, what could go wrong at the Happiest Place on Earth?”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 29</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 5: Janet Mock</b></p> <p>“To announce your gender in name, dress, and pronouns in your school, place of work, neighborhood, and state is a public process, on which trans people literally petition authorities to approve name and gender marker changes on identification cards and public records. Becoming comfortable with your identity is step one; the next step is revealing that identity to those around you. As with medically transition, there are economic and legislative barriers that make it difficult for low-income trans people to make the public changes that align their lives and documented gender.</p> <p>To legally change my name at fifteen would have required me to appeal to my mother to petition for my name change, pay the three-hundred-dollar-plus filing fees, and plead with my father in Dallas to cosign on something he had absolutely no knowledge of. So I postpone the legal process until I was eighteen and wielded the power of self-determination, announcing to my pers and my family that I would only answer to Janet and <i>she</i> and <i>her</i> pronouns.</p> <p>Through I kept the fact that I was taking hormones a secret over the summer before my sophomore year, I was not hiding my dress, makeup, and longer hair from my family. Mom allowed me to spend my back-to-school clothing allowance on skirts, dresses, tight denim jeans, and tops. As long as I brought home good grades, I was in the clear. That was our informal, unspoken agreement.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 144</p> <p>“Social transition is the process by which a trans person begins openly living as their true gender. Trans youth who openly express their gender identity at home are usually aided by parents about their identity, pronouns, and name. Open, clear communication helps detail the student’s and the family’s journey, educate people about what it means to be trans, and set a precedent of support for the young person.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 147</p>
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Question 6: To the extent you feel comfortable answering, what are your thoughts on medical transition? For instance, what does it mean to you to medically transition? If you have started to medically transition, what does that process look like for you?

<p>Celebrity 1: Chaz Bono</p> <p>“It’s true, it’s something he will consider at the appropriate time.’ Bono’s publicist Howard Bragman told ABCNews.com. “But it’s not something that is imminent and not something he believes will make him a man. He feels comfortable with his own masculinity.”</p> <p>‘Gender is between your ears and not between your legs’, said Bragman. ‘And he knows it’s an imperfect surgery and that he will either get something small with some feeling or something normal that doesn’t have any feeling.’” —“Chaz Bono” ABC News</p>	<p>Celebrity 2: Laverne Cox</p> <p><b>“One example of setting the agenda is <i>the off-referenced interview you did with Katie Couric earlier this year, when you explained why focusing on genitalia is misguided.</i></b></p> <p>That felt like a moment when things really shifted. I felt really good about it and I remember thinking, <i>As many people who have been on daytime TV, I’ve never heard someone push back and really talk about the homicide rate in the trans community and talk about the disproportionate discrimination and talk about someone like <i>Islan Nettles, who lost her life just because she was walking down the street while trans.</i></i> And to shift the narrative away from transition and surgery, I’ve never seen someone challenge that narrative on television before. But in the community, we’ve been talking about this and frustrated for years.” —Katy Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks” TIME Magazine</p>	<p>Celebrity 3: Caitlyn Jenner</p> <p>“I thought I would transition in the ‘80s and all this and all that. Never did it. It’s not like you can take two Aspirin, get plenty of sleep, wake up the next morning and you’re fine. When you look in the mirror, when you go out, when you get dressed, it’s with you all the time.” — Katy Steinmetz, “Caitlyn Jenner” TIME Magazine</p> <p>“Jenner had already been taking hormones. The hair on his body and his facial hair had been removed. He had had his nose fixed twice and the tracheal shave. On this Sunday his destination was the office of a surgeon specializing in what is known as facial-feminization surgery. Pioneered in the 80s and 90s by San Francisco plastic surgeon Douglas Ousterhout, it can involve such procedures as hairline correction, forehead contouring, and jaw and chin contouring. There would also be a procedure to augment his breasts.</p> <p>He was not having genital surgery. There are an estimated 700,000 transgender women and men in the United States; only about a quarter of transgender women have had genital surgery. There is a common misperception that such surgery is somehow “required” to be a transgender woman or man, akin to a certificate from the Transgender Licensing Board. The transgender community for years has been trying to get the public to understand that genitalia are not a determinant of gender: you can be born a woman with male genitalia, just as you can be born a man with female genitalia. In any case, under the World Professional Association for Transgender Health’s “Standards of Care,” formed by a consensus of leading psychologists and medical specialists, genital surgery is not advised for at least a year after transition.</p> <p>Jenner had actually gone through various stages of transition once before, in the mid- and late 1980s. He took hormones that resulted in breast growth and had his beard removed through an incredibly painful two-year regimen of electrolysis that he withstood without any medication because “pain is kind of, for me, part of the pain for being me . . . this is what you get for being who you are. Just take the pain.” Buzz Bissinger, “Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story” <i>Vanity Fair</i></p>
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<p><b>Celebrity 4: Jazz Jennings</b></p> <p>“The idea with blockers is that they would give me time to figure out what I wanted to do about my male body later in life, without developing things like facial hair, a lower voice, an Adam’s apple, and other male characteristics. For a long time when I was younger I’d had the same nightmare over and over about giant beards and mustaches chasing me and trying to attach themselves to my face.</p> <p>With the blockers, I’d be able to pick the time that was right for me to start taking estrogen to help me develop into a more feminine body, and then possibly have surgery somewhere down the line. I knew I was still too young to make those kinds of decisions.</p> <p>It’s really important to understand that not every transgender person decides to go this route, and many aren’t fortunate enough to even have blockers as an option. They don’t have the family, medical, or financial support that I did. I really want to stress that every single person’s transition is different. Some people choose surgery and hormones, and some don’t. It’s a deeply personal process, and as a rule you should never ask a person who is transgender about what options they’ve taken—if any—unless they offer to start up that conversation themselves.</p> <p>I get that there’s a natural curiosity for a lot of people who are unfamiliar with transgender surgery options, but if you’re really interested, take the initiative to educate yourself through the Internet. All the information is out there to discover on your own, without putting a transgender person on the spot. I’ve included some great informational websites in the Resources section at the end of this book.</p> <p>Anyway, taking the blockers was what I knew was right for me at that time, and not a day goes by when I don’t appreciate how incredibly lucky I am to have parents who allowed me to choose this option.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 90-91</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 5: Janet Mock</b></p> <p>“When she graduated to Estradiol injections weeks later, Wendi passed her Premarin bottles to me. She claimed didn’t like the pills because bloated her, but I knew part of her didn’t want to go on the journey alone.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 135</p> <p>“After a few months on Premarin, I noticed bloating from increased water retention. My appetite was insatiable, leading to weight gain in my thighs and butt, which settled to a shapely size seven in juniors’ jeans. My skin, which was never affected by facial hair began breaking out with heavy acne across my forehead, a direct effect of hormone levels. There were desirable effects, too, like the suppleness of my skin, which was unnaturally smooth, like a puppy’s hairless belly. Breasts were my favorite feature. I remember being struck by the sensitivity of my areolas, which swelled within weeks, prompting budding of my breasts. If they rubbed too hard against my shirt, my nipples throbbed. Despite the pain, I flaunted my fleshy chest during our weekend nights out in a push-up bra filled out with a pair of silicone cutlets.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 138</p> <p>“People often describe the journey of transsexual people as a passage through the sexes, from manhood to womanhood, from male to female, from boy to girl. That simplifies a complicated journey of self-discovery that goes way beyond gender and genitalia. My passage was evolution from me to closer-to-me-ness. It’s a journey of self-revelation. Undergoing hormone therapy and genital reconstruction surgery and traveling sixty-hundred miles from Hawaii to Thailand are the titillating details that cis people love to hear. They’re deeply personal steps I took to become closer to me, and I choose to share them. I didn’t hustle those streets and fight the maturation of my body merely to get a vagina. I sought something grander than the changing of genitalia. I was seeking recognition with myself.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 227</p>
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Question 7: If you experience gender euphoria, what have those experiences been like? What makes you happiest in your gender identity and expression?

<p>Celebrity 1: Chaz Bono</p> <p>"From the moment I began taking testosterone, I felt different in my body. I felt stronger, more energetic, and my libido became intense. After about a month, I noticed muscle growth and a redistribution of fat—my body looked different in the mirror. [...]</p> <p>But the single most significant change was how incredibly happy I felt. Every part of me felt liberated. I was starting to feel comfortable in my body for the first time in my life. Confidence streamed through me. The male I looked, the more male I felt, the more joyous I became."—<i>Transition</i> 196-197</p>	<p>Celebrity 2: Laverne Cox</p> <p><b>"Would you say you're a happy person now?"</b></p> <p>Absolutely. Happiness is weird though. I'm so busy and I'm living my dream. I feel like myself and I feel pretty integrated, like the person that I am inside is who the world is seeing, which feels calming. But it's not like 'Oooooohhh, I'm a woman now and the world is amazing.' There's hardships. There are a lot of struggles still. I'm happy that I am myself and I couldn't imagine my life if I were still in denial or lying, pretending to be a boy. That seems ridiculous to me. That seems crazy at this point ... It's nice to be done with transitioning." —Katy Steinmetz, "Laverne Talks" TIME Magazine</p>	<p>Celebrity 3: Caitlyn Jenner</p> <p><b>"How comfortable are you living as Caitlyn?"</b></p> <p>I was talking to this one trans girl. She said that about two years after she transitioned and was living authentically as being female, and working, and being out there, she jumped into bed one night and actually thought, 'Wait a second, I went my whole day and never once thought about gender.' She said it was a real milestone for her. She lay there in bed and started crying. I would love to get to that point in my life, you know? I'm not there yet. But I would love to get there. I just want to get up in the morning, be myself, enjoy my day, have loving people around me." — Katy Steinmetz, "Caitlyn Jenner" TIME Magazine</p>
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<p><b>Celebrity 4: Jazz Jennings</b></p> <p>“The memory of Mom calling me a girl for the first time is so clear in my mind. She was sitting in her bedroom, and I walked up to her and asked if she would put my short hair into pigtails. She bunched up what little she could on both sides of my head, so that I looked like Pippi Longstocking if someone had attacked her braids with a pair of scissors. We stared into the mirror together, and Mom told me I was a very pretty little girl. She finally understood! ‘I love you,’ I said, looking up at her. ‘And I love my hair!’</p> <p>I started dancing all around the room, thrilled out of my mind. But suddenly I stopped in my tracks, full of concern. Griffen and Sander had recently started teaching me how to kick a soccer ball around the backyard, and I was really having fun with that. I looked up at Mom again and asked, ‘Can girls still play sports?’</p> <p>‘Girls can do anything they want,’ she answered.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 24-25</p> <p>“Still, they waited about six months, until my fifth birthday, to have my coming-out party. I didn’t want to wait that long, but Dad continued to be very, very cautious, wanting to move slowly and not rush anything. It worked out well, though—since we were going to have a party anyway, it got to be an extra-special occasion, and my parents didn’t hold back on anything. They rented a bounce house with a water slide and a snow cone machine, which Sander and Griffen immediately announced they were going to run. (My parents found out later they were charging everyone \$5 per treat and pocketing all the cash).</p> <p>On that day, I was finally allowed to wear whatever I wanted in front of my friends and their families because Mom had invited my entire preschool class. By that point I’d collected a pretty huge girly wardrobe by sneaking Ari’s old clothes out of her bedroom, and since it was a pool party I narrowed down my choices to two different brightly colored one-piece bathing suits that no longer fit my sister. One had rainbow stripes with an almost metallic, sparkly sheen all over it, and the other one was tie-dyed. Of course, I chose the sparkly option! I felt like it was the one that best represented me. Not that I was using words like “represent” back then. It was more like ‘I grabbed it and yelled, ‘MINE! MINE! MINE!’</p> <p>It was the happiest day of the first five years of my life. There was no nervousness of fear about how people might react. I couldn’t stop smiling because everyone would finally see my real, authentic self in such a beautiful bathing suit. My parents were allowing me to be the girl I knew I was.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 29</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 5: Janet Mock</b></p> <p>“I soon became known at Moanalua as the bell-bottom and baby-tee-wearing boy-girl freshman who’d tweeze your browns for five dollars. I found refuge among the girls, most of whom were also volleyball players. They took me under their wing and complimented the photos I took with Wendi, which I finally had the courage to display in a transparent slip on the school binder I clutched to my flat chest. It was a gesture, reminding myself that I was a girl. “Oohh, you look good!” one of the senior girls said to me one day during lunch, passing my binder around. ‘I wouldn’t even know you were boy.’</p> <p>I took their words as nourishment, the kind of affirmation I needed to grow the courage to transition. Their words fed me more than the lineup from the cafeteria’s make-your-own-nachos station.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 131</p>
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Question 8: To the extent you feel comfortable answering, if you experience gender dysphoria, what have those experiences been like for you?

<p><b>Celebrity 1: Chaz Bono</b>          “The first time I started puberty—or puberty hit me—I was horrified.          I was young when puberty started—only about eleven, and this made me miserable. Of course, my mother and Aunt Gee had told me about puberty—but nothing could quite prepare me for my body’s changes. Most people can’t wait to develop and evolve into adults. I hadn’t dreaded puberty, in fact I hadn’t thought about it at all. I just ignored my body until the inevitable occurred. I could not longer just wear T-shirts and gym shirts after school. I could no longer pretend that I looked just like a boy; I was turning into a woman.          One day in the sixth grade, right as I was about to turn twelve, Harriet informed me that I needed to start wearing a bra. Clearly, I needed to be told; I certainly didn’t ask for one. I don’t remember the exact conversation, but I do remember Harriet taking me to a department store where she picked out a couple of bras. Right after, I went to Gina’s house for the weekend. It was my first time wearing the bra, and I remember constantly tugging on it, trying to arrange it in a way that wouldn’t feel so uncomfortable. Honestly, it wasn’t just that this was something I needed to get used to; I hated having to wear it at all, because it felt so unnatural to me. Wearing a bra felt like a smack in the face—a blatant reminder that I was not the boy I felt I was. I wanted to a boy’s reedy lines, sharply defined muscles, strength and power—all the things I associated with being a boy. Instead my body was giving me soft curves and a shape that I hated more and more with each day. And my breasts seemed to be grow even faster. At twelve I was wearing a C cup bra, and by the time I was fully mature at eighteen I was wearing a double-D. I always felt my breasts were enormous, foreign appendages, and I spent considerable energy throughout my adolescence, as well as most of my adult life, trying to hid me breasts behind baggy high-cut shirts and minimizing bras.          When I got my period later the next year, I was at the movies with my aunt. We’d gone to see <i>Fame</i>, and during a restroom break, I noticed that I was bleeding. Instead of the red tide that I’d expected, I saw only dark brown spotting. I was horrified. The blood was a sign of doom, of weakness, of something I didn’t want.”—Chaz Bono, <i>Transition</i> 32-33</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 2: Laverne Cox</b>  <b>“How comfortable are you living as Caitlyn?”</b>          I was talking to this one trans girl. She said that about two years after she transitioned and was living authentically as being female, and working, and being out there, she jumped into bed one night and actually thought, ‘Wait a second, I went my whole day and never once thought about gender.’ She said it was a real milestone for her. She lay there in bed and started crying. I would love to get to that point in my life, you know? I’m not there yet. But I would love to get there. I just want to get up in the morning, be myself, enjoy my day, have loving people around me.” —Katy Steinmetz, “Laverne Talks,” TIME Magazine</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 3: Caitlyn Jenner</b>          “People say, Oh my God, what a body—you look great. That wasn’t what I was looking for,” Jenner told me. “I could not really cross-dress. I tried to grow my hair out as much as I could without getting yelled at.          The night of his Olympic win Jenner and his wife, Chrystie, stayed in a penthouse hotel suite in Montreal. It was arranged by his lawyer at the time, Alan Rothenberg, after he realized that the Jenners, typically, with their innocence and lack of lavishness, had made no plan for a place to stay.          After Jenner woke up the next morning, he walked past the grand piano into the bathroom. He was naked. The gold medal was around his neck. He looked at himself in the mirror. The grand diversion of winning the decathlon was finished. Everything would change. Nothing had changed. He didn’t see a hunk. He didn’t see success. Instead of reveling in the accomplishment, he diminished it in his mind because <i>he</i> had done it, the stupid little boy with dyslexia. The little boy who knew he had been born a girl and was now just trying to put one over on the rest of the world.          ‘Now what do I do?’ he said to himself.”—Buzz Bissinger, “Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story,” <i>Vanity Fair</i></p>
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<p><b>Celebrity 4: Jazz Jennings</b></p> <p>“Like any kid, I took a lot of baths with my brothers and sister, and I’d compare my genitals to theirs. My little penis felt so wrong on me. I wished I could take the sponge and wipe it off, and behind it I’d magically find a “gagina” like what my sister and my mom had. It definitely bothered me, but I remember feeling frustrated and confused more than anything else. It was a strange growth hanging off me that didn’t look at all like it belonged there.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 3</p> <p>“I was 3 when we went in for the appointment, and I liked Dr. Marilyn right away. She had a very calm and soothing voice like Grandma Jacky’s that made me feel safe.</p> <p>Dr. Marilyn pulled out two stuffed dolls that looked like fake Cabbage Patch Kids you’d find on the counterfeit toy market, with an important difference—they were anatomically correct. She asked what I had between my legs, and I pointed to the penis. She then asked what I wanted, and I pointed to the vagina.</p> <p>That was the first day I ever heard the word ‘transgender.’ I remember feeling this overwhelming sense of relief that there was finally a word that described me—a girl who had accidentally been born into a boy’s body.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 10</p> <p>“While we were shooting, I went for my annual physical and got some news that freaked me out—I had already started puberty. I hadn’t been expecting that at all. The twins didn’t start puberty until they were thirteen! When they had their bar mitzvahs, there was nothing going on, but then suddenly, BAM. They shot up a few inches, grew facial hair, got acne, and started smelling like teenage boys.”—Jazz Jennings, <i>Being Jazz</i> 89</p>	<p><b>Celebrity 5: Janet Mock</b></p> <p>“In the bathroom, I was forced to engage with my penis. It had to be cleaned and it wanted to be touched. The pleasure I’d give myself filled with a combination of release and revulsion. I felt guilty for achieving gratification from a part that separated me from my personal vision of myself, and I let despair because I didn’t have the means to change it. Premarin stimulated that sense of discord and angst, one that cradled me as I cried myself to sleep at night, hoping that some genie would magically appear and all my trouble would be solved.</p> <p>No one came, though, and I struggled in secret, wielding nothing but despair and fierce determination.”—Janet Mock, <i>Redefining Realness</i> 139</p>
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