Looking for Signs of Trans Life: Rejecting Transnormativity to Explore Genderfluidity as Both Identity and Relational Process

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Abstract

Genderfluidity refers to having a gender that changes consistently and nonlinearly. For people who are genderfluid, change is the basis of gender identity cohesion; past genders are not rationalized as a phase, a misnaming, or confusion, future genders are anticipated, and one's current gender experience is not upheld as more "true" or "real" than those past or future genders. It is a form of nonbinary gender, and is an aspect of some transgender people's experience that has so far been understudied. The present research used hermeneutic phenomenology to explore 16 people's experiences of genderfluidity. In their interviews, participants described genderfluidity as a relational experience, fundamentally informed by their interactions in community, rather than solely as an individualized identity. Major themes included the importance of gender euphoria (as opposed to dysphoria) for finding an authentic gender presentation; authentic gender embodiment as a prerequisite for building authentic and noncoercive relationships; genderfluidity as an experience which blurs the lines between masculinity, femininity, and androgyny and which is therefore treated as illegitimate under cisnormativity; White supremacy and ableism as defining features of cisnormativity and anti-transness; and fluidity-affirming community ties as permission to exist as a genderfluid person. Genderfluidity therefore provides a unique lens through which to understand connections between anti-transness, patriarchy, White supremacy, and ableism, as well as possibilities for resisting these forces through noncoercive, responsive, and authentic relationships.

Keywords: Genderfluid; nonbinary gender; transgender; LGBTQ; epistemic injustice; hermeneutic phenomenology; qualitative; minority stress; cisnormativity; queer community; social support

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Preface: Banishing the Imaginary Cisgender Person

This work is intended as a love letter to genderfluid people. It should be approached the same way you would a too-big jacket you stole from a friend or a portrait drawn by a lover or a recipe passed down from a relative – as one part comfort, one part hope for the future, one part opportunity for reflection, and one part DIY project. Sometimes it will veer into musings about how we as trans people might treat ourselves and each other a little better, because I think such difficult conversations are a part of love too. It should never be treated as gospel – this work is not exhaustive and I am not interested in acting as an authority on transness (we already have too many people vying for that oppressive job).

The first two questions I asked in my interviews were, "How would you describe your gender?" and "How do you define genderfluid?" The people I spoke to had beautiful, nuanced answers (which we'll get to in a minute), but oftentimes their initial response was something like this:

> **Ollie:** But if I had to describe it to someone, I would say... I don't know. It's hard. I don't know. It's really tough because I don't think cis people think about their gender. So would it even make sense?

When this happened, I would reply by saying, "But what if you aren't trying to explain it to a cis person? It's late at night, you're hanging out with some trans friends: What would you say then?"

It was only after the two of us had established this premise, only after we agreed to kick the Imaginary Cisgender Person out of the room, that *any* of the conversations you are about to read became possible.

I am bringing this same ethos to my writing.

I am starting from the foundational premise that transgender people are *people* and deserve to be treated as people. Trans people, like anyone else, deserve agency and respect and compassion and space to be imperfect. We are just as diverse and complicated as any other demographic. As individuals, we do not deserve to constantly bear the burden of representation for all trans people everywhere.

Sometimes we don't look the way a trans person is "supposed" to look (you know the look - White, thin, able-bodied, with an easily-clockable androgyny to reassure cis people that they "can always tell"). Sometimes we live with disability (including mental illness) or addiction. I will not provide a caveat around every discussion of mental illness in this book that trans people are not inherently more prone to mental illness than the general population, but instead experience a higher burden of mental illness as a result of our experiences with anti-transness. We already know this from other research (e.g., Testa et al., 2017; Valente, 2020), and I refuse to disrespect trans people who live with mental illness by acting like we are a problem to be fixed as a measure of "trans progress." Like any other person, sometimes trans people doubt ourselves, so I am not going to explain every time the topic of transition hesitancy comes up that most trans people do not regret their transition choices, because other research has already established this fact (e.g., MacKinnon, 2021). Transition is a process and we deserve to work through that process in peace, without people constantly questioning our identities because of it.

Finally, like all people, sometimes we make choices we later regret. Sometimes we hurt people, including ourselves. Sometimes we have problematic opinions and beliefs. Sometimes we misspeak or use offensive language. Sometimes we lash out. None of these things disqualify us from our personhood or justify the harm we experience from anti-trans bigotry.

In other words, I am not going to attempt to preempt every horrible transphobic discourse that this work might get twisted to support. It is impossible to explain yourself adequately to someone who is determined to misunderstand you. They will understand you on their own terms or never. It is unfair *and pointless* to expect transgender people to live our lives only through the lens of respectability politics. I refuse this expectation.

So I am not writing for the Imaginary Cisgender Person becasue I would like to spend my energy on other things in this project. In particular, when I was first exploring my gender, I didn't know any other out genderfluid people in my personal life, but I found the work of trans authors like Kate Bornstein and Ash Hardell extremely helpful in my own journey to understand my gender. I hope this book can add to the existing body of literature written by and for trans people.

Therefore, I am taking Charlie's advice:

> **Charlie:** I think one of the issues that sometimes we as trans people and just marginalized groups in general don't fully understand in our digital world is that for a very long time prior to social media being everywhere, we as trans people, bound in community together, would have these difficult, complex conversations around, "Oh, it's actually okay for me to transition and then transition back because everyone should have access to this care all the time." Or "You can look this way and still be trans." And it's

> kind of problematic but those conversations don't need to be said in the space of cis straight people.
>
> In some ways, yes, these are difficult conversations that those people need to eventually hear, but those conversations are for us first… I know it's problematic because of visibility and representation, but pulling back to find a full community before we move forward is really important because cis people and straight people from an oppression standpoint have really fractured us. And so I think understanding genderfluidity and nonbinary identities and trans identities, I think would be much easier for a lot of trans people if we were to withdraw in[to] our affirming community first and then go out together to yell. Because it's much easier to be louder if there's a bunch of you… because of how the internet silos us, it's been so much harder. And so... Find trans friends first before you talk to the cis straight people is what I would recommend.

I invite my trans readers (if you find yourself with a little safety and a little power) to do the same when you can.

With hope,

Quin

P.S. Regarding my cisgender readers, you are welcome to stay and listen. Genderfluidity already challenges the idea that there is a strict divide between cisness and transness, but also, I thought I was cis until I realized I could be trans. Everyone is entitled to gender exploration regardless of their identity, and we all have to learn to live with each other regardless of our differences, so I

hope you find something useful here, either for yourself or for your interactions with genderfluid people. Just be mindful.

Chapter 1: A Rant (Deconstructing Sub/Super/Human Tropes in Transgender Science)

I am starved for trans stories. I think I always have been, even before I knew exactly why I was so obsessed with Angel in *RENT: The Musical* or…. Honestly, Angel is the only positive-leaning portrayal of a (potential) trans person that I can remember from growing up, and they still die about midway through the show to teach the other characters a lesson about living each moment to the fullest. Angel is also the center of a fair amount of controversy around the production, as their gender is decidedly ambiguous: Angel is referred to in the show using both "he" and "she" pronouns and both masculine and feminine terminology, clapping back at one point, "I'm more of a man than you'll ever be and more of a woman than you're ever gonna get!" Angel is generally dressed femme while on stage, including while spending a regular day out with her partner, but he also occasionally presents masc(uline), such as when he is busking or during a vulnerable moment in the HIV support group he attends. I have heard interpretations that see these masc expressions as the more "real" instances of Angel, as they are the moments when Angel is doing his art and sharing some of the intimate details of his life; however, it's just as easy to see these instances as the times when Angel has the least agency over her life: she is having to convince the cis-het world to give her money for busking, and the process of dying of AIDS leaves her too weak to care for herself generally, including by performing the involved routine of dressing femme. The show's narrator, Mark, calls Angel a drag queen at one point, but Mark is also the most clueless (if generally well-meaning) cisgender-heterosexual character in the show, and we see him struggling to use "she" pronouns during Angel's eulogy so, who knows whether or not he's a reliable narrator? Collins, Angel's loving and committed partner,

identifies as a gay man and uses masculine terminology for Angel, but Mimi, Angel's best friend, only ever uses feminine terminology.

Regardless of which interpretation one holds, critical and fan discussions (e.g., Incarnate, 2019; u/tomobri, 2016) of the production seem to agree on two things: 1) Angel's gender portrayal is "inconsistent," which is regarded as a flaw in Angel's characterization, and 2) Angel can be interpreted as either a cisgender gay man who performs as a drag queen or as a transgender woman unable to live femme full-time. Occasionally, someone will note that Angel also might be genderfluid or nonbinary, but this potential is rarely discussed with any real depth. In these discourses, Angel's gender inconsistency is a mistake, a plot hole that surely would have been corrected by Jonathan Larson had he lived long enough to finish polishing RENT's script (according to fans), or as just another sign that Larson didn't really understand queer people very well at all (according to critics). For me growing up, however, I loved Angel's "inconsistent" gender. Angel was *so* important to me, because they were all I had. And they were written to die as an object lesson.

I'm hardly the first trans person to discuss this problem of representation – a two minute Google search led me to the article "Angel Dies" by Henry Giardina (2021), wherein thirteen trans people describe how the first depiction of transness they remember "told [them they] were an abomination." In her analysis of how trans women are presented in media, Julia Serano (2007) identifies two primary tropes that are used to classify transsexual women: the deceptive and the pathetic. Serano writes:

> While characters based on both models are presented as having a vested interest in achieving an ultrafeminine appearance, they differ in their abilities to pull it off… Even

> though "deceivers" successfully "pass" as women… these characters are never intended to challenge our assumptions about gender itself. On the contrary, they are positioned as "fake" women, and their "secret" trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of "truth"… In contrast to "deceivers" who wield their feminine wiles with success, the "pathetic transsexual" characters aren't deluding anyone. Despite her masculine mannerisms and five o'clock shadow, the "pathetic transsexual" will inevitably insist that she is a woman trapped inside a man's body… While we are supposed to admire their courage – which presumably comes from the difficulty of living as women who do not appear very female – we are not meant to identify with them or to be sexually attracted to them… (pg. 36-39)

For the purposes of my work here, I would like to expand Serano's analysis beyond transsexual women to include all trans people, because Angel doesn't quite fit into either of these tropes. They're certainly not a villain, as "deceivers" are (they're introduced as someone who killed their neighbor's dog and still end up being one of the most likeable characters in the show). They are portrayed as a victim of HIV, and we are supposed to admire their courage without identifying with them, but they are also presented as attractive, charming, and as successfully performing femininity, so they don't really play as "pathetic." I think this is because Angel represents a third trope for storying trans people that Serano does not describe and which is especially (but not exclusively) associated with nonbinary people. I am going to call this third trope "the superhuman."

The superhuman may be a villain or a hero, but is always too powerful to be relatable. In science fiction, the superhuman may be a human or extraterrestrial being in the far future who

uses advanced technology to modify their body at a whim. They do not identify with a single binary gender, and will often spend significant portions of their storyline questioning if they even qualify as a person, because of their dissociation from their body and from a recognizable, static, binary gender identity (e.g., The Major from *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*). In fantasy, the superhuman is magical or divine – wizards, fae, and gods can be nonbinary, agender, or genderfluid (e.g., Janet from *The Good Place*; Double-Trouble from Netflix's revival of *She-Ra: Princess of Power*), but these spaces tend not to be for "normal" humans. And then in RENT you have Angel, literally named after a supernatural being, who cannot save themself from dying of AIDS, but who resurrects Mimi in the third act of the play from beyond the grave.

What Does Science Have to Do With It?

My hunger for trans narratives ultimately led me to the social sciences rather than the humanities, but I am opening this research project with an analysis of a fictional character because I think it's important for scientists to remember that our work is another form of storytelling. This perspective on science has fundamentally influenced my own approach to researching genderfluidity and transgender lives. Specifically, in her book *Dear Science and Other Stories,* Katherine McKittrick (2021) calls us to understand

> theory as a form of storytelling. Stories and storytelling signal the fictive work of theory. I hope this move, at least momentarily, exposes the intricacies of academic work where fact-finding, experimentation, analysis, study, are recognized as narrative, plot, tale and incomplete inventions, rather than impartial treatises. (pg. 7)

Seeing science as storytelling means recognizing that at each point of the research process, the scientist has to decide what sort of information is worth including, and which information is

spurious. The questions we see as worth researching, who we include in our studies, the methods we use to collect our data, how we decide to deal with outliers, and how we interpret our results are each a value-judgement.

Furthermore, science is storytelling with significant clout: We expect science to teach us about how the world "really" works, and so scientific research is regularly used to justify laws, institutional policies, and other norms regarding how we understand and treat each other. For this reason, the scientific stories we tell are often foundational to doing effective advocacy work and to building resilient liberation movements. Importantly, recognizing science as storytelling makes it clear that the stories we tell in our research about trans people often fit into the same harmful tropes we see in fiction.

I am not interested in performing an in-depth analysis of how transphobic tropes appear in the scientific literature, but I will provide a few examples to demonstrate my point. In my attempt to broaden Serano's trope framework, I have been influenced by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's (2020) theorizing of how Black people's humanity is "plasticized:"

> Plasticity is a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially "everything and nothing" at the register of ontology (pg. 3).

My purpose here is not to conflate Blackness with transness, particularly because such a conflation erases the unique experiences of Black transgender people, but I was struck by how well the three categories of the sub/super/human framework and expectations of infinite malleability seemed to map onto my experiences with the literature about trans people. If we

accept that gender is always racialized, such that gendered oppression and racial oppression co-constitute each other (i.e., they create and sustain each other), then one of the ways White supremacy manifests itself is through gendered expectations, and through whose gender gets to be treated as real (Spillers, 1987). For this reason, it makes sense to me that the framework used to story Black people would also be relevant to how transgender people are storied.

Therefore, I have used Serano's (2007) and Jackson's (2020) theorizing as a jumping off point to develop descriptions of three tropes which have defined scientific research about transness to date: 1) subhuman, 2) victimized human, and 3) superhuman. My hope is that describing these tropes will be the first step to doing science that is based in the personhood of trans people, which can better function as a reflection of trans people's lives, and therefore as a knowledge base that can be used by trans people for transgender advocacy work and community building.

Three Tropes for Storying Transness in the Scientific Literature

(Spoiler warning: They're all tools for dehumanization.)

Subhuman

Instead of Serano's (2007) "deceiver" terminology, I am going to use Jackson's (2020) term "subhuman," because the trans "deceiver" is just one facet of how trans people are made to seem less than human. I would argue that this trope also manifests in the political and scientific construction of the "confused" trans person, who is argued to not actually be trans at all, but has some other kind of mental or emotional "problem" that is only making them believe they are trans. These "confused" trans people are seen as incapable of knowing their own minds and as

needing to be protected from making their own decisions. In both cases, as "deceiver" or "confused," the trans person is dehumanized because they cannot be trusted. Fundamentally, this trope is based in what Serano (2007) calls "gender entitlement," or the belief that an institutional authority (e.g., a parent, a medical professional, a judge, even another trans person) has "the ability to know a trans person's 'true' identity and that [the authority's] perception of a trans person is more valid than the trans person's own self-knowledge" (Nordmarken, 2014, pg. 130).

The "subhuman" trope has historically been common in the scientific literature, and is often at the core of the most-obviously transphobic science that gets published; thankfully, it also tends to receive significant pushback from trans scholars and activists. We do, however, still see this trope at work in the insistence that trans people must be evaluated for gender dysphoria (quite literally weighed, measured, and found wanting) by clinicians before they can access transition supports, despite the fact that gender dysphoria is not necessary to be transgender or to desire transition (Turban, 2020). For example, the transgender desistence literature argues that the majority of youth referred to gender clinics ultimately desist from desiring medical transition; however, this body of literature has significant methodological limitations which have likely highly inflated "desistence" statistics (see Newhook et al., 2018 for a critical review explaining why the desistence literature is based on flawed scientific methodology). This body of literature often gets used to argue that trans people, and particularly trans youth, should have to wait through long trial periods to make sure they are "really" trans before they are allowed to access transition of any kind, including social transition.

We also see this trope at play in the scientifically-unverified concept of "rapid onset gender dysphoria" (RODG; for a detailed explanation as to why ROGD is a flawed concept

based on a single flawed study, see Ashley, 2020). ROGD reinterprets self-protective behaviors common to trans youth (such as hiding gender dysphoria from disaffirming parents) to argue that transness can act as a social contagion, and that therefore many adolescents who identify as trans actually are not. In particular, it has been used to argue that adolescents assigned female at birth are coming out as transmasculine because they are trying to avoid misogyny. This argument makes little sense, however, in light of scholarship demonstrating that transphobia is rooted in sexism and therefore being trans is not protective against misogyny (e.g., Dierckx et al., 2013; Serano, 2007). ROGD has been used to justify recent attempts to criminalize doctors who provide medical transition services to youth in the United States (and other countries), with proponents arguing that we must "save" vulnerable youth from queer people and trans-affirming medical professionals, who can "confuse" them about their gender.

Importantly, the subhuman trope is used to effectively neutralize claims of transphobia while perpetuating anti-transness. One version of an argument based in the subhuman trope might be, "Clinicians aren't being gatekeepers – they are protecting their clients' best interests by being conservative with treatment." Another version might be, "Parents aren't rejecting their trans children – they are protecting their children by encouraging them to reject misogynistic stereotypes and to learn to be more comfortable in their (natural, real) female identity." The main thing to remember here, is that every manifestation of the subhuman trope is harm masquerading as genuine concern. To play on Toni Morrison's (1995) work in *The Site of Memory*, you cannot care for someone if you simultaneously refuse to acknowledge that they have an interior life beyond your comprehension or control.

Victimized Human

Instead of "pathetic," I am going to use the term "victimized," because in this trope, trans people are worthy of some degree of compassion, but only as compensation for their suffering. The "victimized" trope is particularly popular in the scientific literature; I would even argue that it is the most common trope we see. It is less obviously harmful than the "subhuman" trope because it is at least willing to trust the trans person's own gender identification, and therefore receives less public pushback. In fact, researchers will often rely upon the "victim" trope in attempts to critique the effects of the "subhuman" trope, for example, by emphasizing the risk of suicide for trans youth who cannot access desired transition services. The victim trope is still deserving of critique, however, because in this research, transness is treated as a state of abjection, which no one would choose for themselves.

Unlike the "subhuman" trope, the "victim" trope doesn't usually come out of flawed scientific methodology. Instead it is most often based in an objectifying interpretation of the data. For example, the transgender health disparities literature, which describes how experiences of discrimination increase rates of physical and mental illness for transgender people, often falls into the "victimized human" trope. It is true that experiences of stigma harm health (for any marginalized population), and I am not arguing that we should avoid talking about the negative consequences of discrimination for trans people. I do think, however, that we need to be more careful about how we discuss these negative outcomes because, as of now, it is common to exhaustively describe all of the negative experiences that can be related to transness – increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicide, domestic violence, sexual assault, homelessness, poverty, familial conflict, eating disorders, substance abuse (honestly, the list is never-ending) – without any interest in the personhood or agency (however tentative or impeded) of the trans person who

is the subject of the research. The end result is that suffering is made to seem essential to transness.

Superhuman

Finally, the "superhuman" trope will often appear when researchers attempt to critique the "victim" trope. As an example of the superhuman trope, it is common in the resiliency literature to focus on all of the ways that trans people can overcome adversity and make the world a better, less gender-oppressive place, but with little concern for the effort or loss trans people may have to go through in order to achieve those positive outcomes. Some examples of research based in this trope include: Trans kids raised in affirming environments don't have the same negative outcomes as the disaffirmed trans kids from the health disparities literature – they're just like cisgender kids (e.g., Gülgöz et al., 2019)! The cisgender siblings of gender expansive youth are more open to being friends with gender nonconforming peers (e.g., Olson & Enright, 2016)! Nonbinary people are "redoing transgender" by challenging transnormativity (Darwin, 2017, pg. 14)!

I know this literature is written with good intention – it is an attempt to show how trans people are valuable members of society and are not just doomed to a life of suffering – however, I also can't help but notice that all of these findings still measure the trans person against a cisgender norm. Then, when trans people inevitably fail to single-handedly undo all of cis-heteropatriarchy, or when trans people with loving, supportive families still end up less than perfectly satisfied with their transition or other life experiences, their gender embodiment is treated as a failure. Then, the cycle repeats; the story circles back around to the subhuman tropes, and trans people are redefined within academic and political discourses as "uniquely obsessed"

with aesthetics, as "mutilating" their bodies with plastic surgery and "unnecessary" medications, and as being somehow particularly invested in upholding oppressive gender norms.

Ableism and Racism as Drivers of Anti-Transness

If we pay attention, it becomes clear that the subhuman/victim/superhuman tropes are all ableist. The subhuman trope defines trans people as being *incapable* of knowing their own minds (and therefore, of knowing their own genders) because of some sort of mental or emotional distress or immaturity. The victimized human trope naturalizes transness as a *risk factor* for just about every negative life outcome a person can experience, and then is used to fashion transness as a regrettable, pitiable condition. The superhuman trope is *inspiration porn*: Superhuman rhetoric is obsessed with avoiding any negative outcomes at all, thereby implying that a trans person living with the aftereffects of gender trauma cannot still have a worthwhile life.

Furthermore, this ableism is re-enforced along racial lines:

> Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura call the "production of transgender whiteness" a "process of value extraction from bodies of color…" Thinking of this racial dynamic as a process of value extraction highlights the impossibility of a rights platform that incorporates trans of color positions, since their inconceivability is a precondition to the emergence of the rights project, not to mention central to its deployment and successful integration into national legibility… Aizura writes that this trans citizenship entails "fading into the population… but also the imperative to be 'proper' in the eyes of the state: to reproduce, to find proper employment; to reorient one's 'different' body into the flow of the nationalized aspiration for possessions, property, and wealth" (as cited in Puar, 2017, pg. 34-35).

In other words, part of assimilating transness into citizenship

> …is therefore capacitated, even driven, not only by the abjection of bodies unable to meet these proprietary racial and gendered mandates of bodily comportment, but also by the concomitant marking of those abjected bodies as debilitated. The debilitating and abjecting are co-substancing processes" (Puar, 2017, pg. 35).

Through this process, transness is simultaneously seen as inherently debilitating, while also being treated as synonymous with able-bodied Whiteness and therefore as a category which "cannot" include people of color and "cannot" include disabled people.

Put differently, the subhuman/victim/superhuman tropes each are tools of *transnormativity*, which is the process by which certain narrow and stereotyped trans embodiments are capacitated and made "normal," while other trans embodiments are defined as "deviant," "fake," or "dangerous" (Kunzel, 2014). Transnormativity is then used to deny care and to justify harm done to trans people who cannot live within transnormative expectations. I think it is important to note, however, that no trans person will ever be transnormative "enough" to be truly safe as long as the subhuman/victim/superhuman framework exists. Transnormativity cannot offer safety to any trans person because it is ultimately an extension of *cisnormativity*, which is the societal expectation that everyone is cisgender, including the false narratives that 1) there are only two genders, male and female; that 2) gender is determined by sex assigned at birth; and that 3) people exhibit specific, divergent behaviors, interests, and abilities because of their gender/sex assigned at birth. And transness, no matter how cisgender-adjacent the expression, can only ever be a threat to cisnormativity.

Self-Sustaining Narratives

The subhuman/victim/superhuman tropes are not exclusive to each other – any trans person can be contorted to fit into any of these tropes at any moment. Let's consider a trans person who has a transphobic experience with a doctor (a frustratingly common experience). This trans person can be portrayed as a victim because they experienced discrimination. Discrimination is a debilitating experience, but in a perverse way, it can also strengthen a person's claim to transness. That said, being able to claim a trans identity does not necessarily mean that one also gets to claim their gender identity – anti-trans rhetoric does this hat trick often, where they will recognize someone is trans (and therefore abject), but will still refuse to recognize them as a woman, a man, or as nonbinary. For example, trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs, also sometimes called "gender critical") will often say that they're not really trans exclusionary at all because they are inclusive of trans men, who they see as "female," but the important part is that a TERF will never see a trans man as a man, just as they will never see a trans woman as a woman, or a nonbinary person as any gender other than their gender assigned at birth.

Alternatively, this trans person can also be capacitated as a superhuman, who fights back against the discriminatory medical system, as long as they don't show the negative effects of the experience on their day-to-day life; any hurt they suffered needs to be overcome (superhumans don't get to have PTSD from medical trauma). And if this trans person does not carefully walk the tightrope of being both a legible victim of transphobia and a superhuman activist, they get shoved back into being subhuman, where any harm done to them is no longer legible as harm at all (Are you sure the doctor meant it that way? *Isn't this your fault?* Did that really happen? *Are*

you sure it's not your fault? Why don't you switch doctors? *I'm pretty certain this is your fault.* Couldn't you have just not said anything? *This is definitely your fault.*).

Rather than contradicting each other, the tropes end up strengthening each other: Through the victim trope, transness is made to seem like a future to be feared and avoided, which justifies gatekeeping practices based in the subhuman trope to ensure only the people who "really" need to transition are "allowed" to be trans (i.e., gender entitlement). Then the superhuman trope asserts that trans people actually have bright, hopeful futures as long as they are able to "successfully" transition, but this success ends up reinforcing the cisgender norm as

> …the favored indication of such 'success' seems to be the gender attribution of non-trans people. Because the ability to be perceived by [cisgender] people as a non-trans person is valorized, normative expressions of gender within a singular category are mandated (i.e., gender entitlement, Spade, 2013, pg. 322).

Then, if transitioning doesn't magically fix everything wrong in a trans person's life, the superhuman trope implies that clearly it wasn't the right "treatment" option for them and they never should have transitioned in the first place (i.e., gender entitlement). Whichever trope is at play, the ultimate outcome is to alienate trans people from our own stories, from each other, and from potential solidarities with other people constrained by similar narratives, because navigating these tropes to be read as "real" positions trans people to have to constantly defend our basic reality and sense of self.

I am exhausted by this self-sustaining narrative cycle. And I have spent the entirety of grad school – half a decade at this point - reading almost nothing but this. Just a litany of studies that distort trans experiences until they bear essentially no resemblance to myself or any trans

person I know, like I'm stuck in some horrific funhouse mirror nightmare. So my question for this project is: How can the scientific method be used to tell other stories about trans people, stories that allow us to recognize ourselves, rather than alienating us further from our own experiences?

Breaking the Cycle: Genderfluidity as a Case Study

The subhuman/victim/superhuman tropes of transness leave little room for genderfluidity, because genderfluidity does not match transnormative expectations. For example, early in my graduate school career, I was a co-author on a paper about how genderqueer people navigate cisnormativity. We ended up submitting our manuscript to a journal primarily read by medical professionals and health researchers. In one section of the paper, we included several quotes from participants talking about the importance of medical transition. We used these quotes to discuss how genderqueer participants engaged in decision-making processes about gender affirming care, and that much of this process occurred long before ever seeking out an appointment with a gender clinic. Based on this data, we argued against the implicit assumption of most gender clinics (i.e., that trans people need to be guarded from mistakenly undergoing transition procedures that they might later regret by a careful, lengthy, and discriminating assessment process), and instead argued for an informed consent model for medical transition. This is something that trans people have been advocating for decades, so we weren't even pushing a particularly novel concept; we were just adding another piece of data to the pile, but during review, we received pushback about this particular section of the paper, despite overall reviewer excitement about the work. One reviewer stated that,

> You then also have to state that there are inherent difficulties for clinicians to initiate treatments which have irreversible consequences (such as cross-sex hormone treatment and gender affirming surgeries) in the absence of appropriate clinical guidance in a group of people whose gender identity (and therefore treatment request) may develop and change. So please consider offering a more nuanced, balanced view here.

In this statement, the reviewer conflated all nonbinary identities with genderfluidity ("a group of people"), and also assumed that being genderfluid would mean that someone could not make trustworthy decisions about their own body.

In the years since that I have been working in transgender research, I have heard variations of this argument multiple times, from multiple people. I think my colleague best explained the problem with this pervasive anti-fluid logic when, after hearing this story, they noted that this reviewer's statement assumes "that there is some gender that can be accurately and completely embodied by anyone," that there is nothing "irreversible" or potentially regrettable about breast augmentation for cisgender women or about puberty or about any other of the many ways that our bodies change and are changed by us throughout our lives, and that somehow genders that are not explicitly fluid are more reliable, are "safer," to embody (I. Esposoto, personal communication, April, 12, 2021). But these assumptions are incorrect. The lived experiences of trans people, whether they are genderfluid or not, undermine such assumptions at their core.

For example, Zitz et al. (2014) and Hansbury (2005) discuss how some (not all) "binary" trans people will sometimes use their trans identity as a marker of genderfluidity, in order to protect important relationships (e.g., a trans woman who is still happy with her children calling

her “Dad,” while desiring everyone else to call her a “mother” or a “parent”) or to avoid invalidating their past experiences (e.g., a trans man talking about when he was a girl scout). None of these instances are signs that these trans people are unsure of their gender or that they are questioning their transition. Similarly, genderqueer and nonbinary people who identify with genderfluidity describe how experiencing fluid gender is qualitatively different than the experience of having one unchanging gender because your experience always encompasses also being a different gender (Bradford et al., 2018). For example, a genderfluid person having a “femme” or “girl” day is not having the same experience as a girl who does not experience genderfluidity – the knowledge of being other genders at other times changes the experience. Additionally, gender fluctuations can affect how gender dysphoria is experienced, with some genderfluid people reporting that they experience gender dysphoria differentially, depending on their current internal gender (Paulice-Farrow et al., 2019). Therefore, genderfluid people understandably report feeling hurt and frustrated when others, including loved ones and medical providers, use the fluidity of their gender to invalidate them as a trans person based on the assumption that the fluidity is a sign of uncertainty or falsity in their identity (Bradford et al., 2018; Bradford & Syed, 2019; Darwin, 2017). This can also leave the genderfluid person more vulnerable to discrimination and negative health outcomes, as they are cut off from appropriate healthcare and transgender community supports (Seelman et al., 2021; shuster, 2019).

Gender play and gender experimentation seem to be especially important for genderfluid people (Bradford et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2018; Catalpa et al., 2019). Genderfluid people find joy in exploring gender, rejecting binarist gender roles, and playing with gender boundaries (Aguayo-Romero et al., 2015; Bradford et al., 2018; Darwin, 2017). In Bradford and colleague’s

(2018) study, one participant even described trying hormone replacement therapy and then changing their mind and stopping the treatment as a form of gender experimentation, but importantly, they did not regret their transition choices. Instead, they saw these decisions as a necessary part of their journey to understand their gender (for other examples of this developmental pathway in a broader population of gender diverse youth, see also Turban & Keuroghlian, 2018; MacKinnon et al., 2021). Contrary to rhetoric which argues that changes in transition choices are synonymous with "detransition" (this participant continued to identify as genderqueer, and maintained their social transition even after stopping hormone replacement therapy) and that detransition always means that one "regrets" their transition, this research demonstrates that changing one's mind about aspects of transition can be a healthy developmental trajectory, and "the most important thing [others] can do is to let them express themselves freely, be open to change, and provide them acceptance and support, no matter how their identities evolve" (Bradford et al., 2018; Turban & Keuroghlian, 2018, pg. 453). That said, trans people with fluid genders generally described their transition considerations in light of their genderfluidity, and avoided changes they deemed to be too permanent unless they were very sure that they would be happy with those changes long term (Bradford et al., 2018).

The body of extant research about genderfluidity is still small; I was not able to find any studies that targeted their research objectives to focus on genderfluid experiences so I had to piece these bits of evidence together from research focusing on other trans topics. Instead of studying genderfluidity directly and purposefully, extant research about trans populations has only examined genderfluidity in its peripheral vision, almost as an afterthought. Additionally, genderfluid experiences crossed identity terms, meaning that even though all of the participants

in the studies I've cited here described their genders as fluid (including by using the word "fluid"), not all of them specifically used the "genderfluid" identity label. Even so, interpreting these pieces of evidence with a deep curiosity about trans life (rather than from the assumption that genderfluidity is odd, rare, controversial, or potentially fake) starts to give shape to a much more complex picture of transness than the constraints of transnormativity would allow. Importantly, this interpretation is personhood-affirming by allowing trans people to remain at the center of the narrative rather than being forced to defend our lived realities, and it has the potential to be community-building by showing the connections that abound between different subsections of the trans community. This, to me, is what it means to reject the subhuman/victim/superhuman framework in transgender research.

Chapter 2: Transness as Relation (A Sideways Approach to Reflexivity)

One of the insights of transness is that everyone has a relationship to gender, or what can be called a *gender modality*. As coined by Florence Ashley (2021):

> Gender modality refers to how a person's gender identity stands in relation to their gender assigned at birth. It is an open-ended category which includes being trans and being cis and welcomes the elaboration of further terms which speak to the diverse experiences people may have of the relationship between their gender identity and gender assigned at birth: the cis-trans binary is challenged by some nonbinary people—especially agender people [and genderfluid people]—some intersex people, some gender creative youth, and some people who were raised in a fully gender neutral manner.

To this description, I would add that racialized gender and disability status also challenge the cis-trans binary, in ways that I will discuss throughout this chapter.

In Chapter 1, I drew on trans theorizing, in combination with theory about race and disability, in order to understand how subhuman/victim/superhuman tropes function to constrain trans narratives. In this chapter, I want draw on trans, race, and disability theorizing to imagine scientific storytelling about trans people beyond subhuman/victim/superhuman tropes. What do we miss in research when we treat transness, race, and disability as separate analytics that can intersect, rather than as co-constituting experiences? What can we gain from treating transness, race, and disability, not as the same, but as sharing space? How can research explore the ways that trans people are not alone?

Approaches to Knowing (i.e., Epistemology) and Studying Transness

Recognizing that trans people are not alone requires a shift to studying how transness (and indeed, gender as a whole) arises in relationships. Importantly, this is not an analysis that can be done at a distance – as the researcher, I am in relationship with my participants, and we each are navigating gender in relation to the other. This reality is at odds with a *postpositive* approach to scientific inquiry, where researchers are expected to account for and minimize bias in relation to their research in order to create new, objective knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In a postpositivist paradigm, the researcher turns to methodological precedent and scientist peers in order to validate their research's scientific rigor and to help ensure research objectivity. To insist, however, upon some potential for objectivity or for theoretical distance from the topic of gender is to lie. Gender helps form the nature of every person's existence in the world (whether we want it to or not). It is not possible for any researcher to bracket their gender modality out of their analysis (*bracketing* is the term some qualitative researchers use to describe the process of recognizing and setting aside their pre-existing beliefs and experiences regarding a topic so that they reduce bias in their research results); because every person in our current societal order is assigned a gender at birth, and is expected by society to navigate that gender assignation until death, nobody gets to exist as a person unless they have a gender modality.

Thankfully, postpositivism is not the only approach to science. Instead, researching gender requires a *transformative-postmodern* paradigm. Transformative scientific approaches see science as a tool for explaining and opposing marginalization (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Postmodernism rejects the idea that there is a single objective truth, and instead seeks to engage with diverse ways of knowing (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Knowledge is co-created with research participants; although scientific precedent and peers are consulted during the research process,

the ultimate judge of scientific rigor is the community that is the subject of the research. Objectivity is viewed as impossible – one will always do research with a perspective. This is where *reflexivity* (i.e., the critical examination of the researcher's standpoint) becomes important.

Reflexivity Reconsidered

Reflexivity sometimes gets a bad reputation for being shallow, navel-gazing, or for reifying oppressive categories by being invasive. For example, Julia Serano (2016) writes,

> …it seems odd – if not downright contradictory – that we often forward a reverse discourse strategy that compels people to constantly show and/or explicitly state where they fall on the cis/trans continuum, and which may even dismiss their experiences with cissexism if they have not yet come to fully identify as trans, or if they choose not to be out as trans, or if they do not live up to other people's criteria of what counts as trans (pg. 278-279).

This criticism is especially relevant for transgender scholars, as transgender people are often expected to share incredibly personal information about our experiences with our genders, simply to fulfill the whims of curious or bigoted cisgender people. So although I sympathize with this critique, I am not convinced of the need to throw out the practice of reflexivity entirely, because I am also moved by Richa Nagar's (2014) deeper conceptualization of reflexivity as part of relationship building:

> If the politics of alliance making are about making oneself radically vulnerable through trust and critical reflexivity, if they require us to open ourselves to being interrogated and assessed by those to whom we must be accountable, then such politics are also about

> acknowledging, recognizing, and sharing our most tender and fragile moments… For, it is in the acknowledgment, recognition, and sharing of these moments, memories, and mistakes that we live our trust and faith, and where we often encounter our deepest courage and insights. It is also in these fragile, aching moments that we come to appreciate alliance work as constituted by fragments of journeys—some fully lived, and others abandoned at different stages . . . interrupted passages through which the co-travelers recognize the power of becoming radically vulnerable together. These fragmented journeys are marked as much by opening ourselves up to the risks of becoming wounded, as they are marked by silences and withdrawals, and by returning to forgive and to love—again and again. (pg. 23)

Within Nagar's conceptualization, reflexivity is not about simply listing a series of identities in a methods section (e.g., "I am a White, genderfluid person living with chronic illness…") and then moving on. Instead, reflexivity requires deep engagement with the experiences and expectations that one brings to a research project, and to allow these entanglements to challenge the researcher's position as "expert" by fostering connection with research participants and readers.

Additionally, I am aligned with Dean Spade's (2013) critical intervention that:

> In most writing about trans people, our gender performance is put under a microscope to prove theories or build "expertise" while the gender performances of the authors remain unexamined and naturalized. I want to avoid even the appearance of participation in such a tradition… I hope that the use of my experience in this paper will provide a grounding illustration… and resist the traditional framing of [trans] experience which posits trans people as victims or villains, insane or fascinating. Instead, I hope to be part of a project

> already taken up by Riki Anne Wilchins, Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, and many others which opens a position for trans people as self-critical, feminist, intellectual subjects of knowledge rather than simply case studies (pg. 316-317).

My interest in this project is personal: I'm genderfluid, I couldn't find much satisfying extant scientific literature discussing genderfluidity, and so I want to participate in creating that research in order to make more space for genderfluid people to thrive, but I do not want to imply that this project represents settled knowledge about genderfluid people. My research questions, interview protocol, and analytic strategy (described in Chapter 3) are all informed by my personal experience. Research always requires that the researcher makes judgement calls, and I want my readers to remain cognizant that this research (like all research) is not handed down by some unbiased entity, but instead represents a series of choices which have come together to form a partial and contextual (but hopefully still liberatory) truth.

All of this considered, I cannot imagine beginning a project where I am going to ask other trans people to share their stories with me without first offering one of my own in return. Therefore, I want to use this story to introduce some of the concepts that drive my interest in this project, and I want to explain how insights from both critical disability studies and queer of color scholarship allow us to view transness as relation. I have also specifically chosen to share an experience that could have happened to any trans person, rather than a more genderfluid-specific experience. Although one of my overall goals of this research project is to explore experiences that are unique to genderfluid people, I still believe that trans people are far more similar than we are different. I am not at all interested in implying that there is some clear-cut, static-vs.-fluid dichotomy of gender, and so I want to begin this project by firmly situating my experience as a

genderfluid person as an aspect of broader trans experience. My personal narrative is shared in italics, with further analysis provided in plain text.

Using My Personal Narrative to Discuss Some Theory

A few years previously, I was in the hospital. I have a chronic illness, and so interactions with medical institutions are not uncommon in my life, but this visit stands out for me because the doctors were having a difficult time figuring out what exactly was wrong and how to treat it, and so I had to stay inpatient for five days. Two White, femme-presenting doctors introduced themselves as the people who would be taking care of my case. I was incoherent with pain and a high fever by the time I was finally admitted to the hospital, so my partner answered most of the intake questions for me. When one of the doctors, wearing a rainbow lanyard and with a probably-queer vibe, asked, "What are Quin's pronouns?" my partner honestly responded, "they/them."

Trans people are often defined through our interactions with the medical industrial complex. There is a common misconception that "trans" is short for "transition," that "transition" only includes medical interventions (such as puberty blockers, hormone replacement therapy, and top/bottom surgeries), and that medical transition is the defining feature of a trans person's existence. To be clear, I am not arguing that there is anything wrong with desiring medical interventions as part of one's transition, nor am I trying to ignore the importance that medical transition holds for many trans people. I am, however, deeply suspicious of *transmedicalism*, which centers a desire for medical transition and the experience of gender dysphoria as the determinants of whether or not someone is "truly" trans. In a transmedical framework, self-identification and social transition (which can include things like changing names, pronouns,

clothing, and which gendered spaces one spends time in) are treated as if they are meaningless unless they are grounded (made "real") biologically through medical interventions. Ultimately, this is just another way of holding trans people accountable to bioessentialism.

Bioessentialism is the behavior-regulating belief/theory/story that humans are a purely biological species and that therefore, our behavior and identity are 1) determined by our biology and 2) are universal to all humans (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015). Sylvia Wynter explains that within the bioessentialist framework "all human societies have their ostensibly natural scientific organic basis, with their religions/cultures being merely superstructural" (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, 21). In other words, bioessentialism posits a unidirectional relationship where biology determines culture, without recognizing that culture also influences biology recursively. The physical realm is therefore seen as the totality of the "real," and oppressive social structures are retroactively justified as being "innate" (because within a bioessentialist framework, those structures must be a natural and inevitable outcome of human biology).

Bioessentialism is a problem for trans people. Most obviously, it is used to justify why our sex is expected to determine our "true" gender, because under the bioessentialist framework, sex is seen as the biological basis of gender. More generally, bioessentialism is the core belief underlying cisnormativity (i.e., the assumption that being cisgender is normal, being transgender is abnormal, and therefore that transgender people should live up to cisgender norms): Because bioessentialism assumes that all humans are the same, when trans people claim to experience gender differently than cisgender people, we are assumed to be lying or disordered. I am convinced that one of the reasons so many cisgender people behave with gender entitlement is because they filter trans experiences through their own. Subconsciously they think, "It would be

weird/distressing/risky for *me*, if *I* started hormone replacement therapy, changed my name, started wearing different clothes, etc." They have been socialized into bioessentialism, so they subconsciously assume that all humans ought to be fundamentally the same, which leads them to the conclusion that one of these disparate gender experiences (the cis person's gender or the trans person's gender) must be wrong. The cis person's empathy fails them in this moment: They don't see their own gender as disordered, so they instead project a disordered gender onto the trans person, never considering that the trans person they are trying to "protect" has a different gender modality than them, and that therefore, gender transition means something different for a trans person than it would for a cis person.

Except Wynter wasn't writing about how bioessentialism shapes transgender experiences (at least not directly). Instead, Wynter is interested in how bioessentialism drives White supremacist imperialism, so what else can we learn about how the medical system is oppressive to trans people if we think about bioessentialism as constructing race, nationality, and gender (modality), not only intersectionally, but also integrally?

If you've never stayed inpatient in the hospital before, it is a singularly disempowering experience. The hospital wants to keep close track of any medications you are taking, so you are not allowed to self-administer medication, even something over-the-counter (OTC) or something that you've been taking every day for years. You are likely connected to an IV, for fluids if nothing else, as well as several vital sign monitors, so it may be difficult or impossible for you to leave your bed, even for the toilet or a shower, without having a nurse come by to help disconnect you. Technicians will come in at random times to draw blood or take you to other rooms for various tests. As a patient you can always ask what these tests are for and the

technician will tell you, but in my experience, unless you ask, nobody will tell you why they are doing any of these things. Hospitals in the USA are also businesses (even if they are non-profit), meaning they are kept at full capacity as much as possible, and staff are frequently stretched thin, so the hospital will first put you in a position where you are highly dependent upon staff for your basic needs, but then may or may not have staff who can actually be responsive to those needs.

The first issue that we need to consider is that western medicine is an extension of *White habitus* (i.e., the habitat from which Whiteness is understood, created, and reinforced; Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006). I am not referring to the demographics of clinicians, and increasing racial diversity among clinicians will not be enough to automatically deconstruct White habitus in western medicine. Instead, I am referring to the White racial frame that gave rise to and continues to sustain the medical industrial complex, and particularly the medicalization of sex.

To understand this White racial frame, we need to study some history. In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity,* C. Riley Snorton (2017) describes how the field of gynecology was made possible through the exploitation of enslaved Black women. Because protecting the chastity of White women was imperative to maintaining White femininity, European doctors were unwilling to even look at White female patients' bodies, which made it impossible for them to learn much of anything about diseases and ailments that primarily affected women:

> …in the field of women's diseases physicians were blind men, working in the dark. Just how much in the dark they were is revealed by nineteenth century woodcuts portraying physicians examining their female patients. A picture of a lady on her medical adviser's

> table shows the patient not only fully clothed… but with hat and gloves thrown in for good measure, while over her rear, from waist to feet, is draped a sheet, beneath which the unseeing physician extends his groping hands, struggling manfully to solve the mystery of her ailments (Harris, as cited in Snorton, 2017, pg. 32).

James Marion Sims, known today as the "father of gynecology," found a solution to this problem by using enslaved Black women as experimental subjects in his attempts to cure various gynecological ailments. Because Black women were not seen as people, they, unlike White women, were not perceived as having a femininity to protect. Snorton (2017) explains,

> …on the one hand, white femininity is conferred in relation to an unwillingness to view white female genitalia, that is, to look upon white women as flesh. On the other hand, the unrelenting scopic availability that defined blackness within the visual economy of racial slavery becomes the necessary context for producing a field of sex/gender knowledge. (pg. 33)

A detailed description of Sims' treatment of the enslaved women he experimented on is beyond the scope of this discussion. It is enough to know that his treatment amounted to medical torture. Furthermore, Sims saw the enslaved status of these women as necessary for experimental control and treatment compliance. Harriet Washington explains that Sims "utilized imprisonment for the control he saw as key to restoring a woman's health. His enslaved experimental subjects were the ultimate in controllable patients" (as cited in Snorton, 2017, pg. 24).

Importantly, control remains central to how modern medicine is practiced – this is not a power dynamic of the past. In their work researching disability activism in Palestine, Jasbir Puar

(2017) explains how the destruction of Palestinian medical infrastructure is used to maintain Israeli settler colonialism:

> Also documented since the first intifada are various modes of obstruction of medical care… The obstructions include blocking ambulances and cars transporting the sick and injured, raiding hospitals and clinics, denying medical teams access to areas under curfew, withholding medical treatment from prisoners, and deprioritizing the "right of the wounded to medical treatment." (pg. 133)

Puar continues:

> The participants face daily the weaponization of debilitation that is maintained to deter resistance to the occupation, as one Palestinian man with a "permanent disability" explained: "They want to debilitate entire families so that their main concern becomes the disabled person and making sure their needs are met… this ensures that we are unable to fight the occupation." (pg. 160)

In other words, the Israeli occupation first disables Palestinians, and then refuses them care as a form of control.

During this hospital visit, I didn't know what was wrong, but I had been able to figure out on my own at home that I needed to keep taking a standard OTC dosage of acetaminophen every four hours or else my fever would get out of control. Even waiting an extra 15 min was enough for the fever to begin going up again. I told my doctors and nurses this when I was admitted. Nevertheless, because the medication was an OTC pain medication and seen as low priority for timeliness, my nurses frequently missed the four-hour mark for readministering the

medication, at which point my fever would get dangerously high, the nurses would freak out, and the acetaminophen would finally become a priority, at least until the next shift of nurses took over, at which point we had to repeat the whole drama again. Fundamentally, my word was not enough to convince this care team to care; they had to see me suffering for themselves before they would prioritize a need that I was able to verbalize, and that I had been capable of meeting myself at home (even extremely sick) before they took away that capacity in the hospital.

Let's go back to thinking about transmedicalism for a moment. Most trans people reject transmedicalism, but they often make this argument by disidentifying transness from disability. I think this tactic is misguided, because it ignores the core power structures that uphold both the medical system and its control over trans people. I have chosen one example of this rhetorical strategy to deconstruct. This passage comes from Florence Ashley, a trans theorist whose work I respect and have already cited in this paper, because I want to be clear that the problem I am discussing is widespread in trans theorizing, and my purpose is not to criticize the theorist, just this particular rhetorical strategy that they are employing.

In the quoted paper, Ashley (2019) is arguing that medical providers ought to shift to an informed consent model for providing transition services (meaning trans clients would not be expected to undergo psychological evaluation in order to receive hormone replacement therapy or surgery). They write:

> We generally trust what other people say about their own mental states. If someone says, "my arm hurts," we typically grant credence to their claim. We have this trust in people's self-reports of their mental states because we hold mental states to be within the purview of people's epistemic authority—authority over knowledge… Not all knowledge relating

> to mental states can be authoritatively reported by individuals. We do not typically grant credence to mental health self-diagnoses, especially not by non-professionals—though perhaps we should more often. However, it is important to notice that self-reports of gender dysphoria do not fall within this type of specialised knowledge about mental health which is reserved for professionals (pg. 2).

Although I align with the desire to remove medical professionals from their current position of control over trans people and our bodies, and although I agree that being trans is not disordered, here Ashley is arguing that gender dysphoria is an experience, rather than a mental illness, and therefore does not require a diagnosis, but instead can be accepted as true based on a trans person's self-report. I do not think this argument holds, because the experiences of chronically ill and disabled people suggest that, as currently structured, the western medical system will only provide care *if* it can simultaneously be in control (e.g., Spillman et al., 2017). As long as trans people need to use the medical system, the medical system will treat us as disabled, as a problem to be fixed, because that is the only way western medicine knows how to "treat" its patients.

This is evident in research about trans people's experiences accessing gender affirming care. shuster (2019) interviewed 23 healthcare providers at transgender health conferences about their utilization of informed consent practices in transgender medicine. shuster found that many of the clinicians claimed to practice informed consent, but instead fell back on a paternalistic model of medical care based in clinician control when they actually described their interactions with trans patients. For example, clinicians discussed the importance of patient agency, but then later questioned whether trans people could be trusted to make their own decisions about their transition. Further supporting the importance of disability activism, trans people living with

mental illnesses or with other "pre-existing conditions" were significantly more likely to be mistrusted or denied care by the providers in this study (see also, Seelman et al., 2021). As another example, one clinician described how, when they discovered that one of their transfeminine patients had a familial history of stroke, they refused to continue to prescribe the patient estrogen. The clinician single-handedly made this decision even though, in the clinician's own words, "[the patient] seemed to understand the risks involved" and did not want to stop hormone replacement therapy. This decision ultimately lead to a significant worsening of the patient's depression.

Therefore, I would argue that it is the ableist+racist+cisnormative expectation of control in medicine, and more broadly the bioessentialism that underlies that expectation of control, that trans activism needs to fight if we want medical systems to implement informed consent models universally. Returning to Puar's (2017) research in Palestine, the director of Shabab Al-Balad for the Disabled, Iyad Jabareen, presents a strategy for this fight:

> He articulates a remarkable vision of disability as a nonidentity not wedded to the distinction between the disabled and non-disabled. As the inhabitants of the West Bank are suffering and resisting together the collective punishment of the occupation, no one is constituted as an idealized able body… this frame posits that everyone is debilitated to some degree, or, in other words, no one is able bodied (pg. 158-159).

Trans people cannot disidentify our way out of disability activism if we want any hope of trans liberation, not the least because, as the transgender health disparities literature has demonstrated, many trans people are debilitated by cisnormativity and transphobia.

It was my second day inpatient (third day? time is weird in the hospital), and I was more lucid than I had been at intake. I'm in a shared room with an older woman who I haven't had a conversation with yet because I haven't done much of anything other than sleep. Through the door to the hallway I hear a loud conversation, some sort of argument about they/them pronouns, and then a male voice incredulously asking, "Well, does she have ovaries?" (Sometimes I remember the phrase as "Does it have ovaries?" but I think that was a dream I had afterwards. I'm not trying to sensationalize anything; it's just that memory is weird in the hospital.) A group of five (six?) people – an older White man with the voice I heard through the door, the two White women from the day before, and a few other people I'd never seen before – come into the room to circle around my bed. The older man goes to say something, probably to introduce himself, but before he gets a chance, I chew him out – singular they/them pronouns aren't that difficult, you probably already use them in your day-to-day life, how can you expect me to trust you as a doctor if you don't even know which organs I do and do not have, it is completely inappropriate to argue about a patient's care IN THE HALLWAY OUTSIDE OF THEIR ROOM WHERE THEY AND ANYONE ELSE CAN HEAR YOU. At this point a nurse rushes into the already crowded room, because apparently the spike in my heart rate had set off some alarms. The doctor sends her away, and awkwardly asks if I will allow him to examine me (a process that involves him poking and prodding at all the parts of my body that hurt to see which parts are the most painful). I almost tell him, "No," but ultimately decide it's best to just get the interaction over with. He does the examination, and then apologizes for "offending me" on his way out of the room. (How come I can remember that phrase perfectly but not the phrasing of the blatant transphobia that happened through my door?) He never introduces himself.

The next day both White female doctors come to my room on their own. One thanks me for saying something. The other one apologizes for not considering the location of her argument with the male doctor. When I go to say that I wasn't angry at her for trying to stand up for me, and that my anger the day before was directed at the other doctor, she interrupts me, saying that "I don't need to make her feel better." Now I want to get angry at her for refusing to listen to me, but I'm too exhausted for a fight that doesn't matter.

Discrimination is a problem of epistemology – it makes the victim doubt their own reality; it warps and reconstructs how we know ourselves and how we know other people. It is also basically impossible to prove, even to yourself. This is purposeful – it serves to keep the marginalized person vulnerable so that they cannot effectively challenge power.

Thinking back to the subhuman/victim/superhuman tropes from Chapter 1, during my hospital visit the older male doctor was functioning from the "trans as subhuman" trope. He was not interacting with *me*; he was interacting with his *idea* of me and of who he thought I ought to be. When I did not match his expectation, he was initially confrontational, and ultimately flabbergasted, but at no point did he trust my description of myself (which is why he apologized for offending me, rather than for disrespecting or hurting me). He refused to alter his understanding of me based on our interaction. This undermined his ability to do his job and care for me as his patient, despite reputably being a talented clinician to cisgender people (at least if his positive online patient reviews are to be believed).

The doctor who spoke over me even as she was attempting to apologize to me was functioning from the "trans as victimized human" trope. I know she meant well. She recognized that harm had been done to me and she wanted to protect me from additional harm. But *I* didn't

want or need to be protected; I needed her to *care* about me (which includes caring about what I had to say). The doctor who thanked me for saying something also had good intentions, but was thwarted by the "trans as superhuman" trope. She recognized my resilience and capability in a difficult situation, but by thanking me she didn't leave space for my anger or hurt (try being angry when someone is recognizing you for a job well done – it feels like you're doing something wrong). Either of these doctors could have discussed options with me for dealing with the male doctor moving forward by asking if I wanted a change of clinician or to file a formal complaint. I might have kept the same doctor and I might not have filed the complaint (again, being in the hospital is a head trip, and my energy was already low at the time – I honestly cannot say in retrospect how I would have responded), but I can confidently state that it would have mattered that they had asked, and that they were offering me resources to support my agency while I was in a disempowering situation, rather than falling back on paternalism ("I'll take care of it for them") or libertarianism ("they can take care of themself without my help").

I get released a day or two later with a new prescription. Ten minutes before I check out, the male doctor switches the prescription from the medication I had been taking in the hospital to a different medication. This different medication doesn't work, and so my primary care physician switches me back to the medication that had helped me in the hospital. I don't know why the doctor switched the prescription when the other medication was working. Maybe he had a completely legitimate reason for doing it, and he would have made that choice for any patient. But part of me still wonders if he switched to a less-effective prescription because somewhere in his mind, he decided my care was less important.

It is understandable to me that many trans people are reticent to identify with disability. Owning the ways that transness overlaps with disabled experiences can feel like it is conceding to the institutions that have historically labeled trans people as inherently disordered or dangerous. That said, I think one of the unintentional consequences of this protective strategy is that we end up alienating trans people who *cannot* disidentify from disability, while also avoiding or oversimplifying some of the conversations that we actually want to have.

If I had told my story differently, avoiding the parts about disability and focusing narrowly on the obviously trans-related sections, this would have been a very different chapter. To begin with, I probably would have spent a lot more time talking about misgendering and pronouns. I might have argued that this experience is an example of how even "inclusive" policies, like asking for someone's name and pronouns, can backfire on marginalized patients, that the loved ones of trans people need to be careful who they out us to, that trans people should not depend on the medical system for our care.

But none of those arguments would have helped me in the hospital. Instead, they would have shifted responsibility for my care from my community to me as an individual, while simultaneously failing to hold the system that did me harm accountable. I needed medical assistance – I had a life-threatening problem and I needed a doctor I could trust to help me. I refuse to get angry at my partner for respecting me, and for speaking honestly for me when I could not, just because they inadvertently shared my identity with a transphobic authority – that is not my partner's fault – and I should not have to hide fundamental parts of myself to receive decent care. The real point of this story for me, is that even if every person in that hospital had

gendered me correctly, I still would have been harmed by my experience – the misgendering was just the most obvious symptom of all the ways that I was not safe or cared for in that space.

After I get home, I text my two best trans friends about how crap the whole experience was, and I never speak of it again, not even to report the transphobic doctor I had. I know I am not the only trans person with these sorts of experiences, and I want to do something because trans people deserve care as we are, but the experience was too raw, and the risk of owning it, of asserting it to some authority at that awful hospital under my own name was not something that I was brave enough to do. I still don't know whether or not I regret my decision. I do know that without the validation of my experience and feelings from my trans friends, and without the ongoing support of my partner, I would not have coped with the aftermath of this experience nearly as well as I was able to. Being seen and cared for as you are is sustaining.

I have not shared my story lightly. I resent that trans people are expected to reveal these deeply personal parts of our lives to help cisgender people understand our experiences, and then when we engage in that vulnerability, it is often turned into spectacle: "Look at the poor sad trans person!" As if they somehow know us in a more real way because they were granted a small moment of insight into our lives during a moment when we likely had little agency over what was happening to us. It is infuriating to live in a world determined to invisiblize actual trans experiences while making a bunch of dehumanizing caricatures of us hypervisible. Given the current rash of anti-trans legislation in the United States right now, I've spoken to some friends who are wondering if maybe "visibility" isn't actually all it's cracked up to be, and maybe it was easier to be trans a couple of decades ago when nobody knew enough about us to even think to clock us.

But I also know I wasn't better off before I even had language for what my gender is. Trans invisibility meant that I had to be invisible to myself. And even if the wider public didn't know much about trans people 10 years ago, trans people were still having to navigate the obsession with control that has dominated our typical interactions with governments and other authorities in the wake of White supremacist imperialism. For this reason, I don't actually think it's helpful to trans people if we act as if our experiences are so strange or secret that they are beyond analysis entirely. The only way I know to fight anti-trans caricatures and to create space for trans lives is to find ways to tell our stories for each other, especially when those stories are complicated. We must refuse to simplify our lives down to their most digestible components. McKittrick guides us to a different kind of story that can hold trans personhood:

> The story does not simply describe, it demands representation outside itself. Indeed, the story cannot tell itself without our willingness to imagine what it cannot tell. The story asks that we live with what cannot be explained and live with unexplained cues and diasporic literacies, rather than reams of positivist evidence. The story opens the door to curiosity; the reams of evidence dissipate as we tell the world differently, with a creative precision. The story asks that we live with the difficult and frustrating ways of knowing differentially. (McKittrick, 2021, pg. 7)

Studying transness as relation means recognizing that the details and contexts of transness matter, and further, that trans people can only thrive in community. We need each other to know ourselves, and we are stronger when we fight for each other, rather than alone. Reclaiming trans narratives for trans people is community building. There is not just one trans story and so we need to invite in as many trans storytellers as we can. One of the benefits of scientific study is

that it can give marginalized people the opportunity to combine our voices, without leaving any one of us to carry the burden of representation alone. In this spirit, I am going to choose to trust Toni Morrison (1995), and accept that:

> My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. (pg. 91)

Chapter 3: Looking for Signs of Trans Life (Methods)

This book is based on data from a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study that asked the question: What is the experience of being genderfluid? My ultimate goal was to create a kind of compendium for genderfluid people wherein our anecdotal stories of everyday routines, problems, and relationships could be used both as a validating mirror of our own experiences, as well as a facilitator for connection where we can learn about genderfluid experiences that might be different from our own. Basically, I wanted to create the sort of book that I could have used in my late teens and early twenties, when I had just come out as nonbinary (I hadn't found genderfluid as a term yet) and was still trying to sort out what exactly that meant for me.

I chose hermeneutic phenomenology for this project because it is concerned with the questions "What is this lived experience like? What is the meaning and significance of this experience?" while also recognizing that the researcher cannot truly be separated from the research product (van Manen, 2015, pg. 166). In particular, this project's goal – to hold space for genderfluidity as a human experience in order to undermine transnormative narratives which attempt to erase genderfluidity – aligns strongly with phenomenology's interest in making lived experience intelligible while avoiding reductionism (van Manen, 2015). In this chapter, I will describe my sampling, data collection procedure, and analytic plan.

Participants

Research was approved under expedited review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Minnesota. This study used a combination of purposive and snowball (referral) sampling to recruit 16 participants (aged 20-36). This sample size was chosen because of its capacity to provide a relatively broad range of participants, while still being small enough to allow

for in-depth analysis of interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In reviewing the literature, I found that transgender people of many different identities described their genders as fluid. To encompass this diversity of gender identities, I recruited people who identified as genderfluid, as well as transgender (including nonbinary) people who described their gender as fluid or fluctuating (see the screener survey in Appendix A for specific question wording). See Table 1 for specific demographic information for each participant.

All participants were living in the United States at the time of their interview, and were proficient in English. Interviews were held via Zoom video conferencing to allow participation from individuals throughout the United States. Participants were primarily located in the US Midwest at the time of their interviews, but most were transplants and had lived in the South, on the East Coast, or on the West Coast growing up, so interviews represent good diversity of US location-based cultures. Two participants (Jay and Pear) had immigrated to the United States as adults, two participants (Hue and Ollie) were the child of immigrants, one participant (Bug) was the child of parents originally from a US territory (i.e., Puerto Rico), and one participant (Emily) was a transracial adoptee from Korea. The sample was majority people of color (*n*=10; 62.5%); six participants (37.5%) identified as White and not Hispanic or Latinx. Both Latinx participants specifically used "Latinx" (rather than Latino, Latina, or Latine) to identify their race and ethnicity in their interviews, and so I have used Latinx throughout this book. See Table 1 for specific racial and ethnic backgrounds for each participant.

At time of interview, two participants (12.5%) owned their own home, one participant (6.25%) was homeless, four participants (25%) lived with their parents, and nine participants (56.25%) rented their housing. Ten participants (62.5%) lived in households with incomes below

$70,000 (the US median household income for 2022 was $74,580). Four participants (25%) had high school diplomas, two (12.5%) had an associate's degree, seven (43.75%) had bachelor's degrees, and three (18.75%) had graduate degrees. All six participants who did not have a bachelor's degree were attending university.

More participants identified as queer (n=10; 62.5%) than any other sexual orientation label, but it was common for participants to use multiple labels to describe their sexual orientation (see Table 1 for a more specific breakdown of each participant's identity). Six (37.5%) identified as asexual (sometimes in combination with other sexual orientations), and two asexual participants also identified as aromantic. Five participants (31.25%) identified as polyamorous. Thirteen participants (81.25%) identified as disabled, chronically ill, mentally ill, and/or neurodivergent; one participant preferred not to answer this question.

Participants received a $75 gift card of their choosing via Tango Card for their involvement in the interview. Participants who elected to complete the member check received an additional $25 gift card of their choosing as thanks for their time.

Recruitment Strategy

I created a Google Website for this study. The Google website included study information, information about my identity and background as a researcher so that participants could decide whether or not they wished to share their experiences with me, and an eligibility screening survey. All recruitment materials linked to this Google website. Then I shared the recruitment flyer through list servs and community-based organizations that serve transgender populations. As a note, all of the community-based organizations where I successfully recruited participants were organizations that I had prior connections to, either directly through my own work, or because I knew someone

who knew someone working there, so other researchers should be warned that they will likely be unsuccessful if they use this recruitment tactic but have not invested time building relationships in the queer community.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Disabled?	Sexual Orientation	Romantic Orientation	Polyamorous?	Education
Bug	23	Latinx (Puerto Rican)	Transmasculine Spectrum, Genderqueer/Nonbinary, Aporagender	Yes	Queer, Asexual	Biromantic	No	Associate's degree or technical degree
Charlie	28	Mixed race: Chinese, Jamaican, White (Jewish)	Genderqueer/Nonbinary	Yes	Gay, Queer	Homoromantic	No	Graduate degree
Crow	23	White	Transgender woman, Transfeminine Spectrum, Genderqueer/Nonbinary, Genderfluid, Agender/Neutrois/Greygender, Gender non-conforming, Undefined	Yes	Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Asexual	Homoromantic, Queer	Chose not to respond	Bachelor's degree
Emily	23	Korean transracial adoptee; raised by White adoptive parents	Female/Woman, Transgender man, Genderfluid	Yes	Lesbian, Gay, Queer	Homoromantic, Queer	No	Bachelor's degree
Hue	21	White Latinx (Cuban); child of immigrants	Genderfluid	Yes	Asexual	Queer, Aromantic	Yes	High school or less
Jay	31	Filipino immigrant	Genderqueer/Nonbinary	No	Asexual	Aromantic	No	Bachelor's degree
Julian	35	White (Italian American, raised Catholic)	Transmasculine Spectrum, Genderqueer/Nonbinary	Prefer not to say	Queer	Queer	Chose not to respond	Graduate degree

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Disabled?	Sexual Orientation	Romantic Orientation	Polyamorous?	Education
Ladybug	20	Mixed race: Native American, White	Genderfluid	Yes	Pansexual	Panromantic	Yes	High school or less
Linda	36	White	Genderqueer/Nonbinary	Yes	Pansexual	Panromantic	No	Graduate degree
Oliver	24	White (Ashkenazi Jewish)	Transmasculine Spectrum, Genderqueer/Nonbinary, Genderfluid	Yes	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Asexual, Polysexual	Biromantic, Queer	Yes	Bachelor's degree
Ollie	25	AfroCarribean; child of immigrants	Transgender	Yes	Queer	Queer	Yes	Bachelor's degree
Pear	22	Indian immigrant	Genderqueer/Nonbinary	Yes	Gay, Queer	Queer	No	High school or less
Rennan	25	White (raised Evangelical Christian)	Male/Man, Transmasculine Spectrum, Genderqueer/Nonbinary, Genderfluid	Yes	Gay, Queer	Homoromantic, Queer	No	Bachelor's degree
Tasha	28	African American	Female/Woman, Two Spirit	No	Asexual	Chose not to respond	Chose not to respond	Associate's degree or technical degree
Tome	22	Mixed race: Indian, White	Transgender woman, Transfeminine Spectrum, Genderqueer/Nonbinary, Genderfluid, Gender non-conforming	Yes	Gay	Homoromantic	Chose not to respond	Bachelor's degree
V	22	White (Jewish)	Transmasculine Spectrum, Genderqueer/Nonbinary, Gender non-conforming	Yes	Queer	Queer	Yes	High school or less

Participants' Genders, In Their Own Words

Bug: In my 10 years that I've been identifying as something other than cis, I've circled between trans male to nonbinary even, and also to some other terms that I don't hear discussed a lot. There is a term called aporagender, which is… a strong feeling of being a third gender, but not third gender. It's a strong sense of gender, but it's not male, it's not female, it's not both. It's not void. It's very interesting…

And as a kid I kind of felt like I best explained it by, you know how colors are very gendered when you're growing up, and blue is for boys and pink is for girls stereotypically, I always felt really attracted to the color yellow because yellow was that third thing that people would get if they don't know the sex of the baby. And they just kind of were like, "Okay, let's do yellow, we're going to find out when they're born," that type of thing. So that's kind of how it feels like.

But in terms of fluidity, I noticed that I do switch between feeling aporagender and feeling trans male… when I see myself as a man, for example, I feel like a very feminine man. I never felt like a very masculine man… So yeah… it's aporagender or transmasc/male kind of mix.

Charlie: I often say nonbinary to broadly encompass [my] gender experiences, I think. Although I know I am not technically later in life, since I'm not actually that old, I feel like relative to many other queer people that I know, I'm earlier in my gender journey. And so it's still very much so in flux. I think I shift somewhere between nonbinary, and transfeminine, and some sort of mixture of expression… I certainly don't identify as a man. That sounds terrible. And I wouldn't say that I necessarily would identify as a woman, at least in terms of how I understand that experience. But I do feel really affirmed by what it means to be perceived as effeminate…

It's more about intentionally opting out [of the gender binary], and then… operating in this feminine space without necessarily identifying as a woman.

Crow: Gender fluid is definitely the biggest label for me. I do use transfemme, my pronouns are she/it most of the time. And then that kind of stems from more how I thought about myself in the past. In the past I considered... The term that I would probably use now that I didn't know at the time was genderfuck. And it was more of just a general rejection of the way people saw gender. Because when I was younger I didn't associate with the boys and the girls were obviously... I was not born a girl so I didn't see myself as one. And just totally all the boys were, "Gross." Because they were middle school boys. So I'd say the primary label for me is genderfluid.

I don't really have many other labels for my gender other than genderfluid transfemme. But then that can get confusing because people... The other pronouns I tend to lean towards are none, by preferring people use my name or any. And then anything he/him or she/her or they/them, I don't use those exclusively at any point. And that can get confusing for people. So that's... There's probably a label out there that either I don't know or doesn't exist yet that I would prefer to genderfluid, but it's definitely the closest that I can get.

Emily: I would describe my gender, so you can see I have my pronouns listed as she/her right now. And I think I also identify as they/them but I haven't made that... I haven't done a more formal thing where I let people know yet. And I'm not sure, I don't know. So I identify as a woman but I think throughout my life, I've questioned my gender identity and whether it's because I... I don't know, I think it would be really difficult to change my gender identity. I think it would be more comfortable to… change my gender identity to they/them and go as nonbinary

or genderfluid. So I would describe my gender as genderfluid. But I think it's complicated and so I think I feel most comfortable and it's easy to go through life identifying as she/her.

Hue: So I would describe my gender politically as trans, emotionally as fluid and expansive and beautiful and then maybe socially as futch [femme butch] female-presenting, cis-passing-assumed. But the word that I think encapsulates all of that for me is genderfluid because it points to the way in which, the way in which I love the mixing of gender expression, the way that I like to play with gender, the way that I like to upset gender as a construct, it's the only word that I've ever found that I feel represents my experience the best. And also allows for unanswered questions within the very question of what is my gender? How would I describe myself? I like that it sorts of skirts the... That's the same reason I like the word queer, sort of skirts the need to even know, which I think is very true to how I feel about my own gender. It's just like, "Ugh, I don't always know."

Jay: [My gender is] anything but she and her.

Julian: I use the terms nonbinary and transmasculine. Generally speaking, I just kind of say that I'm trans, or sometimes I'll say I'm nonbinary, but most of the time I just use trans as kind of an umbrella term that covers all of what I am. Yeah, I know that there are many different ways of conceptualizing the idea of nonbinary. I would say the closest way that I can describe my own identity is closest to agender, maybe. I don't feel like I'm necessarily in the middle of male and female or flip kind of back and forth, but that I don't feel like either of those represent who I am at all. So kind of a third sort of thing.

Ladybug: If it was to someone in the community, I would say I'm gender fluid and I use pretty much all pronouns, he, she, they, they, them, she, her. You could call me anything and I

would respond. If it was to someone outside of the community, I would say that the way that they look at me is the way that they should call me. So if I present as feminine to someone, then I am feminine to them. If I present as masculine to someone, I am masculine to them and I will still respond no matter how they look at me.

Linda: [What is my gender is] always a hard question because I don't know… I don't have a lot of good words because I think it changes often. I also think that I don't have good language for it because language doesn't exist to ... Language is limited. And I think gender is more of a feeling than it is explained. Yeah, it's hard to explain or communicate. So words are limiting. So some thoughts are, I think it's subjective. I think it's fluid. I think it changes. It's dynamic. Those are some initial thoughts.

Oliver: I have described myself as a demi-fluid bisexual lesbian dyke. So I hope that doesn't make any sense. But within the idea of gender fluidity, demi-fluid to me means that I kind of fluctuate within a certain part of the spectrum but it also changes over longer periods of time too. So the area of the spectrum throughout which I fluctuate kind of shifts a little bit.

Ollie: [The way that I describe my gender has] varied over time. As of right now, usually when people ask, I do just say I'm trans. I know that the way that people describe me is usually transmasc, some folks have described me as butch. And then usually as a blanket statement, I just say I'm queer. I feel like that just covers everything.

Pear: I… want to be someone who oscillates not between anything, just oscillates however they want to. And yeah, I'm kind of in that space.

Rennan: I describe [my gender] different ways to different people, honestly… I've got layers. It's like man, trans man, genderfluid.

Tasha: I definitely identify as female gender, definitely asexual. I'm a two-spirit person… I just feel like in my experience, of course if someone looks at me, they'll know that I'm a woman. But then again, depending on what I dress like, since I'm a two-spirit person, a lot of people may look at me and think like, "Oh, she's masculine this day then feminine this day." No one's ever taken a look at me and could say that I'm asexual. But if you look at me, depending on what day it is, you'll know that I have feminine traits or masculine traits.

Tome: I go back and forth on a lot of terms. Generally, when people ask, I'll just say that I'm nonbinary. I am transfeminine. Really getting into the weeds of it, if I'm going to be talking to people, especially other trans people, other nonbinary people, other genderfluid people, I'll get a little more in the weeds of more broadly. I feel like there's elements of pangender to it with there's a little bit of everything in there… I don't often use the term genderfluid or genderflux to describe it. I don't even really know why. But definitely the way I experience gender shifts over time. Because it never really solidly falls into a binary gender, at the very least not in entirety, I'll usually just leave it at I'm nonbinary, I'm transfeminine, I'm trans, any of that language.

V: When people ask, I think that it's the easiest and quickest definition to just say that I am nonbinary because just like my sexuality being queer, it's a great umbrella term that can be its own label, but it leaves people with a lot of questions still. So, I identify as transgender, transmasc, nonbinary. However, I don't present my gender in the traditional idea of what masculinity means. Usually, I present pretty androgynously or femininely, but I still identify as transmasculine nonbinary, and the way that I express myself and my gender depends on the day,

the mood, the people that I'm with, and the pronouns that I use also change. I use he/him and they/them pronouns, and as a general rule of thumb, I just expect people to use neutral pronouns for me, unless it's people in my inner circle. Then I let them use he/him pronouns. But that's my gender. If you know Link from the video games, that's my gender… where my fluidity comes in is because the way that I express my gender changes depending on the day in certain contexts.

Procedure

Screener Survey

To join the study, interested individuals completed a short demographic survey to determine their eligibility, and also to provide basic context for their interview if they became a study participant. To be eligible for the study, participants did not have to identify as transgender, but they could not identify as cisgender. They also had to agree that their gender is fluid, and they had to be at least age 18. The screener survey was hosted on Qualtrics. See Appendix A for a full list of the survey questions.

After completing the screener survey, eligible participants received an email to welcome them to the study. This message described next steps, including a link to the consent form for their review and a link to the Calendly scheduling page where they could sign up for a time to be interviewed. Individuals who completed the screener survey but who were not eligible for the study received an automated email explaining their status and thanking them for their time. Additionally, eligible individuals who completed the screener survey in excess of the target sample received an email thanking them for their interest.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted between October 2022 and December 2022. Semi-structured interviews lasted between 1.5-2 hours, including the consent process. Interviews took place via video chat using Zoom.

Before beginning the formal interview and recording, I spent about 10-15 minutes discussing the content of the consent form, including my plans for analysis and research dissemination. I explained the member checking process, and that participating in the member checking was optional – if participants wanted to opt out of member checking they could. I also used this time to explain the interview process itself, including the types of topics we were going to discuss, and what to do if they wanted to stop the interview or take a break. After participants affirmed that they were still interested in participating in the research, I prompted them to choose the pseudonym they wanted me to use for their interview data. As the final step in the consent process, I began the interview recording and asked for the participant's consent to record the interview under their pseudonym, and to use their data in my research project.

My semi-structured interview protocol was meant to be flexible. Questions focused on four overarching topics: 1) genderfluid identity development, 2) community and interpersonal relationships, 3) experiences in medical environments, and 4) shared dreams (a section asking participants which topics related to genderfluidity they believe need more focus). I developed the interview questions to be open-ended, and prompted participants to give specific examples in order to elicit the sorts of experiential anecdotes that phenomenological research requires (van Manen, 2015). If the conversation lead us to talk about medical experiences earlier on in the interview than the protocol dictated, I followed the flow of conversation. If a participant did not see a particular question as relating to their experience, we moved on. Additionally, I employed

spontaneous probing questions to help further the flow of conversation, and to clarify the participant's responses. Because some of the interview questions could elicit discussions of discriminatory or otherwise stressful experiences, I ended every interview with some lighter questions (e.g., Do you have any recommendations of genderfluid representation in media?), to help ease participants out of any negative emotions that may have come up during the interview. The entire interview protocol is included in Appendix B.

After the interview was over, I would stop the recording but stay on the call so that the participant and I could spend a couple of minutes debriefing about their experience of the interview process. All participants reported positive interview experiences during their post-interview debriefs. At this point, I also confirmed whether or not they wanted to be contacted several months later for the member check. After ending our Zoom call, I immediately sent participants a thank you email and their Tango gift card code to redeem for a gift card of their choosing. Then, I recorded my first impressions of important themes from the interview, as well as a short reflection on my feelings about the interview process.

Data Preparation and Security

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and manually by a transcription service. Then, I re-checked every transcription for accuracy line by line. All identifying information (including the names of businesses, cities, people, pets, etc.) were removed from the transcripts during the accuracy check and before analysis. De-identified transcripts were uploaded into the qualitative analysis software NVivo for analysis. All data and audit trail materials were encrypted and stored online using Box, UMN's secure storage subscription service.

Analysis

The goal of hermeneutical phenomenological research is to understand the meaning of a phenomena through "organized narrative or prose" (van Manen, 2015, pg. 78). It is writing that is meant to give the reader a sense of what the experience is like to embody. In order to generate this final written product, the researcher first develops themes based on the research data. According to van Manen (2015):

> Phenomenological themes may be understood as the *structures of experience*. So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience. (pg. 79)

Analysis begins concurrently with data collection. Themes are generated inductively from anecdotal data: the specific stories shared by the participants in the study are used as concrete examples of the phenomenon in order to generate themes. Then, a process of comparison across anecdotes is used to iteratively revise the theme. Unlike in some other forms of qualitative research, however, phenomenological themes are not meant to be "conceptual formulations or categorical statements" (van Manen, 2015, pg. 79). Instead, a single theme makes sense of an anecdote, and then themes are woven together into a narrative to allow the researcher (and the reader) to gain insight into the phenomenon as a whole.

According to van Manen, "Insight is a product of all of these: *invention* (my interpretive product), *discovery* (the interpretive product of my dialogue with the text of life), *disclosure of meaning* (the interpretive product "given" to me by the text of life itself)" (van Manen, 2015, pg. 88). Therefore, themes in hermeneutic phenomenology are recognized as storytelling, as something that is always mediated and constructed, first by the participants with the researcher (during data collection), and then by the researcher (during data analysis). Because I

incorporated a member checking process, participants had one additional opportunity to re-construct themes before I published them.

To ensure analysis trustworthiness, I maintained a clear audit trail throughout the analysis process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This audit trail included 1) reflexive journaling and post-interview case notes, 2) notation of any critical decisions made during the data collection process; 3) memos to detail the development of each theme, and 4) organized storage of raw and transcribed data, consent forms, and IRB paperwork. The goal of the audit trail is to provide others a way to review the materials and easily understand my process, decision making, and research conclusions.

Member Check Procedure

Once preliminary data analysis was complete, but before finalizing my findings, I used Synthesized Member Checking (SMC) in order to validate my results with participants (Birt et al., 2016). I emailed each participant a unique Qualtrics link where they could access a summary of each preliminary theme. Participants were allowed to complete as much or as little of the member checking process as they liked. In accordance with SMC, thematic summaries were followed by an invitation to share any comments or concerns they had about the preliminary findings, as well as a series of questions to directly determine whether or not the themes resonated with participants. Participants could use both their responses to multiple choice questions, and open-ended answer boxes to share their feedback on the preliminary themes. See Appendix C for the list of questions that participants were asked regarding each theme. The member checking process also gave me the opportunity to ask short follow-up questions of

participants when necessary to clarify parts of their interviews. I then integrated participant feedback from the member checks into the final results presented in this book.

All participants expressed interest in participating in the member check during the debriefing section of their interviews. Eleven (69%) completed the member check when surveys were sent out in April 2023 (Charlie, Crow, Emily, Hue, Jay, Julian, Linda, Oliver, Rennan, Tasha, Tome). Participants were given two weeks to complete the member check, and were sent reminder emails 72 and 24 hours before the member checks were due. Participants spent between 10 minutes and 1 hour completing the member check.

Participant Feedback About the Research Process

During their interviews, participants shared several aspects of my research protocol that made them feel comfortable participating in the project. First, the focus on transness and genderfluidity itself was a draw for everyone in the project. For example:

> **Ladybug:** I actually heard about it through a local organization called the [LGBTQ community center]. I'm in their, what we call, the [trans support group]. It's a trans support group. And the head had actually put the link in, "Hey, I know we have some gender fluid people in our group. If you're interested in this study, go ahead and sign up. It's free to sign up." And I looked into it and I'm like, "Yeah, that sounds like something I would like to be into." I've bounced around with my gender identity since I was young, since I was seven, so it not necessarily has been one set thing.

> **Pear:** I am an immigrant and… when I moved [to the United States], I had an idea that every resource for trans and… genderfluid people will be available here. The moment I

> walk here, this will be a paradise. I will have everything accessible. And that was not the case. And that was something that's not only in the public sphere or an administrative sphere, it's something that's very prevalent in academia as well. And when someone forwarded me your research, I was like, this is so great, this is so cool. I was like, no one does this research. And I got really excited about it and I felt both a duty to participate but also I was just very excited to be a part of something as someone who feels underrepresented constantly.

The respectful pay scale allowed participants to participate who otherwise would not have:

> **Ollie:** Well, there aren't many studies on the trans experience that I have been able to see. And then also, the compensation is a big part too. And I figure I can participate, add to the research, and then also, it can benefit me.

Additionally, the screener survey was welcoming of diverse queer participants, because it was inclusive of asexual and aromantic sexual orientations, polyamorous relationship configurations, and mixed race identity. Participants explained that this sort of inclusion was exceptionally rare in research:

> **Hue:** So first of all, I was very excited at a study that particularly pointed to genderfluid experience because in my day to day I don't really like... Although I use the term genderfluid to describe my gender most accurately, I usually just say trans because that joins me with other people in my community who have similar experiences and similar social goals, I guess you could say. But I haven't really explored that much of what genderfluidity means to me in particular besides transness because as you said, those experiences aren't always centered or really given the time of day in conversations about

gender very much. I think there's a lot of reasons for that. So yeah, my research advisor sent it to me, and I was just so excited to see that there was a specific study that specifically aimed at something that I use to describe myself.

So that was really cool, especially the pay, I was really excited to see that we're being compensated so generously for this work. Especially because from conversations that I've had in my research lab, that's not necessarily super common to be paid more than even $30 for a study like this. But I think mainly because I'd been transcribing interviews, as I've been listening to those interviews, I always have my own things to say and own experiences to share. And I just really like interviews, I like sharing my thoughts. So part of that was that as well, just wanting to be part of an interview process. But I think the thing that really sealed the deal for me was when I was doing the demographic questionnaire, it was super asexual and aromantic inclusive and especially mixed [race] inclusive as well. When I was doing the demographic questionnaire, I got super excited to see the term romantic orientation and the term queerplatonic relationship used.

I've never seen it. That is the first time I've ever taken a demographic survey that was inclusive of my romantic identity and my aro-ace-ness. I immediately sent it to an organization that I'm the president of that's like for aro-ace people in my college. I was like, this is so cool. And especially the fact that I was able as a mixed person, that I was able to clarify my particular racial identity within even the broader categories of White and Hispanic. I just felt very welcomed into the study in the interview. So all of those reasons combined.

Participants also noted the importance of an interviewer who is trans, and who understands transness as more than simply identity, but also as a relational process:

> **Oliver:** I'm very glad that you're also trans… I think it helps that you understand how gender can be affected by relationships, because there's not... I haven't really found a good way to explain it quite yet.

In other words, it's easier to share your story with someone who you think will understand, at least on some level.

Finally, don't take yourself too seriously. I made this mistake at one point; when I said, "So you were talking about how you feel like you're a little bit younger in your gender... I hate calling it a gender journey. That's terrible. But in your process with gender. When did you first know about your own genderfluidity?" Charlie pushed back, saying, "So… I actually find gender journey very fun, because it's like playing a game." Shared humor is personhood-affirming, and transness is often fun. A good interview protocol about transness should leave room for both.

Chapter 4: Stitchwork (A Community Definition of Genderfluidity)

Here, I've stitched together responses from all 16 of the genderfluid people I interviewed, to place their remarks in conversation with each other. Many of their responses had similarities, which I have sometimes removed to reduce repetition and to focus on each unique aspect of genderfluidity that the interviewees discussed. At its core, genderfluidity refers to having a gender that changes in an ongoing and nonlinear way, but each participant offered their own nuance as to what that could mean.

Quin: How would you define genderfluidity?

Oliver: The first thing that I would say is that because [genderfluidity is] very individual to each person… I should not be the only person describing it to them, they should hear from other genderfluid people.

Tome: There isn't really one genderfluid experience… like a lot of other terms, [the meaning of "genderfluid"] is very broad, but that's what gives it its power and its functionality.

Ladybug: Genderfluidity is someone's gender… changing based on how they feel that day, that week, that month, even from hour to hour.

Crow: It's an impermanence of gender.

Charlie: …people assume that when things change, it is inherently growth. But I think genderfluidity is defined by the fact that it's inherently changing and inherently fluid as the base state.

Jay: I like to think about taste in food, I guess like taste in coffee. Sometimes you want cream [and] sugar, or sometimes you just want cream, and sometimes you want sugar, or sometimes you want it black. So it depends on the day.

Emily: I think also the salience of your gender identity can change over time as well as how it interacts with other identities that we hold.

Ollie: My experience with gender has been so… influenced by… my other identities - so [being neurodivergent], being Black, being of a Caribbean background, so I'm not technically African American - there are just a lot of different things that come into play. But if I had to describe it to someone… at least in my case, [my gender can] oscillate. So I could be really femme or feeling like I wanted to present very femme at one point in time. I could feel like I just want to throw every [gender] together or I could feel like I didn't want any sort of gender experience. So really, it just depends.

Rennan: And it's not something that you control, it's not something you decide. It's just sort of an internal sense that doesn't stay still.

Bug: It’s hard to explain to someone who's never felt it before.

Tome: The way I perceive of myself is different, but the way that projects onto cultural ideas of masculinity and femininity are the same.

Julian: There's one aspect of gender that has to do with the way that you're perceived and the way that you're treated based on that perception... Then there's another aspect of gender that is internal and has to do with what feels good and feels right. They, I think, intersect a lot, but can be very different… So my own genderfluidity has both wrapped up inside of it where… the

way that I look and dress don't necessarily express androgyny. For the most part, people just kind of assume that I am a cis man in most spaces, but I feel very genderfluid because that assumption, I feel like, is wrong. There's something essential about that assumption that doesn't feel right to me. I feel the same way about being assumed as a woman.

V: … genderfluidity can be a couple of different things, and it's all based on how each individual person feels. But you can be genderfluid by simply having more than one gender. I know some people who identify as boy and girl at the same time or on different days. So, that, in my opinion, would be very fluid because the way that you perceive yourself changes relating to your gender. But I also feel like the expression of your gender could qualify you as genderfluid…. where the only gender you have is genderfluid, but the way that you express it changes depending on whatever context that it's in. So, I feel like both the identity [it]self or the expression of it could qualify you as a genderfluid person. So, even though my identity itself isn't like, "Oh, I'm genderfluid," [V primarily identifies as transmasculine and nonbinary] because the way that I express myself in certain contexts [or on] certain days, changes, I feel like I would still be in the umbrella.

Rennan: …people think about genderfluidity stereotypically, in that sense of sometimes you're male, sometimes you're female. You're fluid between those two. Whereas, my experience is more like there's so many different flavors of what it is to be a guy. There's so many different flavors of nonbinary. There's so many different flavors of femininity. My borders happen to only just dip into various [feminine] genders. There are some people who are the other way around. There's some people who their genderfluidity leans more feminine. There's some people whose genderfluidity leans more nonbinary... Especially people who think in the binary think that it's a

flipping between the two [masculine and feminine], where it's really… Everyone has a different range. Everyone has a different concept of even what it means for their gender to be fluid. Some people might have a genderfluidity like mine and consider themselves a binary guy because they just see the femininity as… a weird thing that happens. I truly think genderfluidity is way more common than statistics would show because of that, because there's so many different ways to be genderfluid, and they might not be noticeable to someone who thinks exclusively in the binary.

Oliver: I kind of fluctuate within a certain part of the spectrum but it also changes over longer periods of time too. So the area of the spectrum throughout which I fluctuate kind of shifts a little bit…. So for the past few months, I've been feeling more masculine than anything, but it kind of changes from a little bit less masculine to more masculine. But in the past, I felt like that fluidity ranged from more gender neutral or slightly masculine to something more feminine. So that spectrum for me has changed over time, and continues to.

Ladybug: I do experience dysphoria from time to time. It was worse earlier on. But after I came out as trans… I haven't re-come out as genderfluid yet, which again, it's one of those things where when I was out as trans or am out as trans, I still wore the skirts, still wore the dresses. So nothing ever really changed. Just the labels…

For me… I felt masculine, and masculine, and masculine just continuously, and there was no change. And then I started to feel more feminine again and more androgynous again. And I'm like, was I just in this really long stint of just being masculine?... As you think it through, it's like, "Really? That really happens?" kind of thing.

That's pretty much how it was. And considering genderfluid is still under the trans umbrella, I'm not worried about re-coming out. I am still under that umbrella. Transgender is still something that I can say I am and nobody will bat an eye.

Linda: …when I think of fluidity, I think of movement and change. If you think about water and how water isn't contained, it moves, it flows, there's tides, there's waves, there's rip currents. It can be unpredictable at times… when I tie [fluidity] to gender and not water, it's that some people's genderfluidity is that they feel more pulled toward one gender over another on any certain day… or that someone's understanding of gender can change and that they can feel more like a gender in this moment and then a different gender in another moment. Or that it's not that they're pulled toward any gender and that their existence is just there and flowing. And that it's not prescriptive to any certain preconceived understanding of what we've named. And because language is limiting… we're outside of that language that we currently have.

Tasha: I would say genderfluidity is a space of openness… it's a space where the person can define their own gender or it's accepting or embracing different types of genders, being knowledgeable, open of different genders that are not the basic or the normal female [or] male.

Pear: …gender is something that is… restricting in its inherent structure. But genderfluidity kind of breaks that because it allows people to identify or build their own relationship to gender. And that relationship is always open to changes, [is] always open to self-interpretations, and it inherently breaks the restrictive part of gender by giving or placing agency on the person to identify as whatever makes them feel the best or the most comfortable… [Genderfluidity] takes the power away from structures… "out there" and gives it to the person.

Hue: I would say that genderfluidity is the idea, but also a permission for gender to change… I think that that labels in general give people permission to accept their experiences as legitimate… So I think "genderfluid" gives… agency to people… it's an established term that people use and you can just give that to someone and be like, "You are allowed to claim this as your experience. This is not just you being different or being weird or being broken even" - because some people do feel that way – but it's like, "This is something that has existed before you, will exist after you, and it's something that you can be a part of."

Quin: In these definitions of genderfluidity we see the limits of discourses that treat gender as static, exclusionary, and binary. Instead, we are invited to explore gender as a relational, nebulous space where being one thing does not preclude simultaneously being another and where the agency of the individual is just as important to consider as the expectations of society.

Genderfluidity overlaps with (but is distinct from) transgender and nonbinary identity. "Transgender" means having a gender that does not align with one's gender assigned at birth. "Nonbinary" is both a specific gender identity and an umbrella term to describe people who have a gender other than solely man or woman. Because all people are assigned a male or female gender at birth in our current society, nonbinary genders, by definition, fit within the transgender umbrella. "Genderfluid" means that one's gender changes, and may include experiences of being a man, a woman, some other gender, and/or no gender throughout an individual's life, each of which are authentic and important aspects of their gender (Aguayo-Romero et al., 2015; Bradford et al., 2018; Darwin, 2017; Dentice & Deitert, 2015; Galupo et al., 2017). Within this definition, change is fundamental to a genderfluid person's gender; past genders are not

rationalized as a phase, a misnaming, or confusion, future genders are anticipated, and one's current gender experience is not upheld as any more "true" or "real" than those past or future genders.

Chapter 5: If You're Looking for a Sign that You're Trans, This is It

> **Hue:** I didn't call myself trans until my first year of college when people of gave me the term to use. Because I didn't realize that I was valid basically.

It's one thing to define genderfluidity or to discuss how it affects our understandings of identity theoretically; it is another to get a sense of what genderfluidity feels like. This was actually a big hurdle in my own gender exploration – I learned the word "genderfluid" long before I ever identified with it, mostly because I didn't really understand what it meant to have a gender that changes. What does it mean to "feel" like a gender anyway? And by extension, what does it mean to feel your gender shift?

To start with, I want to propose some language that I think will help us discuss genderfluidity. Specifically, I want to make a distinction between a person's "felt gender," meaning their internal sense of gender, as compared to a person's "gender identity," meaning the label that a person uses to describe their gender. I'm going to use Ladybug's narrative to help me explain why this distinction is important when we begin talking about genderfluidity:

> **Ladybug:** If [I was talking] to someone in the [queer] community, I would say I'm genderfluid and I use pretty much all pronouns, he, she, they… You could call me anything and I would respond. If it was to someone outside of the [queer] community, I would say that the way that they look at me is the way that they should call me. So if I present as feminine to someone, then I am feminine to them. If I present as masculine to someone, I am masculine to them and I will still respond no matter how they look at me… [I know what my gender is depending] on how I'm feeling. Most of the time, [my

> gender shifts] between femininity and masculinity, but there are a few times where… I'm just here. I'm just existing…

So Ladybug's gender identity is genderfluid, but their felt gender changes, so in a given moment, their internal sense of gender may lean masculine, feminine, or agender (other genderfluid people experience gender shifts differently, which we'll discuss throughout this chapter). Ladybug's gender identity is not changing in these moments because the identity "genderfluid" encompasses all of the change in their felt gender. Therefore, creating a distinction between "felt gender" and "gender identity" helps us understand the consistent nature of the fluidity that genderfluid people experience, where change itself *is* the source of identity cohesion.

Interviewees described how feelings of gender dysphoria and euphoria act as clues to what one's felt gender is. Interviewees often used the language of "comfort" vs "discomfort" when describing gender euphoria vs dysphoria. One's physical body, clothing, mannerisms, relational interactions, and emotional sensations can all be experienced as being gender dysphoric or gender euphoric.

Many (but not all) of the interviewees discussed experiencing gender dysphoria:

> **Jay:** …it feels like I shift between masculine and nonbinary… Just I guess sometimes I would look at my chest and wish it doesn't exist. Or sometimes I would look at my chest and not care about it at all… So, I guess that's… when I shift.

However, even when interviewees did experience gender dysphoria, most of them centered their experience of genderfluidity on gender euphoria, meaning they focused on finding ways to

embody their gender that felt good. In part, this was because interviewees did not experience genderfluidity itself as inherently distressing, even with its unpredictability:

> **Ollie:** I'm pretty okay with it as a whole. It doesn't bother me to have these sorts of experiences or feel like I want to be addressed or received in a different way, even though it's uncomfortable for a lot of people outside of queer spaces.

Additionally, some interviewees found that gender dysphoria wasn't that useful for leading them to an affirming gender presentation. It can be easy to get used to dysphoria; you can become so accustomed to feeling vaguely uncomfortable all the time, that you don't even realize your discomfort until that state changes. Gender euphoria breaks through that fog:

> **Oliver:** I think that it often comes from noticing when I feel gender euphoria as opposed to dysphoria. Dysphoria is more just kind of a constant state, whereas euphoria tends to be in more concentrated moments. So I'll put on a sweatshirt that my brother used to wear and feel euphoric in it, or someone will call me handsome or some other term that I really resonate with and I'll feel euphoric or I'll do something more feminine that makes one of my partners feel euphoric in their gender, and that gives me euphoria. And I feel that for me and my gender as well. So yeah, it really does come from moments of euphoria and just feeling comfortable in whatever presentation I'm rocking.

Other interviewees noticed a push-and-pull between their sense of gender euphoria and their dysphoria, where they found their authentic gender through moving away from gender presentations that made them feel dysphoric and towards presentations that made them feel euphoric:

Bug: So the first thing I notice is when I look in the mirror and I'm dressing in something that's been feeling so euphoric for so long, the whole winter long it's been feeling euphoric, I look in the mirror and suddenly I'm like, man, it starts to induce dysphoria. And I'm like, this is very annoying because I just bought these clothes, or I just made this effort to present this way, and it starts to feel like my clothes don't fit me the way they did before.

I just follow the feeling of euphoria or dysphoria, and I respect how they flow into my thoughts and feelings. So I kind of experiment. I go into experiment phase where I'm like, okay, what if I wore something more femme? Then suddenly I feel euphoria. Okay, let's follow that trajectory and continue on that path until it doesn't fit anymore.

I noticed the same thing happened just as school was starting this year. I was into this phase where I really liked long skirts and crop tops. I have top surgery, so I've been really owning that. And I'm like, yes, I love the form fitting stuff and everything, but then it just didn't hit the same. It was like, oh man, this is feeling like itchy. I just want to get away from this. It's discomfort and comfort. It's seeking those feelings within yourself. Usually that presents for me in a masculine or feminine lens, and sometimes even somewhere in between… that or even outside of that.

Not everyone related to the language of their gender shifting. A couple of interviewees talked more in terms of their gender expression changing based on their preferences, and then other people interpreting that as their felt gender changing:

Linda: I don't know that it feels like my gender shifts. But my presentation shifts, which I think is read to others as my gender shifting. But again, because I don't have the

> language for it, I don't know if I ever feel like my gender shifts. Because what is gender?...
>
> Anyway, I think there are times that I feel like I want to wear makeup so I wear makeup. Oftentimes I don't. Usually it's in a performative way. I'm going to a wedding and I want to look a certain way and so I wear makeup. And that doesn't feel inauthentic, but it also doesn't feel genuine. But it feels right. There's a really interesting experience there I think. I think it can feel performative, but not in an inauthentic way. I think it can feel credentializing, which is also performative, I guess. If I have a meeting with someone that's important, I do dress a certain way. And it's not me dressing for my gender, it's dressing for a position. But clothing is gendered… It's not inherently gendered, but the way that we make it is. And so I think through more of presentation and expression rather than my actual gender shifting…
>
> I think if I were choosing for me, every day I might show up to work in a sweatshirt and leggings. And there are some days that I know that I can meet my goals better by dressing a different way. And so dressing a different way in ways doesn't feel genuine because if I could choose, I'd show up in leggings. But it also seems like a version... like close enough to authentic or close enough to who I am that it doesn't invalidate me and still accomplishes my goals.

I think it’s important to note, however, that even when interviewees discussed their genderfluidity in terms of gender expression, they still tied their gender expression to their internal sense of self and wellbeing. When I asked Linda, “Is there a point at which a certain presentation feels so inauthentic [that] it is harmful to you?” they replied, “Yeah.” So there is

something deeper going on here than “merely” aesthetics, even when we are discussing gender expression. Gender presentation and felt gender are not the same thing, even if one’s desired gender expression can function as a clue as to what one’s gender is.

V, who is autistic, compared their experience of expressing their gender authentically with what it feels like to “mask” (a term used by autistic people to describe times when they have to hide their autism to navigate a neurotypical-centered world). They could attempt to express their gender inauthentically, just like they can attempt to hide their autistic traits, but that expression would require effort, is personally distressing and exhausting, and might not even be wholly successful. For V, anything other than being authentic to their gender and their neurotype feels wrong and comes at a cost:

> **V:** So, outside of masking, because I definitely do that sometimes, but when I'm being authentically myself, there are sometimes where I am just feeling very traditionally feminine and I want to express myself that way. I want to feel pretty, I want to feel beautiful, and so I surround myself with those things. But I feel like I also really act more femininely when I'm dressed that way as well. Just the way that I carry myself, the way that I speak…
>
> during times where I'm, for example, feeling more masculine, I speak with kind of a lower tone. I'm not so on it with the inflection of my voice. It's just the way that I express myself. I tend to have squared off shoulders when I'm walking. Really just taking up a lot of space. And if there are times where I might be a bit more androgynous or a mix of the two, I just... How do I explain this? Everything just feels very natural. I don't notice that I am leaning a certain way or anything, I'm just kind of existing. It's hard to explain.

But as long as I'm not masking, everything still feels really organic. Even if I do notice that I'm very much leaning a certain way on the expression pendulum, it still feels very me. But, yeah, I don't know how to describe the feeling because no matter how I'm expressing myself, it just feels right. There are some days where dressing hyper femininely just does not feel right. I'll look in the mirror and it just feels super wrong. And so you change your outfit and you find something that feels right, and that's just how you are for the day. And there are times where being hyper-masculine, my version of hyper-masculine, that also just feels wrong. You look in the mirror and you're just like, this is not quite right. And so you change until it feels right. And then that's how you go about your day…

But when I'm masking, as far as my gender and expression goes, it's me trying to pretend that I am cis. Maybe I'm going into a social situation that just is out of my comfort zone. Maybe I don't know what kind of people are going to be at a party. Maybe I'm going to church or something, for a funeral. I don't know. But it feels like I'm putting on an act. Like I'm in drama class and I have to be this character. Today I'm going to be this person, and if I do well enough, people will applaud at the end. That kind of feeling.

It doesn't feel right. Everything feels really forced. I become really hyper aware of how I move my hands. If I'm touching my face, if I'm touching my hair. The way that I'm speaking, the way that I pronounce things... When I'm masking, I make my chest look more feminine. Usually I wear compression tops and things that just feel very snug. Don't make my chest the focal point of my existence. But if I'm masking socially, I feel like I have to. I feel like that's just the expectation. And so yeah, socially masking feels wrong.

> And then as an autistic person, I'm already masking every time I'm in social situations too. So it just compounds. And then as soon as you get home at the end of the day, all the clothes come off. You go sit in your room in the dark with a blanket, and sometimes you cry, but that's fine. It's just draining.

Although interviewees described authentic gender embodiment as important to their wellbeing, gender shifts can be subtle, and interviewees did not find it necessary to mark every time their gender changed. Sometimes a shift would only become noticeable during a social interaction:

> **Tome:** A lot of the time, I would say most of the time for me, it's usually very gradual changes over the period of days or weeks where it's not really that I notice in any particular moment of like, "Oh, this is how I'm feeling." It's more of a constant evaluation for me. Then, occasionally, I don't even really know how describe it, but one day the needle ticks just far enough that it's in a new zone, I guess. But, that's not the entirety of the time. Sometimes I do just sit there and I go, "Oh, huh. I'm definitely feeling more masculine/more feminine." It's not anything concrete I can point to that makes me go like, "Yep, this is what it is."
>
> Because for me, a lot of times when people... I feel like moving through the world as someone who's… anything other than binary and cisgender, you pay a lot of attention to how people refer to you, right?... Sometimes, especially being transfeminine, people will say, whatever, like, “Sir” or something and then try to correct themselves because they're not thinking or they weren't thinking. And sometimes I'm like, "No, I don't mind. It's fine. That's fine. It's whatever." Because I feel like, depending on the time, it's not inaccurate.

> Most of the time it's not something, I guess, I actively think about unless I'm getting ready in the morning and I go, "Okay." I'll look in the mirror and go, "This isn't where I'm at right now." It's not so much I wake up and I just know. That's, at the very least, the experience I've had with those kinds of shifts.

In these social interactions, gender comes into focus, not so much as a personal identity, but as a social sense, a personal reaction to how other people see you and how you want to be received and understood by others. Gender matters here because it allows you to connect (or fail to connect) with others in a way that feels freeing (or oppressive). Gender authenticity matters to us because authentic connection matters to us.

Interviewees often used queer terminology to describe the more-subtle aspects of their genderfluidity, including unique combinations of femininity, masculinity, and androgyny. This queer terminology gave them a way to connect to their gender, and to experiences that might otherwise go unnamed and unheeded. There was a limit to this language, however, which impacted how interviewees could talk about their experiences:

> **Charlie:** I think I shift somewhere between nonbinary, and transfeminine, and some sort of mixture of expression… I certainly don't identify as a man. That sounds terrible. And I wouldn't say that I necessarily would identify as a woman, at least in terms of how I understand that experience. But I do feel really affirmed by what it means to be perceived as effeminate.
>
> And so it's this interesting combination of... we think of nonbinary as like a third gender or just androgynous. But I think once you do that, you've kind of already failed, right? Because… you're saying, "Oh, well, there's a binary, so I'm going to add a third thing."

> It's more about intentionally opting out, and then this idea of operating in this feminine space without necessarily identifying as a woman… And so it's this kind of shifting [process of exploring] what does it mean to identify with these different parts of masculinity, and femininity, or neither? And then frankly, the unique combination of both.
>
> I think when you describe it to people, like when you explain to people that you can have masculine femininity and feminine masculinity, it breaks their brain a little bit. But it's like, you know what a tomboy is. You have seen that person, you have met that person. And so why can't that individual exist in the same context as… the really effeminate theater kid?
>
> …These are the concepts that I grew up around gender, and so that's what I have to grab onto while also acknowledging that it's not a binary. And so it's this kind of goofy constellation of experiences.

Interviewees still felt the constraints of the gender expectations of the society they lived in, and those constraints impacted how participants experienced gender shifts:

> **Hue:** …it's something that I haven't really thought about that much and honestly don't pay that much attention to. Because for me, genderfluidity isn't as simple as just a shift in identity necessarily or a shift in gender. It's more like I notice a consistent shift in certain aspects of gender, such as what I need to express on a day-to-day. So the reason I use the word "futch" [i.e., femme butch] is because I really like how it combines femininity and butch masculinity. Not like cis male masculinity, but AFAB masculinity and queer masculinity because I feel that every day, I fluctuate between the two… I'm never super

hyper femme, but sometimes I am more on the femme side. I'd say today is more of a... I'm dressed a little bit more femme, but I'm always going to have my hair short and I'm always going to, not like to show cleavage, things like that.

But I do notice that shift sometimes I couldn't stand to wear this, I would have to wear something more masculine. I would really want to wear a sports bra or not really feel my chest. So that is something that for me shifts over time.

But I think also the time that I notice my genderfluidity the most is actually when I interact with people of different genders, particularly in a romantic sense, which is very interesting. And I don't have any explanation as to whether or not this is an identity thing or a social thing. I haven't really talked to this about this with many people, but I noticed that if I'm... So this actually does not happen super often, I'm not super often attracted to women, but when I am, especially a woman who's a little more traditionally feminine, I will feel more like a man or I'll feel more butch, not necessarily like a man. Versus if I'm talking about having a crush on a masculine man, I'll be like [raises voice], "I'm a woman."

But I don't ever feel fully man or woman. I don't think I... Yeah, because I also don't really understand what that even means. I feel like I can only experience to the extent to which I understand gender, but what I do understand about gender I think all is influencing my personal feelings and my personal connections to my gender. So I feel a shift happen sometimes when I interact with other people. And it's like other people are influencing the way that I feel about my gender. But it's not necessarily as simple as in this situation I feel like a something and in this situation, I feel like a [different]

> something, it's like I'm feeling different energies constantly at the same time, and they're not competing but they're fusing… but also sort of distinct.
>
> Sometimes I feel more of a feminine energy in a particular situation or sometimes I feel more of a masculine energy and sometimes I feel a combination of both, different types of femininity, different types of masculinity, all at once. But it's mostly affected by the things I wear, the places I'm in, and the people specifically that I'm talking to, especially if it's a romantic situation that will affect a lot of how I feel my gender embodied physically.

It might be tempting to read Hue's experience with how their gender shifts in their relationships and label it as heteronormative. Transgender people often are put in this position, where our gender embodiments and the ways that we build relationships get judged for "upholding gender stereotypes." In fact, many transgender people worry about this when we start questioning our genders (I know I did). Julian describes some of the concerns they had to unpack as someone who was assigned female at birth and who therefore was forced to navigate the expectations we have societally for women:

> **Julian:** I had to overcome… my own internalized transphobia… I had a hard time figuring out whether or not I wanted to be out and whether or not I wanted to use they/them pronouns or anything like that, because I was thinking to myself, why is it that a woman can't also be the things that I am? Why do we have to have this narrow idea of womanhood where you can't be on testosterone or you can't look masculine or whatever, or have dysphoria. All of those things could potentially be part of womanhood, just not everyone's womanhood.

Charlie shared a similar experience from the perspective of someone assigned male at birth, and who was therefore forced to navigate the expectations we have societally for men as well as the impacts of racism and homophobia:

> **Charlie:** I was gay, I was a person of color in the South, I got the shit kicked out of me. Terrible. Zero out of 10… And I developed this really maladaptive protective mechanism, which we know happens to a lot of kids. We know that a lot of people who are marginalized develop behaviors that are protective but are also really bad for you. And I learned that if I was being bullied by someone, if I get more aggressive and escalate the situation faster than they do, I get to end the problem, not them. So I think when I was really young, I tied this kind of aggression, and escalation, and… violence, to my masculinity and what it meant to be a man, because it protected me from other problems… Part of [unpacking] the internalized gender [stigma] became "Well, am I thinking about [transitioning] because I perceive masculinity as an inherently violent aspect of my experience?"
>
> For a lot of people, including cis men, being masculine is not violent, obviously, and is also really affirming for them. So it was this big struggle of... because I had developed these protective mechanisms that were inherently aggressive, I bound that to my gender, and so part of it was well, if I unpack that aggression, maybe I would identify as a man. That is not the case, but that really slowed me down, I think, a lot.

Despite how common these concerns can be, the idea that transgender embodiment somehow uniquely upholds patriarchy, above and beyond any other gender embodiment, is a form of transphobia. Instead, it is more accurate to say that one's social environment determines which

gender experiences are safe to explore, including for transgender people. The trick then becomes finding or making safe spaces for gender exploration.

For genderfluid people, this means finding spaces that are safe for fluidity:

> **Oliver:** …I feel more comfortable being feminine in relationships with trans people where I can explore that aspect of my fluidity, but I also explore more masculine parts of my identity. So I guess it just gives me room to explore in an ideal relationship with intimacy where I'm just kind of able to do whatever I want. Also, if I'm [in a relationships] with girls, my instinct is to be more masculine and I think that that's just, it's partly heteronormative, compulsory heterosexuality, those tendencies, but it just feels safer to explore that with more feminine people.

When I asked Julian what helped them work through their internalized transphobia, they suggested being around other trans people and trying things out until you find what works for you:

> **Julian:** I'm [originally] from New Jersey, and there is just much more community [where I live now]. I felt much safer to experiment and try things here than I [did in New Jersey]… There's so many people who embody so many different parts of transness [here] and who are on low dose T and are experimenting with things, and are trans men who are feminine and all these things that I felt like there was no harm in trying something new and trying to see if something felt right for me. In doing that, it just became what I am, I guess. It worked for me, I guess you could say.

Hue had a similar experience to Julian, but was additionally impacted by being neurodivergent (Hue lives with obsessive compulsive disorder):

> **Hue:** OCD has definitely affected my gender identity… OCD makes uncertainty miserable for me. So when I was questioning my gender, I was having a very bad time. Because my brain - and this was before I even knew I had OCD so I didn't really know what was going on - my brain was like, "You're doing it for attention… you're not actually trans because now you feel more feminine," things like that. So I was just getting a lot of negative feedback from my own thoughts about it. And then, also, the decision to enter or not enter a trans-specific space when you're feeling uncertain about it. And it was very heightened emotionally for me, it was pretty tough. But now that I've just been so consistently accepted by trans community, I don't have that fear anymore… And it was really healthy for me, too, to just be like, the answer is there's no answer. And then I don't have to continue ruminating about it, because I'm not going to get anywhere.

In other words, you don't have to be certain about your gender identity to explore genderfluidity:

> **Ollie:** …when I was younger… maybe I would say I felt a little bit more genderfluid. Usually when I'm talking to people now because I don't know how to... Ugh, I feel like the gender categories we have right now are so narrow. I usually just say I'm agender because we don't have a concept of gender that I feel works for me… But I do think that we are all more than these categories that we've made as humans. It doesn't help anyone… to me to say hard and fast, "I am a woman and I ascribe to all of the things that womanhood are associated with so I love the color pink and I paint my nails and I go shopping." I don't feel like that gives us anything. I feel like, I don't know, I'm one of the

> people that are like, "If we all play around with gender, we're going to find ourselves, it's going to be fun." There's a lot of growth to be had if you just pick and choose and have that freedom to do that sort of thing.

The gender exploration process might not always be easy, but you are allowed to engage in it and to see where it takes you.

When genderfluid people do not have access to spaces that are safe for fluidity, it can cause significant harm. For example, Crow was not out to most people in her life at the time of our interview. She had few safe spaces to be fluid. Crow explained how her experience of being assigned male at birth and being forced to perform a masculine gender role, regardless of her internal sense of gender, led her to associate her masculinity with negative emotions:

> **Crow:** It depends on my emotional state for a good part of it… So I was unhappy being cis AMAB, and when I'm feeling unhappy I do feel more masculine. And, not… that being masculine [is] bad, it's just that's where my brain is at…
>
> Usually what gender I am is a tertiary thought in my head, and I have to sit for a second and be like, "Okay, this is how I'm feeling. Why?" …sometimes it's because [of] life events, other times it's because just that's how I'm feeling, other times it's actually because of the gender I am. If I'm feeling upset [because of my gender], it's because I'm feeling masculine and I'm feeling back in that space when I was younger, when I was feeling like… [a] guy.
>
> Other times when I'm feeling more euphoric, I am feeling more femme and I will talk more effeminate. And I generally don't notice that immediately. It takes a little bit and it

usually comes out much more with people I'm more comfortable with. And so shifts in that direction feel very good. It feels euphoric. Other times it's just kind of a blank slate and I'm just sitting here watching TV or something and then I'm like, "Oh wait, I should check on that." And then I do. I'm like, "Okay, that's what that is." And sometimes that's... Usually it's a null gender when it's like that. But sometimes it'll be on either end of the binary or adjacent to the binary… just wherever I'm feeling.

There have been a few times. Not a lot, but a few where I have felt masculine and good about it. So I think there are times in my experience where I can feel masculine and not upset. It's just rare, I would say… It's not necessarily that [masculinity and negativity] are fundamentally integrated in my brain. It's just like they happen to coincide at the same time so those thoughts will come out more when I'm feeling more masculine... [similar to] state-dependent memory, I guess.

Lack of spaces that are safe for fluidity could also impact transition experiences. Pear described their frustration with others' expectations that they have a binary transition. They wanted to go on hormone replacement therapy, but they did not want to be an "opposite" gender:

Pear: [When my gender shifts] it's kind of like, I imagine it as a half sphere… and there's a little ball on it and it just rolls around.. and sometimes it gets stuck and it's like, "Okay, I'm definitely this." The ball's stuck on the wire and I know I'm there and then it falls down and it keeps swinging. And… I have been in this weird space for very long time where I'm like, "Okay, I have to pick one, right? You have to pick one."

But then… I'm not happy with that decision… I'm trying to navigate the idea that it's okay to not fit a binary and it's okay to not want to, I'm trying to be okay with not having

> to subscribe to those constructs. And I would describe my gender as something very, fluid is a word for it, but fluid and evolving…
>
> It's been challenging because I started HRT recently and… it's been going really great but once I started, the people in my life at the time were very like, “Okay, you started it, so you know where you're going. The end goal is he/him, man, masculine, that's it.” And I was like, “Okay [sheepishly, unconvinced].” But every time I went to the doctor and they were like, "Okay, do you want to up your dose?" I was like, "No." And I've still been at the same dose, even though… I do want to increase my dose and I do want to finally really get on that journey, but I still, I want to… be on hormones, I want to get gender affirming surgery. But I don't want my end goal to be a man. I still want to be someone who oscillates not between anything, just oscillates however they want to…
>
> [Before when] I identified with my sex assigned at birth… I felt like there was no way I could identify as anything else because it was like, “But you look like that. There's no way that that could happen.” And I was fearing that once I'm on HRT and get to a point where I am identified [by others] as a man, I will be in the same spot that I was before where it'll be like, “Okay, you're here now, and that's it. And you're not leaving that little space.” …I left one end and I don't want to get to another end that I am forced to be in again.

At its best, however, transition could also be a way of building a safe space for fluidity. For example, Rennan explained how their medical transition allowed them to both own the nuances of their masculinity and to reclaim their femininity:

Rennan: [When my gender shifts] …it's almost imperceptible. I mean, at the end of the day, I'm still me. It's not like I'm a new person. It's not [dissociative identity disorder]. So it's not something where I'm like, "Oh, I'm a girl now." It's just sort of, I think honestly I notice my body motions, behavioral, physical, language change a little bit. And I go from puffing my chest up to just sitting back…. The way I exist in space is a little different. The way I express emotions feels differently too, I suppose. I think the easiest way I can describe it is my more masculine joy is boisterous. And my more feminine joy is sparkly…

And it's also one of those things where… I consider myself to have masculine genders, nonbinary genders, feminine genders, so sometimes it's incredibly subtle, is another part of it.

Because it's not always you go from the full bull alpha male to the little, demure stereotypes of extreme genders. Sometimes I can go from… my gender being bear to twink. They're both masculine, but they're different expressions of it. Sometimes my gender is gamer, sometimes my gender is a red dress. My gender is objects because it's so hard to put into words…

My feelings of femininity are low enough that I was very confident in taking steps to medically transition to being physically masculine… I think, for me, something that I notice is that my embrace of genderfluidity has changed by being trans because when I was still physically, like, a cis woman, when I was still physically that, I didn't feel like I was allowed to be feminine, or people would think I was a woman. I had to be as masculine as possible so people could recognize that I wasn't a "girl-girl." Transitioning

has allowed me to embrace that gender. I think that was a big thing. I just needed people to know that I wasn't a cis girl…Transitioning and being able to have this body and this face allowed me to be the gender I'm feeling more often, that when I am feminine, when I have that more feminine gender sense, I feel like I'm now allowed to be that without people being like, "She/her."

As another example, Jay was able to incorporate their fluidity into their chosen name:

Jay: I'm an immigrant… I knew I was going to be a citizen, and I was born with a feminine name, so I had a legal name change. I just knew that ever since the possibility of a name change popped up, I wanted to have a name that is not feminine… [Initially] my dad talked me out of it… I kept my old name after I became a citizen and regretted it. So I actually had to file forms, [it] took months, and I was prepared to pay money for it. But luckily I was able to qualify for a waiver.

…at first it was just the difficulty of *finding* a name… [my name is] actually my favorite color… I decided to take an art class on a whim and turns out I loved it. And I like the color [that I chose to name myself after] a lot because of… how flexible it is… it's an earth color… you can mix it up with any color, it will look like mud. And it also looks great by itself, monochrome. You use it dark enough, it can turn into black, or it can turn into night sea or a night sky. So it's a sort of like a blue, grayish blue, that's the color. And yeah, I liked how flexible it is, so I decided to make it my name.

In summary, "feeling" like a gender is not really one identifiable experience. It's not something that can be measured or proven. Instead, it is an attempt to give language to a range of experiences that often go unmarked in our society because we are not supposed to question the

gender we are assigned at birth, and we are certainly not supposed to change genders. The narratives shared here invite us to let go of the idea that gender is an unchangeable, "born-this-way" quality, so that we can explore gender as an internal sense of self, ontologically bound into our relations with others, which cannot be reduced to either a feeling or a behavior. Instead, certain gender presentations can feel more or less comfortable/authentic, and then the individual has to find a way to fit the reality of their experience into the society in which they live. Although this understanding of gender is non-essentializing and contextual, it is still REAL and MATERIAL – people may choose their gender expression (to an extent) but we do not have so much control over what brings us joy as compared to what makes us want to crawl out of our own skins, what makes us feel connected to others as compared to what makes us want to hide ourselves away. And genderfluidity (and nonbinary identity and transness and queerness), above all else, assert the value of honest joy and noncoercive connection.

Cisnormativity and other societal gender expectations impact one's experience of genderfluidity by making some gender expressions safer than others, and therefore forcing genderfluid people to develop coping mechanisms that manage their hostile environment, even if those coping mechanisms are also personally harmful. In such hostile situations, gender exploration and transition can give genderfluid people the chance to reclaim the fullness of their gender. In this way queerness exists as a duality: We do not choose what makes us feel whole, but we do choose whether or not to value that wholeness enough to embody it and fight for our place in the world as our whole selves. We both are intrinsically queer and choose to become queer, and where the intrinsic ends and becoming begins is always messy and mostly impossible to disentangle. So give yourself permission to become.

Chapter 5.5: Defining Gender (A Glossary of Sorts)

Linda: Because what is gender?

Scholars and other authorities have been arguing over this for a long time. I'm definitely not going to settle the issue here, but I am a scientist and we love a working definition, so here's mine.

Broadly, gender is a tool that societies use to organize themselves and that individuals use to understand themselves in relation to other people. More specifically, I treat "gender" as an umbrella term that encompasses several distinct-but-related constructs:

- *Gender embodiment* encompasses all the ways that a person connects to their gender (García Selgas, 2014). Tome gave a great description of gender embodiment in their interview:

  > …there was a lot of talk for a while about, "Gender is intrinsic and it's only that, it's nothing else." Then there was kind of a shift to, "Gender is social and purely social, nothing else. It's only performance." I feel like the truth is maybe somewhere a little more in between. It's kind of where that personal identity and comfort and social performance meet.

- *Gender expression* refers to the recognizable part of gender, the traits that others can sense (sense as in see, hear, touch, taste, and smell, not "intuit") and which have been imbued with gendered meaning. Aspects of gender expression include:
  - Clothing and cosmetics
  - Mannerisms, speech, and interaction style
  - Behaviors and interests

    - Gendered physiology (e.g., breasts, facial hair, the reproductive system)
- *Felt gender* is one's internal sense of gender. This includes one's understanding of themself as having a given gender identity, as well as all of the preferences and innate proclivities of a person that make certain gender expressions more or less comfortable.
    - *Gender dysphoria* refers to when someone's gender expression is so out of sync with their felt gender that they experience emotional distress. This distress can manifest different ways for different people, including as dissociation from one's own body, as a diffuse sense of unease/discomfort/unhappiness, as a general desire to not be perceived (e.g., avoiding photography), or as intense self-hate and hopelessness.
    - *Gender euphoria* refers to when a person's gender expression and felt gender are aligned, causing one to feel comfortable in their gender expression, secure in their gender identity, and grounded in their body.
- *Gender identity* is the label that a person uses to describe their gender. It's a heuristic (i.e., a mental shortcut) used to draw up a bunch of associated gendered meanings, and to signify connection to a particular gender embodiment, including one's gender role. Therefore an individual's gender identity functions as an aspect of their gender expression. Gender identity is both individually determined and socially enforced.
    - Some common gender identities in the United States include man, woman, nonbinary, agender, genderfluid, and genderqueer.
    - You can also get more specific, niche, informal, or individualized gender identities like neutrois, genderflux, tomboy, bear, himbo, and pillow princess. A

lot of the gender identities disparagingly called "Tumblr genders" are actually just more individualized, niche gender identities that people created for the sake of specificity or to relay meaning about gender that is not already easily captured by other, more common gender identities. Whether a given gender identity is seen as "normal" or "made up" depends on whether or not the identity corresponds to a gender role that is recognized by the mainstream society.

  - Some relational identities incorporate gendered meanings as well, and so, depending on the individual and the situation, may also act as gender identities (e.g., mama, brother, auntie). In comparison, other relational identities are purposefully gender neutral (e.g., sibling, parent, comrade).

- *Gender salience* refers to how important gender is to a person's self-understanding overall. Gender salience is contextual: Some environments make gender very important and other environments may minimize the emphasis on gender.
  - Some people don't experience felt gender much or at all. They may identify as *agender* (i.e., as having no felt sense of gender) or *greygender* (i.e., as having a weak or indeterminate felt sense of gender). *Genderflux* refers to people who have genders that are fluid along the agender spectrum (i.e., their felt sense of gender fluctuates over time). For people along the agender spectrum, gender may still be salient, but only insofar as it is mandated by their social environment.
- *Gender role* encompasses all of a society's expectations for gender. In other words, one's gender role determines how a person is "supposed" to embody their gender.

- Gender roles are the aspect of gender that one can fail at. By extension, this is the aspect of gender that can turn oppressive. For example: “Girls should dress modestly;” “Boys don’t cry;” “I’m sure you’ll want children when you’re older;” “Don’t be a f-g;” “Tattoos aren’t pretty, they’re trashy;” “Men shouldn’t have long hair, it’s unprofessional;” “Did you seriously sleep with him on the first date?” “I’m sure he was into it, all men ever think about is sex;” etc.
- Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of performative gender is useful for understanding how gender roles work: The individual engages in some sort of gendered expression (i.e., their gender performance), and then their community either recognizes or fails to recognize that expression as legitimate. Performances that are deemed legitimate are rewarded through the conferral of social recognition and personal safety; performances that are deemed illegitimate are ignored or punished. Through this process, gender becomes material (meaning it has real, objective impacts on a person’s life).
- Importantly, people today usually live in several communities at once, and a person can be affirmed in their gender presentation in one community but not another. As an example, a completely closeted person who reads about genderfluid identity online and then starts self-identifying as genderfluid, but who doesn’t tell anybody or make any moves towards social or medical transition, is:
    1) Performing genderfluidity by identifying as genderfluid, because gender identity is one part of gender performance

2) Deemed legitimate by one part of their community (i.e., the online community that has described genderfluidity and allowed this person to begin identifying with genderfluidity)
3) Deemed illegitimate by another part of their community (i.e., the wider world that makes this person feel like they need to remain closeted).

- Gender roles are integrated with all other aspects of identity. In other words, ethnicity, religion, race, class, disability, body size, etc. are each fused with our assigned sex at birth to determine whether or not we are performing our gender role legitimately. Excluding certain groups of people from ever legitimately performing a gender role, and therefore from receiving the associated benefits of status and safety, becomes a tool for dehumanization (for a discussion of how this "de-gendering" has occurred for Black women because of White supremacist colonization, see Spillers, 1987).
- Mainstream western and westernized cultures structure their gender roles into a binary. Everyone is assigned a sex, either male or female, at birth. These sexes correspond to a specific gender role that every individual is supposed to fulfill through "appropriate" gender expression. Through a *binarist* lens, gender roles are viewed as being biologically-based, immutable, and complementary opposites; therefore, everyone is expected to either be a boy/man who was assigned male at birth, is masculine, and is heterosexual, or to be a girl/woman who was assigned female at birth, is feminine, and is heterosexual. Mixing and matching these characteristics is generally not allowed, although individuals of

higher overall privilege may have more leeway to break gender expectations without receiving punishment.

  - By definition, queer, transgender (including nonbinary and genderfluid), and gender nonconforming people fail to correctly perform the gender (role) they were assigned at birth. Transphobia, homophobia, and sexism act as the punishment for this failure. Genderfluid experiences and nonbinary identities are erased because there are no legitimate nonbinary/fluid gender roles within the binary gender system.
  - Other cultures can have different gender roles, which may or may not be organized into a binary, and which have different expectations for what qualifies as a legitimate gender expression (for examples, see Richards et al., 2017). Destroying these alternative gender roles becomes a priority of colonization. Subcultures can also create their own gender roles but those alternative roles will often be erased/punished outside of the subcultural space; for example, "butch" is not a gender role recognized as legitimate in mainstream western contemporary culture, but it is recognized in queer culture. Gender roles within a culture can also change over time; for example, gender roles in Victorian-era England were different than western gender roles today, although they were still organized into a binary and are related to contemporary western gender roles.

- *Patriarchy* organizes the gender roles of men and women into a hierarchy in which *legitimate* men (White, wealthy, cishet, not disabled) are endowed with power over

everyone else (e.g., cisgender women, all queer people, poor men, men of color). Angela Davis (1998, pg. 158) explains

> male supremacy functions to secure the authority of the ruling class. However, it should be recognized that, while this ruling class is definitely white and is definitely male, only a tiny minority of white males possess the material qualifications for membership in it.

That said, one does not need to be a member of the ruling class to oppress others. Davis (1998, pg. 135) gives the following example:

> That working-class women are even more intensely exploited than their men increases their vulnerability to rape… Working-class men, whatever their color, can be motivated to rape by the belief that their maleness has accorded them the privilege of dominating women. Yet since they have no guarantee of immunity from prosecution – unless it is a white man who rapes a woman of color – the incentive is not nearly as powerful as it is for the men of the capitalist class. When working-class men accept the invitation to rape, extended through the ideology of male supremacy, they are accepting a bribe, an illusory compensation for powerlessness.

Hegemonic masculinity is a term that can be used to describe

> the most dominant and most socially prized form of masculinity available to men. The status of hegemonic masculinity distinguishes it from and sets it above other forms of gender identities that do not match up to this dominant ideal. For example, an alternative form of masculinity is one [that] does not meet the

expectations of the hegemonic form… but which does not present any challenge to that identity; it is thereby viewed as complicit in the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity and as benefitting from that complicity. Other forms of masculinities, however, differ markedly from the hegemonic ideal and are either marginalized or subordinated to the hegemonic version. Hegemonic masculinity thus symbolizes and enacts power over other masculine identities as well as over [anyone who is not a man]. It constitutes the most socially valued form of masculinity to which individual men can aspire, notwithstanding that it does not necessarily reflect the lived identities of many, or indeed of any, individual men. (McVitte et al., 2017)

- *Gender schema* is how someone thinks gender is supposed to work as an abstract concept.
    - People need to fit their own gender embodiment within their gender schema, but a gender schema is much broader than the individual. Based on their gender schema, an individual will judge their own and other people's gender performances for (il)legitimacy.
    - Gender schemas do not form in a vacuum; they are built in reaction to what one has internalized about the gender roles available to them within their cultural context. This can include forming a gender schema that challenges the gender expectations of the society that they live in, but even an alternative gender narrative will still be constrained by societal gender expectations to some extent. In their interview, V explained how this can influence nonbinary people's experiences, saying "there seems to be this cultural idea that anything outside of

maleness or femaleness and the identity and expression of those things is just a third gender and a third expression when it's really this whole spectrum with a whole lot of freedom."

- Assigned Gender at Birth (AGAB)/Assigned Sex at Birth (ASAB): A phrasing used to draw attention to the fact that sex is a socially constructed gender schema that can have oppressive effects.
    - Although the body parts that any individual person has are material, the specific grouping of certain bodily traits into "male" and "female" is a social construction, just like grouping certain animals into a certain genus is a social construction. Social constructions are social tools, and so ideally they function as useful ways to understand the world without hurting people. In this spirit, our understanding of sex needs to become flexible enough to include trans and intersex people.
    - There is no more "realness" to sex than there is to gender. There is no way to know someone's gender without asking them. A person's gender or their understanding of their gender may change over time. Likewise, an individual's sex may change (such as when a trans person begins hormone replacement therapy and so no longer fits within society's expectations for the physicality of someone with their assigned sex) and an individual's understanding of their sex may change (such as when an intersex person finds out that they have different chromosomes than they had previously assumed).
    - Related terms include *assigned female at birth* (AFAB) and *assigned male at birth* (AMAB).

Chapter 6: Mind the Gaps (The Violences of Invisibility)

When we start to unpack cisnormativity, we see that it is grounded in *epistemic injustice*, which are injustices related to knowledge and understanding (Fricker, 2007). Epistemic injustice seeks to ignore, erase, and undermine ways of knowing (and by extension, ways of being) that do not conform to societal expectations. There are two main types of epistemic injustices, hermeneutic injustice and testimonial injustice, which combine to make transgender experiences in general, and genderfluidity in particular, illegible.

Hermeneutic injustice occurs when "a person has no way to describe their experience because the conceptual frame doesn't exist yet due to their stigmatized or disempowered identity" (Richards et al., 2017, pg. 41). Alternatively, the conceptual frame may exist, but be forcibly hidden. The gender development of trans people can be defined by hermeneutic injustice. For example, Bug described how simple lack of information made them more vulnerable to transphobia and patient abuse by their childhood therapist:

> **Bug:** I honestly feel like just seeing it in media growing up would've made me realize this so much sooner. I'm a library assistant right now and I work at a public library and I see new books coming in all the time that talk about these topics so openly in children's books, picture books. And I know for a fact if I saw that as a kid, I would've immediately [identified as trans]. That's why I literally told my mom "I will never grow boobs," because I don't even want them and I can *not* have them? That's an option? So [much] of [the difficulty of exploring genderfluidity] is just not knowing what's possible, because you're so young and I feel like I would much rather educate children on everything that's possible and let them come to their own conclusions than shelter them from these

concepts as if they're too young to understand it. Yet they shove heteronormativity down your throat since you're born…

I feel like if I knew and then I was able to tell my parents… I wouldn't have gone through lowkey conversion therapy at 17… at the time, my dad was unemployed, which meant we didn't have health insurance, but I felt like I really needed to see a therapist. I had a lot of mental health issues and undiagnosed autism going on and gender dysphoria, just a lot going on. And I felt like I really needed to see someone. And in the area, what we could find is, we had more accessibility to Christian-based therapists in our area who typically tended to offer sliding scales for people who had low income like us. So we had low income and we didn't have health insurance, so we said, okay, we'll go here.

And I knew that they were a Christian-based thing, but I didn't think it was going to be an issue because it's a medical setting, so we shouldn't be forcing faith into these things, in my opinion. But apparently I was wrong about that. So I started seeing a therapist… and she was, incidentally, the therapist that I went to the longest… it was one of those moments in my life where I didn't have a strong in-person trans community. So I was a big pushover and I went to her and I said, "This is my name, these are my pronouns." And she said, "I'm not going to call you that." Basically, because she never called me that, she never used the right pronouns and she constantly would be like "you're a woman and this and that" kind of BS.

So I took that. I took that all in… And I was a minor too, to boot, so definitely didn't have enough experience to stand up for myself yet. As a therapist, when it came to my mental health outside of gender and everything, she was great. I mean she provided, she was

> good at listening, she provided good advice I feel like, and that's why I kept going to her. But when we would talk about my gender and my sexual trauma a little bit… she had a very Christian perspective on gender and being transgender and being gay even. And when I would bring up these topics, she'd really do her best to convince me that being trans was not really what I was experiencing…
>
> And being that I was 17 when I was hearing these things, I was very impressionable. This is a medical professional telling me this… she had the credentials and so I thought… maybe she's right and maybe I'm simply confused…
>
> I wish I never experienced that because that was the start of me seeing transgender as something of a curse, [rather] than something that is natural and fine and okay and should be celebrated just like anything else.

We can also see the impacts of testimonial injustice in Bug's story when their therapist refused to acknowledge their trans identity. Specifically, testimonial injustice occurs when "prejudice causes a person to be perceived as… non-credible in their capacity as an informant" (Richards et al., 2017, pg. 41). When hermeneutic injustice fails and a marginalized person gains access to or creates a conceptual frame to describe their experience, testimonial injustice attempts to limit the influence and capacity of the marginalized person in order to protect the oppressive status quo. For example, Ollie described how even after they knew they wanted to transition, their family attempted to stop them, under the auspice that Ollie couldn't "really" be trans:

> **Ollie:** …when I was a kid, it's not like I had a lot of power or authority. And my family's not a family that you can be so outside of the mold and talk back to your parents, like "No, you're wrong." That's not something that you do. So you just have to deal with and

> experience having to be uncomfortable in a space that you're supposed to feel very secure.
>
> And [in] my family, kids don't have any authority and they don't have any knowledge about their own experiences… And so it's just like I didn't have that space to claim my own experience. And I had to carve that out for myself again and again and again. When I decided I was going to get top surgery and my family was like, "Who's going to pay for it?" And I'm like, "I'm going to go start a GoFundMe," the[y] push[ed]back like, "How fast can we get you off this insurance?" [I responded,] "Not fast enough for me to not have the surgery."

Importantly, transphobia does not act on its own in enforcing epistemic injustice. In Bug and Ollie's stories we see the simultaneous impacts of ageism (e.g., children are too young to know about transness or to decide to transition), as well as classism and ableism (e.g., medical care is not guaranteed but instead is gatekept by ability to pay).

Bug and Ollie are both people of color, and so racism and White supremacy also deepened their experiences of epistemic injustice, because trans expression, especially when it is attempting to assimilate into cisgender norms, is often conflated with (and treated as the property of) Whiteness. Bug gave an example of how typical gender norms are defined by Whiteness:

> **Bug:** There was this one post that existed in Tumblr many years ago… it was basically this master post of *How to truly Pass as a Man*. [The post was like,] "We're going to be as blunt as possible. We're going to just tell you how it is. Don't wear baggy shirts, don't do this." Just stupid stuff. And one of them was, if you have curly hair, basically don't. I have naturally curly hair, and apparently naturally curly hair is way too feminine. It's a

> dead giveaway. And I'm like, do you know how many people of color have curly hair, kinky hair, whatever? Plenty. You are telling me I need to relax my hair or straighten it forever because it's not masculine? It's just things like that where they just don't think about, how does this affect someone who's not White? It's really weird.

Just like when Bug was told by their therapist that they needed to internalize transphobia in order to access mental health care, this experience with trans "community" told Bug they needed to internalize racism in order to be accepted as masculine. Similarly, Ollie reflected on how the erasure of nonbinary identities combined with a lack of representation of trans people of color to make it more difficult for them to transition:

> **Ollie:** …when I was younger… I was on Tumblr, and it was the first time I had ever seen… someone who had top surgery. It was this White boy. And I was like, "Oh my God, you can just get your tits cut off, dude. That's crazy." And I was probably in middle school and I was like, "Oh my God, that would be... I understand, man. I would do it." I was definitely like, "Yeah, I would 10 out of 10 do that."
>
> …And the word transgender, it was something that was in my vocabulary after that, because I had ended up in queer spaces because I was like, "I like women." But at that point, transgender was only male to female, or only female to male. And I was like, "Okay, well, I don't want tits," and that's true. But when people are asking, "But do you want to be a boy?" And I'm like, "Well, no." And so, it's a complicated experience to have, especially because there was no broad language about it. It was pretty much just like you're one or the other, either way. So that's kind of where I was at. I was existing as

> the most angrily-boyish girl you could have in middle school and high school. And that's what I had. That was my experience…
>
> So like I said, the first experiences that I had that I was like, "Oh my god, this guy cut his tits off," this was the [White twink]… I never got to see anyone who looked like I did. And even - I think the website is Trans Bucket or something, with all of the photos - even there I was pressed to find photos that could look like my body might look [as a Black nonbinary person]. And it was only when I was nearing my top surgery that I was able to find groups and things like that that I could see and then also take part in sharing my own experience, my own healing after top surgery so that people who do look like me could have something to see and have any sort of idea of what that might be like for them.

Here Ollie's lack of access to Black trans representation made it difficult for them to access needed medical information.

In both Ollie's and Bug's stories, we can begin to conceptualize the harms of epistemic injustices and the importance of representation as resistance to epistemic injustice more deeply. Representation is often discussed in terms of the importance of minoritized people getting to see other people like themselves. The idea here is that representation opens up options, and allows minoritized people to feel less alone. While this is accurate, I think it's a rather shallow understanding of why representation matters. In Bug and Ollie's narratives, both Bug and Ollie came to an understanding of themselves as trans despite having almost no direct representation of trans people in general, much less of genderfluid people of color in particular. Instead, Ollie and Bug's stories demonstrate that Whiteness determines who gets to be accepted as trans, and who is protected within the trans community and by trans advocacy efforts. When we talk about

trans representation, it's not just about feeling good about ourselves; it's about knowing ourselves well enough to keep ourselves safe, and knowing our community well enough to act in real solidarity with each other.

Over the course of the next three chapters, I want to talk about three different areas that are often invisibilized in mainstream discussions of transness: the limitations of agency in gender presentation, particularly as related to intersections between transphobia and misogyny; intersections between transness and Whiteness, including how White supremacy is fundamentally anti-trans; and ways that genderfluid people of color survive colonialism. I think genderfluidity and the ways that it muddies boundaries gives us a particularly strong base to explore these erasures in how we discuss transness more broadly.

Chapter 7: Play Your Part (The Limits of Agency)

At times in their interviews, my participants described their genderfluidity in terms of taking agency over their gender; however, the pervasive power of cisnormativity acts as a limiting force upon this agency. Genderfluidity defies the binarist expectations that we are used to imposing upon gender, including our expectations for what certain gendered language, presentation, and experiences mean. Genderfluid people have to find ways to survive the gendered expectations of the society we live in. This has important implications for how we discuss privilege and oppression in relation to transness, especially as it relates to *identity management*, which refers to modifying behavior and physical presentation in order to manage how other people perceive you.

For the people I interviewed, identity management occurred in reaction to unsafe or unaccepting environments. It can involve remaining closeted or living stealth and passing as a (cisgender) man or a woman:

> **Rennan:** …in the town that I'm living in now, it's a little bit smaller and I've sort of learned to keep things more simple. So I really just, I don't hide things, really, usually. But I'm not… out as really anything. I pass as a guy completely. And I, for the most part, act pretty masculine and naturally so. So I think to the average person, I just identify as a man. To someone who knows a little more about me or just hit the right buttons and got me to say something or they picked up on it, I'm a trans guy. My genderfluidity really only comes into mention with people I'm very close to because it is less ... It's more out there. And I think I have reigned in myself a little bit. And so it's one of the ... I've got layers. It's like man, trans man, genderfluid.

Identity management can also include more subtle modifications to one's presentation:

> **Oliver:** …the real safety comes from my personal security. So feeling like it's okay for me to explore my identity. It's okay for me to express gender in fluid ways… any heteronormative or cisnormative space just immediately shuts that down because I don't even want to broach the topic. And it's not that I'm closeted but in those situations I just don't... When I speak about my relationships, it's much more amenable to norms that cis-het people start with so that they're more receptive and respectful in regards to it. So I don't lie, but I adapt my language and what I'm sharing to the audience that I'm sharing it with, for sure.

Interviewees often shared frustrations about how cisgender people try to force genderfluidity into the gender binary, which can manifest in the fact that cisgender people often don't know how to "read" trans people's gender presentations:

> **Ladybug:** …there's also just times where people will look at me and be like, "So what are you?" Not necessarily in a bad way, but it makes me laugh and say, "Well, how do you think I am?"

Although many participants enjoyed this aspect of messing with people's conceptualizations of gender, it could also cause stress when participants had to find a way to make cisgender people comfortable with gender ambiguity. To reduce the impact of this stressor in their day-to-day life, some interviewees avoided using the term "genderfluid" in most spaces, even though they felt that the term accurately captures their experiences:

Tome: I don't often use the term genderfluid or genderflux to describe it. I don't even really know why. But definitely the way I experience gender shifts over time. Because it never really solidly falls into a binary gender, at the very least not in entirety, I'll usually just leave it at I'm nonbinary, I'm transfeminine, I'm trans, any of that language… Because a lot of times, the way my gender fluctuates doesn't necessarily affect how I'm engaging with society, how I'm presenting. It's very much an internal experience that doesn't necessarily need externalizing. I also feel especially... I don't want to have to sit there and get into the weeds… [with] cis people about the more intricate aspects of my gender, or even really my genderfluidity, just because it's a whole other set of things I have to get into with them. They struggle enough to understand binary trans people a lot of the time that I'm like, "I'm going to blow your mind. I don't have the time or energy for this."

…There are definitely some people - and I feel like a lot of cis-het allies fit into this - they don't see me and think, "That's a nonbinary person." They think, "Oh, that's a man who says that they're nonbinary, or a woman who says that they're nonbinary." There are some cis people where it's like when they slip up, you can tell it's because they fundamentally don't conceive of you as anything other than a man or a woman. Now I've hit this really weird spot in my transition where some people will think of me as a man, and some people will think of me as a woman, which is really funny at work. We'll have a couple come through or whatever, making a drink, and one of them tries to call me sir. The other one tries to call me ma'am. They look at each other, and they go, "Oh, shit. I'm the one who fucked up," and then they swap. There's something a little affirming about

> that. So you could say I'm getting funky with it. I'm a little more ambiguous. That's kind of fun.

Because of cisnormativity, transgender people are expected socially to "prove" their genders in a way that cisgender people are not; cis-ness is accepted as legitimate by default, whereas transness is assumed to be illegitimate unless proven otherwise. This gives any random cisgender person a degree of regulatory power over any given transgender person. By extension, the fact that transness (and genderfluidity in particular) is so illegible to most cisgender people, affects how transphobia impacts different trans bodies, and not always in predictable ways. Whether or not someone "passes" or is able to stay closeted is based entirely upon the perception of others, most of whom will be cisgender in any given space:

> **Charlie:** I could totally be wrong, and this is my perception of individuals a little bit more broadly, [but] it's much easier for people to wrap their heads around genderfluidity in a transmasculine context. And by people, I mean like the uncle you're going to fight at Thanksgiving. Because I mean, they are not affirming, because they're going to perceive that person as a tomboy. But conceptually they can wrap their head around this idea of androgyny. Whereas I think transfeminine people are [seen as being] very rare; they're trans women… So it's [a] forced binary. And so that's been my experience [as a transfeminine person]…

Here Charlie describes how transfeminine nonbinary people get assumed to be trans women by default. Charlie is discussing one of the impacts of *transmisogyny*, a unique intersection of transphobia and misogyny that is leveraged against transfeminine people. Julia Serano (2007), who coined the term, wrote:

> While all people who fall under the transgender umbrella potentially face social stigma for transgressing gender norms, those on the male-to-female (MTF) or trans female/feminine (TF) spectrum generally receive the overwhelming majority of societal fascination, consternation and demonization. In contrast, those on the female-to-male (FTM) or trans male/masculine (TM) spectrum have until very recently remained largely invisible and under-theorized. This disparity in attention suggests that individuals on the trans female/feminine spectrum are culturally marked, not for failing to conform to gender norms per se, but because of the specific direction of their gender transgression—that is, because of their feminine gender expression and/or their female gender identities. Thus, the marginalization of trans female/feminine spectrum people is not merely a result of transphobia, but is better described as trans-misogyny. Trans-misogyny is steeped in the assumption that femaleness and femininity are inferior to and exist primarily for the benefit of, maleness and masculinity. (pg.

Building on the concept of transmisogyny, what can we learn about the mechanisms of transphobia if we spend some time thinking about "invisible and under-theorized" transmasculine experiences, especially as they pertain to genderfluid people? Because, when we start looking at the experiences of trans people who were labeled "tomboys" as children, it becomes clear that we heavily police tomboys. In fact, part of the reason the term "tomboy" exists is in order to control that sort of behavior in girls (and in people who are supposed to be girls); you are allowed to be a tomboy until maybe puberty, at which point, it's time to "woman up:"

> **Emily:** When I was in early elementary school, I wore dresses, I wore pink all the time. And then I started a [makes air quotes] "tomboy phase." And so for a long time, I wore basketball shorts… and my mom didn't like my basketball shorts. And she used to give me so much grief about it. Both of my parents did and they were both just like, "when are you going to stop wearing basketball shorts?"…that was a point of conflict for us… I just feel like that's inherently a little bit tied to the gender thing because I don't know, all the boys I went to school with also got to wear essentially that. So I think there's a little bit of gender policing going on way back in middle school… I don't think it's really been a topic that we've [Emily and their mom] talked about much… I think there's just so much all the time in my life that I pushed the whole gender [thing] onto the back burner.

At the time of the interview, Emily was questioning whether or not they might be genderfluid, and the pervasive policing of their gender (and of how and when someone might change their gender) in combination with their experiences as a transracial adoptee and as a person with a disability made it more challenging for them to explore and find peace with their gender:

> **Emily:** I feel like it's just an extra thing. And I think throughout my life, I've just tried to not... be different growing up because I grew up in a White family, in a White community, in a small conservative Christian, predominantly-White town in rural Nebraska.
>
> So I have hearing loss, I had hearing aids when I was younger. I refused to wear them for a long time, even though the school was like, “She's going to fail out, she's not going to graduate high school.” So that was something I refused. I couldn't change that I was Asian and I looked Asian. I couldn't change my physical appearance. And I feel like I felt

more comfortable identifying as a queer woman because not everyone knows just based on looking at me… So I think just growing up, my point is that I've been different in a lot of ways. I'm part of the marginalized group in a lot of ways… it just feels like "Emily's already a queer Asian adoptee woman… with a disability." So there were just so many things, where I'm like, do I really need to add on one more thing if it doesn't really feel like... If it's going to be a thing and it's going to require people to make a change or reconceptualize me? I don't know. Is it really how I feel? I don't know…

[I wish I could] confide in someone and not worry about it spreading to other people. And I think what would feel most comfortable is if I had someone that I could talk to about this and not worry that, "Okay, I've said this. Now I can't take it back and I can't really change my mind," because it just feels like once I put it out there, that I'm questioning my gender identity, then I can't really retract that… I just feel so much pressure to identify, come out as one way, and then stick to that.

And so… the whole thing with genderfluidity, is you don't have to. But then I think there's a lot of confusion more-broadly in society with [genderfluidity]... my dad is a professor and he was like, "One of my students let me know that… it depends on the day, whether they want to be called they/them, she/her, or he/him." And I think there's a little bit of, he's just like, "Yeah, I'll do that and I'll be as respectful as possible but also how does that happen?" Or like, "What?" So I think there's less of an understanding of genderfluidity… and I think there's this assumption… that [genderfluid people are] confused.

For Emily, the compounding nature of marginalization, combined with lack of understanding of genderfluidity in their community, and the pressure to not "change your mind" about your identity (an inherently anti-fluid component of cisnormativity) meant that they did not feel that they could explore genderfluid embodiment publicly. Emily's experience doesn't look anything like freedom of expression. I'm not even really willing to call their situation "safe."

Interlocking Systems of Oppression

The experience of being fundamentally unsafe to explore gender, outside of the impacts of transphobia, wasn't just true for Emily. For example, Pear talked about how as a trans person of color, no matter how they express their gender, they are not taken seriously by White people, including White LGBT people. In fact, they discussed preferring de-gendered spaces over LGBT spaces at their predominantly-White university because the de-gendered spaces were actually more affirming for them:

> **Pear:** …I go to a [predominantly White institution for college] and everyone in the LGBT Student Association is White… it's really weird when I go into predominantly-White spaces, I wear clothes that are very gendered because I'm not even going to try.
>
> It comes down to the smallest thing, oh, I don't have a piercing or oh, I don't have a tattoo. And they'll make you know you're excluded and that you're not a part of it. And I've seen people get accepted with different pronouns and that is something that's not extended to me. I still keep getting misgendered because for whatever reason. I'm not sure.

> But when I am in other spaces or in class, I feel more comfortable expressing myself however I want to because I know that I don't have to have that social interaction because a class is more of, I guess, a liminal space. It's like everyone's there but no one has to track with each other… And that is a space where a faculty's leading that… interaction is not an expectation. And that's where I feel most comfortable because I feel that there's something else that people are focusing on because once the focus is on me, I will not be granted that space in the community.

Disability can interrupt one's ability to explore and express their gender. Disability is othering in and of itself, and like Emily, some disabled trans people feel like they cannot add on another reason to other them by being openly trans. Furthermore, exploring one's gender takes time and energy, which disabled people often have in limited stores because the nature of being disabled requires its own time and energy:

> **Crow:** somebody catching and helping me through my depression as a teenager [could have made exploring my gender easier] because I think a lot of myself was lost in that depression. So if I had the context to explore that more younger, I think I… would've had a much better... quality of life now if that was caught sooner. And I think I would've understood my gender sooner and been more comfortable with it, and probably even came out to my family a long time ago if it weren't for that depression in high school.

Other disabled trans people are limited in their self-expression by physical pain or sensory differences:

> **Tome:** As far as chronic pain and disability, I wouldn't say that it necessarily impacts my gender, but it certainly impacts the way I work, the way that that's expressed, the way that

> I engage with people around me. But that's a little harder to pin down, especially because chronic back pain and general joint hypermobility, they are very much invisible a lot of times. So it's not something that people necessarily see outside of... Sometimes I would like to go out in a pair of heels because I think it'd be fun and it would... It feels very affirming for where my gender's at, but I probably shouldn't because if I'm not doing things to keep my joints strong and healthy, I'll probably break a leg.

Not all types of gender expression are equally accessible:

> **Julian:** Because of [my] chronic [health] condition, there's only so much that I can do with my body. I would love to do more weight lifting and more with testosterone and having that opportunity to really use it to build muscle and to be that hyper-masculine bodied person. Part of me will go to the gym and see guys who are doing that, really pumping iron or whatever and I'm like, "Ah, I wish. I really want to do that. I really want to be that." But that just never going to happen for me.
>
> And so there are things like that that are frustrating or that I feel like are just limitations that I have to deal with. And there have definitely been times in my life where I'm mad at my body for all the gender confusion, for the mental health stuff with depression and anxiety, that preventing me from doing things I want to do. And then my body preventing me from doing things I want to do just physically. I can get mad or frustrated with myself, or with my body… for that reason.

Similar to physical disabilities, body size can limit which gender expressions are available to an individual. Currently, all legitimized gender expressions in the United States (and most of the world) are defined by thinness. The denigration of fatness is based in White supremacy and the

attempt of White people, and especially of White women, to disassociate themselves from Blackness (you can read *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* by Sabrina Strings for a full exploration of this topic; Dr. Strings also has discussed her work on a number of podcasts, listed on her author website, if that's more your thing). Furthermore, fatness has been medicalized to the point where ableism is directed towards people with larger bodies, including the ideology that being "healthy" is a sign of moral superiority. For trans people with larger bodies, this can close-off many options for expressing their gender in ways that will be read as socially legitimate. Linda discussed their struggles with navigating this fraught space:

> **Linda:** I think my weight, there are times that I feel disabled with my weight and limited by ... I don't want to say limited by my weight because that feels like a medical model and that I don't think is helpful. But I do think that there are pieces about my weight and my size that are unhealthy. I don't know how to frame that because it feels gross. But I also think part of it is objective and real, and society fucking sucks.
>
> So a year and a half ago I had gastric bypass surgery and lost 150 pounds and that's where I am today. And I still identify as fat. And so I think the intersection of fatness and if we're thinking through a disability like obesity, but that feels scientific and medical, and what my body allows me to do and what I'm able to do with that, I think that's an intersection. But it's always gray to me as to whether or not I feel like that's a disability. So the ways that intersects, I think most is through clothing choices. That clothes that are made for people my size a year and a half ago were super limiting and made for my body currently are also limiting. And that absolutely impacts how I… communicate or represent how I feel.

We can see in the stories of Emily, Pear, Oliver, Tome, and Linda that gender presentation is not always an expression of agency. There is always a need to consider how a person's gender might interact with other aspects of their identity.

"Sticky" Femininity and Interactions between Transphobia and Misogyny

The genderfluid people I spoke to who had been assigned female at birth consistently talked about how difficult it could be to separate themselves from womanhood. People assigned female at birth do not get to escape misogyny, regardless of their gender identity:

> **Hue:** I… went to the doctor and I was like, "I feel really dizzy and I feel lightheaded some parts of the day." And they were like, "Okay, well what makes it better?" And I was like, "Sometimes if I eat meat, it makes me feel better." And they're like, "Okay, then just do that." And those are anemia symptoms. I might have been anemic at that time, but no one checked in about it. So even without a gender component, actually no, that is a gender component. Being a woman, being seen as a woman. This is why... Sometimes I will literally just say "as a woman," because although I don't identify as a binary woman, people view me that way and people treat me that way constantly all the time. Wherever I go I get "she/her'd" everywhere ever. If I ever get a "sir," if someone calls me "sir," I will be dancing around for the entire rest of the day. It's so exciting because it's so rare. So genderfluidity isn't even a part of the conversation. It's just being a woman, being seen as a woman, being a female person with any doctor has just been enough where it's like I can't even think about transness. That is the least of my problems at this point. Because even just what they perceive as a cis woman coming in to get healthcare and not giving it is like, I cannot imagine adding anything else to that.

In interview after interview, femininity and womanhood were sticky; transmasculine people are marked by their "femaleness" just as much as transfeminine people are, but I think this marking functions differently. *Transmisogyny* uses transphobia to do misogyny, telling transfeminine people, "These are the boundaries of womanhood and you will never properly fit within them." The goal of transmisogyny, like all misogyny, is to regulate the meaning of womanhood so that it exists only within the bounds of patriarchy, in a form that is useful and pleasing to men of the ruling class. Transfemininity, by the nature of its transness, is a womanhood that exists for itself, even under the constraints of patriarchy, because patriarchy does not have any use for transfemininity. Therefore, transfemininity gets marked for destruction under patriarchy. In comparison, I would argue that transmasculine people are impacted by *misogynistic transphobia*, which I define as using misogyny in order to do transphobia. Misogynistic transphobia tells transmasculine people, "These are the boundaries of womanhood and you can never escape them." The goal of misogynistic transphobia, like all transphobia, is to maintain the logic of patriarchy, because if the people who were assigned womanhood don't have to be women, under what rationality were men entitled to power over any woman in the first place?

The only way for transmasculine people to get defined as anything other than a woman seems to be to divest from femininity completely:

> **Rennan:** [I don't want to] make someone think the wrong way about me…. I think people consider queerness to be a exclusively feminine trait. And they sort of ... I think being a little bit outside of the strict binary, you start to notice that people within it treat everything as gendered. And so things that are explicitly non-gendered get gendered, nonbinary people are considered feminine. And… even with my genderfluidity, part of

> the reason that I transitioned is the more masculine genders and the more nonbinary genders [happen] more frequent[ly for me] than feminine ones… And it's one of those things where it's like, when I'm more feminine, when I feel closer to female, I don't mind it as much. I don't mind being as out, I don't mind being as vocal. But when I'm a little more masculine, I want people to respect that. And for them to respect that, there has to be the absence of femininity… And there's degrees to this. There's certain things that you can get away with. I'm openly gay. But to be openly genderfluid is like, I don't know… It just, it feels like if I were to be open about genderfluidity, I would never be allowed to be a man.

In other words, to be seen as men, transmasculine people need to be willing to uphold the logic of patriarchy; however, this isn't a safe situation for transmascs, because under patriarchy, by the very nature of their sex assigned at birth, they are marked by femininity. Furthermore, under the structures of transmisogyny and misogynistic transphobia, nonbinary people and genderfluidity are never given any legitimacy at all: nonbinary people assigned male at birth are "fake women" (and thus are marked as deserving violence), and nonbinary people assigned female at birth are "noncompliant women" (and thus are marked as deserving violence).

Misogynistic transphobia can lead to significant harm, and in ways that we do not often study in our research about transphobia. By extension, these harms can sometimes get ignored in trans advocacy work. To give us an example of what I mean, I have chosen a story shared by Pear. Pear is originally from India and used to live with their sister in the USA while attending university:

Pear: My family's very much... I don't want to say that they would... They have the capacity to do a lot of bad things to people who are like me, including me. They don't know [my sister's husband] is transmasculine.

My sister's also kind of estranged from my family. The reason why me and my sister are estranged is entirely different, and has to do with my identity. With my family, I'm not out to them either... When I realized that I was not cisgender, I was like, "Okay, I need to cut this off right now." And with my sister, it was shocking how it developed [because she is affirming of her husband's gender].

I think it comes back to [my sister]… not understanding how genderfluidity works… A lot of, "You just pick who you are," has been thrown around. And when I told her that I wanted to start [hormone replacement therapy], but I don't want to identify as a man, she was like, "Oh, I can't have more testosterone in my life. I already have enough." I was like, "Hey, that's a great thing to hear. Thank you [sarcastic]."

...Last year I had an abortion, and it was awful. Hated it emotionally. And my sister was, God, just the worst. [She] went back to misgendering me... *I could see the switch from her seeing me… as someone who doesn't know what's happening to them, what's going on with them, to [her] being like, "You need to start acting like someone who has the capacity of being a mother"* [emphasis added].

And at this time, I was talking to my brother-in-law. And I was like, "Is this a thing? Are transmasculine people always at the risk of being pregnant?" And he was like, "Yes... There are ways you can stop that, but if you haven't taken those steps, that is something that's present. But that doesn't negate whatever you identify with."

> …And I found out about this when me and my partner were not together. We had just separated, because they were moving to a new city. And for the procedure to be conducted, my partner had to come back, because my sister refused to give me support. She left the house, and I don't have a car. So I was kind of stuck. And once my partner came down, and we figured things out, that was [last year]. So last year was when I cut off my family. Because I realized that the concept of [binary] gender's so embedded within them, everything I do is going to be critically looked at. And I could never just be me in their eyes…
>
> My sister did not allow me to come back to her house anymore. She was the only home I had [in the United States]. And during the pandemic where you could be sent back anytime, that's not a great feeling to have. So I have always constantly been on the brink of just being like, "Okay, I won't have a home."

When Pear initially came out as nonbinary, their sister infantilized them, and treated them as if they were confused about their identity. This is a form of transphobia based in an interconnected framework of misogynistic+ableist ideas; specifically, that women (and people who have been assigned womanhood) tend towards neuroticism, don't know their own minds, and therefore don't need to be taken seriously. This framework then gets used to make sure that trans people are barred from living publicly as trans, by denying gender recognition (and by extension, social legitimacy). This is violence. There is not a cisgender person hidden deep down inside every trans person that we can magically become at will. Even if we stay closeted our whole lives and never transition, we will still be trans. Transness chooses us:

> **Rennan:** [Cisnormativity] stopped me from understanding why I was the way I was.

> It didn't stop me from being the way that I was because I don't think any force on Earth could have stopped that with me. But it definitely stopped me from understanding why. It stopped me from having language and from basically knowing that I wasn't just bizarre, as a person. Because I would go on the playground and I would run out, "I'm Buzz Lightyear, I'm Spider-Man, I'm Kidagakash from Atlantis," all these... It's one of those things where it was like if anyone had the language for this. If anyone thought about it, two seconds, outside of the realm of Evangelical Christianity's idea of who someone is supposed to be and the life they're supposed to lead. If anyone had the language, used the language, anything like that, thought about it for more than two seconds, I was so obvious.
>
> But no one around me acknowledged it. I was just weird. No one acknowledged it, no one brought anything up to me, and I didn't have the means, the resources, or even the concept that anything was up, so I couldn't even think to look up the language for this. I just was like, "The label that I have is, 'Weird,' and that's the label I'm going to run with for everything that I got." …I was very, very lucky to be born with the personality that I have because it kept me from stopping myself from being myself. And I was still myself and everyone looked at me and they were like, "Oh. That's a girl because..." whatever. I wasn't that internally.

Of course trans people know this, but I think sometimes in our attempts to pick our battles (because there a lot to choose from), we let this truth get dropped. I have definitely made brash comments before along the lines of "I don't need you to validate my gender; I need you to not have power to fire me from my job because of my gender." But gender is social at its core. It's

not entirely social, body dysphoria is a thing, but the social aspect is foundational to gender and is a big part of why gender matters. V describes this tension between the reality of self-understanding and the necessity of social recognition and belonging for trans people:

> **V:** [As a community, we need to talk more] about options for transition and not having medical transition be the end all, be all… Even within the [trans] community, people base the validity of someone's transness off of either their plans to medically transition or whether they have medically transitioned. And if I medically transition, outside of [my] sensory [dislike] of having breasts, if I medically transition, it is for the approval of society. It is for the way that I will be treated in society. It's not for me, it's for me to survive society. And so the validity of my identity shouldn't be based on extrinsic reasons for transitioning. It should be, this is who I am as a person, I'm telling you, the end.

For myself, I don't need everybody to validate my gender, but if *nobody* else validates it, that just leaves me in the same situation I was in before I transitioned (you know, miserable). What would even be the point?

Going back to Pear's story, when Pear became pregnant, the tone of their sister's misogynistic transphobia changed. Suddenly, she did not see Pear's gender as innocuous silliness; it was a reason to deny Pear medical care and to deny them housing and to deny them free access to movement (both transportation and potentially their immigration status). This was an attempt to completely upend Pear's life in order to force them to not be trans, and the only reason it did not work was because Pear's ex-partner (who is trans) drove from hours away to help.

Importantly, Pear's sister behaved the way she did in spite of having a transmasculine husband. The difference is that her husband, in accordance with the demands of patriarchy, had divested himself from femininity. Despite being accepting of Pear's identity himself (to be clear, Pear only had positive experiences to share about their brother-in-law), he was unwilling to make himself "less of man" in the eyes of his wife or to threaten the peace in his marriage for the sake of protecting Pear. Put a pin in this idea because I'm going to explore it more in the next chapter.

Why This Matters (With Some Important Caveats and Complications)

To be clear, my point in writing this chapter is not to ask, "Which is worse: transmisogyny or misogynistic transphobia?" They are both shit. My point is that hypervisibility and invisibility are complementary strategies that patriarchy uses to eradicate transness. All trans people get treated as a threat in this system.

Furthermore, I am unsure that transphobia+misogyny always manifest in easily predictable ways based on one's sex assigned at birth. Invisibility and hypervisibility can impact all trans people. Like transmasculine people, *transfeminine people also question the logic of patriarchy* (by being people who were assigned manhood but who do not embody that position of power), and by extension, have their lived realities ignored or erased as society attempts to force them back into a legitimate masculinity. Like transfeminine people, *transmasculine people also challenge the patriarchal bounds of womanhood* (by exploring masculinity despite having been assigned womanhood, and further, exploring masculinity for reasons other than oppressing others); by extension, transmasculine people get viewed as predators and marked for destruction (the TERF manifesto *Irreversible Damage* by Abigail Shrier is a good example of this, although I definitely do not suggest that you read it).

When TERFs posit that transfeminine people must be transitioning in order to "invade women's spaces" and that transmasculine people must be transitioning to "escape misogyny," this shows that they cannot conceptualize gender as anything other than a hierarchy of oppression. Even spaces that attempt to be trans-inclusive can adopt a related version of this hierarchical understanding of gender by simplistically arguing that transfeminine people "give up" privilege in their transition and that transmasculine people "gain" privilege in their transition. Such limited understandings of gender fail to understand the nature of misogyny very well, as misogyny does not let go of any of its victims willingly; the idea that transmasculine people are not impacted by misogyny or are only impacted by misogyny in the same ways that cisgender women are, without any moderating impact from transphobia, does not accommodate the reality of transmasculine experiences.

Here we see a framework of gender privilege and oppression that treats being transgender as if it's the same as being cisgender but with extra steps. This is not an accurate conceptualization of transness, though, because transness, in all of its forms, asserts that gender can function as something other than hierarchy. A transfeminine person does not have masculine privilege, even before she transitions, in the way that a cisgender man does, because *a cisgender man never has to question the essential nature of his masculine privilege* in the ways that *a transfeminine person will*. Neither does a transmasculine person have masculine privilege in the way that a cisgender man does, because *a cisgender man will never experience the essential nature of his privilege being questioned by his society* in the ways that *a transmasculine person will*, even after he transitions and even if he generally passes as a man. This is especially true for

non-White, disabled, and nonbinary transmasculine people, who are often not allowed to disinvest from femininity, even if we want to (and importantly, many of us don't want to).

When we consider genderfluidity in particular, the terms "transmasculine" and "transfeminine" do not always neatly apply to genderfluid people. Like Ladybug and Tome near the beginning of this chapter, Charlie also experiences being gendered differently depending on their context:

> **Charlie:** I have very mixed feelings about wearing a mask during the pandemic. Not because people shouldn't be wearing a mask because everyone should be vaccinated and wearing a mask because people are dying, but it was this really interesting space of, if you can't see the bottom half of my face, I'm read much more often as a woman, which is very affirming.
>
> I do remember a really affirming experience… I was hanging out at a park and a little boy came up who was nine and I wasn't wearing a mask because this was before the pandemic and they just assumed I was a girl, which was incredibly affirming. Then, the parent came and they didn't really know what to do with me. I think they thought the child was misgendering me. That was a very affirming experience, having a child do it, I think. Now, that I wear a mask more often, I get misgendered but gendered correctly, frankly. Like, I get ma'am'ed a lot, which is super problematic, but also affirming.
>
> That ends up happening more often, which is really great. So masks are this kind of double positive in some way. Then, every once in a while, which is particularly fun and affirming, people think I am a trans man. They're like, you've gone all the way around and you're a man again. I'm like, I don't think you understand that this is really not

> harmful in this moment. I will be a trans man in this moment. That's a great experience for me. I think having more attention to me as an Asian person because racism during the pandemic, but also wearing a mask ended up in this weird [situation of], well, this person might assault me, but at least I am a woman in this harassment moment.

Charlie's joke that "at least I am a woman in this harassment moment" is basically peak trans humor. That someone might find a silver lining in being harassed - because at least they're getting gendered correctly - sounds ridiculous, except that it encapsulates one of the basic truths of transness: Even knowing that transition will likely open us to discrimination, transitioning also allows us the chance at a more livable life. For Charlie, who sometimes gets gendered as a trans woman and other times as a trans man, there likely isn't a neat distinction between transmisogyny and misogynistic transphobia. Their experience of stigma is going to be as fluid as their gender. The erasure of their gender identity is as violent as the harassment they receive for publicly embodying their gender as a person of color.

Speaking for myself, I don't love the term transmasculine for describing my own gender, because it implies that my transness moves only towards masculinity (and away from femininity), when my gender is fluid in all kinds of directions, many of which have nothing to do with masculinity at all. While I am glad for trans people who resonate with the terms transmasculine and transfeminine to have access to them, I am also uncomfortable with the ways that these terms have been made synonymous with assigned sex at birth, when the original purpose of the terms "transmasculine" and "transfeminine" was originally to highlight the identity of the trans person. I have used these terms in this paper for readability and because I'm trying to deal with how the world forces genderfluid people into binary gender, but I think it's

important that we do not lose sight of the fact that those binaries are not anywhere near sufficient to encompass the expansiveness of transness.

None of this is to say that trans people are paragons of feminist ideals; that's not how being a person works. Especially in efforts to protect ourselves, trans people can and do play into patriarchy. But I do think there is something special, even radical, in transness. A world where all trans people can live freely is a fundamentally different world than the world we live in now:

> **Hue:** I think that genderfluidity threatens… current conceptualizations of how gender is and how it works. I view a big disconnect within the trans community between more, what you could say, "traditional" trans people - you know, binary trans people who are gender conforming to American standards of male and female, specifically White femaleness and White maleness - versus people who view gender as an expansive thing for themselves, and there's a disconnect between… the things that we want to do with gender. Genderfluidity sort of threatens both [ideologies] because genderfluidity is saying that it's actually not one or the other. It's not a binary, it's also not a trinary of man, woman, nonbinary. And it's not easy to then figure out who's in your community and who's outside of your community… And I think that makes people really uncomfortable not really knowing how to place people or how to treat them based on what they perceive their identity to be. I think any identity that fluctuates or exists outside of easily understandable categories makes people really uncomfortable because a lot of people use those categories to understand themselves.

My hope in writing this chapter is for trans people to become better at recognizing the needs and experiences of ourselves and other members of our community. We need to be ready to fill the role of Pear's ex for each other, because there is no guarantee that anyone else will.

Furthermore, we deserve the chance to make sense of our own experiences, rather than having to find ways to disassociate from them:

> **Julian:** I feel like even in my day-to-day life, what is easiest for me is to come across as... I'm trying to figure out a way to say this. It's easiest for me to be as easy to understand as possible to other people. And that's something that is a privilege definitely… But the ability to be able to just adapt to how other people see me in order to get what I want is something that I do every day. There may be some pressure for me to conform my gender to be more in line with what's expected of me, but ultimately I feel like I'm doing that most of the time when I'm around cis people.
>
> When I'm around queer or trans people, I feel like I don't have to do that. I can be more... I don't need to be so guarded. I don't need to dumb myself down for other people to just treat me normally. And it was the same way before T[estosterone], I would lean into femininity or womanhood when I felt like I needed to or when I felt like it was advantageous for me. I feel like that hasn't changed very much.
>
> I think I've become so guarded that I've really told myself that it's fine and a lot of times will act like it's fine. But definitely... There are times when it is challenging, it is frustrating and it is difficult to go there when I don't... Especially if it's not on my terms. If it's on my terms, then I feel much more at peace with it. But if I'm leaning into a certain gender based on what I feel like I need to do in that moment and the agency's taken away

> from me, then it becomes a little bit of an icky feeling. But like I said, I feel so guarded about it that I'm just like "Whatever, that's just part of what I have to do."
>
> …It's confusing [in dating relationships]… it always kind of brings up, “Am I _____ enough?” “Am I masculine enough for this cis woman who...” I don't know. More so it's, “Am I a guy enough for this gay man?” is typically what insecurities that I have, because I don't identify as a trans man, and I don't necessarily feel like a man when I'm having sex with this cis man. So it's just weird. It's just weird and confusing, and I have insecurities come out around that.

Julian describes their ability to perform their gender so that they are “as easy to understand as possible” as being a privilege, but “passing” is clearly bad for Julian’s wellbeing overall, even if it confers some degree of partial protection from some kinds of violence. Most importantly, though, Julian is nonbinary. They can’t pass as their gender because there is no option to be nonbinary “quietly” in a binarist society:

> **Julian:** I guess the only thing I'll add is that there are times where, and I think this is related to genderfluidity, but when we're talking about the transition into having access to men's spaces and all of that stuff, I really do very much value and miss the camaraderie I had with women when I was seen as a woman. And I feel like I am the same person inside as I always was. And so it breaks my heart a little bit that even though that part of me is still there, I just have to relate to it in a different way. And there's really no way to fix that because if, let's say, I detransition and people see me as a woman, okay, well then I'm sacrificing a large masculine part of myself. It feels like no matter what, there's always a loss. And I don't necessarily feel like people are ever going to see me because

> either they see me as a man or as a woman and there's something that is missing in both cases.

Julian's choices are to be closeted to some degree or to be out as nonbinary. Therefore, in thinking through the violences of erasure and invisibility, I think we need to challenge the neatness of this conceptualization of passing as privilege. My question is, is Julian privileged because they can pass, or are they allowed to integrate into cis norms (even if at their own expense) because they are White? Let's talk about Whiteness and transness.

Chapter 8: Deconstructing Whiteness is Queer Activism

N.B. I wrote this as a White trans person for other White trans people as a kind of call-in. It's fundamentally about how Whiteness invades and compromises queer movements, so I hope people of color can find something useful here too, but given the nature of the topic, I want to make sure my perspective and my intended audience are made explicit.

I asked everyone I interviewed how they felt their race and ethnicity have impacted their experiences with gender. The White, non-Latinx people I spoke to recognized the importance of the question and why I asked, but didn't really have a way to answer for themselves. Instead, they saw the question as fundamentally being about people of color or about the types of harm that they, as a White person, do not experience. Here's an example of what I mean:

> **Linda:** So when I think about… my Whiteness, I think about my privilege. And when I think about my privilege, I think about the buffers that are put around me. And so that's inclusive of my gender... I know that my privilege and my Whiteness allows me more flexibility, or ability, or less scrutiny, or less bullshit, less violence, to understand my gender. Or to play with my gender or to express it in a way that society doesn't support. So I know I have more liberty in that. I can take more liberty in that.

Across interviews, White genderfluid people recognized that their Whiteness gave them a degree of privilege in exploring their gender:

> **V:** As a White person, I feel like I do get more social passes the way that I experience my gender than BIPOC [Black, indigenous, person of color] counterparts would… I have a

> lot more freedom I think as far as expressing myself and my gender. Even though I do face discrimination, I feel like it's not to the same degree.

This is where the discussion about race and gender stopped for most of the White people I interviewed. Gender in European-based cultures is centered upon and derived from Whiteness, but the White people I interviewed generally were not able to articulate what exactly that means for them, even if they intellectually understood the reality:

> **Crow:** I often recognize that my gender is very White, and I just... I don't know, I don't necessarily consider it a huge aspect of my gender, just that it is part of it. And I usually, because of... I do recognize where I have White privilege often and I'm able to contextualize that against my gender depending on how people perceive me. Because most of the time people do perceive me as a cis guy, just because that is the mask I wear at work, or wherever I am that needs to have the mask. So I do recognize that.
>
> And then when I... It usually doesn't come out until I'm watching some sort of media where there is a trans person who is not White, or talking with a trans person who's not White, because I feel like their experience with their race and gender is more important, because my race is not the one being discriminated against, just my gender. When for other people it's both, and that makes it so much harder. And so I often default to them when it's something that... When it's a discussion about race. If it's about gender exclusively, then I'll put in more to the conversation. But if it's race and gender, I default that to them more so I can learn better from other people.
>
> I think that's the most of it. Just the way that my race corresponds to my gender is that I default to people who are minorities in that demographic…

> And so I definitely relate very closely to LGBTQ concepts and ideas and those are very American and oftentimes very, in some spaces very White, in other spaces less so. But in most of those spaces that I have experienced, they've been very White. And so I recognize that. A lot of the queer faces that I see are White, and so I just recognize that my gender is probably very White because of that.

Like with Crow, White people's failure to wrestle with our Whiteness is often not malicious, even though it is harmful. It's hard to question the norms that make up your own being. We may even have good intentions in remaining quiet during conversations about race, out of a desire to avoid overstepping or over-speaking, but this is not sufficient if we want to act in solidarity with our trans siblings of color. Acknowledging that people of color bear the brunt of harm under White supremacy is fundamental, but there is a point at which acknowledging your White privilege stops being about accountability and instead becomes an excuse to avoid your own personal entanglements with White supremacy.

People of color notice how the White people they are in community with fail to think more deeply about race. For example, Hue, with some frustration, explained:

> **Hue:** …White people are not asked to think about how Whiteness intersects with their trans identity the same way that people of color are asked to think about that with their own race… I wish that in trans spaces Whiteness was also a factor in trans experience. Not just like Brownness or Blackness or whatever.

In this chapter, I want to make the intersection between Whiteness and transness more visible. How is a White trans person's experience with gender impacted by Whiteness? Furthermore, how does Whiteness (as an oppressive social construct, not a genetic phenotype) undermine trans

liberation for all trans people? Most importantly, is there anything White trans people can do about it?

Conceptualizing Whiteness as Ownership

In order to begin conceptualizing Whiteness, we need to start with its creation through European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade. From it's very inception, Whiteness was defined by ownership. Critical race theorist Cheryl Harris (2011) describes Whiteness as a property interest:

> Whiteness defined the legal status of a person as slave or free. White identity conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits and was jealously guarded as a valued possession, allowed only to those who met a strict standard of proof. Whiteness - the right to White identity as embraced by the law - is property if by property one means all of a person's legal rights.

The importance of viewing Whiteness as a property interest becomes clear when we consider that Western governing systems today, including the United States, are based in the political ideology of neoliberalism. At its core, neoliberalism endorses "an ideal of liberty founded on the sanctity of property" (Hartman, 1997, p. 122). Under a neoliberal system, individual rights are endowed through universal participation in a social contract which allows people to sell their property as they wish and to buy new property as they are able. Furthermore, the neoliberal social contract has a fundamental tie to capitalism because "the exercise of [property] rights inexorably yield capitalist economic arrangements, where capital is held by both capital owners

and workers" (Vallier, 2021).

Because property is a broad concept in neoliberalism – one not only can own land or clothing or food, but also people - neoliberalism provides the connecting thread between Whiteness and capitalism. Capitalism is an economic system in which:

> …the means of production (i.e., factories, tools, machines, raw materials, etc.) are organized by one or more business owners (capitalists). Capitalists then hire workers to operate the means of production in return for wages. Workers, however, do not have any claim on the means of production nor on the profits generated from their labor - these belong to the capitalists… Under capitalist production, the business owners (capitalists) retain ownership of the goods being produced. If a worker in a shoe factory were to take home a pair of shoes that they made, it would be [considered] theft. This concept is known as the alienation of workers from their labor (Liberto, 2023).

White civil society and neoliberal capitalism exist in a mutually-reaffirming relationship that only functions through worker exploitation. We can see an example of this connection in the trial of John Kimber, a captain of a British slave ship who was charged with murder in 1792 for killing two of the enslaved Black girls that he was transporting. Kimber was acquitted. In *Lose Your Mother,* Saidiya Hartman (2008) explains the logic of the British court's decision:

> Were two dead girls more important than the prosperity and commerce or Great Britain? Were the fools and idiots ranting about abolition blind? The fruits and majesty of the empire would be impossible without slavery. Prosperity had a price. There was no getting around it – death was the cost of the Africa trade… These scenes of violence present a picture of human nature not very amiable, but are frequently justifiable, and absolutely

> requisite; as without which no commerce… can exist. (p. 148-149)

The violence of the slave trade did not remain within the slave trade; it spilled over into every part of society, and must be "contextualized within a transatlantic capitalist system that traded information and strategies of labor management between the plantation and the factory" (Hartman, 1997, p. 138). In other words, slavery provided the proof positive of exactly how far neoliberal capitalism could exploit a person, the logical conclusion of equating rights with ownership.

In defining what it means to be enslaved, Whiteness also defined (and limited) the very nature of freedom itself (Hartman, 1997). Within neoliberalism, any free adult person is considered to own their body, but ownership remains fluid and dependent upon deference to White civil society. This means that people can lose ownership over their bodies.

The precarity of freedom under neoliberalism is evident everywhere. In the United States, for example, slavery is still legal as punishment for a crime. Instead of truly abolishing slavery, the 13th Amendment states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (U.S. Const. amend. XIII, § 1). The US prison-industrial complex has taken full advantage of this purposeful loophole. In her work as an ACLU lawyer, Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, describes

> …seeing rows of black men lined up against walls being frisked and handcuffed and arrested for extremely minor crimes, like loitering, or vagrancy, or possession of tiny amounts of marijuana, and then being hauled off to jail and saddled with criminal records

> that authorized legal discrimination against them for the rest of their lives. (Remnick, 2020)

In other words, an ownership-based approach to liberty means that all the state needs to do to subjugate a group that it finds undesirable or inconvenient (e.g., Black people, protestors, undocumented immigrants and people presumed to be immigrants based on their race, drug users, unhoused people) is to associate that group with criminality.

Turning people into criminals isn't the only approach neoliberalism uses to inherently constrain liberty. Again, neoliberalism treats rights as property that are earned based on one's adherence to the expectations of the state. Stacy Clifford Simplican (2015) explains in *The Capacity Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* that the neoliberal social contract is in fact a capacity contract, which requires one to be capable of "rationality" in order to qualify for full liberty under the law. John Locke, one of the fathers of liberalism (which provided the foundation for neoliberalism), argued that "birth does not bestow species membership. Instead the faculty of thinking separates the meaning of man from person" (Simplican, 2015, pg. 33). When rationality is imposed as one of the requirements to earn liberty, people with intellectual and neurodevelopmental disabilities can be refused basic freedoms under the auspices of custodianship. For example, Simplican describes the constraints placed on her autistic brother when he was moved into state-run institutional care:

> Like many other aging caregivers in the United States, my parents could no longer care for [my brother] in their own home… The facility [where he now lives] sits on the outskirts of town, and town residents refer to it as the "old state hospital" …at the same time my brother's life disappeared from the public sphere, I began to see the political and

> theoretical import of living and acting in public. The more time I spent in his new home —cut off from the community —the more I began to appreciate the radical nature of Charles having dinner in public. Charles's slow and deliberate counting of his Cokes took on new meaning, as my brother's new institutional guardians banned caffeine from his diet, despite his preference for soda. The laughter and fellowship between staff and people with disabilities that I observed around Charles [during disability affinity group meetings] echoed against the silence of my brother's new home, as staff members' tasks and paperwork left little time to interact socially. Like the behavior at many other group homes for people with severe intellectual disabilities, interactions between staff and residents centered on functional and instructional commands. Rather than taking part in spontaneous fun, staff spend much of their time filling out daily reports—as bureaucratic regulations seem more pressing than the emotional needs of residents. My brother's life thus made apparent the ways in which the personal is political, as his everyday practices — such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and being with other people — became measured, patrolled, and regimented. (pg. 119)

The ways that disabled people are treated demonstrate how neoliberalism conflates rationality with self-sufficiency. To be free, people are expected to take care of their own needs. The state assumes essentially no obligations to care for any individual. If someone is unable to take care of themself (either because they are disabled or a child), the nuclear family, as the only formally recognized social unit of care, is expected to fulfill those needs instead, allowing the dependent individual to be self-sufficient by proxy (i.e., not dependent upon the state/civil society). However, because the familial caretakers are fulfilling the requirement of self-sufficiency on

behalf of the dependent person, the family assumes most rights to agency on behalf of the dependent person, either through conservatorship, or just the basic fact that the dependent person must depend upon their family for their care because they have no other options. In the case of Simplican's brother, who cannot fulfill the obligation to be self-sufficient, the institution where he lives treats him as if he must not have any capability for agency at all (or at least none that they need to respect).

By no means is rationality an objective metric; instead it functions as a proxy for whatever is acceptable behavior according to Whiteness. We can see this connection in the treatment of Black people starting in the US Reconstruction period:

> …the issue was not simply whether ex-slaves would work but rather whether they could be transformed into a rational, docile, and productive working class… However incongruous and inconceivable, nearly three centuries of black servitude could not relieve the [United States'] anxiety about the productivity of labor or assuage the fear that the freed would be idle if not compelled to work… From the vantage point of abolitionists, policy makers, Freedmen's Bureau officials, and Northern entrepreneurs, the formerly enslaved needed to be trained as free laborers… Textbooks like *Advice to Freedmen, Friendly Counsels for Freedmen, Plain Counsels for Freedmen,* and *John Freedmen and His Family* aimed to instill rational ideals of material acquisition and social restraint… The lessons contained in these primers were basically a series of imperatives – be industrious, economical, useful, productive, chaste, kind, respectful to former masters, good Christians, and dutiful citizens. The full privileges of citizenship awaited those who realized the importance of proper conduct and applied the principles of good management

> to all aspects of their lives, from personal hygiene to household expenditures. (Hartman, 1997, pg. 127-129)

These expectations continue to impact Black people today through the imposition of respectability politics (i.e., the expectation that someone behave "appropriately" by assimilating into the majority culture before anyone has to take their political stance seriously), which is just another example of how the metric of rationality gets used to constrain liberty for marginalized people. Here we also see the imperatives of capitalism acting through the association between rationality, self-sufficiency, and being a good (exploitable) worker. It is not an accident that "inability to work" is the primary determinant of disability under neoliberal capitalism. It's not enough to say that something makes your life more painful or less enjoyable in order to qualify for accommodations. Quality of life is not relevant to the neoliberal capitalist state so much as worker productivity, without which, it cannot function. For this reason, the disabled person has to prove that their disability inhibits their productive capacity, at which point, the state will require the bare minimum accommodations be made to make the worker productive again. In cases where a necessary accommodation would actually disrupt typical system functioning, it is considered "unreasonable" under the Americans with Disabilities Act and is not mandated by law. In these instances, a disabled person might be able to receive support from the state through entitlement programs (e.g., Social Security) if they can prove an inability to work, but in return, their capacity to thrive will be purposefully maimed by the state (Puar, 2017). In order to qualify for most US social safety net programs, the recipient must remain in poverty; any degree of financial stability they achieved would disqualify them from government support (you can look up the income/asset requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid,

and Supplemental Security Income for some examples). In this way, the state maintains the bare illusion of a free and moral society, while also maintaining rationality and productivity as prerequisites for liberty (Puar, 2017).

Thus, neoliberalism constructs and organizes society like a perverse mathematical proof, wherein: Whiteness = rationality = good citizen = productive = not a criminal = free = ownership.

This equation creates constant elisions of meaning so that "Within the liberal [definition of human rights] owning easily [gives] way to being owned, sovereignty to fungibility, and abstract equality to subordination and exploitation" (Hartman, 1997, p.116). Under neoliberalism, you are only as free as you are wealthy enough (as you own enough) to make yourself because all rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, are based in ownership.

White supremacist neoliberal capitalism is most-immediately harmful to people of color because, by definition, they can never meet the "strict standard of proof" needed to own the property of Whiteness. That said, this isn't really a good system for anyone, including White people, because although Whiteness = free, it also has to equal everything else in the equation too, including ownership. The cost of failing to adequately perform ownership is social exclusion from the "White racial family" and from many of the privileges we associate with Whiteness (Ahmed, 2004).

What does performing ownership look like on a practical level for White trans people, though? Trans people run afoul of both expectations of rationality and criminality. As stated in previous chapters, our genders do not conform to civil society's expectations and so we are

labeled as crazy and/or as predators, and the law is absolutely willing to take away our rights to bodily autonomy, to public space, and to basic physical, mental, and emotional safety because of it. White trans people, however, also have inherited Whiteness, so what does that do to us? What are some examples of Whiteness coming through in our ideology and behavior, and what is the resulting harm for ourselves and our trans siblings of color? Fred Moten (2018) describes two components of Whiteness/ownership - consumption and containment - that I think can help White people connect our property interest in Whiteness to our own experiences and actions. Using this lens, I found that the White participants in my own research had more to say about Whiteness and how it impacts their lives:

> **Rennan:** I think a lot of the strain on [my relationship with my dad] is religious, political. And by extension, I know that the amount of respect that he has for me is only due to the fact that I'm not dead in a ditch yet. The fact that I have a job, I'm making money, I have an apartment, a cat, the fact that I am at least somewhat put together as an adult is the only reason he has the smallest shred of respect for me… *At the end of the day, that's what my family cares about is: Are you working within society and are you making enough money?* (emphasis added)

So let's unpack both consumption and containment, one at a time.

Consumption

Consumption is the core mechanism of survival under neoliberal capitalism. When rights are equivalent to ownership, the goal becomes to accumulate as much property as possible, no matter the consequences. There are few places where the violences of capitalism are more obvious than when we consider the ongoing housing crisis. Transgender people are more likely

than the general population to experience homelessness or housing insecurity (DeChants et al., 2021). Indeed, all of the genderfluid people I interviewed for this study had experienced either housing insecurity or an unsafe housing situation (where they were not immediately at risk of being forced into homelessness, but were living in substandard housing without basic utilities or were dependent upon a gender-disaffirming or abusive person for their housing). Further, the threat of unstable housing weighs on trans people. Julian explained:

> **Julian:** …even for those who haven't experienced direct housing discrimination, …the stories and experiences of those who have can still have an effect. Knowing that that is something that could happen because it's happened to people like you can take a toll, and minor housing concerns can spark major anxiety.

For this reason, trans homelessness is a common issue for LGBTQ advocacy nonprofits. Large, widely-recognized nonprofits like The National Center for Transgender Equality and the Human Rights Campaign treat trans people's struggles with access to safe, stable housing as issues of inclusion. They see transgender people as being failed by a discriminatory system and so they focus their homelessness prevention efforts on attempting to pass enumerated anti-discrimination policy for transgender people. The idea is if we can change this one thing, then the system will become fair for trans people.

When we actually consider the challenges that trans people face in accessing housing, however, it becomes clear just how inadequate this approach is:

> **V:** So, I lived with my mom, but my mom wasn't ever really home. So, I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' house, and every other weekend, I spent at my grandparents' house. I didn't really meet my dad until I was like seven. But then as we were starting to

have a relationship and I was starting to go to his house, then my mom got pregnant again. So, that stopped. She pulled it back a little bit. Then it was around that time I stopped seeing my grandparents as often as well.

But yeah. So, it wasn't super consistent. I moved a lot as a kid. Even though it was within the community, I changed houses pretty frequently. The county actually got involved. I won't get super detailed here, but there was a lot of abuse in my house growing up. So, right before my senior year of high school when I was 17, the county got involved and basically said that I should just move out and that there wasn't enough time before my 18th birthday for me to be considered an emancipated minor because by the time the paperwork went through, I would be an adult. [But the county did not offer any help with moving out] So, I dated this really abusive guy and lived with his family so that I had an address to enroll myself in high school and finish. Although that relationship was not great, it was better than being at home. So, there's that, and then I graduated early. So, there's also that…

the abusive person that I was seeing, when I was demanding respect with my identity as a person, he would often hold it over my head that the only reason I wasn't unhoused was because I was staying with him. And that all he had to do was say the word and his family would kick me out… and so I stayed with him until I had just turned 20…

And we had attempted to do couples therapy and the therapist said, write a list of things that would have to change for you to be happy. And so that was our homework for the week. We had to come up with a list of things that would have to change for us to be happy. He didn't take it seriously and he didn't write down a single thing, even though I

> brought it up a few times, "Hey, don't forget to write at least two things." And he was like, "I don't think anything needs to change." And… once I got to ten things on my list, I realized that this is asinine, why am I seeing this person? And the number one thing on [my list] was to respect my identity. And the second was not to sexualize my identity and use it for his own gain because the only time he would recognize my identity is when it paid off for him.
>
> So we were on our way to a therapy appointment [when I broke up with him]. I had talked to my mom already, I had to move back in with my mom after that... But I talked to her and she said I could stay with her temporarily… And it sucks and I hate it and I'm so depressed all the time… I have really bad CPTSD from growing up with my mom and I have felt my personality change ever since the first day that [I] came back to her house. And I cannot wait to just be in my own space again. I think I'll feel a lot lighter the moment that I step foot in my own apartment.

V did not get the support that they needed from their local government, but that does not mean that the system failed. In fact, it was functioning exactly as intended. V was (nearly) an adult, meaning that they were expected to be self-sufficient. This left V with a series of impossible choices: First, move in with an abusive boyfriend who weaponized their gender identity to control them, or become homeless and unable to graduate high school; subsequently, move back in with an abusive parent at the expense of their mental health, or remain trapped in the relationship with the abusive boyfriend, or become homeless. Being White was no protection for V because they had failed the prime directive of Whiteness – own enough to be capable of consumption:

> …violence, as it pertains to and structures [White on White] relations… is of a contingent nature: White [people] who 'transgress' their position in the symbolic order run the risk of attack" (Wilderson, 2010, p. 88).

Although violence for White people is contingent, those contingencies are constructed to be impossible to meet for some percentage of the population - there can be no housing market if everyone has a house. The market requires scarcity, even of basic necessities. Whether or not an individual has access to what they need to survive is dependent significantly on luck (e.g., were you lucky enough to inherit wealth, were you unlucky enough to have abusive parents). Importantly, what qualifies someone as "lucky" within this system is entirely socially constructed: We could do things to change the way wealth is distributed in our society, but we don't. We could do things to give families more support so that domestic abuse is less likely to occur, but we don't. We could give people in abusive situations wrap-around support to leave those abusive situations, but we don't.

For this reason, enumerated anti-discrimination laws would not have protected V. Such laws essentially function as an accommodation for trans people, to make up for the "unlucky" quality of being trans, but an accommodation can only stretch the existing system. By definition, accommodations do not change the system, and as such they can never make a fundamentally unjust system just. By taking an accommodation approach, mainstream LGBTQ advocacy movements define transness within the bounds of Whiteness, as an alienated quality that is separate from the human and which therefore should be *disregarded* in housing and employment decisions in order to avoid bigotry. Treating transness this way functions within the same logics that colorblind ideology does in regards to race. Instead of rebuilding the world for trans people,

it redefines transness to force it into a form that is acceptable (rational, palatable, *consumable*) and nonthreatening to the system as it currently exists.

I don't think it's an accident that the most-illuminating example I have to demonstrate how an accommodation approach to trans liberation harms trans people was shared by a disabled Black interviewee. Here, Ollie describes their experience living in a "historical queer house:"

> **Ollie:** So I currently do have a roommate, although they are, I don't know where. It's not a great situation right now... So this place that I'm living, this apartment, it has always been a queer house and it's a historical queer house, which is fun…
>
> My roommate needs support. They just have a lot going on with their health, their mental health. They're also queer and trans, but I think they're just very much struggling… they lost their job and then they didn't pay [rent]. So they borrowed money to pay rent last month and then they haven't paid this month's rent. And then now I've got an email [from the landlord] basically threatening [eviction], because all my rent and everything has been on time, but their half, if they're not paying, then who knows what's going to happen…
>
> That's what I'm trying to talk to [the landlord] about right now because they used the most vague terminology on this email they sent about the action they were going to take. And I was like, "You need to let me know exactly what that is," because they were willing to give my roommate until the first of next month to get last month's rent and this month's rent paid, whatever. But since we're on the same lease and everything, it's a pickle. But anyway, the wording, the language that they used was weird. And so I told them they need to let me know exactly what that action they're going to take is. And they

> need to let me know before so that I can plan because I am disabled and I need to know. But I'm doing the best with the energy that I have…
>
> Technically I can go to my partner's or their partner's [if I'm evicted], but my partner also has disabilities and needs their time to just recharge. And it's just a question of how feasible is it? So trying to figure something out, if I really, really had to, I might be able to talk to, because I've had such strong relationships with certain people I've worked for that I could reach out to them and ask them for some sort of help. But I don't know. At the very least, I think if it comes down to it, try to pay rent in full and I'll just pay all of it for next month or something and at least not have to worry about getting evicted in December.

If we conceptualize Ollie's experience using an alienated definition of transness, Ollie and their roommate weren't going to get evicted because they were trans; they were going to get evicted because they didn't have money. This isn't discrimination, because like V, Ollie and their roommate failed the only measure of humanity that really matters under neoliberalism - own enough to be capable of consumption. An alienated definition of transness (even when held by a "leftist") would explain Ollie's experience with housing insecurity as stemming from two separate issues – disability and wealth inequality – and would see Ollie's transness and their race as irrelevant to the issue, but this ignores the simple fact that in this scenario, a Black trans person was facing eviction from a "queer" house, and most trans advocacy work, even if successful, would have done nothing to improve their situation.

I feel like some readers might be wondering though, "How is any of this about Whiteness? Didn't Ollie and V both experience housing insecurity? If White trans people and

trans people of color are each harmed by neoliberal capitalism, why bring race into this at all?" If this is you, here's what I want you to sit with: White people, more than anyone else, are socialized to believe that the system as it currently exists is fundamentally just. White people, more than anyone else, are raised to believe that an accommodation for difference might be enough to eliminate inequality. From birth, we are taught the lie that Whiteness = freedom, and in order to maintain our social belongingness with the White people and the White institutions that raised us, we internalize that lie so intensely that we will even ignore our own suffering to maintain our Whiteness-centered understanding of the world:

> …white children adopt colorblind ideology to become part of a white community despite bearing witness to race… forcing white children to deny the reality of race is a form of child abuse that causes a racial trauma for white individuals. However, because of the globalization of white supremacy… this trauma of white racialization is overlooked, rendered invisible, and ultimately replaced by the feeling of shame anytime something reveals or reminds [the white person] of this racialization process. (Matias, 2014, pg. 143)

To give an example of what racial trauma can look like for White trans people, I am going to use a series of quotes from Oliver. Their vulnerability in sharing their experiences gives us a strong case study, but I want to be clear that I could have done a similar analysis with any of the White people I interviewed. This is a widespread issue for White people, which is why I think we need to talk about it.

When I asked Oliver how their race has impacted their gender, they replied:

> **Oliver:** I'm White. I obviously have a lot of privilege in terms of exploration… people supporting me in exploring my identity. I come from a fairly affluent suburb and am not affluent myself, but have been surrounded by people who always had a certain level of freedom to do what they wanted… So the fact that I'm White has given me a significant amount of privilege in being able to explore my identity without stigma and without social mores and expectations and worrying about that. Whereas money, because I'm still perceived to be of a certain [higher] social class, was not as much of a factor…

Like all of the White people I interviewed, Oliver discussed their Whiteness in terms of their privilege. They also discussed how the general socioeconomic status of the neighborhood they grew up gave them more freedom to explore their gender. Later in the interview, they again brought up Whiteness when they discussed their high school context:

> **Oliver:** I grew up in an affluent suburb… it gives you a sense of the culture… I am near a group of suburbs that is known to be very wealthy, very White, and very competitive academically. So a big part of where I grew up was academic pressure and pressure just to get into a good college and have a good future… But I experienced a lot of mental health issues in my teenage years as a result of my own disabilities, things that would've happened to me in any context, and contextual factors like academic pressure and teachers who ... Just bad high school stuff…

Oliver describes their high school as being competitive, and they have an intuitive sense that this competitiveness was tied to the Whiteness and the wealth of the space. They were pressured to "have a good future," which they were taught could be earned through achievement. They admitted that their own high school experience was difficult because they are disabled, but stated

that those negative experiences "would've happened to me in any context." Finally, I asked Oliver about how their experiences with disability have impacted their gender:

> **Oliver:** The main aspect of my disability or what has impacted my life on a daily basis the most is a disorder called misophonia [which causes extreme sensitivity to certain everyday sounds]… I have a pretty severe case that started when I was 12 or 13. It's been about a decade. I feel reflecting back on how it impacted me, especially in high school, it made me very... deferent. I would defer to other people in spaces a lot more. I was a lot more quiet. In that way, it made me more dysphoric because I felt like I couldn't express myself… I felt so othered already that, honestly, I wasn't thinking about my [gender or] sexuality at all when I was in high school or growing up. I was thinking about how do I make it look like I'm normal and fitting in while still plugging both of my ears while I try to take this test? How do I grow a third arm without growing a third... That was where I was focused on as opposed to anything directly having to do with gender, but it has significantly impacted the way that I view myself in relation to other people because I always felt like something was off and just didn't have the language for it… As a result, I viewed every other aspect of my identity through the same lens that I viewed my disability. Just as closeted, basically, but I didn't think of it as that at the time, but it was very much like there would be days where I would try not to speak at all because I felt like I had to try so hard to be normal and it didn't work out. But, that was how I viewed all aspects of my identity at the time, for sure…

Here, in contrast to their initial discussion about White privilege, where they talked about having freedom to express their gender as they wish because they are White, Oliver explains how they

actually were not able to express their gender in high school. This is what I mean when I say that White people ignore the ways that Whiteness harms us – Oliver recognized that their high school context was defined by its Whiteness, they recognized that their high school did not give them the support they needed for their disability and that they were harmed by that, they recognized that not having support for their disability made it harder for them to explore their gender, but they described their hurtful experiences in high school as being inevitable, as "things that would've happened to [them] in any context," and they never once connected the lack of support that they received for their gender and their disability to the Whiteness of the space they grew up in, even though two extensions of Whiteness – 1) treating transness as an alienated, irrational quality that is separate from the human and 2) ableist expectations of competitive self-sufficiency - harmed them in high school.

Oliver's bad high school experiences were not inevitable. Things improved for them when they finally found language and information about their disability and their gender:

> **Oliver:** Receiving a diagnosis was extremely important and continues to be. Having the understanding of what my... Cause I don't just have misophonia. I have other stuff going on, too. Figuring out what those things were and having them validated or just the possibility of them existing being validated, you know? People even being like, "Hey, you can self-diagnose. You don't have to go to a psychiatrist necessarily if this is really impacting your life." Or going to a psychiatrist and then being like, "Yeah, no. You're not supposed to live like that. You aren't supposed to wake up every day dreading having to go to class because the person next to you is going to have a cold. That should not be

> something that you're struggling with." Having the language to talk about it empowered me a lot…
>
> [Before I found language] It was literally just like, "Oh, I guess I'm quirky." I had no sense of what was going on other than I didn't fit into any group. I called myself a "floater." I called myself a "misfit," all of these names that media has coded as queer, but that I didn't realize was coded that way. I just felt like I didn't really fit in anywhere. Even when I was surrounded by queer people doing theater, I still felt like something was off because there were no trans people and because no one talked about disability.

The first thing that helped Oliver was self-diagnosis. Self-diagnosis mirrors self-identification of gender in that it does not default to medical authority, and is a radical rejection of the White supremacist, control-oriented mindset that structures Western medical systems (Snorton, 2017). In other words, it was only by challenging the cultural norms of Whiteness that Oliver was able to find space to explore their gender. Still, Oliver only ever discussed their experiences with Whiteness in terms of privilege.

I want to be clear here: My point isn't that White trans people don't have White privilege; we do. The fact that Oliver was eventually able to access a psychiatrist who would take their concerns seriously is a privilege that many people of color never get (Faber et al., 2023; Shim, 2021), and Oliver did not have to simultaneously navigate racism directed at them while trying to understand their gender, even if their gender exploration was hampered by the White institutions that they grew up within. My point is that White people compulsively ignore the ways that Whiteness does harm. How can we possibly begin to act in solidarity with people of color, who are constantly being harmed by Whiteness, if we don't have the capacity to conceptualize

Whiteness as being anything other than a privilege, no matter how much violence we see or experience from it? James Baldwin (1961) summarizes this dynamic in his meditation on how White people disavow their own suffering under White supremacy in "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy":

> I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed upon me as being in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order, against which dream unfailingly and unconsciously, they tested and very often lost their lives… There is a difference… between Norman [a white man] and myself in that I think he still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose. (Baldwin, 1961, as cited in Wilderson, 2010, p. 11-12)

This "nostalgia… of security and order" often leads White people to support oppressive systems. We see this tendency in the hugely inadequate anti-homelessness efforts of The National Center for Transgender Equality and the Human Rights Campaign, both of which locate their advocacy work firmly within the bounds of Whiteness, even as they profess to care about the needs of trans people of color. So why do so many White people, even multiply-marginalized White people like the disabled genderfluid folks I interviewed, seem to have such a hard time coming to terms with the fact that we do not have anything worth saving?

Containment

Considering containment as a constituent element of Whiteness may help explain why solidarity between White people and people of color, even for those White people suffering materially under neoliberal capitalism, is such a fraught project. As stated earlier in this chapter, under White supremacy, Whiteness is a measure of citizenship. Further, Fred Moten describes

the process of becoming a citizen under neoliberalism as becoming like the state:

> To be a citizen you have to own yourself, buy yourself (everyday), sell yourself, equate yourself with money, figure yourself as/in relation to the commodity… it's literally trying to be like the state when the state is constituted like and exemplary subject when, in the levying of taxes or the setting of monetary policy, it buys itself, owns itself, comes into its own as itself as force or power. (Moten, 2018, p. 79)

Max Weber (1918) defines the state as a body that claims a "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force." Therefore, if becoming a citizen requires living up to the example of the state, being a citizen (i.e., performing Whiteness) requires exerting power, literally becoming an avatar of containment and control.

In this manner, Whiteness functions as a self-reinforcing system. White people have been socialized throughout our entire lives to act like the cops in relation to others:

> White people are not simply 'protected' by the police, they are the police... though [White people] do not necessarily perform any advocacy of police practices or of the policing paradigm... the civic stability of the twenty-first-century U.S. Slave estate is no longer every White person's duty to perform. In fact, many Whites on the left actually progressively oppose the police, but each performance of performance of progressive opposition encounters… a certain internal limitation..." (Wilderson, 2010, pp. 82-83)

White people are taught that our value, our personhood, is determined by the extent to which we uphold existing systems of power. In other words, White racialization teaches White people to act like the cops, not only in relation to others, but even in relation to ourselves: "White shame

functions as a psychological guard, as an L.A. cop whose sole duty is to keep the emotions of the residents of this realm in check" (Thandeka, 1999, p. 27).

When we act in accordance with this socialization, we sabotage attempts to mobilize resistance movements against those systems of power, even when those systems actively do us harm. None of the White participants in my study shared personal examples of them behaving this way, but the people of color I interviewed did have stories to tell. Here's one example:

> **Charlie:** Well, it was really odd because I really got essentialized as a man. It's this really problematic… language of like, "Well trans women can't exist. Transfeminine people don't exist because they're socialized as a man and they're read as a man and so you can't pull that apart. Therefore, they're a man." There's this really weird dissonance of, "You are comfortable in your transmasculine identity and you are comfortable identifying as a trans man, but you are not read as a woman. However, I'm assigned male at birth and I don't get the same privilege afforded in that way." And so it was this really weird [thing] like, you don't own a mirror because clearly you're using the same arguments that people use against you towards me, and it is way more hurtful because you're my partner…
>
> And it wasn't until [I became friends with another gender nonconforming person of color who was assigned female at birth and] we compared notes that we realized that the issue was not our sex assignment, it was Whiteness. I think in some ways it, and I don't think the White partners realized this was happening, but it almost felt like, oh, it's socially not acceptable to be racist to your partner who is someone of color so I'm going to use the gender leverage as the weapon. I think is kind of how it felt in some ways, especially I think for me because it was this, "Oh why don't you just be a very androgynous gay

> Asian man?" And it would be really essentialized and weaponized in the problematic parts. Now, on the backside of that main relationship, now that I describe this ex-partner to people, they're like, "Have you ever opened a book that defines intimate partner violence? Sounds like that."
>
> It was a really interesting... This is one way to weaponize gender to abuse someone and so it did feel like... "I'm really targeting the intersection of race and gender and I'm really targeting your race to put you in your place, but I'm going to do that by reminding you that you're a man," which was uniquely odd because those rules apparently did not apply to them.

We can see in Charlie's experience that cisnormativity, by the very nature of its dependence upon White supremacist gender expectations, is simultaneously racist and transphobic. You can't get rid of one without the other going too, but there are still a significant number of White trans people who somehow expect freedom from White supremacist gender norms for themselves while still trying to use those gender norms to oppress others.

Transness resists containment. It is unruly by its nature, and so White trans people live at an almost-nonsensical intersection of privilege and oppression. Here I want to revisit a quote from Julian in the previous chapter:

> **Julian:** I feel like even in my day-to-day life, what is easiest for me is to come across as... I'm trying to figure out a way to say this. It's easiest for me to be as easy to understand as possible to other people. And that's something that is a privilege definitely… But the ability to be able to just adapt to how other people see me in order to get what I want is something that I do every day. There may be some pressure for me to

> conform my gender to be more in line with what's expected of me, but ultimately I feel like I'm doing that most of the time when I'm around cis people.
>
> When I'm around queer or trans people, I feel like I don't have to do that. I can be more... I don't need to be so guarded. I don't need to dumb myself down for other people to just treat me normally. And it was the same way before T[estosterone], I would lean into femininity or womanhood when I felt like I needed to or when I felt like it was advantageous for me. I feel like that hasn't changed very much.
>
> I think I've become so guarded that I've really told myself that it's fine and a lot of times will act like it's fine. But definitely... There are times when it is challenging, it is frustrating and it is difficult to go there when I don't... Especially if it's not on my terms. If it's on my terms, then I feel much more at peace with it. But if I'm leaning into a certain gender based on what I feel like I need to do in that moment and the agency's taken away from me, then it becomes a little bit of an icky feeling. But like I said, I feel so guarded about it that I'm just like "Whatever, that's just part of what I have to do."
>
> …It's confusing [in dating relationships]… it always kind of brings up, “Am I _____ enough?” “Am I masculine enough for this cis woman who...” I don't know. More so it's, “Am I a guy enough for this gay man?” is typically what insecurities that I have, because I don't identify as a trans man, and I don't necessarily feel like a man when I'm having sex with this cis man. So it's just weird. It's just weird and confusing, and I have insecurities come out around that.

This is what I meant when I said that I don’t think Julian is privileged because they can pass, but that Julian can integrate into cis norms because they are White: Whiteness is the position of

power here. Transness challenges many of the gender expectations of Whiteness, but White trans people have also been taught that conformity to Whiteness will buy us safety. Jasbir Puar calls this "piecing" and distinguishes it from "passing" for survival, stating that "integration [into society] through piecing, rather than wholeness through passing, becomes a valued asset in control societies" (Puar, 2017, pg. 49). Piecing means fitting oneself into society as it is, including the patriarchal, binary gender roles prescribed by Whiteness. To be clear, piecing behavior is not limited specifically to nonbinary or "binary" trans identities, or even necessarily only to White trans people (although I definitely do not have the requisite lived experience to dig into piecing as it relates to the experiences of trans people of color, so I am going to leave that work to others); theoretically, any trans person of any identity can engage in piecing, because piecing is fundamentally about what the trans person is willing to give up (and who they are willing to harm) in order to gain power under White supremacist patriarchy. Think Caitlin Jenner and Buck Angel for some obvious examples of piecing behavior from trans celebrities – Jenner and Angel are not piecing because of their gender presentation per se; they are piecing because they are willing to throw other trans people under the bus (such as by supporting Donald Trump's presidency or by parroting TERF rhetoric) in order to protect the privileges they do have as people who are White and wealthy. Not all piecing behavior is so obvious, though. We also saw piecing behavior from Pear's brother-in-law in the previous chapter – although he empathized with Pear's situation as a trans person, he was unwilling to threaten the perceived authenticity of his gender in the eyes of his wife in order to protect Pear from his wife's transphobia. But does piecing really have the potential to keep trans people safe, the way Whiteness tells us it does?

Let's consider this issue more broadly at the political level. A practical example of how Whiteness can sabotage trans liberation can be found in how the murder of Brandon Teena (a White trans man) in Humbolt, Nebraska on New Year's Eve in 1993 was leveraged to pass the Hate Crimes Sentencing Enhancement Act:

> The HCSEA politicized Brandon Teena's death through the logic of visibility and inclusion, whereby his interred body could be symbolically reanimated and restored through the pageantry of the criminal court procedure and spectacularized punishment (Snorton, 2017, p. 180).

This attempt at restoration was a farce. The HCSEA could not save Brandon Teena, nor has it saved any other trans person. Brandon Teena is dead. Punishing the person who killed him with a longer prison sentence cannot bring him back, nor can it give any meaning to his death. Even the US Department of Justice admits that increasing the severity of punishments for crimes does not act as a crime deterrent (National Institute of Justice, 2016), so passing the HCSEA in Brandon Teena's name does not allow him to act as some sort of protector from beyond the grave for other trans people who might have otherwise become victims of violence. So, if the HCSEA is completely ineffectual at doing anything for any trans person, why did so many queer people rally behind it?

Here we must consider why the murder of three people (Brandon Teena, Lisa Lambert, and Phillip DeVine) is remembered only through the death of the White trans man. Lambert, a White cis woman who owned the house where the murders occurred, was killed in retaliation because she refused to give the murderers information about who was staying in the house with her, but DeVine, a disabled Black man, appears to have been killed simply because he was there.

DeVine has been ignored in the archive and in the political organizing that occurred in response to the murders, so we must ask, why does "the radical erasure of blackness [make] queer stories queerer" (Jennifer Devere Brody, as cited in Snorton, 2017, p. 178)?

Queerness has been defined by Whiteness, and so people of color are often treated as if they cannot be queer (I'll talk about this in more depth in the next chapter about genderfluid people of color resisting colonization). Furthermore, I would argue that through the lens of Whiteness, queerness marks the human gone wrong. This is why queerness has been both criminalized as dangerous deviancy and medicalized as mental illness. This is why the root of queerness is theorized as sin or as the result of sexual trauma. This is why "It's okay to experience same-sex attraction as long as you never act on it." This is how someone might say to a queer loved one, without any cognitive dissonance, "I love you, but you can't bring your partner," or "I love you, but I don't want you spending time around the kids," or "I love you, but I cannot accept this lifestyle choice." This is the logic behind conversion therapy.

Antiqueer violence is obsessed with saving the (White) human from the queer; however, the redemption of queerness can only occur through its own destruction. A White queer person might be tolerated, as long as they straighten out. Straightening oneself can take on various forms: Anything from sharing your desperate prayers to be heterosexual or cisgender as a child, to containing your queerness within marriage, to beating it into shape with a formal gender dysphoria diagnosis might work. To be clear, my point here is not to tell any queer person they are in the wrong for being the victim of internalized queerphobia, or for wanting to access protective rights for their relationship, or for doing what they need to do to access transition healthcare, but I do want to draw attention specifically to *which* performances of queerness can

elicit tolerance (not quite acceptance) within cis-heteronormative society. Queer people who don't want a traditional marriage or a traditional gender role or to pretend to be the same as cisgender-heterosexual people are usually not invited to dinner (or at the very least, we're expected not to make a scene while we're there).

If you want to respond to me by arguing that even when queer people try to assimilate into cis-heteropatriarchy, "born this way" justifications, marriage, and transmedicalism do not provide much protection in the face of anti-queer violence, you have stumbled upon the very truth I am trying to illuminate. "Redeeming" the queer

> opens upon a discussion of assimilation and the various orders minoritized people are given to perform, as if they are no different from anyone else, which is to say, no different from white people. This, on the one hand, might be regarded as a 'survival strategy,' but, on the other hand, it maps the colonial promise of assimilation as the always deferred possibility that one might live into as a way to contend with one's current condition. (Snorton, 2017, p. 189)

This is the crux of the problem for White queer people; unlike queer people of color who are never allowed legibility under White supremacy, White queer people *can* become legible to larger society under Whiteness, but only through suffering and deference to the state. The ultimate version of straightening, of suffering to achieve redemption from queerness, is dying for being queer. A trans person living their life in public is horrifying, dangerous, even predatory; in contrast, a (White) trans suicide is tragic, even if many cisgender people also see these deaths as inevitable because they refuse to recognize that transphobia is the debilitating cause of trans people's deaths, including by suicide:

> **Linda:** I think if you caught me on a different day, I might have said no to that question [i.e., Does disability come into play at all for you and your gender?]. And so that one also feels fluid, but I think that feels more fluid because of a lack of understanding on what "counts" as disabled… so if you're using depression, anxiety, PTSD, yes… how people interact with me impacts my mental health. I don't think my mental health impacts my gender. So when I get misgendered, I get pissy and I get depressed. And so that happens on the daily… how people interact with me through my gender impacts my mental health.

All that to say, I believe queer people and their allies rallied around the HCSEA because it represents the sum-total of what Whiteness can do for queer people: We can be mourned if we die. The state doesn't actually give a fuck about trans lives (even the White ones), but if trans people want to bolster the state's monopoly on violence through our use of the court system, that just serves the state's interests. The joke's on us if we think it has anything to do with us being human.

Queer Rage

Over the course of this chapter, I have analyzed Whiteness not merely as a privileged individual identity, but instead as a property interest defined by consumption and containment. This analysis demonstrates that under neoliberal capitalism, the queer White person does retain some chance of being treated like a full and valued member of society in the future, but only if they are able to remake themselves into an agent of consumption and of the law. This is the limit of Whiteness. You may be human, but that fact is ultimately irrelevant in comparison to the needs and will of the state. You may hope to escape violence through following the rules (i.e.,

pursuing Whiteness), but that is all Whiteness can offer – the *potential* to escape having violence done to you based on the *guarantee* that you will do violence to others.

The problem with Whiteness is that even after tracing its limitations, it remains incredibly resistant to its own destruction. It is impossible to just "give up" being White – the entwined histories of colonialism, neoliberalism, and capitalism have mapped Whiteness onto biology (Wynter, 2003), and so the White person's skin color and ancestry will speak regardless; however, I think it might be possible for us to stop pursuing Whiteness, by which I mean, to stop pursuing ownership, which is the synthesis of consumption and containment. This requires a politics of abolition:

> "A politics of abolition could never finally be a politics of resurgence, recovery, or recuperation. It could only ever begin with degeneration, decline, or dissolution. Abolition is the interminable radicalization of every radical movement, but a radicalization through the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion… No one has a claim to anything." (Sexton, 2014, p. 109)

A politics of abolition requires White people to give up the power that we have always been told will make us safe. We will have to consciously and effortfully choose to "undercut the very basis of [our] capacity or even desire to rule" (Sexton, 2014, p. 98). This idea is frightening, and every trans person I know right now is already frightened, so I want to be gentle with you. We are not entitled to ownership but we do deserve gentleness, so although I don't know how the legal situation for trans people is going to work out over the next few years, I want to talk about one last bit of queer history that I think about a lot.

The documentary *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012) is about ACT UP, an

international direct action movement that pushed for better treatment and support for people living with HIV and AIDS at the height of the AIDS epidemic. If you've never gotten to really study the ACT UP movement before, I highly suggest watching the documentary (it's 90 minutes and up for free on YouTube). Most queer people at least vaguely know that when the AIDS epidemic began, governments ignored it. AIDS was killing queer people and poor people and drug users and people of color, and that suited neoliberal politicians like President Reagan just fine. According to public opinion polls in the 1980s, 50% of respondents agreed that people with AIDS should be quarantined from the general population (Hubbard, 2012). The political situation then was about as scary for people with AIDS as the political situation today is for trans people. Greg Bordowitz recalled that time, saying, "We were very scared that the Reagan administration was going to put people with AIDS into internment camps, and I think that we came close to that" (Hubbard, 2012).

The ACT UP movement started with one primary demand, "Drugs into bodies." Activists not only wanted more treatments for HIV, but they also wanted universal healthcare so anyone who needed HIV testing or treatment could access it; housing for people with AIDS so that nobody with AIDS lived or died homeless; better representation of women, drug users, and people of color in medical trials so that medications were adequately tested for safety in the full population; full access to abortion and LGBTQ-inclusive, comprehensive sex ed; and an end to medical apartheid. In many ways, ACT UP was remarkably successful. It got new medications tested and out to the public, it expanded the CDC's official definition of HIV symptoms so that symptoms common to people assigned female at birth (like cervical cancer) were no longer ignored, it increased available funding for HIV research and for programs promoting safer sex,

and it drastically reduced the stigma associated with being HIV positive. Activist Matt Ebert describes the ACT UP movement as being powered by the rage of people who were tired of being killed by a system that hated them:

> I wouldn't be alive today if I didn't get arrested 20 years ago… The medicines that I take to stay alive I would not have… if you tap into a forbidden emotion, you can unleash enormous amounts of power. It tapped into this rage that people didn't know they had, didn't know they could have.

Maria Maggenti agrees:

> At a time when people were just hovering around a certain kind of "I think we're doing okay in the gay community, I think they like us." ACT UP said, "So what? Why do we need to be liked? We need certain things as human beings, and the reason we're not getting those things is because they don't [actually] like us that much."

Anger is a protective reaction – it's why rage plays such an important role in liberation movements - but we must be careful of what our anger protects. ACT UP always had a relatively decentralized organizational system, but even still, White people were some of the most influential members of ACT UP (at least in the USA chapters). Ron Goldberg talked about his experience as a cis White queer man in ACT UP:

> Part of the journey, being within ACT UP is also understanding, "Right, but you come from privilege." These were people who were brought up, myself included, you get sick, you get taken care of, your life is not written off. So imagine the shock when you turn around and you discover, "What do you mean me!" There was this… sense of

> entitlement, that… actually proved to be very useful for the group because it really sparked anger. There's nothing that gets anyone more angry than to discover suddenly their entitlement is taken away. (Hubbard, 2012)

But as we've discussed throughout this chapter, White entitlement is a finnicky creature. Despite ACT UP's successes, as time went on, schisms arose around the movement's social policy in regards to homelessness and universal healthcare. As the more-privileged (wealthier, and usually White) members of the movement got access to medications to survive, many of them left ACT UP:

> A split came between people who were interested in immediately saving their own lives versus those who had a bigger vision of bigger issues or were interested in saving other people's lives… I thought that was tragic. I thought it was a complete misunderstanding to think that these were opposite and exclusive points of view. (Hubbard, 2012)

ACT UP didn't stop existing; you can still start a chapter today, but it does not have the same level of activity and engagement that it did at its height. Today, HIV is no longer the death sentence that it used to be because of the medications we have available. These medications would not exist without the work of ACT UP, but because the most-privileged members of the movement left once they had what they needed to survive, there are still many people today who needlessly die from AIDS simply because they cannot afford treatment.

Clearly, to be protective of all queer people, queer rage needs to be based on something sterner than simply White entitlement. Based on *The Capacity Contract* (Simplican, 2015), we can extrapolate two different approaches to political solidarity: "communities of strength" and "communities of vulnerability" (Philosophy Tube, 2018). Membership in communities of

strength is based on what resources (material, social, intellectual, etc.) one can offer to the group. Whiteness lends itself to building communities of strength because White humanity is defined by owning resources earned through fulfilling responsibilities. But if we accept that we cannot own anything and that White humanity is not worth the blood it costs to purchase "even if it was somebody else's" (Gumbs, 2018, p. 152), we cannot depend upon communities of strength to help us achieve queer liberation. In contrast, communities of vulnerability are built based on the recognition of mutual need, even if everyone's specific needs are not the same. Communities of vulnerability reject "equality grounded in sameness" (Hartman, 1997, p. 122), but they also require a type of work fundamentally different from that required by communities of strength. Rather than proving your worth (as one would in a community of strength), building a community of vulnerability requires holding space for others and valuing their needs as extensions of one's own.

Just think of how different the world could be if ACT UP, and all of the beautiful queer rage powering it, had not lost its nerve. Maybe we could have universal healthcare and guaranteed housing. Maybe the movement could have so thoroughly dismantled the idea that healthcare should be profitable, that countries in the global south could have received Covid vaccines faster than they did, and fewer people could have died. Maybe racial disparities in healthcare would be lower. Maybe rights to bodily autonomy, including abortion and transition, would be protected. We deserve to live in that world. Queerness is so much bigger than "Love is love" or "Being authentically you;" queerness is about having a life worth living. If we want to build a queer movement that can live up to this promise, the first step for White queer people is dealing with our Whiteness. Only then will we be able to engage in the work of building spaces

that can actually hold us,

every one of us, in our fullness,

every shifting, messy part of us,

in safety and dignity and freedom.

Don’t compromise your rage.

Chapter 9: Genderfluid People of Color Resist Colonization

In contrast to White participants, the genderfluid people of color I spoke to for this research had a lot to talk about regarding the intersection between their race, ethnicity, and gender. I want to explore what their narratives can tell us about building queer spaces in the wake of White supremacist settler colonialism, but beforehand, let's discuss some important context for this chapter.

Even though I am grouping these narratives under the label of "people of color," the people I spoke to each came from different backgrounds and so they each have a unique experience at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender. In other words, the category of "people of color" is to some extent nonsense, and so we need to hold it lightly. I have chosen to use this category because it draws attention to the specific power relation that exists under White supremacy wherein White people are treated as the default human state, and people of color are treated as lesser because they deviate from that norm, which I think can be a useful analytic for discussing the specific context of the United States. However, people of color who were born in the United States have different experiences than people of color who immigrated here or who are the children of recent immigrants. There are differences between the experiences of people who are racialized as Asian verses Latinx verses Black verses Indigenous verses racially ambiguous people who are read differently in different contexts. These groups could be disaggregated even further, to look at the distinct experiences of, for example, Cuban immigrants as compared to Puerto Ricans who migrated to one of the 50 states. Further, there are differences between people of color who can trace their ancestry back to a specific culture as compared to those who cannot trace their ancestry in the aftermath of settler colonialism and the transatlantic

slave trade. There are additional intersections with religion and socioeconomic status that can be so intertwined with race and ethnicity that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the next begins. I will touch on some of these nuances over the course of this chapter, but my research project is not positioned to fully explore any of these issues.

In order to contextualize the backgrounds of participants, I will usually give a brief description of their self-identified race and/or ethnicity. Some multiracial participants also specifically made mention of how most of the world reads them (e.g., "Asian-presenting") in their interviews because they found that information useful for explaining their experiences. In regards to these comments, I will only ever include what participants explicitly told me; I have not editorialized these descriptions myself.

I am White, and that undoubtably impacted who was willing to talk to me, what they were willing to share with me, and how I have interpreted participants' experiences. I have attempted to share excerpts long enough that even when I miss nuance, that nuance will still exist in the quotes themselves. Like everything else in this book, I hope this chapter functions as a starting point for further research and discussion within trans community, but it should not by any means be treated as the final word on the topic. My goal here is to start a conversation, based on what the genderfluid people I interviewed told me was important to them.

At the end of every interview I did for this project, I asked "What is one thing that you don't hear discussed enough in regards to queer and trans issues that you wish we were talking more about?" Ollie, who is Black, talked about how colorism marginalizes them, even in spaces that are supposed to be queer:

Ollie: I want to talk about race and I also just want to talk about colorism because all of it comes together. But it's just something about how your lightness or your darkness influences what people think about you inherently.

So if my partner and I were standing side by side, my partner is White, and I mean we are both really gender nonconforming, but if you look at them and you look at me immediately, I'm going to be seen as masculine and they're going to be seen as very feminine because of the color of our skin alone. And I think that there's something to be said about that in queer spaces. And I think it's really harmful, especially for, I don't know, even really femme Black women who might be considered predatory in a queer space when it's like, no, they're just kind of living as Black women that are queer. I think that's just a really harmful thing that's made its way into our queer spaces…

it's not just between races, it's also in races themselves. So you could look at the spectrum of Whiteness and compare that, but you could also really, really look at Blackness and having dark skin or even having lighter skin. Someone who is depicted or who is visually seen as maybe as just mixed, but with light skin and how their value is inherently more than someone who is also mixed, but dark skin and what that means when they're going through the medical system or what that means when they're navigating queer spaces because one of them is going to be much more widely accepted. And it's not someone who looks like me.

I created the queer spaces that I belong in and I beat my way into queer spaces and say that I belong here as a queer person, but I have to do that because I'm as dark as I am. But if I had a lighter complexion and a different hair texture, I wouldn't have to work half as

hard. I wouldn't have to feel like I need to carve out a space for myself. I could probably just kind of slide in and be accepted and also be coveted as some sort of... The tokenism would be there.

Charlie, who is multiracial (Black, Chinese, Jewish, and White), agreed with Ollie, and discussed how they are tokenized by LGBT organizations and within their workplace because they are Asian-presenting:

Charlie: …from a corporate standpoint, I'm not trans, I'm an Asian gay man… And the implication is that gay people are White. Gay is a White experience. And so I think from this corporate standpoint, as an Asian, racially ambiguous, gay person, I check a lot of the boxes that they want to be checked. Yeah, I think that's part of the situation.

I think if you still go to the LGBT Resource Center webpage from [the university I graduated from], I think I'm still the front person. The banner image is just [gestures at self]. Which is comical… 'cause I had to teach the photographer how to take diversity photos. It was like, "I've done this for a while. If we're going to do this, you should at least take a good photo of me." And so I think if you go look it up online, I might still be the banner photo, which is so funny to me. And I'm like, "Let's be real. There are no other Asian people in this building." So I don't know if I should be the banner person, but I know why I'm the banner person.

So I think part of it is that when I am queer, I'm an angry queer, I'm not queer in the catch all sense. And so when I'm read as gay, I'm much more palatable in those settings. And since being an angry queer in a professional setting does not go well for you, I then come off as very accessible in these [professional] spaces. And then they get to know me and

> they're like, "Wow, this person hates everything that this place stands for." But that's a whole other thing.

Pear, who immigrated to the United States from India for university, described how tokenization and exclusion work together to limit support for queer people of color. They needed support after they came out, but were unable to find a communal space specifically for queer people of color because many such spaces had shut down during the pandemic. The LGBT cultural center on their university campus had the institutional support it needed to stay open, but did not have any interest in supporting queer people of color:

> **Pear:** I came out during the pandemic and [the LGBT cultural center on campus] was the only resource accessible. I think the pandemic really shifted people's access to communities, especially considering how drastically it affected organizations and communal spaces for queer people of color…
>
> I went into that organization thinking that I would find the community, but then I realized that queer people of color are just not there in the public eye. They… just don't get to have that role. So I was like, okay, maybe I can find a community here. Maybe I can show people that queer people of color exist. And I tried so hard to make that… a space that's friendly for queer people of color. I'm just tired. I gave up and it was not just the organization, it was at every level of the university where I was like, oh, can we make the space? Can we do this? Can we do that? And they were like, if this doesn't go on the publicity poster, we don't care about you. That was the thing that was made very clear to me. And I guess it developed a strong, not animosity, but frustration and it's been really

> difficult to navigate. How do I feel included while I'm frustrated at my community and can I even call them my community?

Across interviews, genderfluid people of color described finding themselves in a sort of double-bind, where they were expected to embody either their racial and ethnic background or their queerness, but not both. Charlie explained that their own story of queerness was obscured as they tried to cope with the violence of being forced to choose one part of their identity over another:

> **Charlie:** I really felt like when I was younger I had to choose between my race and my sexuality, and because everyone on [the Jamaican] side of the family is terrible and just really terrible Catholics, I chose my sexuality. So it took me much longer to get to my race, my internalized racism, which was bound to my gender, and so it took me much longer to get to the gender stuff. It's this really weird ... having a not abusive family would've been great, would've probably helped that along, having queer and trans people of color, but in particular Asian trans people…
>
> I think would've been really helpful, because I had no role model and I grew up in the South in a multiracial school, but one that was wildly hostile to gay people. It wasn't until I went off ... and everyone thinks I'm really smart for it, I skipped a grade in high school, but I really just found a loophole in the student handbook that allowed me to graduate early… I mean, from my perspective, it was like I am either going to stay in this high school another year and kill myself, or I'm going to leave the state. So I left, which was good.
>
> But at my liberal arts college… everyone was really White. I think the language ... nonbinary as a term… did not exist in the gay spaces that I was a part of. There was

> really no ... there were very few trans people that I was able to interact with because I was still really in the liberal arts bubble… I… [studied] identity development… and I think part of that was kind of counterintuitively a protective mechanism. Like "Oh, if I study trans people and gay people in this context outside of me, then I don't really have to do the self-reflection." ...I have education privilege, and I think I sound and come off as very smart, and so I had the language to come off as if I understood, even if I really didn't… I [could] very easily spin this story of a gay experience even if it didn't quite align with mine, because I knew that's what people wanted to hear… if I just use these stories, I don't have to look into my own.

Similar to Charlie, Jay's father, who Jay moved in with after they immigrated to the United States from the Philippines for university, refused to affirm their gender, which led them to leave their father's home and to cut ties:

> **Jay:** I mentioned [that I'm nonbinary to my Dad], but he's not really the type of person who likes to listen… He and my stepmother are the last people to accept my new name. He got married to his wife, and I already had my name change years before I even met her. But apparently, because he always talked about me using my old name, when I moved back in with them [after university], they're like, "We're going to get you used to your old name again." Seriously? Oh no… I cut them off…
>
> I got a job. It actually affected how I looked for a job because I was in the West Coast. I'm in the East Coast [now]… I was hoping for the other side of the globe, but the other side of America works as well. It just happened to be lucky, I guess. When I started looking for a job, I applied everywhere without even caring where it is. As long as it

> pays… enough, I am willing to move wherever it is. And when I got a job here in the East Coast, I accepted. And then after I managed to sell my car and get my phone number out from their account, I cut [my dad and his wife] off. I wouldn't put it past them to retaliate using either my car or my cell phone number…
>
> So, immediately after I… cut everything up that you can possibly use against me, I cut them off. Sometimes I wonder if I should [have] gave them a heads up or something, but I know that... they're just going to talk about how dumb it is... So yeah, I saw nothing good... it's not like I want them to change or anything. It's not a threat. I'm just really tired.

Hurtful family relationships that lead to relationship cut-offs are not unique to queer people of color; many White queer people have similar disaffirming familial situations. However, the impact of familial cut-off for queer people of color in the United States is multiplied by the fact that their family may be their primary or only connection to their cultural heritage:

> **Jay:** I'm Asian from a Catholic country [the Philippines], and I guess at some point they… don't really like different stuff... At the same time, I guess when it comes to my family, because… they're the only people I actually talk to, I'm not… the cultural person to talk to really. It's like why add to the people that would just make me uncomfortable?

In comparison to Charlie and Jay who were pushed away from their families (and by extension, significant aspects of their cultural heritage) because of their queerness, Emily explained that even though they had been questioning their gender for a while, they did not feel safe embodying a nonbinary gender in the predominantly-White spaces that they have to navigate in their day-to-day life as an Asian person who was assigned female at birth:

Emily: I am an Asian woman. I'm a Korean woman but I also was raised in a White family. And so that's just complicated, my race, ethnicity, my experience in the world since I'm a transracial adoptee. So I don't really feel like I fully belong to or am accepted by either racial group, White people or Asians. But I do exist in the world as an Asian woman and Asian women are hypersexualized and exoticized. And so I think I'm really uncomfortable a lot of the time in public, especially around male-identifying people.

I'm definitely very hypervigilant and I think if I identified as nonbinary as well, I'd still feel really unsafe and just hypervigilant. I think that the race piece has given me a lot of hypervigilance. And then also gender does as well. If you're not a man and you're not someone of bigger stature, I think it's pretty common to not feel safe in public spaces around strangers…

I think I just already feel very aware of my identities in most spaces, probably all spaces. So I'm hypervigilant… but I also think part of being an Asian woman, I mean, up until the Atlanta spa shootings, I will say I felt safe. And this sounds contradictory, I don't feel safe being out alone walking, but I felt safe in a way where I feel like, I don't know. I think because of Asian [people]'s proximity to Whiteness, we're more accepted than Black women and so I know that that experience is very, very, very different. And so also as a woman who's feminine presenting most of the time, I can pass as a straight woman and so I just feel safer. And I think if I presented more nonbinary or more masculine, then I might lose some of that safety in social situations.

To Emily's point about Black women having a different experience, Ollie explained how being a Black, neurodivergent immigrant from the Caribbean has impacted their experiences embodying their gender:

> **Ollie:** So my culture is extremely homophobic and transphobic. And the way that I would be accepted versus the way that maybe my brother [who is also queer] might be accepted within our own culture is different because if I go back to the Island, they would see me as femme altogether, and that they're more accepting. But my brother would not have a similar experience, just being a part of a queer community and going back to the Island and trying to experience our culture.
>
> I know that when I was younger, when it came to coming out, my family, specifically my mom, her response was something along the lines of, I would lose touch with pretty much the majority of my family. I would expect to have no connection with my grandparents, that sort of thing, because there was so much hostility and just so much hate towards the queer community on the Island.
>
> And so, as I was growing up, as much as that was the case, I think authenticity has always been a huge thing for me. And I feel like I can attribute this to being also just neurodivergent, but I could not actually try to be as femme as everyone else was around me. There was no way that was going to happen. So instead, it was a hard left. I was wearing my brother's hand me down clothes that were super big because I was very small, but I was always bigger than… the girls that were in my class... So just being Black in a space that is all pretty much White, I was always considered more masculine

than my peers just because Blackness is associated so much with masculinity. Even Black women are considered more aggressive, all of these masculine traits.

And so, me wearing my brother's stuff to school, being very athletic, all of those things, never quite fitting in with those girl groups and stuff like that, all of that, I feel like is just folded into my experience… I can't necessarily conform. It's not comfortable for me. It always feels like an insult to myself, even as a kid. But also, I was completely outside of any sort of [queer] community or social connection because that just wasn't a thing that was in my childhood… But it is completely different, I think for me, just if I were to compare it to my brother. If I went to the Island, I would be received as a woman. I would be unhappy, but I would be safe… I definitely could not visibly date or something like that, unless I was dating a man. But I would definitely be in a more secure situation. I would have less fear than my brother trying to have a similar experience.

Anti-queerness didn't have to be abusive in order to be alienating. Invisibility and lack of affirming language could be alienating all on its own. Bug described how queerness is seen to be an "American thing" by their relatives living in Puerto Rico:

Bug: I am Puerto Rican, so I'm Hispanic. Both my parents are Puerto Rican. They born and raised, grew up there. My brother was born there, but I was born in the States, New Jersey. And so I got to have an interesting experience being that I do not have the exact same cultural norms that my cousins do. All my cousins almost live in the island and I live here…

Luckily, my dad and my mom were also a little bit more open-minded than some of my other family members. But a good example is my grandparents, my cousins, my whole…

extended family, they do not know really that I'm trans. They don't ever use my preferred name. They use my dead name. They never use my pronouns. I'm sort of like this mystery. And it feels really weird, because I don't feel necessarily extremely close to them given that they live [in Puerto Rico] and I only visit every so often, every other summer, every two summers. They haven't really seen me since I was 15. So they don't even know... Facebook, yes. They know I have short hair. They know [my preferred name]. But they don't use that.

The reason is because my mom feels like, and my parents feel like it's too complicated to explain to them in a Spanish way… And there's also the fact that… I don't use they/them exclusively, but I did at some points and there is no they/them at the moment in Spanish, right? We have Latinx and whatnot, but not a they pronoun like we do in English. So I think culturally it's just not something that comes up often…

I don't even know of any gay cousins, bisexual cousins. Representation for me just doesn't exist within my family. So it can be very isolating. It can feel like I'm the black sheep or the bad egg. And it can feel like if I ever fully transition with hormones and have secondary sex characteristics look different when I go visit them, they're going to not even know how to process that. They're going to be like, "What? Who are you? What happened?" And it's going to be hard to explain to them, "I'm trans." "Oh, trans. What is that, an American thing? I don't get that. None of us are that way. None of us ended up that way." And it makes me wonder, how many have experienced dysphoria and simply don't know how to even process it because it's so not, at the moment, very normalized there or accepted or understood…

> And of course, being a person of color and being trans, even in the States you can't really find other people like me or that look like me.

Bug was careful to explain that they didn't see their Puerto Rican relatives' lack of knowledge as being hateful, even though it was hurtful. They specifically compared the environment of Puerto Rico to the hateful environment of Texas, where they grew up:

> **Bug:** I think to me, the way that Puerto Rico… specifically is when it comes to transness and the way that conservative states approach it, they kind of have a different energy to me. It feels like in Puerto Rico, it could be just from a place of literally just not understanding it and not seeing it often enough to be able to know how to even openly discuss it. And it feels like here [in the United States] it's a known and it's actively hated.
>
> I wouldn't say my grandparents, if they found out I was trans, would hate me. They would say things that maybe are a bit transphobic like, "You're a beautiful girl," or "How are you [trans]?" Things that come from ignorance, but not so much come from hate. I feel like with enough explaining and education, it might change and shift and it might already been happening as I'm speaking, because I feel like Puerto Rico is, especially in the capital areas like San Juan for example, is a bit more liberal than [a] middle-of-nowhere county in Texas. They're more forward thinking and they're more open about many things, including sexuality in general. Sexuality is a bit more understood there. We have many famous gay singers who are Puerto Rican and lesbian or whatnot. I think trans is just still in its infancy of being understood, but I think there's potential for it to be understood and accepted.

> Texas, I felt like I was able to tap into a [queer] community regardless of the fact that there was hate, because there was finally, after two years of me being in high school… a GSA club [was] created and I was able to see other people who are trans within my own school.

In comparison to Bug, Tasha, who is African American and who grew up low-income, also described being the only person in her community who is genderfluid and asexual, but she did not feel alienated from her family because of it. She specifically described how support can look different depending on the circumstances, explaining that even though her Auntie, who raised her, might not talk with Tasha about gender and sexuality, that she still felt supported:

> **Tasha:** So I feel like my race doesn't have anything to do with me being asexual or a two-spirit person. I feel like my culture embraces that. I feel like, well, I'm the type of person, it just depends on how a person grows up in who they are. Because some people come from families, cultures, or races that may have different thoughts about that…
>
> yes, some [African American] people have different stuff to say about different genders and stuff like that. But my family and the community that I've grown around in… just being myself, some people may have different things to say, but I feel like within my family and my friends, it's accepted because they already know I'm a different type of person, a weird person. So, well, not weird as in something's wrong, but weird in a cool way type thing…
>
> [My auntie] knows that I'm different. She really doesn't bring up relationships to me much. She definitely knows I'm a colorful person. She doesn't ask about it. It's just something that she knows. No one in my family brings it up.

They asked me was I gay before, but that's all. That was a while ago. And then no one ever brung it up again. So she doesn't ask me questions about my sexuality or nothing like that because I'm pretty sure she already knows. So she just doesn't ask me questions about my sexuality. They ask me was I gay before. And that's all. And no one ever asked me nothing about it again. I don't know why, but that's all that they ever asked me was one time. And then everybody left it alone…

I come from [a low-income neighborhood], so where I come from, if you some way then you just some way. You may have parents who are concerned or something like that. But I didn't grow up with two parents. I grew up with my auntie raising me, so I was already living… in poverty, on top of that, having somebody else raise me. So it's really not really a lot of time for somebody to ask questions and stuff like that… if I was the type of person, "Oh I need support, this is me. I'll be this gender, I'm asexual or two-spirit or whatever, and I need some support because people not supporting me," and stuff like that, yeah, my auntie would be that supportive.

…but with where I come from, they ask me if I'm gay, then I said no. And then that's that. They know something is off, but it's like, I'm just me. I just feel like they just accept and embrace me as just me. Support, I mean, you could take it as somebody didn't support me. Because in order to support somebody, you got to ask questions, be made aware, like, "Oh, I support you if you need anything, da da da." But it wasn't that type of situation, [where I said] "Oh, I'm this type of person." It's just somebody that I've always been. Literally, I've always been a… more of masculine type of person...

Although her immediate family and friends are supportive of Tasha, she still felt pressure to hide her masculine energy and play up her feminine energy in order to date. Tasha felt like she had to choose between an authentic gender expression or a meaningful romantic connection within her cultural community:

> **Tasha:** I have a best friend that [used to move between that masculine and feminine energy], but I feel like she wasn't ... She'd just [be] masculine all the time and then sometimes female, but now she's in a relationship with a man, and then she's never been gay or she's never been identifying as a different gender. She never said she was gay, bisexual. She never claimed any gender. She had masculine energy and feminine energy every once in a while, but then just one day it just stopped and then she is in a relationship with a man. So now she has the feminine energy 1000%.
>
> So no, I've never met anyone like that. It's just really been me, and most of the females that I hang with is feminine energy, really prissy. If I could… show you pictures… you would see I will be the only masculine person around because I wear, like now since COVID hit, I try to teach myself how to do makeup because my best friend bought me a makeup kit… because I'm just like, "Oh, I want to learn how to do my makeup. I want to dress more feminine." So that's what I've been practicing on during COVID since we were in the house, but before that, it's like, no, never. I never really, every once in a while, feminine, but now I'm trying to be more feminine energy.
>
> So I'm the only person that, right now, in my life that's demonstrating the feminine and the masculine energy, and I've been trying to do different things like makeup and stuff like that to try to tap into more of my feminine energy… it's been fine, but then again,

sometimes I'll just be like, "Man, do I really want to do this?" It's like, "Who am I doing this for?" It's weird because I'm the person that's always, no one will force me to do anything. It's like, okay, I do like makeup sometimes. I do want to do my makeup and dress up nice and go to places with my friends and stuff like that, but then at the end of the day, I'm like, "Man, why am I doing this? Why can't I just be?" I could be who I am because no one's stopping me. I go to events, I do stuff. I'm a nice person, I'm a popular person, but then it's just like, why the feminine stuff, though?

It's just like, "Do you want more? Do you want to enter a relationship with a man and that's why I'm doing feminine stuff, to tap into more feminine so I could attract one man to talk to? Or can you just find men to talk to yourself with the masculine?", but it's like, you know that's not really going to happen. Yeah, I've talked to guys before just being myself, but it didn't get me anywhere. I'm not in a relationship. Deep down inside, I haven't told anyone, but I'm just like, "Yeah, maybe me trying to be more feminine will lead to me a relationship or marriage or something like that," but if I could just be myself, wear my colorful wig, be in my masculine, bubbly energy… then I probably would just do that 24/7, but it's like, if I want a relationship, then I'm going to have to tap into this feminine energy more.

Hue further explains why some genderfluid people of color might feel pressure to conform to their assigned gender at birth, even when their family is supportive:

Hue: …finding Latino community that is also trans can sometimes be a little hard… just based on demographics and likelihood, I'm less likely to find people that are both. So if I'm in a trans space, it's going to be a White majority space. And also, I might be the only

specifically Latino person there. Whereas if I'm in a Latino space, I might be the only trans person or one of very few. And then conversations about that, those intersecting identities are not really explored. So I think that I haven't actually really had the chance to super explore those combinations because they haven't been super salient in my home life, which is where I mostly experience my Hispanic cultures.

My parents aren't very traditional, they're not religious, they're pretty chill people. So I think that's definitely part of it. They never forced me or pressured me to conform to a Latina ideal of gender. But actually, now that I just said that, I feel that when I first started identifying as trans… it was uncomfortable to have to move away from using the word Latina for myself because that was something that my parents would talk to me about and would want me to feel proud about… So it felt a little uncomfortable to be this thing that I have on a t-shirt that people are telling me is something to be proud of and something to connect to other people with is suddenly something that I have to give up because it doesn't encapsulate my gender identity, but it is pointing to my specific gendered and ethno-racial identity…

And I don't know, it's complicated because I feel like to an extent, I am still Latina because people view me as a woman, I'm socialized as a woman, I'm treated as a woman, I have the same wounds that women have. But my internal experience of gender is a little more complex. And the way that plays into, I guess my affinity to Latina as an idea is a little complicated. So I sort of half accept it, but still I much prefer Latinx as a term. So I'm glad that has gained traction and that people are using that because it does make me feel more included in my ethnic group.

Later in the interview, Hue clarified that they never felt pressure from other Latinx people or other queer people to disidentify from the term Latina. It's just that the term didn't adequately capture their gender experience and so it felt constricting; however, because "Latina" had functioned as a tie not only to their gender but also to their ethno-racial identity, it was difficult to give up without another gender neutral option to replace it.

Bug added additional nuance around the challenge of finding nonbinary linguistic options, noting that terms like Latinx are contested by some Spanish speakers. Even though Bug grew up with Spanish in their home, they did not feel like it was their place to create nonbinary linguistic options in Spanish because they are not fluent in the language:

> **Bug:** So Spanish, I have a confusing relationship with it, because I can understand it at least 80%. If someone had it just came up to me and started speaking Spanish, I'd know exactly what they're saying, with general words. Now, if I watch newscasters use really long words and talk very fast, I sort of have some gaps, but I can still follow a little bit. Speaking is more like a 50%, 60% fluidity. It's not something I can just do in the same way I'm doing right now with you in English.
>
> But I do feel connected to it, because my mom speaks it constantly in the house. My father will speak English and Spanish with perfect fluency all the time, and if I had to think of any language I wanted to adopt right away, I would try to do Spanish. When it comes to how it relates to my gender, I feel like with it lacking that, it does feel like a little distant to me when it comes to how I want, like if I wanted a they/them moment, I just feel like I couldn't do that. And it's not to the fault of Spanish, I think it just didn't happen in the creation of the language. Languages are very complicated things…

> I don't feel like I know the language enough to say, "I'm going to make these changes to the language." I feel like they'd be best approached by someone who speaks it very fluently and maybe even grew up culturally around it to know all the slang that... See slang, I don't know. And those little things you learn when you really grow up in a place I don't sadly know. So I feel like even though it literally is my language, it doesn't feel like it's my place, weirdly, to just tell people who've been speaking it their whole lives, "This is what you need to do." Even Latinx has points of contention as people discuss it and I feel like it's perfectly fine, but there's some people who feel like, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that. That's not for you to do." And it's interesting.

"Latine" is a term that has been suggested by some as a gender neutral option which, unlike Latinx, can follow familiar grammatical conventions for Spanish speakers, but Latine had not permeated into either Hue or Bug's communities, demonstrating that the uptake of nonbinary language options can be uneven, with terms gaining traction in different communities at different times or in some communities but not others. If we consider support for genderfluid people more broadly, this means that two different genderfluid people with the "same" ethnic background (at least as far as most demographic data is concerned) might experience significantly different levels of support in their ethnic or racial communities.

Overall, the genderfluid people of color I spoke to desired to build, maintain, or rebuild connections to non-White communities and to their own cultural heritage. This desire was heightened by the fact that they were so often made to feel out of place in White spaces as a result of their race and their queerness. Tome, who is biracial, Indian and White, talked about

how they had to modify their mannerisms during gatherings with their father's family in order to avoid making anyone uncomfortable:

> **Tome:** I guess important context, I am biracial. My mom's family is Indian. My grandmother immigrated back in the sixties. My dad's family is White. They've been living in rural Indiana for like 300 years. As a result, my cultural background is a little weird. I get bits and pieces of everything…
>
> The way I relate to my [race and ethnicity], especially with my journey with queerness and gender, hasn't really involved [my dad's] side of my family a whole lot… because I don't move through the world as a White person. The way we conceive of race and ethnicity, there isn't really room for understanding of race or culture as a spectrum or of a messy fuzzy around the edges sort of thing. So I move through life more like I'm Indian because people see my skin tone and my hair and all of that, and they just go, "Oh, that's a Brown person." It wasn't something that is as salient, even though I see my dad's side of the family a lot more.
>
> I feel like because especially there wasn't as much room to... I guess, I'm trying to think of the best way to describe it. If a White person is trans, that's more of what we're socially expecting. I feel like our idea of gender nonconformity, of trans issues, of nonbinary people, of any of that is very rooted in Whiteness, and so even though I engage with that side of the family more, there's this distance that comes with just... I look very different from the rest of them. And anytime I am engaging with them, it feels like I'm putting on this... Obviously, I'm not being perceived as White, but shifting my mannerisms maybe a little more to fit that idea of rural, Midwestern White people… I don't have a lot of

> particularly notable Indian manners of speaking or carrying myself. And that comes with being second generation, being mixed, all of that. But it does definitely involve toning down a lot of the queerness or even just overt mention of my heritage and my culture from the other side.

Therefore, finding a way to connect with their Indian heritage was really important to Tome. Learning about Hijra communities, and recognizing that their mother's anti-transness was the result of White supremacist colonization, rather than being inherent to Indian culture, helped Tome in this process:

> **Tome:** As I was thinking about my gender and coming to terms with it, seeing historical Indian nonbinary and transgender people was something really affirming to me. This idea that the Hijra as a community have been around for millennia at this point, there's myths about where they came from, their role. They, well, were, kind of are, a very messy... Viewed as very spiritual figures. There were important events that they were there to facilitate because there's this idea that because they have a foot in each pond, I guess, that there's this understanding that comes with that and ways modern Indian society really is not quite the same.
>
> British colonialism did a number on that. The British came in. They tried to make it illegal. There was a lot of harassment. Nowadays, they experience a lot of poverty. They experience a lot of sexual violence. Weirdly enough not a lot of physical violence in that way because it's viewed as bad luck to harm them, which is a really... There's a lot of really weird nuance to that. But looking into that and realizing that it's not just me was

> something very, very empowering because I feel like there's this broader idea that queerness is for White people.
>
> I remember even when I was exploring my sexuality when I was much younger, there was this weird thing of "I can't do that. I'm Brown." Which is not really how... It's not really how it works, but understanding more of the cultural context that I'm from and my heritage and whatnot was really, really powerful for that. Understanding that just because my mom's family may be very homophobic and transphobic now, it points to both the cultural and the historical components in that. It really opened my eyes, made me feel more comfortable in my skin even.

Pear also discussed anti-queerness as colonization in the Indian context. For them, even though they are no longer religious, reconnecting to the religious traditions that they grew up with was an important aspect of integrating their queer identity with their Indian heritage:

> **Pear:** But it was so weird. Because my family was super religious, but then they weren't even reading their own texts that they were like, "Oh yeah, no, this is what being a good Hindu is." And I was like, "No, it's literally not. It's not."
>
> That's one of the reasons why I was like, "I hate religion and I'm giving up on it." Now I'm trying to reconnect to that part of my culture, and I don't identify as a staunch atheist anymore, because I do see the cultural significance of my religion. And I do see that discrimination was never something that it was founded on… even today, Hijra people are seen as holy. Because if a new child is born, a Hijra person has to bless the child. But this is more in the rural areas.

> It was considered that once you're out of the village, and you're out in the city, you've made it. But if you've made it, it also means that you have to hate gender diverse people, and you have to discriminate against them because that's what people in power do…

However, the knowledge that queer people had a place in pre-colonial Indian society, important as it was for Pear, was still not the same as being accepted in Indian and South Asian communities:

> **Pear:** It's very paradoxical, in the sense that I don't feel comfortable going to a lot of Indian, or Brown spaces, like South Asian spaces. Because I know they're going to hate [my gender]. But as I was talking about, my culture has been very, very accepting of queer people.
>
> So it's both, I get to celebrate that. I get to be like, "Oh, my culture has always allowed this to happen. My culture has always been open to people like me." If anything, we're considered the perfect human.
>
> In ancient Indian culture, if you were queer, and if you were, especially in a queer relationship, you were the epitome of being close to god, if you defied these structures. And I was like, "That's so great."
>
> But if I go to a South Asian club, or something like that, no. I'm considered incongruent. I'm considered weird, or having assimilated into White culture. And that's something I've heard about a lot. It's like, "Oh, okay, you're no longer Asian."

…there was a story about Krishna transforming into different people, or genders specifically. He used to transform into women, because he was exiled from a lot of places.

He used to transform into women and become friends with women who were in difficult situations. Then he would help them escape. And then they would all live in this big palace, and he was like, "Oh, they are my wives." But they were not his wives, they were just best friends, because he made it very clear that he did not have any sexual relationships with them. He was just a nice person.

When I was a child, I was like, "I can change genders?" It was so exciting to me. And I remember having this conversation with my mom, I was like, "Oh, I want to be a boy like Krishna." And she was like, "You can be a boy like Krishna, sure." And she let me dress up as him.

I was like, "Oh, I want to grow up and be him." And that was fine. I thought I had that in the bag. I could do it. And then I grew up, and the moment when puberty started, and there were changes to my body, it was like, "You need to turn it off." And it was like, "Okay, you can no longer access that [i.e., be a boy like Krishna]."

But I would say that, just reading about that, and seeing my culture, or being really ingrained in my culture, allowed me to start that journey very early. Because my culture is not restrictive. And that's why it was just a whiplash when I grew up, and I was supposed to fit these little boxes. Because when I was growing up, that was not the case.

> So I think my gender identity and fluidity is definitely… empowered by Indian history, and empowered by Indian mythology because they celebrate diversity. And it gives me a lot of comfort knowing that I would be accepted then, and I would be accepted in those contexts even though currently I'm not.

In the wake of White supremacist colonialization (including anti-queerness), avenues for connection to heritage and ethnic communities could be challenging to find for genderfluid people of color, especially for multiracial interviewees. Charlie went so far as to say that their experience went beyond simply "disenfranchisement" or "disconnect from one's heritage" and was instead more aptly described as an "inability [to engage] in ethnic identity development… it's a separation from a path forward."

Charlie wasn't alone in feeling this separation. Hue described the experience of being multiracial (and therefore not knowing where one fits culturally) as being "racially nonbinary." They desired a more-experienced person in their life, outside of formal arrangements like therapy, who could support them with their ethnic identity development as a mixed race person, but they did not know where they could find such a mentor:

> **Hue:** I just want someone who isn't my parents. I want an adult who I can trust that is not my parents, that I can talk about relationships with.
>
> Actually, another support group that I have is my couples therapist. So my partner and I go to couples therapy at our college campus and we have a queer Latino therapist and he is phenomenal. And he's definitely a huge support, but again, that's in a very limited setting. I would love to have a queer mentor, or even just a mentor, in general, that I

could talk to about life things that was an adult. Who I could, who was just in my life all the time, that I didn't have to specifically see in class or in therapy.

I would love to have an adult who could help me answer difficult questions about racial identity, mixed identity, especially. And I think the gender, the gender stuff I have more support for. But all of my close friends are White and don't, can't really provide that more ethnic, minority, weird, confusing racial identity support that I think I'd also want from an adult mentor. So that's really the main thing I'd want, and something that I have really been wanting for a very long time and haven't found…

Because, well, first of all, my Latino side which is my dad's, we don't have super strong relationships with anyone on his side of the family. They also don't live near us. They live in [the southern United States]. And, also, I'm not sure that they're asking the same questions that I'm asking. My dad's sister tries to make herself sound and look more White by using her husband's last name instead of her Cuban last name. And, also, I don't know, my dad and I have talked about racial identity a lot, but… I have the experience that I think a lot of mixed people have, which is everyone telling us what our identity obviously is. When to everyone it seems super obvious, but everyone's saying different things. And it's like I have to deal with all the different things that people are saying, and it's like I don't know what's going on. I'm trying to develop this concept of my racial identity, but then people are telling me that it's obvious. People are telling me that I'm White, people are telling me that I'm Brown. People are telling me that I'm... Once, my friend yesterday… said that she's racially nonbinary, and that hit really hard, and I was like, that's it. That's the one.

Ladybug echoed Hue's experience. They are mixed race, Native and White, but grew up without a connection to their Native culture or even realizing they had Native ancestry. Even still, they are consistently read by others as non-White because of their darker skin tone:

> **Ladybug:** It was like, "Well, I'm White," and [people would] look at me and they're like, "No, you are not. You are too dark to be White." And I'm like, "No, I know I'm White, looking at my skin tone." So it's always been, "I know I'm this." And I never grew up in the Native culture… So it has always been, "Okay, you're White. You're just White."

Ladybug learned about their Native ancestry as an adult through doing family tree research and speaking to their grandparents. They found comfort through learning that Two Spirit people had a place in many Native communities pre-colonization and desired to learn more about their Native heritage, but weren't really sure how to connect respectfully, or even if it was appropriate to connect at all:

> **Ladybug:** …it was always told by my grandparents. My great-grandmother... I don't know my father's side of the family. So, my grandpa's mom was… Siksika Blackfoot, and… Cherokee. And then, on my grandma's side of things, her… mom was… Blackfoot. And then [as an adult] I was doing the family tree and I hit one of the leafs and it went back centuries… So all the little bits and pieces finally came together that, yes, I am Native, but now, what's my percentage? How much am I truly?
>
> And then with TikTok being a thing, I am on the Native side of TikTok, and a lot of… Natives that are in my generation and just the generation above me will say that blood quantum does not matter. That is generally just a government thing. So I want to know

> my percentage, but I am not worried about it. I know, based on actual family tree research, that I am Native and that's all I care about…
>
> after it was "okay, I know I am [Native]," I got older, I started looking more and more into my culture, and I learned the name of [two] spirit… So it is a thing in Native culture…
>
> I would love to meet with some other Natives… [to ask] "Hey, this is what I know. What are your thoughts on it?" [I want] to understand the culture because I now know that there are Pow Wows, and this regalia is connected to this, and this dance is connected to this, and this mythology is connected to this. But it was never a thing when I was little… Now that I'm older, I definitely want to attend a Pow Wow. I'm interested in learning the history of the dances and I'm interested in learning about anything and everything that I could without wanting to come off as offensive…

Tome similarly struggled with finding a way to engage with a non-Western conception of gender that was connected to their cultural heritage, but without colonizing a space/community/identity that was not theirs. They felt an affiliation with Hijra identity but recognized that being Hijra required a specific connection to community practice that they did not have:

> **Tome:** I've gone back and forth on using the term Hijra for myself because it's a really rich third gender tradition in India and I think really speaks to very important in non-Western conceptions of gender in the way that it's about the social role that you're performing. It's not about this idea of trying to pass as a binary gender in society. That's something that I've found really, really powerful and impactful.

> The main reason I haven't fully settled on using it is just because it is a term that does refer to various established communities. While I am South Asian and I do conceive of my gender in a very similar way, I don't want to make any sort of claim about my identity that may not be accurate. I don't really want to step in spots that aren't necessarily mine. Especially because for a lot of Hijra communities in India, there's certain rites of initiation that you have to go through involving a form of bottom surgery. It's not what people generally think of when they think of bottom surgery in the west, but.... It's something that because I haven't experienced, I don't know if it's really my place to claim that label.

Later during the member check, Tome explained how their thinking had evolved on their identity:

> **Tome:** In our interview, I mentioned my uncertainty around using the term Hijra for myself. After doing some reflection, I've concluded that I think the term is not one I use for self-identity, not because I feel as if I am "not Indian enough" but rather because Hijra communities are built around a more traditionally transfeminine experience, as well as not experiencing the Hijra culture.

Tome ultimately came to an understanding of their gender and heritage that recognized their unique positionality as a genderfluid person with Indian heritage.

So far, interviewees have described several tools that can help genderfluid people of color build an identity that integrates their ethno-racial background with their queerness, including culturally-based nonbinary language and knowledge of the anti-queer impacts of colonization and of the possibility of queer heritages within their culture:

> **Hue:** I think that actually, to go back to the relationship between race and gender, is that I think that the way that I've thought about gender and had to train myself to think about gender has helped me a lot, understanding race a lot better. Because gender has taught me that things can be social constructs that aren't based in any scientific reality and still have a huge effect on culture and the way that we move through the world. And they can also be dismantled and reconstructed and are constantly being done so. And also that the categories and the way that we understand things isn't necessarily correct or broad enough, and that you can introduce new things. Or bring back old things that were colonized and destroyed and are being brought back, or have been marginalized, and are now being given more understanding and spotlight.

This sort of decolonizing and self-advocacy work is exhausting, though. Sometimes, it can even be demoralizing:

> **Jay:** I feel like any effort [on] my part, that if there's ever going to be any change [improving the environment for trans people], we'll all be long dead before we'll able to see it. So that's why I don't [bother], no matter how strongly I feel about it, [it's] not something that I would do for myself… I think because of my country [the Philippines], they've been fucked since after they got invaded four times… So yeah, colonialism, very nice. So yeah, because of that it feels like, my old country is, they have a lot of issues. They have a lot of problems. But everybody's thoughts are to flee to another country. That's what they want… [When you just have that specter of colonialism hanging over you, it's like] Why bother? We're all going to be long dead if they ever recover.

This is where community connection and care was really important for participants. It could provide validation and energy in a way that self-advocacy couldn't on its own. For example, it was only through meeting and becoming friends with another trans person of color that Charlie was able to begin looking into their own story of queerness:

> **Charlie:** I think so much of the struggle around my experience has been a lack of trans people of color in my life. I really don't think there is any way I can unbind my race and my gender identity. It's not even an intersectionality thing… It's like they're completely fused. And my race journey and coming to terms with my identity was matched to my gender. They happened simultaneously. I know that's literally how intersectionality understands itself, but like, I don't experience it as an intersection. I experience it as a fusion...
>
> There are still very few trans people of color in my life that I am aware of and in particular Asian trans individuals. It really was an unpacking of how much of my experience... I would have to play the game: Is this internalized gender problems or is this internalized racism? Who knows? I did not know. It was this really interesting kind of struggle. I really struggled a lot around identifying and being transfeminine because… I think most people [believe] that gay Asian men are the most feminine and androgynous men who are queer. So part of it was like, well am I just really leaning into this or is there something else going on? I now know that there was something else going on, but it was really difficult for me to pull those things apart because if I did have a trans person in my life who I could relate to, they were White.

> It wasn't until much later in graduate school that I started being with another trans person of color as a best friend that I was able to start pulling that apart… In some ways we bonded first over "Man, we sort of feel weird about our gender, but all of the White trans people around us are telling us that we're doing it wrong. So maybe we are doing it wrong." We were doing it right. They're just assholes. That was kind of our foundation before we started to learn how to affirm each other. I mean, I think bonding over other people being terrible is affirming, but not really in the same way that singularly positive affirmation [is].

Most participants found value in meeting with other trans people of color, but explained that it could be difficult to find other trans people who both shared a similar background with you and who you actually liked spending time with when community spaces for trans people of color were so rare, especially for folks who live in predominantly-White areas:

> **Tome:** [I don't have] a very active community [of trans people of color]. I've certainly seen more and engaged with more. A lot of them, just by virtue of people are moving, or, sure, we're both trans people of color, but we also have nothing else in common. It's not a lot of people that I'm necessarily close to, but I have engaged with them more. The Queer Student Cultural Center here on campus has a group for queer people of color. That was a really powerful experience of being able to talk to other people who understand the relationship that our gender and race and ethnicity have. I actually met this person who is like, "I don't use the trans label for myself because I feel like that's a very Western lens. It's not something that people with similar experiences to me in my heritage would've used to describe themselves. So I just don't use the term. Sure, by the medical definition,

> I do meet that." But it's not a term that they use to describe themselves just because they feel like it's a very colonized term, which I think has a lot of merit.
>
> I mean, it's still a term that I use for myself because it's something that resonates with me and I relate to. But hearing that from people, or even just people describing about how there's an extent that androgyny is reserved for Whiteness, and so being able to discuss that with people, where it doesn't feel like I'm just standing here giving a gender studies lecture, is very ... I don't know. It's very nice. It helps me feel a little more supported and like there is a community. I just have to reach out and find them. I don't have… an active community. That sucks sometimes. But I also understand I go to a predominantly White institution. It's going to happen. It is what it is.

Therefore, finding a way to connect with a community often required its own work. Indeed, most of the people of color I interviewed discussed the need to create their own queer spaces in order to find belonging:

> **Emily:** I definitely found queer community at [small liberal arts college]. And so I had met some juniors at the time who were like, "The Queer Straight Alliance is excluding people of color from leadership positions." And it was just super not inclusive. And so they asked me if I wanted to help them create a queer and trans people of color affinity group. And so we did that. And so I think a lot of my first year was spent in that space… It was really great. It was really nice. I think older students were really nice to have around and to make connections with. And I think that was a theme throughout my college experience, is the older students were really mentors in a sense. It was really nice to have that community… they were very just much like, here's what you need to know,

here's the history of these groups on campus. And also outside of the community, just like, here's what I know, here's the knowledge I have. And I don't know, just helpful to navigate.

More than sharing an ethno-racial or queer identity with other members of their community, it seemed most important to interviewees that they had a community of people who shared "close enough" backgrounds that there was some foundation for understanding and with whom they were able to assert their divergent experiences and still be respected:

Ollie: Since high school until now, I create those communities for myself. In high school, I was on the track team and they really wanted me to, I was a really good sprinter, but I did not fit in with the cliques that were on the track team. And I was like, "You know what? Fuck this. I'm going to go pole vault." And I literally left and I went to go and train with the boys and there was no girls pole vaulting coach and then people followed me.

And so that's pretty much what I have done in all of the spaces that I've been in, because we will not have them otherwise. So with disability, the work that I'm doing is to create more access and community in connection between folks in our [university] area. And currently I have, I guess, a few facets of my identity that are met by being in maybe a few communities themselves, but not one of them is going to meet all of those sorts of things. Not everyone has or shares my identities, and I am okay with that.

I think it's going to be really hard for us to find a Caribbean trans person in [small midwestern town] that is also neurodivergent. It's very specific. But that's not a bad thing for me. I think what it does is it gives me a lot of authority over my own experience because I have to check people when they say certain things and make assumptions about

me or my own experience, because they are often not right, because they are not thinking in a way that is intersectional. It doesn't incorporate all of my identity or identities and experiences enough.

So yeah, I do have a lot of spaces where, like my main friend group right now is queer and disabled, but a lot of them are not. They're not people of color. Almost none of them are Black. And that's not something that I necessarily have a problem with.

Importantly, such a community could lead to serendipitous encounters with other trans people who did share a background, simply by virtue of the space being inclusive:

Pear: I do have surprisingly a lot of heterosexual and cisgender people in my life that are people of color and somehow that's more comfortable than affiliating with any queer person on my campus…

And they are also Indian or Pakistani, so most of them are immigrants and, it's really nice to have that bond that I lost [with my family of origin]. But on top of that, they're willing to learn and I feel that for the [White LGBTQ] community that I tried to be a part of, despite celebrating diversity and celebrating inclusion and expression, they were so rigid in their ways. And my friends currently are very open to learning about pronouns and learning about gender and how there is a world outside being cisgender. And they're very comfortable with me starting HRT…

I also met another Indian trans man who I did not know about. I didn't even know he was on campus at all. And I felt that I would have never had access to him if I wasn't a part of my ethnic or racial community… It was really nice because... He was in my room, I've

never met him before… and [my roommate]… introduced me to him and we got really close and he was like, “Oh, I really like your haircut. Where do you get your haircut?” And I was like, “Oh yeah, it's at this super great salon,” whatever. And he was like, “Oh yeah, is it gender affirming?” And I was like, oh my God. Oh my God. It was great.

And it is intimate in many ways that I don't think anyone else understands. And it goes to the smallest of things. He taught me how to bind and we got binders together that weren't hurting his skin. And it was... We're not best friends. We don't hang out all the time, but when I am in a room and I see him, I'm like, okay, I feel comfortable. And he is that source of comfort and just tranquility that I wouldn't... He takes that edge off… [of the feeling that] someone's going to say something that's bad and I'm too tired to correct them, but if I don't correct them, they're going to do this to someone else. And just having another person to fall back onto is, it's good…

Honestly, I would say it's luck. Because I escaped an abusive situation with a roommate, and I ended up in a room [where] my current roommates were all South Asians. And I was so scared that they were not going to accept me.

But they sat me down. They're like, "You need to explain everything to us. And we've done our Googling, we've tried to understand, but we would love your insight on it." That was honestly the first time that has happened.

And within that friend group, there are other people who have said stuff like, "Oh, my parents would never allow that." So that is still very present. I was just lucky with... I lucked out with the people I found.

In other words, inclusive queer spaces, just like any other social environment, can become self-reinforcing if the people within them are committed to maintaining the space, even in the face of a hostile *overculture* (i.e., the dominant culture in a society, whose mores, traditions, and customs are those normally followed in public).

Over the past few chapters we've talked about some of the challenges of building queer community. In the next couple of chapters, let's discuss what support for genderfluid people can look like.

Chapter 10: You're Not Asking for Too Much (Supporting Genderfluidity in Interpersonal Relationships)

At a certain point in the process of earning my PhD, I started getting invited to give talks about how organizations and individuals can support transgender people. In particular, folks would often ask for specific "action items" that they could implement to create a more supportive environment. Although I appreciate the desire to build more inclusive spaces, I always felt odd about the expectation that I should be able to give a 50 minute talk on the "5 Easy Steps to Supporting the Transgender Person in Your Life." I've honestly never really known what to say, other than some variation of "Don't be a jerk," which never felt particularly illuminating to me. So for this project, I wanted to ask participants about their relationships and what they experienced as being supportive or not supportive.

In talking with genderfluid people, four components of supportive relationships consistently came up: 1) safety; 2) acceptance of authenticity and facilitation of agency; 3) respect; and 4) protection and caretaking.

Safety

The foundation of a supportive relationship is safety (both physical and emotional), because safety is a necessary prerequisite to authenticity:

> **Charlie:** I started identifying as trans or nonbinary and going by different names in dating and romantic contexts long before I was in other spaces. Mostly because it meant that if something went wrong, I could eject that person from my life pretty easily. I didn't really date my friends in the same way. And so it was like, "Well, I can do this in this

> context because if someone acts up, I can just cut that one off." And it wasn't until I was much later in graduate school, and frankly was safe and had power, that I actually came out and started using the correct pronouns for myself.

However, genderfluid people (and trans people more generally) are not safe in most spaces and most relationships:

> **Oliver:** Yeah, [coming out as nonbinary] was super awkward. I never really came out officially because… it felt very "uniqueness complex." I struggled a lot with that when I was first figuring out my identity, it felt very almost selfish to be exploring my own identity and realizing that I wasn't like the other girls because I wasn't a girl at all, and putting that together. So when I told people, it took a while after sharing that information. I shared it just to close friends on social media. And once I had shared that, it took a long time to actually feel comfortable in it. I kind of [came out on social media] to push myself out of this rumination, this contemplative state that I was in because I just needed to get it out of my brain and into reality.
>
> So that experience was, I mean, it's also continual. I still have to talk about that pretty often. They say that you never finish coming out, like, it's a lifelong process and so I definitely feel that. But having to name it and be like, "Yes, this is the term for how I identify and I see myself in this term," is a very big deal to how other people see me.
>
> And so we were talking earlier about safety and I didn't feel safe putting such a concrete term in association with myself when cis het people could see that and then interact with it and that would affect my own sense of safety. And so I struggled with that for a long time before being more open about it gradually.

Interviewees stressed that safe people do not act entitled to information about anyone else's gender. Information about a person's gender identity should be considered private unless you have explicitly been told you can share that information with others:

> **V:** And people also need to respect that you should never, ever out someone without their consent. Because that can just be dangerous. Not only can people face discrimination in general, but people could be hatecrimed. So people need to be aware that the expectation is that that person comes out [for themself], unless they give you permission.

Safe people can be trusted to act as a sounding board. Even a person who affirms genderfluidity might still be an unsafe person if they cannot be trusted to avoid gossip:

> **Emily:** I have some people in my [life] who identify as they/them strictly. And there's probably one that I feel like I could talk to more than the other. But it's also just like, if I tell someone that I'm thinking of, I mean, anything related to gender, I feel like then everyone will know… [because they're] pretty gossipy…
>
> I think just being able to confide in someone and not worry about it spreading to other people. And I think what would feel most comfortable is if I had someone that I could talk to about this and not worry that, okay, I've said this, now I can't take it back and I can't really change my mind because it just feels like once I put it out there, that I'm questioning my gender identity, then I can't really retract that.

Furthermore, a safe person will not use a particular gender expression as an excuse to ignore what someone says about their own gender:

> **V:** So, the people that are closest to me, I feel like they understand and respect my gender. So, using he/him pronouns as people in my inner circle, I feel like they're less likely to associate me with an idea of what a he/him should be. So, that's why the people that I'm the most comfortable with, I trust them. I feel safe and heard by them. I know that I won't be perceived differently or held to this gender standard just for using certain pronouns. But in public, because socially, people just expect you to be a certain way based on the words you use, I use they/them because there are a lot less expectations for how you're supposed to be if you use neutral pronouns.

When someone lacks safety in a relationship, they may pull back from that relationship to protect themselves. This pulling back can occur on a physical or an emotional level, and may not be obvious to the unsafe person:

> **Crow:** I think that my queerness does affect how I communicate. If I am with my family, who I'm not out to, and I don't feel like myself, I will communicate less effectively because I can't talk the way I want to talk, which is more effeminate and a little bit more flamboyant, depending on whatever we're talking about. And that definitely affects the way I can communicate with them. If I feel uncomfortable with a person, then I can't share my ideas. And I do think that that has affected... I'm always known as the quiet one in my family, but I'm not really that quiet. I just don't know how to talk to them because they don't know that I'm queer, so I can't express myself in a way that makes sense to me or would be considered out of character.

Because genderfluid people experience so many unsafe spaces, we sometimes get used to lacking safety, and it can impact how we understand our own experiences:

Charlie: Probably when I was younger I would put myself in the couch surfing category. So for the first two and a half years of undergrad, it was no contact with my parents. And so at school I had a dorm, but then anytime during breaks I would go staying with a friend. Even if my parents were living three miles away, I would not be at their house. I would be staying with a friend. And part of why I really wanted to do my study abroad in Canada is because it would mean I had a bed. And so I think the college equivalent of couch surfing because I only had to navigate it during breaks, which made it much easier…

But if you had asked me during that period of time, I would've said that my home was the university because I didn't have another home to go to… I think I would've referred to it as couch surfing as if that's what college students did and just bar the fact that I was just afraid to interact with my... I had gone no contact with my parents because my mother was hostile to queerness and so I couldn't return home. Because that was such a normative experience for gay people, it didn't occur to me that that was a problem. Which saying out loud is obviously a problem, but I don't think I would've labeled it as unstably housed, even though I would've said I don't have a home…

[I couldn't go home because] my mother doesn't get it. She really wants me to visit Jamaica because she is Jamaican, even though you can kind of legally kill gay people there. And she's like, "Just pretend that you're straight, it'll be fine." That's the vibe she has. It doesn't occur to her. And I was like, I can't be in this space when I am mentally unstable, still figuring things out. And my relationship with my parents are much better now because they know that I can cut them out if I want to.

When we normalize lacking safety, it can also impact what we are willing to ask of others. Just because someone isn't making a big deal about something, that doesn't mean that the behavior isn't hurtful:

> **Hue:** When I said that I didn't feel like my transness was allowed in my high school, it was very much at school. Whereas, when I went to a summer program that had trans people in it, and it wasn't like a trans program, but there was one trans person there and I was like, that's enough. And it was at a college in my hometown that was very progressive. I was able to use they/them exclusively for the first time in my life. And I was like, yeah, this works, this is great. And then when I went back to school, I didn't do that, because no one asked my pronouns. And if they had, I might have said they/them, but no one asked so I never did.
>
> I was never really invited to be openly trans. I would've had to make a stink about it. Which is, again, not really my style. If I'm not being actively invited to exist in my fullness, I'm probably not going to give people the privilege of experiencing my fullness…
>
> It's not my style to ask people to utilize my pronouns, because I just feel really uncomfortable doing that. It just is like, it makes me feel like, I don't know, I have complex feelings and probably internalized transphobic feelings about… asking to be accommodated. And that's really uncomfortable, to ask someone, "Hey, can you actually do this for me?" And you never know how they're going to respond. So it's not really my style to push through that discomfort, I usually just avoid it. Whereas, if it's other people, I will make an absolute stink if they want me to. And I'll make a stink about other things

all the time. But when it comes to pronouns, it's also something that I'm like, it's not really something that I fight for very much in myself, or with other people about myself.

To give another example, when I asked Ollie, “Is there any support that you wish you had received around your queerness as a young person?” they responded:

> **Ollie:** I don't think it would've been possible. In an ideal world, I would've been just accepted and I would've been a very, very happy kid with all of that. But if I'm thinking about it now, I really don't think of anything in particular because I came from where I was as a kid and it all shaped me and I feel very secure where I am right now. So it's hard to say, "Well yeah I should have had XYZ sort of support," because that would've changed who I am just fundamentally in my experience of my own gender altogether. Because if someone had said to me as a kid that, "Oh yeah, you can absolutely just, I don't know, do XYZ sort of thing," if I had been on puberty blockers or something like that, who's to say I would have the same experience of gender that I do right now? What if it's like, "You know what? I had a small chest and I didn't really like it actually," it could just be completely opposite. I don't know.
>
> But it would've been maybe nice to feel like I had maybe even just a few folks that could understand what I was dealing with. But I mean I found the community online that felt similarly and I didn't necessarily need to have them in person.

However, Ollie responded differently when I rephrased the question to instead ask, “Let's say that you either have your own child or you're helping raise a child of somebody close to you. What would you want for them as a young person? Let's say that they're sort of exploring their

gender, they seem to have an expansive gender themselves. What would you want for them in an ideal world?" To this alternate phrasing of the question, Ollie replied:

> **Ollie:** That they can do whatever they want. They can engage in things however they'd like and that play is a perfect place to do that. You can have all of those experiences and you can explore what it might feel like to, I don't know, wear whatever you want to wear or do the things that you want to do that are associated with a gender that maybe you're not feeling or you are feeling, just anything. They would be able to have that sort of safety and freedom within the home and then also within the community.

So how can we build the sort of safe space that Ollie would want to exist for their hypothetical child?

Acceptance of Authenticity and Facilitation of Agency

To be supportive, relationships need to give people room to be themselves without question. This is a particularly big deal for genderfluid people because our internal sense of our gender and/or our gender expressions change:

> **Tasha:** [My ideal romantic] relationship would have a lot of respect, like I'll respect the person that will respect me, and I feel like, I know this is going to sound crazy, but I thought about that the other day. I'm like, okay, if I'm in a relationship with somebody, let's say I have my own apartment. The person wants to come live with me, but how would that go when I know that I wear these masculine outfits and these different wigs? How am I supposed to do that? And then it's just, in my culture, in the African American culture, hair is a really big thing… and then I'm just like, am I supposed to get a sew-in?

Because sew-in could last typically for a couple of months, two, three months. Should I get a sew-in with a weave and then just let my wigs go and just be feminine all the time? Then I'm just like, how would that even work?

But… a perfect relationship for me would be respect mutual on both ends. Somebody that I could be myself with, they could be their selves with. We work towards goals, have nice jobs, careers, all of that type of stuff, but then I also think about that other side of me. With a man, you definitely would have to let your other side go because a man that's attracted to women only, he's not going to want my masculine side because he's masculine. So that's another thing that I thought about. I do talk to someone that I do like, but he's a masculine person. So it's just, I know that if I ever was in a relationship with the type of men that I've talked to… they're attracted to my feminine side and not the masculine side of me.

So it's just, I don't know… I'm talking to somebody [to potentially date]. They know the feminine side of me, but then they don't know the masculine side of me, which is, that's like 90% of me. So the feminine side is kind of 10%, 15% of me… me having a perfect relationship with somebody, is somebody who accepts me for me, the masculine and the feminine…

We need the people in our lives to go along with these changes:

Ladybug: My girlfriend… is my biggest relationship… She is just straight out female. And we actually met while we were both still in high school. And she was the first person that I came out as trans to. She knew I was genderfluid. She knew my preferred name because [name] was one that I went by at one point. And then I switched to the name Ace

after Ace Frehley of Kiss because I'm a huge Kiss fan. And within the last about six months, I've been switching back to [name] because it has connection to my grandparents. That's what they wanted to name me when I was born. That is not what was chosen, but it is the one that I am happiest with. But [my girlfriend] knew and it was never judgment on that... And if my gender changes, it's, "Well, are you female or male of the day or are you just..." Because the nickname for me is Bear, "Or are you just Bear today." So it's little things like that…

The other [person I want to talk about], and as I mentioned, I am polyamorous, is one of my crushes. She is a trans woman and she is very much, "Okay, just tell me whatever you're feeling." And just she understands, considering I've known her since the very early on when I was 11. She was not the one to bring up, "Hey, are you genderfluid?" But I did know her at that age. It was someone that I could be like, "Oh, I'm like this." And even at that point, "Oh, okay, cool." And even now, the very same way. And still, a very good relationship, a very good friendship, where I don't have to worry about if, hey, I do come out again or something does change again, I'm not going to be judged for it.

We also need our communities to be flexible enough to change with us:

Oliver: I'm very involved in queer Jewish activism and forming supportive community spaces on my campus. One of the situations in which I feel most feminine is in Jewish spaces because there's… a sense of community among Jewish women specifically that is more about your role and relationship with community and with your religion than with the gender itself. I grew up helping my mother, and my aunt, and my cousin in the kitchen during holidays because it's something that Jewish women do. It wasn't like men

didn't come in and help out, but there's sort of like a camaraderie that comes from religious tradition and ritual.

…I grew up in Reform Judaism specifically, and my answer would differ significantly if I had grown up in a different branch of Judaism. I think that having the freedom to interact with my religious identity and form it however I wanted to allowed me to form a really healthy relationship with it and find a lot of resources within Judaism to help me on my gender journey. There's a lot in Jewish literature and beliefs that I have found to be really helpful with that, specifically in terms of sexuality and gender…

But something specifically that I do is go to Sabbath services every Friday. In doing that, I... I've started to wear a yamaka [a traditionally-masculine piece of clothing in Judaism]… That was super gender euphoric for me doing that… I have a nonbinary friend who is Orthodox... Since I first joined the Jewish community on campus to when I started doing queer Jewish activism and cultivating that safe space for queer Jews, there is now a policy for Orthodox Jewish services. Usually they have something called a mechitza, which is a wall, basically, between women and men to sit in order to pray. It's still up, but people who don't feel like one or the other side makes sense are allowed to just sit at the middle, either in front of or behind the mechitza just because they can. That used to not be something that was acceptable at all. So like little changes in general culture and acceptance have really impacted the ability to participate in rituals and practices that make me feel gender euphoric or make my friends feel gender euphoric… It's extremely emotional and amazing to see, and also nice for me personally because I'm able to find new ways to express my intersectional identities.

A space that accepts authenticity is also supportive of agency. Pear shared a really clear example of how these two processes are intertwined:

> **Pear:** Yeah, so I really like my roommate group. They're amazing… They're all premed, which is really interesting because they're like, "Oh, once I have an access to all that, I really want to make sure that I'm being supportive of genderfluid people." And one of my roommates is actively, every time she goes to the clinic, she comes back and she's like, "Oh, I just hate how it's so centered to cisgender people and I hate it and how can I make this space better?" And I was like, "Well, there are a lot of things you can do." And we have those productive conversations all the time. And in fact, a lot of, one of my roommates has talked to her parents about being genderqueer. Her Indian parents were religious and even they were like, "Yeah, we're cool with it." And just seeing that I'm accepted by my community, not only in my age group, but also their parents has been really nice…
>
> I think my partner has really helped me have these conversations with my roommates because I always felt like I wasn't going to tell my preferred pronouns to my roommates. I was like, "Yeah, I don't want to make them uncomfortable." And [my partner was] like, "It's not making anyone uncomfortable." And that was when my partner encouraged me to really bring my identity and gender into the conversation with my roommates. And when I did, [my roommates] were very accepting of it. And I think in a space where gender is so important, because everyone is a cisgender woman in my room and most of the friends in our friend group are cisgender women and there's a very specific prototype

> you're prescribed, you have to act a certain way, dress a certain whatever, and having me around really emphasizes that gender difference.
>
> Despite me not fitting in with everyone, allowing to just be myself and respecting my pronouns and respecting my space and my needs in a context where gender so prevalent is empowering versus my partner, where we don't think about gender because we really reinforce in our relationship that gender shouldn't shape how we interact with each other. And that that is something that we get to determine and that is our personal journey and we'll support each other. Like, my partner has been really supportive through the HRT process, but that has never limited how we interact with each other. So I think it's different context and in those different contexts how gender is emphasized or deemphasized has helped me gain a better sense of my gender identity.

It was only because Pear's partner made them feel comfortable to share their gender with their roommates (facilitating agency) that Pear's roommates were able to create a supportive space for Pear (acceptance of authenticity).

Discomfort with or refusal to talk about gender demonstrated a lack of acceptance:

> **V:** [People need to] not mak[e] it seem sexual to just identify as a being. Because that's why my mom won't talk to me about gender. She's just like, "I don't need to hear about your sex life." It's like, it's not my sex life. It's me as a person.

That said, "making a big deal" of gender could also demonstrate a lack of acceptance:

> **Rennan:** [Hiding is] something I sort of learned. It's not innate, it's something I sort of learned to do as I got older. But I feel like me as a person, I've definitely started to hide

more out-there aspects of my life. And genderfluidity is about as, it's weird. It's weird. People still think being trans is weird. Genderfluidity is weird-weird.

It's one of those things where it's like, while I like being weird, I found that I don't like being, hated is the wrong word. I don't know, I feel like I've sort of ... I don't like people treating me as less than for being weird. I'm fine with being weird. I'm fine with being out there. I'm not so fine with people avoiding me because it's too much. Or getting weird around stuff. I'm a very open, blunt, vocal person about stuff. And when I talk about stuff like genderfluidity, people just, they get scared. I think that's what it is. I think that's what it is. I like being weird. I like being out there. I don't appreciate when people get too scared to interact with me.

Indeed, some participants specifically described how relieving it could be to spend time in a space that was de-gendered altogether. Charlie talked about spending time with their grandfather in a way that felt safe and nonthreatening:

Charlie: I think going back to the original supportive space, kind of counterintuitively, in this kind of masculine boyhood narrative, my grandfather ... my paternal grandfather died when I was very young. Looking back at photos of me, I look so anxious as a child that it looks like I'm going to vibrate out of existence. I'm just constantly alarmed. And he would take us fishing in South Florida, and the idea of killing something around fishing was absolutely horrifying, but the idea of just sitting there quietly with ideally a fishing rod with no bait was a really great experience for me because it was one of the few times in which silence, and quiet, and calmness was encouraged. So it was one of the few spaces in which I was able to calm my anxiety. When you're doing that kind of

> experience, identity also didn't really matter. Sea salt is a very safe scent for me. I wouldn't say it was identity related because I was very young, but it was probably one of the few spaces where I didn't feel extraordinarily anxious and threatened. It was like pre-identity, in a way.

And Jay talked about online spaces, where they did not have to worry about performing their gender in a way that would be read correctly to be respected as their gender:

> **Jay:** [I'm] definitely [out] online. Definitely on Discord. And I like how sometimes they can't tell if I'm a boy or a girl. That's how I prefer it.
>
> Sometimes of course it leaks out. I don't know. Sometimes, I already have a pretty good voice sometimes. Actually went to speech therapy for a bit… I just hate… when I talk over the phone, it's not like I can talk about the, "Can you use they and them instead?" I just want to make it already hard for them to tell…
>
> And that's also why I prefer being online because it feels like gender doesn't exist unless you already have a female name. So it's like we're just souls or brains just talking to each other. No, body parts at all, which is awesome… Online I forget that there's even genders to begin with, even for other people.

In both these cases, the de-gendered space offered interviewees a rest from having to worry about what others thought about them. Instead, they could just be. These spaces are not supportive of genderfluidity because they avoid gender; instead they are supportive because *they make it easy to be any* gender.

In other words, the goal of a supportive space should be to center personhood (which includes difference), rather than to create otherness (which is obsessed with difference to the point that it obscures personhood):

> **Rennan:** A lot of media is about overcoming the bizarreness of being trans or genderfluid. It's never about just being a person. It's always like, "Because they're trans, they have to deal with these issues… because they're genderfluid, they're not understood." Can we introduce the concept of just being a person? Because I think that's what fed into my mom's fears [when I transitioned]. When all the media is about the struggles or the joy of overcoming the struggles, it doesn't matter if the story's depressing or encouraging. It's still about difficulty. It's always about otherness. It's always about standing out and overcoming standing out, and not just about me sitting at home playing [a video game]...
>
> It's not like I wake up, and I'm like, "Oh, God, I'm trans." Then I go to work. "Oh, God, I'm genderfluid." …I'm just here living life. I have a beard. I have a vagina. Sometimes I wear thigh highs and a skirt, and I don't give a shit. I'm just chilling. I'm not losing my goddamn mind over my gender all the time. When it affects me, it affects me. But it's not always there. I'm just sitting here.

To demonstrate acceptance, genderfluidity needs to be a part of conversation, but it should not be THE conversation:

> **Linda:** I don't know that I will ever land at a point where I feel like I know myself completely. I think that there will always be things outside of my cognition and my knowledge. And so that's less important to me. And understanding how I feel and how I

> engage in how I understand myself in any given moment is more important. So I don't think I could nail down a word for my gender. Genderfluid is one. Agender could be another, trans could be another... I don't fucking know. And I don't feel a need to know. And so I think it feels a little lazy sometimes because I'm like, "I don't know, I don't care, it doesn't matter." But I think my work has given me the opportunity to engage in the conversation a lot, which does feel supportive of my identity.

In the ideal circumstance, it should not be left up to the trans person alone to find the courage to be open with their community. Supportive communities explicitly invite expressions of authenticity:

> **Tome:** I had a community of Discord that I was really involved in. They were very, very open about like, "Hey, feel free to experiment with things. All of us have changed our name twice since coming in here." That was really where I ended up exploring a lot of my early forays into gender.

When interviewees talked about their process of recognizing themselves as genderfluid, many of them discussed how important it was to have someone who opened a conversation about their gender, which then allowed them to question their gender:

> **Linda:** There was a moment… it was the first moment that someone asked me [what my gender was], which allowed me to question it, that allowed me to understand it. But before that I just didn't question it. And so it just always was. And so it's always interesting to reflect back on that. So I was in grad school… when my friend who always procrastinated on all of his papers, he needed an interview person. He needed a participant. And so I was his participant. And it was at the very end and he was asking me

his demographic questions. And he did it in a way that was not helpful. But helpful for me, but not the way that you should ask them.

He's like, "You're White, right?" And I was like… I am White." And he's like, "Identify as female." And I was like, "Ooh, that's a good question. I don't know because I don't know what that means." And that felt distinctly different than White, which, not trying to compare race and gender… but like him asking me that question allowed me to actually consider it. And so I was like, "Check yes for now. And I don't know, so I'll get back to you." So it was in that moment that I was able to actively start thinking about gender to come to a different understanding than I had up until I was 25…

[This moment with my friend felt different than other times I had been asked about my gender because] it was a conversation and I don't know if I had access to a conversation around it before. My other thought that feels maybe more accurate is… my friend, our relationship and dynamic was always thoughtful. And so just interacting with him… pulls me to a place where I'm more introspective. It's just who he is and it's just how we interact. And so because I was with him, and our default is introspective and thoughtful and critical and deliberative, I think I just went there more naturally than I typically would…

I didn't know options, or I didn't have language, or I didn't have education around these things. So because I liked boys, I thought I was straight. I didn't realize that there could be other options in addition to that. And so I think earlier access to education around the topics of identity and all identity, not just, we touched briefly on race. But all identities would be helpful. So education, I think more representation, more people who could have

conversations. Because it's not lost on me that the moment I had a conversation with [my friend] about this is the moment I started questioning it. And so I think having someone to have those conversations with would be cool.

Supportive conversations avoid shaming people for who they are and for their growing process:

Julian: I feel like my friends are supportive of me and are willing to give me the grace of just experimenting with things or trying things. So that's cool. And in a way, some of my family members I feel like are the same way, that they'll just be like... No matter what I say, if it's "I'm going to stop testosterone" or "I want you to call me something else or use he/him pronouns" or whatever, I feel like there are family members and friends who would be like, "Okay, cool." But I don't know about supportive as a verb, I don't know what that necessarily would look like even. No one's encouraging me to have those conversations…

I guess my ex, who I first started talking about gender with [encouraged conversations]. Her friends were some of the first trans people that I met. She is cis and I was cis when... I identified that way when I dated her. But the conversations that we had… helped. It challenged me and pushed me in a way that helped me become more comfortable with who I am…

In general, I feel like she really opened up my world to different things in a lot of ways. She just had more radical views than what I was used to at the time. She was just an opinionated person who put herself out there and was everyone's advocate and whatnot. And so there were things as her partner that I was just like, "I don't know how I feel about that. I don't know how I feel about you putting yourself out there and knowing that you're

> going to get arrested at this protest." This was probably 2012 or something. This is pretty early on. And so there were things like that. Those types of conversations that often present themselves as conflicts because we both were from New Jersey, and that's also very cultural, that you work through things through arguments about them. So there were those types of conversations about gender, about all things. The world and the way that things are, that I feel like were consistently pushing me and opening up my mind to different perspectives that I wasn't aware of…
>
> That was the first relationship where I really noticed that I was flip-flopping [my gender], I guess you could say, in my own mind, with fantasies and when I was having sex. Just the way I was feeling. That's the first time I noticed that. I think that I had experienced that in other relationships in the past, but I only started naming it when I was with her. And I would say she encouraged me to just be open about those things or lean into it a little bit, and didn't have... there was no shame associated with feeling or wanting to explore gender.

Indeed, avoiding shaming others requires rethinking one's own understanding of gender. It is not possible to make space for genderfluid people to exist authentically without challenging binary gender and the oppressive institutional forces (like racism and ableism) that are intertwined with binary gender:

> **Ollie:** So actually, I don't even really tell people [that I am genderfluid]… after I had top surgery, I was like, "Yo, whatever people think, they're going to think, and I don't even care." Because it's really stupid and irritating when I open my mouth to speak, and that's when people are like, "Okay, you're a girl." And I'm like, "Interesting." But I don't

actually explain my gender to anyone aside from, "Hey, don't gender me. These are my pronouns." It feels weird to me to even have to be pressed to do that…

[Authenticity for me is] an internal thing. So people can perceive me in whatever way they want to, that's their prerogative, whatever, I don't care. And also, it says something about them. But I can't be something that I am not. It just does not work for me. It feels like a betrayal of the self.

And this has always irked me, but I have the language to talk about it now, thank goodness. But when I was younger and I would get all of these forms or have to fill out some sort of survey and it was like, "Are you African American?" There was not a Black category. And I'm like, "No," because I'm not in the sense that what they're talking about is African American culture, and that's not it. And maybe I'm a naturalized American of African heritage way down the line, but immediately, my family has immigrated here. One generation back, my family was not in America. So it means something to me to be truthful about who I am and where I'm coming from.

So when it comes down to gender, I can dress however I want to dress, and I can wear whatever I want to wear, because it's my stuff. And also, anyone who has a problem with what I put on my body is weird. But also, that to me doesn't change my own feelings about who I am. If someone says to me, "You can't wear those pants, you need to put on something else. You can't dress in a certain way," or those sorts of things, well, that's different. And those things that are dictated by other people saying that I should do X, Y, Z, or live in certain ways that don't line up with my own experiences or beliefs about myself, that's when I feel like it becomes me not being authentically who I am and

> presenting myself in a way that is just false… Then we're going to fight. Then we're going to have a problem.

Authentic spaces leave room for genderfluid people to exist as their full selves. For people of color like Ollie, this means a supportive space must have room for their specific cultural background. For disabled people like Crow, a supportive space must be accessible and make room for disability:

> **Crow:** The contextualizing of being neurodivergent really came from times of Not-Crisis, it was more just regular conversation and it was like, I don't know, [my friend] would talk about being autistic and some of those traits, and then I would be like, "That's an autistic trait? That's weird because I do that." And they were like, "Oh, really? Interesting." And it just kind of kept, that happened often enough that my friend was like, "There's no way in hell you're not autistic." So I was just like, "Okay, cool. Is there anything I should do with this information?" They were like, "If you want to."
>
> And I was like, "Okay." But most of me figuring out that was through just them talking about their experiences with autism and their experiences with doctors, and their experience being autistic in social situations, and then me relating to that. And not necessarily in any kind of me having... Like I've never had any kind of... I never felt uncomfortable with the idea that I was autistic or even worried about it, just that it might be a thing, and they knew before I did, and so just talking about it helped me think my way through it. And then after I was able to contextualize that with them, I was able to actually relate that with my gender a little bit and think about how that has influenced my communication of gender.

> In terms of gender stuff, they didn't help me think through it or talk through it, just because they didn't know how. They just kind of listened, and I think that was also very good. I think that they were exercising the idea that everybody's gender is very unique on their own thing, and that their experience of gender was not something that they could, or my experience of gender was not something that they could understand because it's not their experience of gender.

Consistently, assumptions were seen as closing off space for authenticity. If the conversation about race, ethnicity, or disability is too narrow, a space can inadvertently leave some genderfluid people out:

> **Oliver:** [Disability has] affected the way I've explored my gender and the freedom that I give myself to do so, but I think that my neurodivergency definitely impacts the way other neurodivergent trans people interact with me and my gender…
>
> I am living on a college campus. A lot of the people in my community right now are very much at the cutting edge of gender and the intersection of gender and neurodivergency. I'm a little bit divorced from that because I'm a little bit older, and that was just never something that my friends got into, so this is a little bit new to me. But pretty much in every queer space I've been in on campus there has also been conversation around disability and even terms like autigender [i.e., a gender identity used by some autistic people who experience their gender as deeply influenced by and even intertwined with their autism] or things like that that are the very tangible intersection between, in that case, autism and however someone views their gender. But, it impacts the way that other people see me.

> I'm really having trouble articulating this just because people assume that I'm neurodivergent. And they are correct, but they don't always necessarily understand how I'm neurodivergent. They talk about gender with me in ways that might resonate more with someone who's autistic, but I'm not autistic, but I do have ADHD. I just interact with those topics a little bit differently.

Therefore, accountability is an important part of building a space that can be inclusive of the diversity that exists withing the genderfluid population. Importantly, holding people accountable is not the same as shaming them, and is a part of making space for authenticity by facilitating agency. Rennan talked about how their best friend helped them unlearn some of the hurtful patterns that they had been taught growing up within evangelical Christianity:

> **Rennan:** The thing is that the transmasculine people who I would know in high school were not transitioned. And to breach this point, the person who I was in high school was not a good person. So there was a lot of making fun of people and a lot of belittling identities that [my friends and I] thought were frivolous… cruel[ly] if someone [hadn't] taken medical steps, [we didn't] take them seriously. So the transmasculine people that I met in high school, as the person that I was then, I didn't really process that as being applicable to me because that's not what I wanted. You know? That's not who I wanted to be. I needed to be deprogrammed to accept myself…
>
> [I met] my best friend… in high school, through some people… and we were like soulmates. And for a while she was the token, the last surviving cishet of the people who I maintained contact with after [high school].

> She's still in the questioning phases of stuff, but she's a big part of the reason why I was able to just become better. I don't know what it was exactly, we just clicked, we were friends, and she wasn't a dick. And I wanted to be like her, I guess. And I wanted to be less of a dick, so I could be closer of a friend with her. And she got me on Tumblr, she got me from 4-Chan and Reddit, to Tumblr, and encouraged my joining different parts of the internet, being more involved in fandoms and a lot more liberal spaces. And we're still friends. I mean, we're still currently trying to work out a rooming situation for next year…
>
> [My genderfluidity is] something that she's aware of. She was one of the first people to know about it. And she's aware that even after my… Because some people aren't aware that after my transition I'm still genderfluid. They think that my being trans was me finally selecting one. So she's one of the few people who's still fully aware that I'm still genderfluid. And that's sort of got her thinking about gender too…
>
> We can just chill and be whatever together. We could bro down. We can also go watch Mamma Mia together. We can be the two most obnoxious people in that theater together.
>
> We're, just by virtue of us just knowing each other so much and so well by now, it's one of those things where we might not always talk about [gender] explicitly, but… if I suddenly start acting totally different or dressing a little bit different, it's not like she's going to be like, "Whoa." [She's just going to take it all in stride], and vice versa. When we're together, we're not genders. We're just friends.

As Rennan's story demonstrates, facilitating agency isn't just about always agreeing with someone. If someone is behaving hurtfully, expecting them to behave differently, especially

when paired with resources to begin behaving more-kindly, is a form of facilitating agency. This is important to keep in mind because we are all living in a world that trains us into White supremacist cisheteropatriarchy from birth, and so unlearning those patterns is an important part of being able to treat ourselves and others well.

Make careful note though – Rennan's best friend never criticized or tried to change Rennan's gender; she only ever pushed Rennan to change the way that they treated other people. It is common for cisgender people especially, but also sometimes trans people, to justify policing other people's genders by saying that people who do not perform gender a certain way are "giving the community a bad name" or are "just looking for attention." These sorts of criticisms are not about accountability, because they do not address any actual harm. In fact, such criticism shuts down authenticity by enforcing a measure of acting "trans enough" to qualify for community support, which reduces safety for all trans people in a space, but especially for genderfluid trans people whose genders do not align with transnormative expectations. This is where respect becomes a central part of supportive relationships.

Respect

Whereas making room for authenticity was about giving space for the genderfluid person to be themselves, respect is more about acting in accordance with what the genderfluid person expressly says. Respect can only thrive in spaces that already accept authenticity and facilitate agency:

> **Julian:** I guess, ideally... I was just thinking about this in terms of neurodivergence too, because in thinking about... I'm an adult. When thinking about getting or pursuing a diagnosis, if that's something that I were to do, I was just thinking about what that would

mean for me and why I would feel like it would be necessary to do that in order to get the desired result that I want to get. Let me explain, and how that fits into gender as well.

I feel like if we take away the "why people are the way that they are" and focus on the fact that everyone has individual needs and everyone interacts with the world differently and wants to be treated differently and uniquely, and we were comfortable... we were raised, I guess, to be comfortable sharing with other people how we want to be treated. And knowing how we want to be treated. Identifying that within ourselves and what our own needs are, then it kind of takes the why out of it and it's more of like, "Oh, we're just people who interact with the world differently, see things differently. And you're giving me what I need in order to be myself, and I'm giving you what you need in order for you to be your most authentic self."

For me, that is the ideal. And that's a lot of social deconditioning involved in that. A lot. And a lot of systemic stuff that is not involved in that kind of perspective. When there are systems that make you choose or fall into certain categories, you don't really get a choice, necessarily. You have to put a label on what you are. But just interpersonally, that's kind of what I would see the ideal is in terms of gender. That everyone sees gender and embodies gender differently. There's not any two people who are the same in that way. And so it's very much that we're just unique fingerprints, basically, in the world, and less so that we're... transmasculine and nonbinary, or genderfluid, or cis, or trans, that we just are what we are. And yeah, so I was thinking about that in terms of neurodivergence for similar reasons where I feel like if I don't want to look people in the eye when I'm talking

to them, it doesn't matter why that is. It matters that you don't assume that I'm being rude by doing that.

And I feel like I can just communicate that to somebody like, "Hey, I'm not being rude when I do this." And they don't need a reason why. I might just prefer it that way. So anyway, that's kind of what I've been thinking about and where I'm at with that.

The big thing here is trusting the genderfluid person to know their own life and experience, without forcing them to constantly have to reassert themself:

Linda: It'd be cool for people, not just to be well intended, but also to be educated in how to do that or to be able to have one conversation about what that means. And for that one conversation to stick. Yeah. I don't find that it sticks with one conversation often or just a general intuitiveness. I sign all my emails, [Linda], and all my email signature says [Linda], and my legal name comes through on my email. And so people are using my legal name and... I've given you in my email twice how to call me. And you're not doing that. I shouldn't.... That's the best practice. That's easy. And so it's shit like that that I'm like, I just need people to pause a second, and think more critically and use the information that I'm giving you. It's not hard.

Being respectful includes:

1) Accepting the reality of the genderfluid person's gender identity or presentation and using their correct name and pronouns:

V: [I want people to realize] I understand that you don't relate to the information that I'm about to give you. However, this is very important to me and my identity. So, I want you

to at least accept the words that I'm saying… Even if they disagree, they can still accept the reality of it. My grandparents, for example, they're both in their 70s and they gender me correctly, even though they live in a community that is very anti-trans people. It's all very new to them, and they said to me, they're like, "We don't need to understand to accept that it's real." I think that kind of philosophy could be really useful to a lot of people and just accepting other people for who they are, learning and giving everyone space to just exist.

2) Behaving in accordance with supportive asks:

Ollie: …my best roommate had no problems, I had no issue or feelings around how I presented myself, but my other roommates… Sometimes it's tricky because what I wear in public or what I wear going out somewhere is different than what I'm going to wear at home and lounging around in. And if I'm living with someone, of course they're going to see what I'm wearing as lounge wear.

But if I'm living with someone, I would prefer to know when other people were going to be around because that's my presentation at that point then matters because it's not a private situation anymore. It's people are coming into this space and then my reception will be different.

So that's where things can get tricky because I am not as comfortable in certain things as lounge wear as I would be. And I am a little bit particular in what I will wear and rest in. So yeah, that can be a difficult kind of line…

> [With my best roommate] there was just an understanding that, "Okay, we're living together, we're sharing a space, we can communicate with each other respectfully, and we can also be friends." All of those things. And being able to say, "Okay, I respect your needs. I'm going to do this in accordance with your needs and you respect my needs, and so I'm going to do that with you."
>
> So I would ask maybe for a heads up if someone was coming over, it could be even just hours, if not like 30 minutes. But that's enough time for me to like, "Okay, I've set myself up for this. I can manage this or I can leave." And similarly, if they needed something or had those sorts of requests, it's not anything for me to take the time to do something like that for them. And so just that sort of respect was very, very valued.

3) Incorporating the information that the genderfluid person has shared about themself into your treatment of them. For example, when a parent uses phrasing like “you’ll always be my son” when their child has just come out as a transfeminine nonbinary person, that parent has failed to incorporate the new information they have just received about their child:

> **Tome:** As a kid, because I was very mild mannered, I went along with everything. I got a lot of that affection. I was the good kid. I had everything together. Then I got older, and I grew a spine between first coming out. At first, [my mom] was like, "Oh, my God! You can't do this.” … I've been basically told in no uncertain terms that if I ever have a partner, I am not permitted in [my parents’] home. I think my dad is softening up on that as the years go by. My mom is not.
>
> Then again, when I came out as nonbinary, there was this, "Well, you're always going to be my son." I'm like, "I don't want that. It's, in fact, the opposite of what I want.” …At

> this point, I am very content with the fact that once my siblings are 18, I am probably not going to speak to [my mom] again, certainly not unless she does a lot of growing and a lot of changing.
>
> At the same time, there is still a part of me that wants her to approve and to be here with what I'm doing. When I stopped being in engineering, I didn't tell her for almost a year that I was a linguistics major now and that I wasn't going to be in engineering because I was afraid that she would be disappointed. I've made peace with the fact that my mother is not going to attend my wedding. At this point, I'm not giving her an invitation. She can get a save the date, if anything.
>
> But just because I've come to terms with it and I've accepted that that's the reality of things, it doesn't mean that it doesn't feel like a loss and something that hurts. It's a relationship that's been very impactful in my life, even if it's something that's caused me a lot of hurt and pain. I am still unpacking some of the issues I've developed now, and I haven't lived there for five years. It's an important relationship, but not necessarily in a good way. I would very much love for her to get help and work on herself and be a better person. I don't think it's likely, though.

Importantly, there is a point at which disrespect starts to feel outright rejecting:

> **Crow:** Communication is definitely very different with people who do not understand queerness or specifically genderfluidity. It feels like middle school biology when you're talking to a non-queer person about queer stuff. It's not necessarily true, but it's the closest that we're going to get before we can move on to higher thinking.

But then with queer people, I can use some abstract concepts that is almost a string of nonsense words and they'll be like, "That makes sense," because they know what I'm trying to say, because they understand what it is to be queer…

I live with just my mother, who is very good at “not being bigoted” but she also doesn't know a lot. And telling her would be a conversation that would be awkward and uncomfortable, and I'm not really comfortable being vulnerable with her like that. It's not comfortable, and I just don't want to have that conversation. Because she understands transness and other queer identities, but not the fluidity part just based on, she's never actually mentioned genderfluidity or, not that I've, as far as I'm aware of, seen it. And it's just seeing her struggle with other “lower grade” (for lack of a better term) queer stuff, I don't imagine [coming out as genderfluid] being fun for me…

And then the rest of my family, they are... I don't know. I just don't have any interest in having them know. It doesn't serve me one way or the other. And for some of them it would be unnecessary drama. And I'm just like, "I don't want to deal with that."

It's like if you are really binary and you only understand gender through biological sex - completely ignoring intersex people, because they do – [then] understanding that concept of genderfluidity is really hard. I don't remember any specific situations in which I've had to have this conversation with somebody who was cis het or didn't understand genderfluidity, but I have seen other people have that conversation and it doesn't look fun or it doesn't look like it goes well.

It just looks like [the cis person is] very much unable to understand because of this emphasis on biological sex. And I know that my mom, while she is trying not to have that

> idea that biological sex is important, you can still tell that it is for her. And she'll often say things that are bigoted in a very culturally-acceptable way, and I have to call her out on it. And then she's very receptive, but then I don't feel understanding. I just feel like she feels... she doesn't understand why it's bad. She just knows that it is… So it's like if she can't understand why it's bigoted, then she's not really putting in the deeper thoughts that might be needed to overcome that emphasis on biological sex that you need to understand genderfluidity.

So respect isn't just a matter of being polite; respectful behavior signals interest in having someone in your life. This is because acting respectfully builds safety:

> **Hue:** I'm super not conscious of gender when I'm with my friends, which is really great… I just feel like I just get to focus on what makes me unique and an individual beyond gender categories again.
>
> I will say that is not necessarily always the case. I do have the one cis friend who… has misgendered me in the past and that's like, that really hurts because it's a stark contrast to how I feel in the group. And then when I'm misgendered or when... She dead-named me one time, and that really stuck with me for a very long time. Because, to be in that supportive network and then to have someone mess up in that way is like, even in my safest avenue there is still the possibility that someone will see me wrong…
>
> It was mainly when I was changing my name, she was having a really hard time remembering. And I texted her a couple times, I was like, "Hey dude, please make an effort to be super on top of this, because it really affects me poorly when you don't get it right. I understand that it's a process and I'm not going to get mad if you mess up a couple

times, but you're messing up more than anyone else I know, and I just want to remind you that this is really, really important." And the second time I reminded her, she didn't seem to understand what I was asking her to do, because I was being kind of subtle, but I was like, "Dude, I just changed my name, please use it."

And she was responsive and she really got on top of it after that, that's the only time I really addressed it. One time she... One time, half a year after I changed my name, she dead-named me once on accident. It was a total Freudian slip type of thing, and there was nothing really to address there because it was totally a mistake and she felt really bad. It was also on my birthday, which is also her birthday, so it was bad. And although that affected me really negatively because it was really a shock - that really had me questioning or made me feel less secure in myself than I had been previously before that - I think I've recovered from it now, but it took me many months to feel secure in my name after that.

Respect requires effort. There's this adage I sometimes hear tossed around of "It costs nothing to be kind." This is completely untrue when it comes to being respectful of genderfluidity. The society we have all been born into has taught us from birth how to be unkind to genderfluid people (even if that genderfluid person is ourself), and unlearning that prejudice takes work:

Hue: My parents are paying for my legal name change, so I definitely have their monetary support, and an extent of emotional support. My dad is kind of out of it. I don't think he truly gets it. He's paying for my name change, so that's cool. But he's told me to my face, "You're not trans," because I just don't think he gets it. But I've given up on that

with him, as well as a lot of other things emotionally. So that's not really something I even focus on.

But I have my mom's support. I have an extent to her understanding, I think. We don't really talk about this very much, because it's just kind of a fact of life, which I like that. I don't always like to think about transness and gender all the time because it confuses me and whatever…

[With top surgery] it's definitely something else because my parents could be chill about it in a way that was like, "Do whatever you want and we'll support you. We can have a conversation." But they're not like that. They're more just like, “Yeah, this is just something that exists for you which is fine. I don't necessarily want to change it. Well maybe I would… change it [if I could].”

I mentioned to my mom sometime earlier this year and I was like, sometimes I really don't feel comfortable with my chest and this is a big genderfluid thing. Sometimes I can totally tolerate my chest and sometimes I'm like, I really wish I didn't have this. Which is what freaks me out about top surgery because I'm really scared that I would miss my chest or not feel happy with having it flat all the time. But it's different than binding. It's just so different to have an actually flat chest.

But anyway, I mentioned to my mom earlier this year that I sometimes am not comfortable with my chest or that in the future I could definitely see myself getting top surgery. And she was like, "Oh really? I didn't know you felt that way at all." Which is totally not something I'd said to her before because it's a really scary thing to say to a parent I think. But she definitely... I was surprised with how she reacted to that, she was

really thoughtful and was like, "Wow, I didn't know you felt that way." And I think that's something that stayed in the back of her mind. So maybe if I brought it up in the future, she'd be open to it.

My dad would be so pissed because it's expensive. And even though my dad has a very high income… so he makes 180K a year and he has no reason to worry about money in the way that he does. But because he grew up fluctuating middle to lower middle class, I think it's something that he worries about a lot. And it sort of instilled some of that worry in me. But also he can be economically abusive and just be very controlling about money. And I know that if I brought this up he'd be like, "You don't need that. You don't want that. That is a luxury, that is an aesthetic thing. You are not requiring this and I'm not going to want to pay for it." I know for a fact that would be the reaction because I have asked him for things like therapy and he's reacted that way. So if it was something that was on top of it, like a surgery that's kind of uncomfortable because it's about my boobies and something that he doesn't understand very much like dysphoria or euphoria, he would not be supportive.

Someone who is unwilling to engage in the effort necessary to be respectful, can at best only ever be half-safe:

Rennan: I guess my relationship with my mom is, I suppose, easier. Well, not necessarily easier to talk about than my dad. It's just more comprehensive to talk about than my dad. There's more to say because it's a little more complex because she's someone who... She was raised Catholic, very lax in a way… but then got in a

relationship with my very conservative father and took on his ideas as her own by virtue of being his wife. But, that's not her, if that makes sense? It's not her…

She definitely tries a lot. She doesn't always hit the mark. A lot of the contention in our relationship comes from other places, just like regular, independent kid… Because she really tries with [the queer] stuff. As I was coming out, she was reading more and more books. She doesn't quite get that I'm still genderfluid, and we don't really talk about it. She gets that I'm trans, and she does her best to support that. She really does now. She's not always great at it, but she… does spend a lot of time reading, and she goes out of her way to focus on books about queer identities. I think that's one of the main reasons why I haven't completely fucked off out of my parents' life, because she's put in enough effort that I feel like there is some mending that can happen….

[In comparison my dad is] trying begrudgingly [to accept my transition] due to the fact that if he didn't try, he'd look like an idiot… If he called me my dead name and used she/her pronouns, he's the dumb... He's got dementia… I know that sounds a little bit rude, but he's my dad. I hate him… he's never really put much effort into my gender identity. I remember what he said when I came back from that first year of university. He was like, "First you're gay. Now you're trans." I was like, "No, other way around. Other way around. What you're saying makes no sense right now."

But, I think my biggest thing with him is that every bit of effort that he has put in feels like it's been forced… With [my mom], it was always hesitancy, and paranoia, and fear. With my dad, it was a little more "This fucking liberal is..." You know?

…[my mom] has such a paranoia about stuff. She sees statistics about trans suffering. I went through… informed consent for my hormones. My [process for] starting hormones was me telling my parents, "I'm going to go get hormones. Bye," and my mom being like, "Wait, wait, wait. Let me come with you." None of my process was ever to give them the illusion their opinion mattered. But, my mom always wanted be on it because she was like, "What if you're going to end up homeless?" She was looking at the informed consent list and she was like, "All these health problems. All these health problems." I had to explain to her. I was like, "That's literally just the change from the normal female increased health problems to the male increased health problems. It's not like the testosterone is going to give me a heart attack. It just means that I've gone from the female expectancy of a heart attack to the male one. That's literally all it is."

…A lot of it was the concern that I was going to *become* depressed, I was going to *end up* homeless. In her mind, my being trans was going to be the cause of all these scary stories of trans suffering in society… [I handled that by] laughing at her. I'm not always very polite with my parents. That is just the way our relationship is… which sounds bad, but it's been years, and years, and years, and years, and years my entire life back and forth. But, a lot of it is like, "Oh, you don't know this. Let me just tell you this," or, "You're scared for nothing. Ha ha!" …In a sense, it's mocking what I think is unreasonable instead of getting dramatic with her…

I will say straightforward so long as she is with my father, [repairing our relationship is] going to be a work in progress. Because she's living with him. She's living with his ideas, his opinions. The amount of effort that she's putting in is noble, but it's always going to

> come with him. Because at the end of the day, I guess for me, in my mind, her still being with him is her on some level approving his behavior.

That said, being respectful does not require perfection. It just requires that one commits to keep trying:

> **V:** My grandma's fucking awesome… she's like a mom figure to me. She's always been there. And even though she's in her seventies, she is super open to learning every day. My grandma reads like a book every three days. And that's what she and my grandpa do together. They go out into their sunroom where they have all their bird feeders outside of all the windows and they just read books together and talk about it. And it's really cute and I love them.
>
> But yeah, my grandma, when I told her during the pandemic, I was like, "Hey, I've been keeping this inside for a really long time, but I just have to let you know I am trans and I'm nonbinary." And at the time my pronouns were exclusively they/them.
>
> And so I told her that and she was so confused, but she asked me, she was like... Because she's not good with the internet. She struggles. She's got an Apple computer and doesn't know how to work it. And so she asked, she was like, "Are there any articles about that?" And so I compiled a cheat sheet with seven different articles, infographics and other personal stories from people like me. And I'm like, “I know you got a lot of time on your hand now that you're freshly retired. So you and grandpa, this is your lit circle homework.”

> But they sat down and they actually checked out all of the resources and they asked me questions throughout. They were like, "What does this mean? What is this word? Does this mean you're gay? Does this mean your fiance is gay?" And I'm like, “I don't know. Maybe.”
>
> …even though they still make mistakes sometimes because they're in their seventies, I get it. They still really try to be accepting and show that they're accepting. My grandma has tried cutting out all gendered language. She doesn't call me her granddaughter, she calls me her grandchild. When she tells of memories from when I was younger she doesn't talk about when I was a little girl. She talks about when I was a small child and you know can tell she's really putting in the effort and I appreciate it. And she encourages me to be out in more spaces. She thinks that there need to be more trans people in the world…
>
> My grandpa still has a hard time. He tries, he really, really tries, but he's almost 80. So I take it with a grain of salt. At the end of the day I know he loves me and that nothing that he does is insidious. It's not like he's a 20 year old… He tries his best. And my grandma really wanted me my whole life to wear her wedding dress at my wedding. And now we've had a discussion about how I don't think that that's going to happen. And although I really appreciate the gesture and I would love to do something like that, it just wouldn't feel authentic to myself. And she understands and respects it even though it makes her sad.

This includes apologizing for harm done and then changing behavior to avoid doing harm in the future:

> **Ladybug:** At one point… we were in a very toxic friend group. There was a couple people who just did not like me, and they were a big influence towards [my friend] as it was always, "Well, [Ladybug is] different, so you shouldn't be friends with them."
>
> …it was always directed with transphobic comments, always. And they would frequently do it in front of me. And there were many times where we would be on a video chat, or it was over Skype, but we didn't really use the video part, and I would just get so frustrated of trying to defend myself… And I would just end up leaving and saying, "I can't do this."
>
> …[At the time, my friend] went along with it. And after a few years of us not talking, she had messaged me on Instagram and said, "I'm so sorry for my behavior in the past." And we re-bonded from there… [She said] I'm no longer friends with them and I'm no longer in contact with them. I don't want to be in contact with them. I know what I did was wrong. And I asked, "Well what was the change?" And that's when she came out to me as trans.

But it shouldn't take someone realizing that they themself are trans before they're willing to stand up for the genderfluid person in their life, because *protection and caregiving* are the final primary components of a supportive relationship.

Protection and Caregiving

Safe spaces don't happen by accident. Constantly having to protect ourselves can sap our energy for anything else and so leaving the labor of creating a safe space entirely to the genderfluid person is harmful:

> **Ollie:** I mean I always feel like queer spaces, there can always be more of them. We should be able to find each other just as much as... a lot of my work in undergrad, and then advocacy work, and work-work has been around creating and maintaining communities for different identities. So specifically I've been working a lot with the disabled community. And so of course having more connection, more ability to find one another, I think that's really important because it's been important in my life and it's been important to folks that I've met and worked with over time. So I would love to see that I guess. And feeling like we didn't have to hide the groups and communities that we're building because it is really, really sad when there's like this really nice, I don't know, sort of queer thing going on, but you can't even put the date and time on it. They have to reach out to get that information because it's unsafe to give out that information, so that sort of thing. If we had more protection, that would be great.

For this reason, actively working to create safe spaces by reducing the burden of self-protection is supportive:

> **Charlie:** I'm also really into music and I follow a lot of queer artists and indie artists, and just not cisgender, straight White men. They have had far too much space to tell boring stories, and so queer people are just better at telling stories, and so I listen to a lot of that music. So when I go to concerts with them, I also know that I'm safer. I've been in spaces in which a White man has been acting up and the artists have just stopped the show, and they've just looked at him and they're like, "We are going to stop playing until you leave." That's really, really supportive.

Protection and caretaking behavior were seen as being closely intertwined with each other:

> **V:** [My fiancé] is super supportive of my identity and the way that I express myself and he holds our friends and family members to that same standard of respecting me. He doesn't expect me to be the one putting in all the work either. If his friend misgenders me, he'll be on it, which is great because even if that person is very insistent on misgendering me, at least I know that my fiancé has got my back…
>
> And we encourage each other with issues that I have with burnout specifically. That's a big one. Or trauma triggers. He is always there to very calmly be a support and to accommodate whatever my needs are. He never shames me or makes me feel guilty or like I owe him. He's just there because that's what partners are for. We're here figuring shit out.

Caretaking came up as being particularly important for disabled genderfluid participants. As discussed in previous chapters, managing unaccommodated or untreated disability and ableism could leave disabled participants without energy to do anything else, including gender exploration. Alternatively, when participants did finally get access to accommodations or treatment, they were much more able to thrive, including in regards to their gender:

> **Crow:** I did go to therapy for a few years and… [my best friend was] instrumental to helping me do that, because I got free therapy through my college and they were really supportive on making sure that I actually signed up for an appointment and then kept going. So they held me accountable, is a good word for that.
>
> It's like a mix, so most of their support is just the being there, helping me figure out coping mechanisms inadvertently, and then the keeping me accountable. I think the accountability was also a pretty big one, because when I'm feeling low, I don't do

> anything. But then they would be like, "Hey, have you done this thing?" And I'd be like, "Shit."

Furthermore, protection itself was seen as a caretaking behavior:

> **Pear:** One of my roommates is… known for being a little rude because she tells you things as it is. Every time I get misgendered… I don't correct other people. It's something that I feel like I'm going to be laughed at, whatever. She's always there. She will break a conversation to correct people and she has received a lot of antagonism from other people for being friends with me and for standing up with me. And I have seen her actively cut off relationships like that. So that has been seeing someone, for the first time, support me over other people. Novel.

A perfect understanding of transness is not necessary to act in a caring manner:

> **Charlie:** My dad is really accepting, even though he does not have any idea what's going on. I experienced a lot of discrimination and bullying around being gay as a kid, and once my dad found out, he lost his shit. He got a bunch of people fired, which was great. Loved that for me. He really does not understand the transgender situation, but I do believe that if I had a problem with another person, he would go to bat for me. I don't have to doubt that.

However, providing access to knowledge is still an important form of caregiving and protection, so having a better understanding of genderfluidity and how it intersects with other aspects of identity can help you better demonstrate care:

> **Charlie:** [My experience with] laser hair removal… was super affirming and very funny because all of the women who are my laser technicians were super affirming of my gender and they knew how Brown people worked. And so they were like, "All of the information you probably got was for White people's skin and you don't have White people's skin, so we're going to tell you how this works." …So that was a really good experience…

Protective behavior has an additional benefit in that being openly affirming of genderfluidity yourself makes it harder for other people to behave in anti-trans ways:

> **Ladybug:** When I first came out as trans, my mom was against it, didn't want to call me my preferred name… would still use "daughter." And now it's a complete 180… there are still a few feminine names that she calls me, but that was very early on… Things like "sis" and, "Well, what are you up to baby girl?" And things like that. And [I'm like] "Okay. I'm just here. I'm just vibing." But more often than not [now], it is my preferred name, and I'm her son, and things like that.
>
> …I think she needed a minute [to adjust]. Plus, my sister... I told my mom first, and then my sister had jumped all over her for [not being supportive]. My sister is bi herself. And also, just my girlfriend using my preferred name constantly and little things like that, and my mom [picked] up on it… like, "Oh, it's going to happen whether I like it or not, I'm just going to have to deal with it."

Sometimes, the most effective protective behavior occurs "behind the scenes" and without the knowledge of the genderfluid person:

Charlie: [After I came out at university] there was definitely some of the older individuals who interacted with me, I could tell that someone had talked to them before me, to be like, "If you mess this up, this is going to go really poorly for you, sir. So you need to get this person's pronouns correctly and use the correct name."

…I was out to my advisor prior to the broader department. [My advisor who is a cisgender lesbian] was definitely like a mom and was super excited for me to do this. She kind of, in a very affirming way, pushed me out of the closet.

And so it was clear to me that she had been setting the space for me to be safe and transition socially before I knew it. And not in a condescending or a problematic way. But I think from her perspective it was like, "This will be the first trans student who is a person of color." For both of those, separate. No trans people. Definitely no trans people of color for like a 10-mile radius. "And so if I can set the stage now for them, it means that that stage will be set for all other people that come after them."

A Reminder

Supportive relationships for genderfluid people are safe, they accept authenticity by facilitating agency, they are respectful, and they provide protection and care. In other words, supporting a genderfluid person is really not much different than supporting any person. It's just showing up for someone, every day, with the commitment to treat them well:

Tome: I have a very close friend right now who I've known since my freshman year. He was one of my roommates that I first came out to in person. We're still friends to this day. Him and his girlfriend are very close friends of mine. We hang out multiple times a week if possible. He's seen me through a lot of my life. We met, and I was like, "Maybe I'm bi, maybe I'm gay, we'll see," to like, "Okay, no, I'm just gay," to "Okay, I'm nonbinary, but that's it," to, "Okay, sure, I'm transitioning now. I don't know what that looks like." He's really been there and really understanding through a lot of it. Even though he's a cisgender heterosexual man, he's doing his best. He's trying. We've just always gotten along really well.

Conversely, I've seen him through a lot. We've both seen each other through a lot of the worst mental health of our lives. But I know that, no matter the circumstances, I can call him, and he'll answer. There's this mutual we'll drop something if you need something. I haven't known his girlfriend nearly as long. I met her through him. But the three of us all have that at this point, or I guess I have that with the both of them. We're here to support each other. We're very close. We can tell each other anything. I'm making plans right now to, after the holidays, after Thanksgiving, hang out and just vent for a while because it's our go-to, like, "One of us had to deal with family. We're going to get together, drink tea for six hours. We're going to bitch about it. We're going to hang out. We're going to have a good time." Because we all get the messiness of families.

Support does require intention, and it does require effort, but that's how loving *anyone* works.

When trans people come out or when we make an ask of someone in our lives for some sort of support or even when we just decide to exist in a space as ourselves, we can often be

made to feel as if we're too much, or we're being unreasonable. Especially for nonbinary folks, we are told that our genders are unnecessary, even ridiculous, and that accommodating us would be too complicated. We can hear this so often, that we might start to believe it or to become resigned to it:

> **Charlie:** Frankly, I have always lived in a world that has been unaccepting… And so I have a hard time imagining that more positive future, which is just tragic. So I don't have that much more advice because [cisgender people] are not meeting the baseline.

I've also felt this way before, so I wanted to draw attention to just how basic being decent to a trans person really is. In interview after interview, I heard genderfluid people offer grace to the people in their lives who didn't "get" genderfluidity. For myself, this compassion often comes from knowing how hard it has been for me to unpack all of the binarist ideology I was raised with. I don't think our compassion is misguided. It can be a great strength. It is also often a survival tactic; we have to find a way to live with the things and the people we can't change.

But I do want you to know that you're not asking for too much. It is not unreasonable to expect the people in your life to do the same work unlearning their own biases that you have already had to do in order to live with yourself. And it's not your fault if you have people in your life who won't extend you the most basic signs of care.

I also wanted to use this chapter as a way to discuss what we mean by a "safe space" for genderfluid people. When we recognize that gender is a relational process, it becomes clear that a safe space is a responsive space that facilitates a network of safe, authentic, respectful, and protective *relationships*. People naturally tend to mirror the behaviors they see, so if the people

in a space are engaging in the supportive relationship behaviors described in this chapter, new people who enter the space will tend to also relate to trans people in a safe way.

Trans community, however, acted as a unique protective factor for trans people, above and beyond even the components of supportive relationships described in the present chapter. Therefore, in the next and final chapter, I want to talk about trans community, and how trans people take care of each other.

Chapter 11: Permission to Exist (Queer Community and T4T)

Community in these interviews functioned as something beyond what we typically think of when we think of social support. When I asked V what topic they felt needed more attention in discussions about transness, they told me:

> **V:** Trans relationships, and not just trans relationships, but trans relationships that end well.

Before we get into a conversation about trans community, however, I think it's important to start by noting that the line between trans community and queer community is porous. This is a feature, not a bug. Gender and sexuality may not be the same thing but they are deeply tied in Western society:

> **Tome:** It was my junior year of high school. My friends and I were kind of the only ones doing the GSA. And honestly, half of it was just because we could put it on our college application because otherwise functionally it was very much like, "Okay, it's just our friend group. We're just sitting in a different spot now." And then occasionally we played Queer Jeopardy! Or had a little bit of a more in depth talk, but a lot of it was just, we were here, we were queer, get used to it. But my junior year, one person who's a freshman that year joined… he was using nonbinary as a label, was using they/them pronouns at the time.
>
> And I remember just... It was a very neat experience... And I couldn't even put a finger on it at the time of why I thought it was so cool. But I was like, "Yes, I'm here for this. I want be here for you." I'll fist fight someone. I wouldn't actually, I am not that kind of

> person, but if someone's given you shit, we'll make something happen. And looking back was maybe my very intense and exuberant allyship maybe a sign of something that I recognized in myself? Absolutely. And then sometime over that year, I think it was just a few months in, because it was homecoming where he did some more self-exploration, came out as a trans man, started going by he/him pronouns, all of that.
>
> But I think he was the first trans person I met that I was aware of... Because something definitely clicked. I just didn't recognize it at the time. And I think I really needed to finish my exploration of my own sexuality before I could get into that. I really didn't have the room to even think about exploring my gender until I fully accepted and come to terms with being gay first. So it was very much... It was a formative moment, but one that I needed to wait to address.

This means that many participants found inspiration for their own gender expression through the examples of all kinds of queer people. For many trans people, a history of identifying as gay or lesbian before coming to a trans identity remains an important part of their gender journey:

> **Charlie:** I... changed names before I changed pronouns. When I was a research assistant... the[re was a] person I worked with who I thought… was extraordinarily hot, he would sign all of his emails with just his first initial, which really felt like a power move at the time. From a non-pseudonym standpoint... if you take my first initial… and then you say it phonetically out loud, that's the name I chose. And so it was kind of reminiscent of this person. And they actually use... The first letter in their name is the same first letter in my name. It was this kind of funny... I was mirroring this cis gay man

> before I fully understood that that was not what was happening. I think that ended up being more powerful than actually identifying in any sort of way.

This doesn't mean that genderfluid-specific community didn't matter. It did, but usually as a piece of broader queer community connections. For example, Charlie came up with their name using the example of a cis gay man, but was introduced to the idea that they could pursue gender affirming care from their transmasculine partner, and learned the language of genderfluidity from a nonbinary friend:

> **Charlie:** …really early on, my partner, who was transmasculine, they jokingly convinced me to put on their binder. Which was extraordinarily difficult to get into, because they were also smaller than me… And so it wasn't affirming to me necessarily, but it was sort of like, "Oh, this is what some groups of trans people do to align their body." And it had never occurred to me to do that. Which is to say in the following year, or two years later, I would start laser hair therapy. Because you can remove hair, which is very good. And so it was a lot of these different instances where I had these moments that I was really not ready to emotionally process. And so [I] just put that to bed until… much later…
>
> I sort of slid into [telling other people I am trans]. Partly because I had started dating more trans people, I think neither [I nor my partner] had felt the need to [verbally identify] as much. It was more about the emotional, physical experience [of being genderfluid] than the identity itself. It was not until… I had made other trans friends and they kind of helped me come up with that language. One of them was nonbinary. And prior to that I had dated transmasculine people, but not really anyone who had explicitly identified as nonbinary or genderfluid.

The distinction between being genderfluid and trans is sometimes relevant and sometimes not. Ollie specifically brought up the potential dangers of microlabels and how they can interfere with community building if we allow them to be used for gatekeeping:

> **Ollie:** …community is so important. And feeling connected to people who either share similar identities as you do… honestly it is life or death because… when you're isolated and you do feel like you are just by yourself and your feelings, no one else can understand what you're feeling and society is telling you that what you're feeling is wrong, what are you supposed to think? What do you do at that point?
>
> And so having queer spaces, me existing and looking how I do and then showing up in class every day, all of that stuff, that to me is part of it. It's just like, because if I don't ever show up how I want to and advocate for myself, then how are people going to feel secure in doing that for themselves? [They] just won't see that. And people might feel stuck in living how they were living and miserable. So I do think that queer spaces and trans spaces are very important.
>
> The one thing that I don't like about them right now is this shift we have to microlabels... It's good to have labels that really fit, but I do think when it comes down to it, microlabels can separate us very quickly. And that's worrisome for me as a community that should be finding support in each other… especially because I mean they do get exclusionary and I'm like, I don't know if that's where we want to be.

For example, Hue shared how two of their transmasculine friends responded differently when they started considering binding and top surgery.

> **Hue:** My friend who I live with who is a trans guy has a lot of dysphoria around his chest and whenever I talk about not having the same degree of dysphoria, I'm not sure if he's joking, but he gets kind of salty because I have a smaller chest than him and I think he feels resentful to the fact that it's easier for me. And when I've talked to him about, "Hey, I might want to try binding for the first time," he's been like, "If you don't have a degree of dysphoria where you need to, you shouldn't do it." Which was not very supportive because it's something that I ended up doing and it was helpful and it was just cool to have the option to do that. So it wasn't until last year that my other close trans guy friend was like, I mentioned top surgery and being like, "I haven't actually really thought about this before, if it's something I would want." And he was the first person who was like, "You're allowed to want that. And you're allowed to think about it," like very explicitly.

Because Hue experienced dysphoria differently from transnormative expectations, one of their friends attempted to make them feel as if they weren't trans "enough" to bind or to access top surgery. This was hurtful. In contrast, their other friend was unconditionally supportive of Hue's gender by inviting Hue to explore what could make them feel the most comfortable in their own skin.

The degree of openness of a queer community makes a significant difference as to whether or not genderfluid people are able to thrive. Queer community had a unique significance in most participant's stories, particularly in regards to identity development, capacity for self-advocacy, and overall wellbeing:

> **Bug:** For me, [trans community] makes me feel like just so seen, just feeling seen by other people that are like me. When I don't have a lot of that in my life, I tend to be a

pushover with my gender identity. And lately I've been a bit more, because I started school and I'm really meeting people and I'm like, "Wait a minute, this is not acceptable. Being treated like this is not acceptable because they're not accepting it. Why am I?" The sense of self-advocacy that I gain when I'm around people who are examples of advocacy as well, is great. And it gave me the push I kind of needed to re-explore transitioning and to really fight the internalized biases and transphobia that I had been dealing with for so long, because [before] it was easier to just be complacent. It was easier because I didn't feel like I knew other people in my own workplace even.

I felt like when people mess up my pronouns, which they do all the time, I just was like, "Whoa, it makes sense because I'm… five [foot] three, I'm feminine, whatever." So I just was like, "Yeah, can't blame them. They just don't get it." Instead of being, "actually that's not right" and I should be correcting them. I shouldn't have to, but I *want* to correct them, I *want* to stand up for myself. Having community makes me feel like I can do that and it makes me feel like I will have more accessibility to the things I need or know how to access them, like hormones for example, or doctor recommendations or things like that, are just great when I have a community.

Essentially, connection to queer community acted as permission to exist as a queer person. For example, Crow, who lives with depression and who is not out to most people in her life, discussed the importance of her queer community to her mental wellbeing over the course of her interview:

Crow: I own one dress, and I had my friend buy it for me and then I paid him back for it. And I have that hidden in my closet because I don't want my mom to find it. Other than

> that, I don't really have anything material-wise, or even material support. It's all on me and trying to figure out how to get what I want to feel more like myself and then how to keep that away from the sight of my family…
>
> I have only one straight friend… So, my entire support structure, outside of familial support (which is actually less important to me [than] friend support is)… is my friends, who are all queer. I don't have any kind of support group or anything like that… but I definitely wouldn't be in a very good mental health state without my queer community that I have around me.
>
> …all of them are disabled in some way. So they definitely understand what I'm feeling, and I think that they're really good at, like they've also been queer much longer than I have, most of them anyway. And so they know… what it's like to help somebody who's just finding out that they're queer navigate that, they know how to understand the mental distress that might come along with that...
>
> [The kinds of support they provide] depends on the person. Most of the time, it's listening. Other times, it's talking through whatever I'm having an issue with, or just providing any kind of distraction. Like one of my friends, we often, if one of us is having a bad time, we will just be on a phone call and watch YouTube together, and that really helps. So it's like kind of just being there is, yeah, just being there is really where the support is, I think.

When describing what "just being there" with another genderfluid person could look like, Crow explained that it was much deeper than simply sharing time and space:

Crow: I don't think I started actually identifying as genderfluid until about almost two years ago. I think what really brought that out, I was talking with my friend who was experiencing the same things as I was and I'm like, "Wait a second, me too." And so we just kind of found out together... Having somebody with the same experience has helped me not ignore it and more be able to talk it through and think about it. And I think that really helped cement it better in terms of describing myself. Instead of just saying, "Fuck it. Nevermind. Don't worry about it."

… just having somebody else's contexts ... re-contextualize what I was thinking ... The new context made it feel better than it did before… There was always that feeling of genderfluidity throughout, I don't know, probably a very long time. And I never had any outside thoughts on it at all because... I couldn't express it in any way that made sense to other people. And I didn't know any other genderfluid people until my friend started talking about it and I was like... They were putting words to things that I had felt for a very long time and the words were the new context, and that felt good. So I kept exploring that with them and it eventually came out as definitely genderfluid…

[My best friend and I] got close when they were on a trip abroad in Argentina, and so we just kind of texted. And it's weird because I had been with them in person for a year and a half before that, and then we got close when they were away. That was hard, and also very... It was hard for them to be away for so long and so far away, but also we were still getting close so it still felt really good. And most of the support at that time was just talking on the phone, watching videos together, letting me cry to them on the phone for

> whatever I was going through, and then he would do the same. And then it ended up being really good for the both of us that we were getting so close.
>
> And then when he came back home, we were still really close and that support shifted kind of. Not negatively or positively, just differently, because they were in person now, we could actually do things. We would have more... Some of that support was actually gift-giving. We both bake, so we'd trade whatever we were baking, and that's kind of how I found out that baking is one of my most effective coping mechanisms, was through the help of my friend, because we were just baking each other stuff. So that support also kind of translated from just verbal support to helping me explore coping mechanisms, even if not intentionally.
>
> And we would still talk about our genders and stuff as we were doing all this, and that helped contextualize it and I was able to think my way through it, and we both made progress about the same time…. And that was really helpful for me too… to have both somebody who I was exploring this with, as well as a reference… genderfluidity I think is actually a really big facet in our relationship, just because we were going through it together and going through it in opposite directions. [jokingly] It's like we almost traded genders. (Crow)

For Crow and their best friend, the process of taking care of each other was fundamentally intertwined with self-care. In other words, their relationship functioned as a microcosm of community care.

Rennan also discussed exploring and understanding their gender as a basic developmental need, talking about how finally connecting with queer community after growing up in an anti-queer, Christian Evangelical community took precedence over their schoolwork in college:

> **Rennan:** [Before I realized I was genderfluid], to be honest, the idea of not being a woman always came first… And so I joined Tumblr in 2014, and that would've been my junior or sophomore year of high school. And so you pick up the lingo. You pick up the lingo, you find these words, you find lists of words and definitions that are being reblogged and shared… And then you start to be like, okay, that's kind of me. I think I learned the term demiboy first. And I was like, that's not quite right. And you just go through the terms. And you find these terms and you're like, okay, that one fits. And that's sort of what happened. I literally found genderfluid on a list of genders. And I was reading the definitions and I was like, yeah… that's the one.
>
> And basically, I was very, very, very involved in the LGBTQ center, I was at [a large public university] at the time. I only spent a year at [that large public university] and I flunked out… because I spent all my time at protests or at the LGBTQ center trying to figure everything out…
>
> And then the next step is like, okay, what are the pronouns I like because I don't like she/her. So what are the ones I do like? And it's just going through the list of, all right, what can I categorize myself as? And it was sort of through that ... And especially at the time, a little less now, but especially at the time I was very analytical about things. So my being trans was after my genderfluidity. It was sort of realizing I'm genderfluid, okay. What are the statistics of my genders?

So basically, that entire year was spent not doing anything about class. Forget math, forget my psychology class, forget all that stuff. I'm going to be doing some research.

…since I spent so much time in the center and there were always people there... there was an AIDS epidemic in [the state where I lived] at the time. That center was active. There was never a time where there weren't five people there, at least, hanging out.

So it was one of those things where it's like, a lot of it was my own research. And some of it was just talking about stuff. Just talking about things I found out. "I think I'm genderfluid." "Oh cool. I'm genderfluid too." "Wait, you knew about it? I just learned about this."

And then being like, you know, "I don't think I like she/her pronouns." "I mean, that's fine. You can do other ones." "I mean, I don't know which ones I'm going to use, but..."

So there was some back and forth, but it was always sparked by my own research. And just sort bouncing ideas off of other people. Being like, "Oh, I think I'm this." "Yeah, I've heard of that. You can do that." "I can do it? Okay. I'll do it."

…I did more of that than I did homework.

Julian also talked about the ways that trans people make space for each other in the world:

Julian: …when I started really thinking about some of this stuff or just mulling some things over in my head around gender… I said to myself, I can't. I just don't have space or capacity to deal with this right now, so I'm going to just put it aside and come back to it after grad school. So around that time, I also cut my hair. So I had short hair for the first time in my life, which was a really big deal in terms of discovering my gender or feeling

more in my body. After grad school, I didn't necessarily come out to everyone as nonbinary in my life. I mostly was like, "Hey, I want to go by [name], or you can call me that." I would introduce myself as that and change my social media as that, which is something my family has called me my whole life.

So it made sense and wasn't necessarily a hard coming out by any means. Then I changed. I would say, “Okay, I use she and they pronouns.” Then somebody I met once who was a trans woman was like, "Do you really use she and they pronouns, or do you want me to use they pronouns for you?" I was like, "Ooh, no one's really asked me that before. I guess, yeah." Because a lot of times when you say, “she and they,” people are going to just default to she. So it took somebody being like, “Wait a second. Is this really what you want?” for me to push myself to ask for people to use they/them pronouns for me. Then from there, I don't know if there was ever a time where I was just like, “I am nonbinary.” I think maybe some of my friends might have started asking me, "Hey, how do you prefer to be referred to?" Or whatever. But I just kind of started talking about being nonbinary and being trans and discovering more and more about myself that way.

Theoretically anyone, regardless of whether or not they are trans, could offer this invitation-to-be(come):

Hue: I have one friend who's a cis woman, who thought she was trans for several years. And with her, I don't really have to explain stuff. So it's not necessarily that someone is trans, but it's more that they've done a lot of work to understand better, which in her case meant being trans for a few years. But it doesn't have to be that.

In practice, however, interviewees described trans people taking care of other trans people more often than anyone else. When participants talked about who they could turn to for no-strings-attached material support (e.g., support with disability caretaking needs, clothes, a place to stay in an emergency, food, a little money to make expenses), it was most likely to be another trans person. This really stood out to me, because most participants were young adults and for most young adults in the United States, parents are the primary providers of material support, not peers (Hartnett et al. 2013). Furthermore, trans populations experience high rates of poverty (29.4%) meaning that trans people provide this support to each other despite oftentimes not having much to go around (Siers-Poisson, 2021). While noting that queer community spaces can be fractured at times, V focused on the importance of the types of resource sharing that queer people in general, and trans people in particular, engage in:

> **V:** [Queer community is] how I find myself, how I see myself. The community itself is really toxic in a lot of ways. It's like a giant family. You accept the good and accept the bad. You try to teach each other new things, but at the end of the day you all love each other. But yeah, there's a lot of gatekeeping, mostly from either elder queers or baby queers… you get the people that are very set in their ways and there are people who still have a lot to learn that are convinced that things are set in their ways. But I see myself in the community, I see a lot of solidarity in the community. There's a lot of strength in the community and it's nice always knowing that you're not the only one going through something. There's a lot of support and I really like that.
>
> …There's a lot of crowdfunding kinds of things that go on within the community… queers don't let queers go hungry. I have a lot of friends that are either currently

unhoused or have been previously unhoused. And if there is a couch open at a queer person's house, then they'll do what they can to give someone at least temporary space. People talk about, “Oh my god, who did your bottom surgery?” And they'll share medical resources.

“How are you getting access to testosterone?”

“Oh, I see this person at this Planned Parenthood, they're really cool, you should go see them.”

There's just the support of knowledge teaching you about yourself, how to cope with things that are pretty unique to folks. There's providing companionship. If I see someone on Facebook who has “they/them” in their profile frames and I'm like, that's my person, I'm going to send them a request. You meet other trans folks in public and you both establish that both of you are trans and all of a sudden you're just already kind of kinning each other. But yeah, so there's social support in a lot of different ways and a lot of solidarity and sharing clothes, sharing resources, sharing knowledge, all of that.

Pear gave a specific example of the reciprocal supportive dynamic that V described:

Pear: And in my university itself, I had a roommate who left because when she found out that I… did not identify with my sex assigned birth, so I was moved to another space with someone else who always thought about what having sex with a trans person would feel like. And I was like, "Okay, that's weird." And well, she assaulted me… I literally ran out of my room with my blanket and everything in that blanket and I had to tie it up and I was just sitting on the road… [I ended up] sleeping with one of my other queer friends.

> They also are genderfluid… And I was sleeping on their couch for a little bit until I was moved with my current [roommates]…
>
> We're both Aries and we're we both like the same music and stuff. And they're definitely one of my closest friends now and they are currently in a weird housing situation with the people they live with. So they have been crashing on our couch for a little bit. But it's really been nice because they're… thinking of starting HRT and [I'm] helping them with that process and that has been really nice.

Pear and their friend shared the resources they had to help each other navigate transgender *minority stressors* (i.e., stressors unique to minoritized people, which are caused by systemic prejudice). Indeed, a number of participants saw giving back to the trans community as an inherent part of being trans:

> **Hue:** And now the way I think about it is I think of trans, not as a gendered experience, but a political coalition more than anything. And that's something I want to align myself with because I really believe in trans issues, in trans healthcare and access to resources for trans youth and all these political issues that I really, really agree with. And see myself as a necessary, I guess, actor in making the world a better and more inviting place for trans people because that's something that I do all the time, like having conversations with people in my everyday life, just as a trans person. I talk about gender, and I talk about inclusivity with people and so I view that as part of this greater movement of transness as a concept. This is so intellectual [laughs]…. But just practically also, it just makes me feel included in a community that I care about.

The Significance of T4T

T4T (i.e., “trans for trans” or trans people dating trans people) is a form of trans community that participants described as being especially potent. This is in part because, excepting participants who had access to a local and active LGBTQ center (like Rennan) or who worked in LGBTQ research/advocacy (like Linda and Charlie), most participants didn’t have any sort of formalized queer community. They had queer friends and queer lovers:

> **Emily:** It's important to feel like I'm part of a community. But I feel like my sense of community is more piecemeal of different people in my life who live in many spaces. So that would be my more immediate sense of queer community, just a bunch of queer friends in different places.

Additionally, monogamous, romantic+sexual relationships are given particular prominence in Western cultures as the central, supportive, intimate relationship in an adult’s life (this is called *amatonomativity*). Therefore, the gender exploration process, which is sometimes frightening and often intimate, can feel most natural within a romantic+sexual relationship for many people:

> **Julian:** Because I'm so internal with a lot of stuff… my love relationships have been the most significant ones that I've had, really, because I am myself with those people more than most others.

This meant that a number of participants first started exploring their genderfluidity within or because of a romantic or sexual relationship:

> **Oliver:** [I realized I was genderfluid because I] started dating someone. Well, I started dating a guy and I fell in love. And then that guy turned out not to be a guy at all. And I did a lot of soul searching at that point about what that meant for me. And I'm glad that I

> did because before any sort of questioning of my sexuality came about, I realized that I could be just as fluid as this other person who I loved and saw go through a transition themself. And I realized that I don't have to... there's no certificate that you have to earn to be valid as any gender that you want to be. And it was really my first time hearing about nonbinary identity at all. I grew up in public schools where that was really very much not a thing. And so upon being introduced to it, something clicked in my brain…
>
> And I pretty much only date trans people at this point, not because I'm exclusively T4T, but just because I would be hard pressed to find a cisgender person who I felt really understood where I was coming from with my gender identity. So when I'm in intimate relationships with trans people, I feel understood on a basic level where I don't have to explain any further.

Indeed, whether the relationship ended well or poorly, T4T relationships were often notable for the intense identity development that they prompted for participants. Oliver, who is polyamorous, discussed both of their current romantic relationships, and how each relationship provided a unique environment for their genderfluidity:

> **Oliver:** I have two partners. So I will start with the one that I've had for about three years…. I have been with this person since my junior year of undergrad, and we met actually through the work that I did with queer Jewish activism because, I mean, it's just easy to connect with people that you share identities with, and also, we had a lot in common, and music is a really big deal to me as it is to them. We started out monogamous, and we were both out at the time, although they were not out to their family at the time. They are now. I was actually really new to being out at the time. I'm

thinking about the timeline, being surprised by it because we've changed so drastically since then…

They identify more so as agender, whereas I identify as all of the genders. So we used to joke that we're in a straight relationship because we're opposites in that way, but obviously not very much at all. Being in a relationship with them has impacted my gender identity for sure, in terms of what knowledge I have about transmasculinity, because they knew that they were trans when they were 15, and they're a couple years younger than me, but we're around the same age. They recently started hormone replacement therapy. And like I had mentioned, my ex also started HRT while we were dating and started transitioning while we were dating. And experiencing it a second time in a completely different context was just as revolutionary.

Reflecting on it and talking with them about it had the same impact of me then reflecting on myself and my own identity, experiencing what they have liked and haven't liked about transitioning, about what they have gone through in the healthcare system and with insurance, literally everything from the most logistical to the most intimate and abstract has been very much impactful for me. I think it goes both ways as well. We've both changed so significantly in our gender expression, how we feel about our gender identities, so even though I've been nonbinary and genderfluid the whole time we've been dating, the way that I've expressed it has changed significantly because I feel more confident, I feel more stable…

They're super supportive. I've never had any qualms about sharing anything, and I think a lot of that is also because they're trans. And like I said before, there's just a certain

baseline that is such a relief to have because it took so long to explain my identity to myself, let alone explain it to other people. So, having that really, really helped me feel more comfortable. And also, I would say we're both transmasculine or transmasculine-adjacent. I mean, I'm genderfluid, so I change how I identify with that label. We talk about what brings us [gender] euphoria a lot... So because we're both transmasc, sometimes that compels me to take on a more masculine role, and sometimes it makes me feel more comfortable being more feminine because I feel like they understand where I'm coming from and I'm just feeling myself in that way. It can really change, but they've always been super supportive, and that is a huge help always… Being more feminine with a transmasculine person sometimes feels scary to me because of the heteronormative roles associated with that. So I am afraid of being the woman in the relationship. It's not a conflict that has caused any issues between us. It's more so on a personal level and just working on unlearning all of these standards that I have for myself in order to be a valid trans person…

[My second] partner [and I have been together] a much shorter period of time, but they identify more similarly to me than my other partner does in terms of gender and sexuality… we were friends for a long time before we started dating, and we have a lot of shared values because of the profession that we're pursuing. It's very much value based. And another way that we connect that's special, well it's special to me, is through religion. So they're not Jewish, they're Jamaican, so obviously our backgrounds are extremely different, but we've actually found a lot to connect on in terms of religion and spirituality, just because we have such different experiences of being in minority

communities and how that ... We've had really, really interesting conversations about how that's impacted our gender identities…

[My] gender identity has been really interestingly affected by our relationship in... So I mentioned at the very beginning of this conversation that I'm a bisexual lesbian dyke, and I identify that way because our relationship - and [my partner and I have] discussed this - feels very sapphic. Even though neither of us identify as women, it's still, there's something about it that feels distinctly lesbian. And we've had so many conversations about how that interacts with our own genders and [that] has gifted me this new experience of gender euphoria through queer love…

I haven't really found a good way to explain it quite yet, but I think that we're just so comfortable with each other that they feel comfortable wearing cardigans around me and I can talk in a higher pitched voice and not feel weird about it around them because I know that they still view me the way that I view myself. So little things like that. And it's been interesting for me feeling more feminine with them than I really have with my other partner. And just processing why that might be different has been really interesting and has really helped me come into my own independent identity just by having those different experiences…

We're very much aligned in terms of mental health and focusing on wellness, self-care, boundaries are really important, all of those things. And affirming ourselves, giving ourselves compassion has been something that both of us have been working on and something that they're really good at is clocking when I'm being self-deprecating without even realizing it. And they actually brought up, I'm just remembering this now, they

> brought up how that can impact identity insecurity and everything from gender identity to just feeling okay in your own skin. And them pointing that out and not playing into moments in which I self-deprecate or dismiss my own experiences has been a huge green light. But yeah, their support is really consistent and really sincere, and that's what matters to me.

In Oliver's discussion of their romantic relationships we can see all of the main qualities that make T4T relationships such an intense version of trans community: opportunity to compare one's own gender to other ways of being trans (rather than simply comparing oneself to other cisgender people); freedom to try new gender expressions that might feel unsafe in another context; the importance of engagement with queerness as a political identity; and general social support (as described in the previous chapter), with special importance placed on mental health and self-advocacy support. Pear reiterated many of these same relationship features. In particular, because they are in a relationship with another genderfluid person, genderfluidity was allowed to become such a normal part of the relationship that both partners could instead focus on other shared interests and values:

> **Pear:** [Our genderfluidity shows up in our relationship] …in the smallest of things, but sometimes it's bigger things as well. But every day it's like, sometimes I call my partner wife and sometimes I call them my husband or my partner, whatever. It really doesn't matter. The lack of gender in our relationship is so nice. I think about gender so little, [and] about gender roles specifically, when I'm in that relationship… my partner and I make this joke that cisgender people think about gender more than genderfluid people or

> gender diverse people do. And sometimes cooking is just cooking, you know what I mean? You don't have to be gendered.
>
> And they also… do work with trans youth and just having gender be absent and gender roles be absent in our relationship but seeing that both of us deeply care about our community and how that is a big part of our lives and our morals is something that I think strengthens our relationship because it makes me realize and believe that we care about our identities and our community beyond just ourselves and that it is a part of our life and our morals and it's just unshakable in that way. And I think that's really nice.

Ollie largely agreed with Oliver and Pear, but they also mentioned that finding ways to label their own identity and their relationship for others outside of the relationship remained challenging, if generally nonsignificant when compared to the benefits of the relationship:

> **Ollie:** I can talk about the relationship that I have with my partner… what I found as we have been together is that I feel like my experience of self and my identity has shifted a little bit. It doesn't necessarily feel quite as rigid as it was before I had met them because it feels like queer spaces, especially queer relationships, offer a lot of freedom to choose… Regardless of what we want to do, or how we want to do it, or [how we want to] present ourselves, [or to] label ourselves within the relationship, our identities are still being respected. And so that means that we can play more with femininity without feeling it's going to be a risk to us and it's going to be misconstrued in some sort of way. Or outside of our relationship it's going to change something about how we feel about each other. It's just not the case.

> And so the relationship has offered me a lot of support in that I can enjoy things that I didn't used to allow myself so much outside of maybe my home or outside of spaces I do feel really safe and secure. It offers some of that confidence and I don't know, it's been a neat experience is what I will say…
>
> it's only when we talk more about language and labels that things get tricky, but I also don't care. I don't care about labels... I don't think that we necessarily need to have words for everything, so I'm unbothered, but other people might feel some sort of way, and I also don't care… [My partner doesn't care either.] We're just exploring labels together and what that means for us and how that's different from how we viewed ourself. Our relationship just is a very safe place where we can do that without sacrificing things that we just hold true about ourselves.

Similar to Ollie, Julian discussed how even though a T4T relationship can create a space safe for genderfluidity, that safety and acceptance won't necessarily translate to the outside world. Even still, they were careful to note the importance of remaining connected to our queer histories, as well as the unique potential for freedom and belonging that exists in queer (and especially trans) relationships and how much that potential matters:

> **Julian:** …a lot of people, especially people I've dated, have these expectations about how I should show up and those are [cisgender] queer people. Where it's like "Because you are the more masculine person, you can't also be as emotional as I am, as a cis woman," or things like that where there are those expectations put on you…The nonbinary people I've dated are AFAB, femme presenting, nonbinary people and so most of the time... people assume that they're women, people treat them like they're women... We could be

at a similar thing and people will treat me like I'm a man and assume I'm a man. And so I think that there's just certain roles that we fall into based on just societal expectations. It's hard to be trying to fight societal expectations all the time. Sometimes it just happens that you find yourself falling into them. I think that with nonbinary people, that would be like what's going on there, but with cis people, there really is, I feel like, less room for playing around. Less room for trying new things…

I guess it's hard for me to describe because in queer and trans spaces, sometimes I don't necessarily feel like I fit in either. Or I have my own qualms about those spaces. But I would choose them any time over cis-straight… spaces. So anyway, I guess for me... there's just something really special about queer spaces and about people... I think especially given the history of queer persecution and violence against queer people and all of that stuff, having queer spaces is really radical and it really makes me appreciate the people who came before me who really fought for those things or had to hide that they were hanging out with other queer people.

I was talking to somebody who's not that much older than me. I want to say maybe in his 50s or 60s, where he was talking about when he was in college, he couldn't go out to dinner with other queer men. They would not be able to just go to a restaurant as a group because there would be assumptions there and it wouldn't be allowed. I don't know. Things like that, that wouldn't have been that long ago. It'd probably be 30, 40 years ago. I don't know. So the fact that things have changed so much is something that queer community really helps me appreciate…

> [But] queer people have experienced a lot of trauma almost across the board, I guess. And queer people also are at higher risk for a lot of other things of that cause trauma like poverty and loss of family and support systems, maybe not a great healthcare situation. Because of that and because of all the trauma that creates, that's generated from all these things, I feel like sometimes we as queer people don't feel like we have an outlet for that outside of each other. And so sometimes I feel like people really do approach other queer people with the worst intent. Or how do we take this person down? What can we find about them that's their weakness?
>
> So sometimes there's that. Queer people have really high expectations of each other, and that plays into it too. We want there be a perfect queer person who is fully formed in every way. And that's not possible, and that's not something that straight people, that's not a standard that they have for each other.

Recognizing the fallibility of other trans people not only avoids the sort of destructive trauma dynamic that Julian described, but it can also be protective. For example, Bug shared a challenging experience they had in their own T4T relationship. They wanted to discuss this experience in their interview because they were so shocked that such a situation could arise within a T4T relationship:

> **Bug:** I met [my ex] online. I met him on Instagram... I… am part of a community…. [of] accounts that post diaries… Not public accounts, always private and always very popular if you're trans… or gay in some way. Because all my mutuals are, in some way. And I think it's just because it's a place for us to just be ourselves and not deal with parents knowing what we were talking about. But I met him through there.

At the time we both identified as… gay trans men. And that, we just started talking and I ended up starting a long-distance relationship with him. We started… dating [3 months after we started talking], and then continued to date with maybe one or two breaks [for about 4 years]. Throughout that relationship I feel like our trans identity played a big part in it because we had very similar struggles I think, with parents, and I don't know, it was very T4T… And that's my favorite type of relationship, personally. I feel most understood and happy in those types of relationships. And I think the reason why I wanted to mention Theo because if I go through the whole story that's hours of hours of talking, right? But I think I wanted to bring him up because interestingly one of the reasons we broke up was because I am trans, which is confusing because he's trans. Why would that be an issue, right?

But as we dated, towards the last year of our relationship, when I moved here, in maybe a year to six months I would say, I noticed that he was starting to lose interest in me as a partner. And he was starting to, kind of those... I thought I was going crazy, but it turns out I was not going crazy, he was losing romantic interest with me and sexual interest with me. And I thought, "Man, is it me? What do I do?" I tried revamping my look and talking with him about it, of course. And he didn't really know what was going on, but the gist was that what ended up being the case was that he was exploring his sexuality for the first time really in his life. I was the first person he ever had a romantic relationship with and ever had a sexual relationship with, ever. So I was first for many things, even a first kiss.

And it was all very sweet and fine, but I think he grew up really repressing his sexuality because of religious reasons, religious trauma with his parents. And it didn't seem to be an issue, until later one, when I think he started to finally uncover that and realize he had a strong preference for people who were AMAB, versus people who are AFAB. And that's a really finicky slope to get into because... him breaking up with me because I'm trans, but saying he is gay, right? Some people will argue that that's transphobic because trans men are men. And other people will argue, "Well, it's about preference," right? So he doesn't feel sexual attraction to my body, then it doesn't mean he's transphobic. And can he be transphobic if he's trans? I would say, "Possibly." But I think it's just, it's interesting just because it really was a blow to me. It really felt like, "Wow," like, "This is someone that I've been with for so many years and I really considered marrying." We would talk about it openly like, "We're going to get married."

And just a really strong bond that ultimately ended because of something way beyond my control. And he feels bad about it, like it's not like he feels amazing about what happened. But I think it's unique because it's another trans person and it's not something I ever expected to experience with another trans person. Because I thought of anyone, they would understand that just because I don't have the parts doesn't mean I can't ever. Or it doesn't mean that I'm less of a man. But I think it went down to sex, right? Like gender-marked sex. And it failed I guess, so I just wanted to mention that a little bit.

[My genderfluidity] came up because as I dated [him], my gender did have fluctuations. There were times that I felt very strongly that I was nonbinary and I started presenting very femme. And there were even times where he also felt like he was nonbinary and he

> was identifying with they/them pronouns at one point and decided to be more femme as well. So I do wonder if the fact that I had moments of femininity, if that affected his attraction to me. I don't know. I could ask him maybe, but it's not something I knew how to ask because... I don't know. I think for me, it made me insecure about that part of myself because I felt like, "Well, maybe if I had gone on T while we were together and was very masculine he wouldn't feel this need or this desire to be with people who have beards… and what not. And maybe if I didn't have moments where... I think for a full six months I was wearing dresses all the time. And I also had a period of time where I wasn't binding either because it was just so uncomfortable, until I got top surgery. And then I finally really ramped up wearing dresses and being extra feminine than usual. I think it could've, it might've, possibly…
>
> An insecurity that was born… of whether or not… my transness... and genderfluidity as well because I am subject to change my expression, if that will ever affect someone's attraction for me. Or if they'll have a preference of, "Well, I prefer when you're identifying as a trans man because I like masculinity more than femininity," or, "I like femininity," I've experienced that in dating, where [the person will be like,] "I like femininity more than..." And it's like, "Dude, that's not my problem… I'm just being myself and I thought you were okay with this. And if you're not, then I don't know."

What I think we can learn from both Julian and Bug's more cautionary discussions of T4T relationships and queer community is that making spaces safe for genderfluidity and authenticity is a conscious process. There's not a guarantee that just because a bunch of queer people are in a room, that room will be supportive. It's necessary that we celebrate the special "crack in the

matrix" qualities that T4T relationships and queer communities can embody, the moments of freedom that we create for ourselves and for other queer people through really *being there* with each other. This celebration should be honest though; there's no benefit in pretending at or expecting some sort of perfection that doesn't exist.

Asexuality, Aromanticism, and Amatonormativity

I think one of the major shortcomings in how we currently discuss T4T relationships can be seen in the concept's tendency towards amatonormativity, which asexual/aromantic interviewees identified as one of the ways that the queer community tends to exclude people. For some participants, being ace or aro was actually a bigger barrier to finding queer community than either their genderfluidity or their race and ethnicity. For example, Tasha didn't identify as being a member of the queer community, in part because she never knew asexuality could fit under the queer umbrella:

> **Tasha:** Definitely having a group of people who identify as asexual to be around [would have made it easier for me to explore my genderfluidity]. I say asexual rather than two-spirit because I had different type of friends. I had feminine friends and then I had gay friends too. So it was never like I didn't have people around that I could relate to, but the asexual part is just something that I never had access to, but if I read it, I definitely know it was me, but I never heard nobody refer to them as an asexual… Yes, I know people who are bisexual, gay, just all of that, but I just never had a group of people or people that I could connect with that identified themselves as an asexual.
>
> I just feel like that would've made life easier because it's like I would have somebody to talk to or connect with maybe if I wanted to ask any questions or ask how they feel, or

ask how their relationships with people are going, because right now it's like everybody is in a relationship except me. Like all of my friends, all of my family. So it's just like, "Okay, will I ever be in a relationship?" I haven't been in a relationship. I'll talk to somebody on the phone here or there, something like that, but it's not like a physical, sexual, intimate relationship that regular people are having with their boyfriends and their girlfriends, something like that.

So it had came a time… my family would just be like, "Oh, if you gay or something, then you just gay." No, I'm not gay… it's just a whole different thing that is just hard to explain that I am. So, I just feel like having a group of people that I could connect with would definitely help because it's a lot of different questions that you want to ask them like, "Okay, how is your relationship? Do you have relationships?", "Is it something that you went through, but you're out of now? How long did your relationship last?", you know… I want to know from asexual people like…"Have you had successful relationships and naturally you not sexually attracted to somebody?" …having people to connect with and learn more information about would've been good…

I feel like the [queer] community is important… I just feel like every person that I meet that's a part of that community has a great personality… Because it seems like a lot of people from those communities, I'm a social media person, I'm always on social media, so when you watch their videos, their photos, they're always living their self. They're always being true to themselves or saying what they like and just living their lives. So I feel like that's very important for me, or just anybody because it's very positive. It's very positive. It's very encouraging.

> …But I feel like I'm that type of person in general, I'm… open minded, want to talk to anybody. And a lot of people from that community always think that I'm from that community because how I dress… I mean, I'm probably a part of the queer community. If I am, that's fine. I just haven't announced it, like, "Oh, I'm a part of the community." …I just have not said I'm a part of the queer community just because I'm not... Okay. So you don't have to be dating somebody to be a part of that. But it's just, I haven't had any type of relationship or anything like that. And then I've never known asexuals to be a part of that community, and I haven't even met anyone that's asexual or I never really hear the term. So if I heard the term a lot, like, oh, we're a part of that community, then definitely, I would definitely feel like that. But I never hear it… I never hear nobody say asexual. I'm not really for sure if I'm even saying it right.
>
> …I definitely wouldn't mind being a part of the queer community. I never just considered myself a part of the queer community, but people just think I'm gay and that's cool.

Jay explicitly said that they stopped going to an LGBT group because of the amatonormativity of the space. They desired a queerplatonic relationship because they wanted to raise children with a partner, but weren't sure how to find such a relationship:

> **Jay:** In real life [i.e., not online] I joined the club one time, LGBT club, but I didn't really, really relate to them very much. So I stopped going… I can't relate to how they... all want to find somebody to love or they do have them and I don't… And there wasn't an ace club either…
>
> I would love to raise a kid someday. But probably first off, I'm not interested in a spouse and [adoption agencies] probably won't let me adopt if I'm single. I know it's done. I

> know it is possible to be done. And at the same time there's also the financial issue. Are you able to provide for a kid by yourself with only one provider? And then it's also gender… I know [the expectation from society is that] they will have both a mother and a father… And [at the] same time it's like a partnership because you got to have a break sometimes, right?...
>
> I would like a partner that would love the child to bits, but it would be mostly a friendship rather than any romantic or sexual relationship. [But] I have no idea [how to find a relationship like that]… [To] have a spouse who would be interested in only having a child but not a wife. So yeah, that's not going to happen. Really rare, but I can't be the only person who feels that way, right?

In Jay's desire for a committed childrearing relationship that would not require them to be a "wife," we see the intersection of their genderfluidity, asexuality, and aromanticism, and it's an intersection that made them feel as if they did not belong in queer spaces at all.

A Little Bit of Magic

The thing is, Jay is right that they are not the only person who wants what they want out of a relationship. For example, Hue described their T4T relationship with their ace and nonbinary partner:

> **Hue:** But I think that my partner being trans, [and] especially being ace, in the context of our relationship has helped so much, because I don't have to make a compromise on my boundaries and what I want in a relationship with them, because we're on the same page. And we want the same thing and we also respect what each other wants… both [me and

my partner] play with expression a fair amount, and I like that we're super supportive of each other no matter what way we're dressing or what way we're expressing ourselves. Although… I personally prefer… when they dress masculine because that's what I like, I still really support them and always will hype them up when they dress more femme too. And they do the same for me. They'll be like, "You look so hot, you look so good," no matter really what I dress or how I dress up. And I don't feel that I need to perform a certain gender for them to think I'm attractive or whatever. Which also they're aromantic, so that's not actually something I have to worry about at all, because it's just not really something they experience or is at the forefront of our relationship. But yeah, what they find cute about me is consistent throughout any gender expression or any gender feeling that I'm having. It's very like, you're cute because you're you, and I like your mannerisms and little things you do.

In Hue's story, we also see a discussion of a similar challenge to what Bug experienced in their T4T relationship, but whereas Bug's ex decided he needed to date cis men in order for his attraction to masculinity to be fulfilled, Hue and their partner made a space for genderfluidity by maintaining focus on the parts of each other they found attractive throughout the expansiveness of their genders.

As another example, Tome described a relationship with their roommate that wouldn't exactly "qualify" as T4T under the standard definition, but which definitely feels T4T because it fulfilled all of the same needs and benefits of T4T relationships that other participants described:

Tome: I guess, as far as another really good and supportive [relationship], my current roommate is definitely one of those. We're both out here. We're students. We're working.

> We're both at the end of our rope. But we've done our best to support each other, especially being someone else who understands the shifting and elusive nature of gender, someone that I really, really connect to, really relate to. We're planning on driving down for the holidays together. I'm going to drop them off at their parents, spend the night there, and then continue on. There's very much a kindred spirit thing there. I feel like we relate on a lot of levels.
>
> And... I'm trying to remember the way they worded it before. It was some night we were having a few drinks or whatever. We looked at each other and realized, "We're not attracted to each other, but the likelihood of us drunkenly making out at some point is high, not for any real reason, but just the way we are." I think we're both like, "We're not going out of our way for it, but if it happens, it's not going to be weird. It just is what it is." I don't really know. It's a very weird relationship to describe. But I feel like… we're here to support each other. We're going to do our best, whether that's you don't want to get up, let me go grab your meds so you don't die. I was in bed coughing up a storm last night because I've just had a cough the past few days… I was coughing, and at some point, they cracked open my door, and they're like, "Do you want a cough drop?" Just like that. We'll take turns cooking and doing chores and all of that. There's a support there and an understanding that I feel like is really important.

In other words, I think T4T, both as a concept describing trans experience and as tool for trans liberation, has much greater potential when it lets go of amatonormativity. There tends to be an intensity (which is not necessarily good or bad) in relationships between trans people that deserves to be recognized, regardless of the particular relationship type:

> **Rennan:** I mean, I definitely know people who are supportive of [me being genderfluid]. But even then, I feel like the ones who get me the most are other genderfluid people. I feel like when it comes to people who are not genderfluid, who are in my life, even the ones very close to me, I tend to keep it a little more on the down-low…
>
> If you are the only guy or girl in the room of a bunch of people, that's when you start thinking about your place. But if you have even one other person in that room, who understands your identity, you have a friend. You have solidarity. You are not alone. You are not just weird. You're of a category, you have people.

I'm not arguing necessarily that we should start using the term T4T for all relationships between trans people, so much as I think we need to remove the pedestal that T4T relationships get placed on. They can sometimes get treated as if they are THE solution for when trans people feel isolated or lonely, and that's not really true. On the other hand, even seemingly shallow interactions between trans people can end up being really meaningful:

> **Linda:** [A little while after I realized I was genderfluid] I was interviewing for my first professional job... And the people who would be my peers were at the table. And I think they were going around and doing introductions of some capacity. Somehow it was named that the person on my left, my immediate left… used they/them pronouns. And I can't remember if they said that they were nonbinary or genderfluid or how they coded that. But when they said that they used they/them pronouns, I viscerally remember reaching over and grabbing their arm and saying, "Me too." And that was a moment clearly that I remember [from] almost a decade ago, I think, so vividly.
>
> And so that felt like the first time unintentional community happened.

The small and large ways that trans people find to show up for each other (even if imperfectly) are an element of being trans and of trans culture that I don't think gets celebrated enough. It can be so hard for us to find each other and then even harder for us to unbury ourselves from the absolute mountain of anti-transness the world puts upon us. It's a little bit of magic that we find so many ways to be good to each other. So this chapter functions as my ritual, my hope that we keep finding ways to pass this cultural tradition on.

Epilogue: Some Final Thoughts

In writing this book, I wanted to think deeply about genderfluidity and genderfluid people's lives. There seems to be a general assumption that the distinctions between various nonbinary identities are either 1) irrelevant and so the umbrella term "nonbinary" is sufficient, or 2) that the *only* way to interact with microlabels like "genderfluid" is through the lens of identity and difference, as a way to distinguish trans people from each other. As I complete this project, I hope I have demonstrated some ways that we can think about genderfluidity, not individualistically, but through the lens of community. When treated as a tool to make ourselves known to each other, genderfluidity not only illuminates what makes trans people's experiences distinct from each other, but also what connects us to each other.

Another way to think about this work is as a call to reframe "inclusivity" as solidarity and community building. There's power in trans relationality, trans ways of making/holding/taking space, trans ways of really *being there* with each other. Transness is not just about identity; it's also a culture. I believe that a significant aspect of trans liberation is deciding how we want to share and grow this culture. For my part, I think we should focus on creating and maintaining a culture of vulnerability based in an ethic of community care, where we recognize each other's needs and fight for each other to meet those needs, in the knowledge that the community will fight for us in return. No one gets left behind, no one is too "cringe" or inconvenient or subaltern to give and receive care and recognition. Although idealistic, I truly believe trans communities of care are an achievable goal, because I found elements of them throughout my interviews. That said, I also found that these sorts of communities are not inevitable, even amongst trans people. A lot of trans people are still functionally alone right now. They don't have strong connections to

other trans people who they can turn to when they need material support. If we want a community that can fulfill these needs, we have to actively choose to grow and maintain it, especially as anti-trans movements work to break down trans communities by keeping trans people out of public life.

But transness has always been about choosing something true because it is life affirming, regardless of what the world might try to do about it:

> **Linda:** I think genderfluidity is fun and dynamic and an adventure and it allows me to [choose], "What do I want to be today?"

I think this is where trans joy becomes important. Fear of the very real challenges that we face in the world, or even rage at the ways that we are mistreated (sacred as that emotion is), can both be co-opted by the forces of anti-transness, because they can make us feel like there is not enough space to go around. It is harder to co-opt joy, that bubbly, almost overwhelming feeling you get when you are secure and satisfied with your place in the world, including your relationships with other people. Joy multiplies as it is shared:

> **Oliver:** Seeing trans joy gives me joy.

So there is no reason to jealously guard it. And joy acts as a marker of what we are trying to protect. If rage reminds us that we deserve better, joy shows us what better can actually look like.

So my final hope for this book: May you find joy worth protecting, and may you find people to protect it with.

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Appendix A

Screener Survey

1. Is your gender fluid (i.e., does your gender change or shift)? You may use additional terms (e.g., transgender, nonbinary, Two Spirit) to describe your gender identity, or you may not.
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Unsure/Questioning
2. What age are you? (survey ended if they chose "under 18")
3. In which country do you currently reside? (survey ended if they chose any country other than the United States of America)
4. Are you willing to participate in an interview about your experiences as a genderfluid person? The interview will be conducted via Zoom and will last about 2 hours.
    a. Yes
    b. No (survey ended)
5. How can we contact you?
    a. Email:

Part 2 Instructions: We know that genderfluid people have diverse backgrounds and experiences. Socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, disability, and relationship status can all impact a person's experience with gender (and how other people treat them).

If you complete the interview, the remaining demographic questions will be used to help guide your interview. For example, the interviewer will not ask you about your romantic partner if you state that you are not in a romantic relationship. Your responses will also be used to contextualize your interview when we analyze your data. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer.

6. What best describes you? (Choose all that apply. If you prefer a more specific term than the options provided, please write in as needed.)
    a. White [With an option to write in provided]
    b. Black or African American [With an option to write in provided]
    c. Latino/a/e or Hispanic [With an option to write in provided]
    d. Indigenous or Native American or Alaskan Native [With an option to write in provided]
    e. Asian [With an option to write in provided]
    f. Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander [With an option to write in provided]
    g. Middle Eastern or North African [With an option to write in provided]

    h. Mixed race or Biracial [With an option to write in provided]
    i. Another race or ethnicity (Please write in)
7. Do you identify as disabled, chronically ill, mentally ill, or neurodivergent?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Prefer not to say What language should we use to describe you?
    d. Identity-first language (e.g., disabled person)
    e. Person-first language (e.g., person with a disability, person living with mental illness)
    f. Something else (Please write in)
8. What best describes your gender identity? (Choose all that apply.)
    a. Woman
    b. Man
    c. Cisgender
    d. Transgender
    e. Two-Spirit or another indigenous gender identity
    f. Transfeminine
    g. Transmasculine
    h. Nonbinary
    i. Agender/greygender
    j. Genderfluid
    k. Genderflux
    l. Genderqueer
    m. Gender nonconforming
    n. Undefined
    o. Another gender identity (Please write in)
9. What are your pronouns? (Choose all that apply.)
    a. He/him/his
    b. She/her/hers
    c. They/them/theirs
    d. Ze(zie)/hir/hir
    e. Ze(zie)/zir/zir
    f. Xe/xem/xyr
    g. I am pronoun indifferent.
    h. I use different pronouns depending on how I'm feeling.
    i. I use different pronouns depending on who I'm with.
    j. Other pronouns (please write in)
10. What is your sexual orientation? (Choose all that apply.)
    a. Lesbian

b. Gay
c. Bisexual
d. Pansexual
e. Queer
f. Asexual
g. Straight/Heterosexual
h. Other (Please write in)

11. What best describes your romantic orientation? (Choose all that apply.)
    a. Homoromantic
    b. Biromantic
    c. Panromantic
    d. Queer
    e. Aromantic
    f. Heteroromantic
    g. Other (please write in)
12. Are you polyamorous?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. I don't know
13. Are you currently in a sexual, romantic, or queerplatonic relationship?
    a. Yes
    b. No
14. Which of the following best describes your current sexual, romantic, or queerplatonic relationship(s)?
    a. I am in a relationship with one person
    b. I am in a relationship with two or more people
    c. Other (please specify)
15. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
16. Are you currently enrolled in undergraduate or graduate school?
    a. Yes
    b. No
17. What was your household income for the previous year, before taxes. If you are unsure, please give your best guess.
18. Do you have health insurance?
    a. I'm on my parents insurance
    b. I get insurance through an employer/school
    c. I am on a private plan
    d. I am on a low-cost state funded/medicaid/medicare plan
    e. I don't have insurance

f. Other (please specify)

19. How would you describe your housing situation?
    a. I own the house I live in
    b. I rent the house/apartment I live in
    c. I live with my parents or other family members
    d. I don't have a regular place I live (stay with friends, couch surfing, etc.)
    e. I am homeless
    f. Other (please specify)

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Theme #1: Intersections of Genderfluid Identity

1. What motivated you to join the study?
2. How would you describe your gender?
3. If you were to explain to someone what genderfluidity is, what would you say?
4. What is it like when your gender shifts?
5. When did you first know about your own genderfluidity? Can you tell me about how you came to realize you are genderfluid?
    a. When did you first tell someone else? Why at that time?
6. In discussions of transness we often forget about or segregate out race and ethnicity, even though gender and culture are really connected. So I'm interested in how your race or ethnicity comes into play for your gender?
7. Can you tell me about any spiritual or religious practices you have?
    a. Does your gender relate to your spiritual/religious practice?
8. [If they identified as disabled in the screener] Does disability come into play at all for you and your gender? For example, does it affect how other people treat you or how you present your gender?
9. What could have made exploring your genderfluidity easier?
    a. What do you wish you had known?
    b. What support did you have?
    c. What support do you have now?
    d. What support do you wish you had received?
    e. What support do you still want?

Theme #2: Community and Interpersonal Relationships

10. Can you tell me about your first time meeting another trans, nonbinary, or genderfluid person?
11. What sort of importance does queer or trans community have in your life?
12. Take a moment to type in the chat 3-5 important relationships in your life. Don't write names, just write their relationships to you (like best friend, brother, partner, parent, cousin, pet, etc.)
13. Can you choose one of these relationships to tell me about?
    a. How is your genderfluidity present in this relationship? [Can you give me an example of that?]

        i. Do you ever experience difficulty/support around your genderfluidity in this relationship?

    b. Can you tell me about another important relationship in your life?

14. Can you tell me about the place you live currently?
    a. Who do you live with? What is the space like?
    b. Has being genderfluid affected your relationships with the people you live with?
    c. Has your genderfluidity ever made it difficult to find or remain in safe housing?
    d. Have you ever been homeless or couch-surfed? Can you tell me about that experience?
        i. When did it happen? For how long?
        ii. Why did it happen?

Theme #3: Experiences in Medical Environments

15. Have your interactions with medical providers generally been positive, negative, or mixed?
16. Can you tell me about a time when your genderfluidity came up in a medical appointment?
    a. Have you ever sought gender affirming medical care? Can you tell me about experience?
    b. Do you have any other experiences with medical professionals that you would like to share?
17. How should a respectful medical professional treat you during an appointment?

Theme #4: Shared Dreams

18. What is something about being genderfluid or being trans that you wish you could talk about, but never seems to come up in discussions of trans issues? Can you tell me about it?
19. Do you have any recommendations of genderfluid representation in media – books, movies, television, video games, music?

Appendix C

Member Check Questions

All participants were presented with a 1-2 paragraph summary of each preliminary research finding. Then, they were asked the following four questions about each finding:

1. [Multiple Choice] Does your experience fit with this theme?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Somewhat
2. [Multiple Choice] Do you want to change anything?
    a. No
    b. Yes [If the participant chose "Yes" they were prompted with an open-ended answer box to explain what they would like to change about the theme.]
3. [Multiple Choice] Do you want to add anything?
    a. No
    b. Yes [If the participant chose "Yes" they were prompted with an open-ended answer box to explain what they would like to change about the theme.]
4. [Open-ended] Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your impressions of this theme?