

Binary, Bodies, Beyond:

An account of TGNC embodiment

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis has not been previously submitted for the requirements of another degree or diploma in any university. All material contained within is novel and was produced for the purpose of this thesis with the exception of works produced by other individuals, which are duly attributed within.

Macquarie University's Human Research Ethics Council granted approval for the fieldwork portion of this thesis to be conducted under the supervision of A/Prof Chris Houston (Appendix A: HREC Approval).

Signed:

Date: 24/02/22

Contents

Declaration of Originality	2
Acknowledgements	4
Abstract	5
Introduction	6
Literature Review	7
Method	10
Photography.....	11
A note on language.....	12
Faelan (he/him)	14
Mina (they/she)	29
August (they/them)	43
Brooke (she/her)	57
Aaron (they/them)	79
Conclusion	93
The entrenchment of transmedicalism	93
From transexceptionalism to TGNC embodiment	94
Trans gender non-conforming embodiment.....	95
Final words.....	97
References	98
Appendix A: HREC Approval	103

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Divinely decreed and custom made.

"She's American" – The 1975.

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Abstract

My body isn't sacred to me. It's to be moulded by me. I'm not born in the wrong body, I'm just moulding this flesh clay I've been given in a way that a lot of people do, but just not in this way.

*

Embodiment, the experience of bodily existence and its fundamental influence over our perceptions of ourselves and others, is a bedrock of both anthropological literature and trans studies. However, aside from a handful of works (e.g., Seamont, 2019 and Malatino, 2018), the two fields have remained largely separate in their treatment of trans intersubjectivity, body modification and the limits of language.

In this thesis, I seek to bridge this separation. Drawing from a 4-month period of fieldwork with five trans gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals, the thesis demonstrates the beauty and variety of embodiment enacted by not-cis individuals. To do so the thesis is structured into five accounts, each of which encapsulate one individual and the everyday nuances of being in their body. Woven within these accounts are extensive quotations and self-taken photographs, intended to create an authentic multimodal representation of the individual. Each individual is presented in a single piece of writing, with accounts placed next to one another to complement and contrast individual understandings and experiences of embodiment. Dominant themes including the limitations of language, desire for and rejection of body modification, and intersubjective embodiment as fluid, ever-changing and ongoing, are conveyed at an individual level with external literature and theory referenced as appropriate. The conclusion weaves these threads together to explore what they may mean at a more collective level, emphasizing the need for trans and gender non-conforming voices in anthropology.

Introduction

What can be said about bodies that has not already been said? Pop songs sing of bodies on dance floors, while true crime podcasts point to bodies in the street. Humans die and their bodies decay, becoming one with the earth that birthed them. We are our bodies, inescapably. Bodies are vessels of our being, but in their ageing and decrepitude, of our misery, too. Despite their all-encompassing nature, bodies are often taken as an unspoken fact of life – at least until they stop working properly or ache in new and unfamiliar ways.

In taking our bodies for granted, what do we miss? What wrinkles, what perfections, what quirks? What features, what habits, what modifications? What broader social processes that course through and in them? What constitutes a body? Is it the moles in my skin, the lack of serotonin in my brain? Or rather, my internal gender identity, my external gender presentation?

What is this vessel for and who does this form serve?

Is my body a temple, sacred and hallowed? Or, a temple, crumbling, haunted, and desecrated. If my body is created and maintained by my own hand, do I not get a say in what decorate its' halls? Do I not determine how it is built?

*

This thesis documents the lived experience of five TGNC (trans gender non-conforming) individuals over a 4-month period of fieldwork, both in face-to-face and virtual settings. By using the term 'TGNC', I emphasize that the thesis is not about the characteristics that these individuals share (e.g., being from middle-class economic backgrounds or having attended the same university) but concerns how they differ in perceiving and experiencing their body.

Each individual is presented in a single piece of writing, their accounts placed next to one another to complement and contrast individual understandings and experiences of embodiment. These accounts foster an understanding of embodiment as perceived both through a sense of self and external socialisation, which at different times may be good, bad, or ordinary. Woven within these accounts are extensive quotations and self-taken photographs, creating a multimodal representation of the individual. Taken together, these five accounts demonstrate the beauty and variety of embodiment enacted by trans gender non-conforming individuals.

Further, in demonstrating such beauty, the dominant themes of the limits of language, desire for and rejection of body modification, people's unfinished sense of self, and embodiment as fluid, ever-changing and ongoing, are revealed. External literature from both anthropology and trans studies are referenced as appropriate with the thesis predominantly focused on communicating the lived experience of my interlocutors and their personal understandings of gender and identity. As the thesis is focused on individual experiences of embodiment, the conclusion summarises the main thematic analysis presented whilst emphasizing the need for TGNC voices in anthropology.

Literature Review

First and foremost, this research was approached, in both fieldwork and write-up, through the lens of phenomenology. Phenomenology, as defined by Desjarlais and Throop (2011) is "the study of phenomena as they appear to the consciousnesses of an individual or a group of people; the study of things as they appear in our lived experiences" (p.88). Simply, it is an approach to studying human experience that prioritises the subjective and intersubjective aspects of human life. In addition to this framing, "the existential null point" (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011, p.89) of human existence and therefore of phenomenology is understood to be the body, leading us to the concept of embodiment.

Embodiment, as defined by Csordas in 'Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology' (1990), is the view that "the body is not an *object* [author's own emphasis] to be studied in relation to culture but is to be considered as the *subject* [author's own emphasis] of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture" (p.5). In the context of this thesis, the nebulous concept of culture is replaced with a focus with broader ideologies of gender and body modification, such as transmedicalism.

As Csordas (ibid, p.36) explains, "Our bodies are not objects to us. Quite the contrary, they are an integral part of the perceiving subject". Consequently, to fully understand how an individual navigates their day-to-day life against the backdrop of these ideas, I believe we must pay close attention to how they perceive and experience their bodies. The phenomenological view of embodiment and its centring of the body as the locus of reality therefore is essential to any analysis of identity and experience at the individual level.

Anthropological literature on both bodies and embodiment is extensive (e.g., Featherstone et al., 1991, Synnott, 1993, Csordas, 1990, 1994, Mascia-Lees, 2011, Thomas & Ahmed, 2011, Stewart & Strathern, 2015). Nevertheless, there are few works that empathetically examine how TGNC individuals perceive and experience their bodies, both in relation to their internal gender identity, but also in relation to their broader socio-cultural worlds. In addition to this, trans studies remains somewhat separated from anthropology, with anthropological discussion of gender diversity more likely to explore non-Western contexts such as South Sulawesi (Graham Davies, 2004) and Thailand (Blackwood in Mascia-Lees, 2011).

A more recent and narrow intellectual discipline, trans studies emerged within mid-20th century medical discourse due to the highly publicised work of U.S. endocrinologist Henry Benjamin. It would take another half a century before becoming fully realised as its own field of study with trans and gender non-

conforming scholars at the helm, beginning with Sandy Stone's seminal essay '*The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*' (1987).

A cursory glance at the multiple editions of *The Transgender Studies Reader 1* (Stryker & Whittle, 2006) and *2* (Stryker & Aizura, 2013) as well as the ongoing success of the journal *TSQ*, reveals the magnitude of work that has already been done on trans identity, including issues of language, representation, and the troubling question of hetero/cisnormativity. The breadth of issues considered in trans studies, including the corporeality of trauma and its inheritance (Wiggins, 2017), as well as the gatekeeping of trans identity and medical procedures (Heyes & Latham, 2018), makes the relative absence of trans gender non-conforming voices within anthropology sharp and explicit.

Jackson Wright Shultz's book '*Trans/Portraits*' (2015) significantly influenced the thematic approach of this thesis, with the individual voices of his text having significance both as lone entities and in dialogue with other interviewees. The works of Susan Stryker (1994, 2017) and Jack Halberstam (2005, 2020) have also been of personal significance.

Over the last few decades, embodiment as a tool for theoretical analysis has dominated both anthropological and trans studies work. Both disciplines also find a commonality in an embrace of phenomenology and its focus on the minute details of everyday life. This disciplinary overlap led me to focus on embodiment, rather than gender performativity or the provision of gender affirming care.

Hil Malatino's book '*Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*' (2018) is a significant work within an emerging trans canon for its intimate account of intersex personhood but also for Malatino's eloquent analysis of monstrosity, sexology, and the limits of gender-as-being thinking. This thesis is founded upon Malatino's discussion of embodiment beyond sexual dimorphism and a revisiting of 'gender as becoming', as first coined by Simone du Beauvoir.

Similarly, Morgan Seamont's anthropological doctoral thesis '*Becoming "the Man I Want to Be": Transgender Masculinity, Embodiment, and Sexuality*' (2018) has influenced both my approach to interviewing and to analysis. Seamont's hybridisation of anthropological and trans theory is noteworthy not only for its consideration of trans embodiment, but equally for its first-person narrative, as Seamont himself is a trans man. My thesis continues the work of Seamont by expanding his initial conceptualisation of trans-masculine embodiment to consider other forms of embodiment including trans-feminine and non-binary.

Method

Preparation for this thesis began in late 2020 with a submission to the Human Research Ethics Council being made on January 29th, 2021. This application went through several rounds of revision and re-submission before being accepted on April 7th (Appendix A). In addition to this, restrictive and mandatory COVID-SAFE protocols for this project's conduct were approved on April 30th. Recruitment via snowballing and social media posts began shortly after and ran for a month. It is also important to note that for a majority of interlocutors, their participation in this research was only made possible by my own status as a non-binary individual.

Between May and August 2021, qualitative interviews were conducted. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours 30 minutes. Initially, these interviews were held face-to-face at Macquarie University and at a private address. The city of Sydney went into lockdown late June with face-to-face research being paused on June 24th. The lockdown presented several challenges, including the loss of a dedicated physical space for interviewing. From June onward, interviews were conducted via the video conferencing software, Zoom. At each interview, both face-to-face and virtual, informants were offered compensation for their time in the form of a meal.

Interviews were loosely structured, giving each individual space to discuss the characteristics of their body and identity that they wanted to highlight. As a result, a wide variety of topics were covered, ranging from the homoeroticism of the

recent *Cats* movie to the difficulties involved in purchasing stylish androgynous clothing. Initial interviews followed a preliminary interview guide to help informants understand the project's intentions and introduce themselves to me. Subsequent interviews returned to topics raised in the initial interview. Audio of each interview was recorded for the purpose of transcription and will be deleted upon thesis submission.

Photography

The focus on individual experience and perception is not only emphasized through the use of quotation and analysis but also through the presence of self-taken photographs in a majority of accounts.

Self-photography is a powerful medium for portrayals of embodiment by helping to create a nuanced visual articulation of individual's sense of self. In drawing upon a combination of photographs, textual analysis, and direct quotation, I intend to create a complex multimodal representation of personal embodiment. Although photographs appear to freeze time, I hope readers will also perceive that these images index brief moments in passage, when the paths of my interlocuters and myself cross. Sarah Pink's '*Doing Visual Ethnography*' (2007) approaches photography as a multi-authored process, rather than a static moment in time. Visual anthropologists Robert Desjarlais (2018) and Karl Heider (2006), and queer scholars Eliza Steinbock (2014) and Zubillaga-Pow (2018) share a phenomenological approach to photography. Consequently, each author draws attention to the need for a contextualisation of images, so that viewers' own personal pre-judgements do not overwhelm the subject's own meaning in producing photography.

Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic was a boon for this form of anthropology, which meant that I could not take the photographs but instead invited interlocuters to photograph themselves, when and if it suited them. After interviews concluded, a prompt list was prepared for each individual. These were

designed to hone in on a significant topic from their respective interviews and acted as guidance rather than a strict instruction concerning their self-photography. For additional guidance, I sent photos of myself that were influenced by the work of Canadian photographer Laurence Philomène. Philomène's series '*Puberty*' (2019-2021) is a vivid, syrupy depiction of young adult life that is highly personal and yet broadly relatable to the TGNC community. Their photography provided the perfect reference point as they are non-binary and of a similar age to my interlocuters.

As Hans Belting argues in '*An Anthropology of Images*' (2011), photography can never be truly objective as the creation of the image is inherently shaped by both the photographer's own perceptions and the viewer's interpretation. The subjective generation of photography and the thesis as a whole is replicated in the dialogue between interlocuters and myself. These conversations spanned multiple months as prompt lists were responded to, and chapter drafts were critiqued and refined.

A note on language

Each interlocuter's voice is explicitly represented through the use of italicised quotes. Comments are transcribed accurately, including swearing, fragmentation, and slurs.¹ Where possible, quotes are included in their entirety with only minor formatting changes. No quotes have been combined from disparate interviews.

Every instance of an identity referent (e.g., trans, non-binary) is used with regard to that individual, reflecting their personal usage and understanding of the label. The label TGNC was used for recruitment purposes, referring to both binary and non-binary trans individuals, as well as those who are agender, genderfluid or simply not cis. Whilst in this thesis cisgender somewhat simplistically refers to individuals who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth and socialised as, TGNC

¹ [] indicates an implied referent (word, phrase, or idea)

// indicates additional noises

() indicates a specific tone. (i.e., mocking).

Underlining indicates the individual themselves emphasized this word or phrase.

individuals includes those with a variety of relationships to gender – including those who reject the notion of an assigned gender at birth.

Language is fluid and ever-changing. TGNC is used here as it was the term I used in recruitment. It is also used in medical guidelines, including the American Psychiatric Association's *Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People* (2015). Much like the terms cisgender, transsexual, transgender, trans*, trans, or trans and gender diverse, future readers may contest this language.

Faelan (he/him)

*I don't feel like I was born in the wrong body, I'm fixing it or
whatever.*

This is my body, the body I was born in.

I can't be born in the wrong body because it's my body.

*

A hobby taxidermist, a surveyor of bees and a collector of tattoos, Faelan is a soft-spoken man who in his mid-20's, has already experienced many of the colours of life's tapestry, with soaring joys and horrifying lows. In his conversations with me, each of these threads weave together, intertwine, and sometimes even fray.

At our first meeting, Faelan clutches a large rainbow umbrella with his neatly lacquered nails. He has primmed and preened himself with a careful hand, exuding an aura of sophistication. His denim jacket, black boots and messenger bag are all lovingly worn in. Each piece contributes to the image of a quietly self-assured man.

Faelan's trans ness is enmeshed amongst his passions, his career, and his friends – simultaneously as important as a university graduation and as mundane as a cup of tea brewing on a countertop.

*



*Feels like a very trans experience to be like, it's very complicated, I don't know, **I feel weird if someone were to shove me in the same gender category as a cis man.***

*Not to say trans men aren't men, but – **I feel we have very different experiences to gender and just being a man than what a cis man has.** Just the way they go about the gender, I'm very different, very, very different.*

For a man who exudes confidence, Faelan is remarkably soft-spoken. At our first meeting, his voice barely breaks through the noise of the café we are seated in. Red Bull in hand, I can feel him assessing and evaluating me as I run through the logistics. This is not uncommon for trans people meeting new people, especially in research settings. As a gender non-conforming researcher, I am acutely aware of this. So often research is done on us, or about us, but not with us: but now this pattern is beginning to change.

Historical research into gender identity and expression was more often than not pursued by white, cisgender men who wrote about the TGNC people closest to them. One example of this is Henry Rubin's seminal work *'Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men'* (2003), which scrutinises and dissects trans men to see what makes them men. The simple answer is that, by virtue of identifying as a man, these men are men. Faelan is a man. It does not need to, nor should it be more complicated than that.

*

Oh, I hate pushing the whole 'I was born a girl and I was born in a girl's [body]'.

Like no, gender is a social construct, you're not born anything, you're born a baby. And then I was assigned female at birth without my consent.

And later in my life, I went 'hey that's not correct'.

I've been a boy as long as a cis person's been a boy, yknow?

*

For Faelan, gender operates like the layers of an oil painting. Paint shadows and light pile on top of one another, are scraped away, co-mingle or dry on their own. Gender is a curative process composed by both the individual and society, a bricolage of self-socialisation. Faelan's manhood is cumulative, built up over time as he explored his presentation and altered his body. As he becomes comfortable in his identity and body, layers are added and removed. Dress styles are adopted then dropped, nail polish is re-discovered, whilst a fear of needles is surmounted via hormone replacement therapy and tattoos.

In this way, Faelan's experience of his body, his identity, and his sexuality fluctuate and change. Whilst the process of being oneself as a trans individual is often medicalised while being made into a straight-forward narrative line, the process of becoming oneself is non-linear (Malatino, 2018). This process does not simply end with transition but has a lifelong rhythm, foregrounded by personal and communal articulations of trans ness that surpass the tempo of objectively measured time.

*

I don't like that narrative [of wrongness].

I think cis people see it a lot and then they apply to every single trans person. And yeah, maybe there are trans people who feel like 'I've always known I was a boy' or 'I was born in the wrong body' but nah, to be honest – I don't feel like that.

*

The narrative of 'wrongness' that Faelan refers to is persistent and hegemonic in social life to the point that a 'default' definition of trans ness is built upon it. The conventional definition of trans(gender) states that a trans individual is one who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. As Stryker (2017) notes, the

line between transsexual, a person who has undergone a “one-way, one-time medicalized transition” (p.38) and transgender, is anything but clear. This is due not only to linguistic changes never being wholly transformative but can also be attributed to the proliferation of body modification practices that are considered ‘conventional’ transsexuality by non-trans identifying individuals (Stryker, *ibid*).

Optimistic readings propose that the initial gendering was incorrect in assigning someone as male or female. It is not the concept of gendering an infant that is challenged, but rather the incongruence of body and identity: the always gendered individual is thus born in the ‘wrong’ body (for a more explicit detailing of the wrong body and beyond the binary models of trans identity, see Bettcher, 2014).

As will be discussed in more detail in Brooke’s account, the association of trans individuals with wrongness and abnormality possesses a long historical linkage (see Stryker’s ‘*My Words To Victor Frankenstein*’, 1994). However, this notion of ‘being born in the wrong body’ is directly challenged by many trans people, including Faelan. Even as Faelan identifies an initial mistake at birth, he still perceives his body and identity as a work-in-process, something that he has developed and will continue to develop over time. To spite the trope of hegemonic masculinity, trans men are as varied as cis men.

*

*And even the trans men I know, trans males living in Sydney, it's not just like we are all very masculine, we're all tradies... **There are so many varying degrees** - some trans men who don't like to do any feminine stuff like paint their nails at all, nothing like that, which is fair – **but [we are all] very, very different with gender.***

....

I would say I'm a trans man, but I wouldn't 100% say I'm a binary man. 'Cause I feel like for most trans people, it's very fluid. We don't like to be put in boxes.

*

One of the first anthropological works to seriously consider the fluid nature of trans embodiment is Morgan Seamont's *'Becoming 'The Man I Want to Be': Transgender Masculinity, Embodiment, and Sexuality'* (2018). Writing both as a trans man and through working with other trans men, Seamont testifies to the ongoing curative dimension of trans masculinity.

Masculinity is not simply being a 'man'. Instead, it refers to the cultural cum political qualities and practices associated with being male in spite of the fact masculinity is performed not only by men, but also by women and other gendered individuals (Halberstam, 1998). Inherently unstable, masculinity (and also femininity), is a tricky practice to pin down and even trickier to neatly map onto bodies (see Latham, 2017 for an autoethnographic perspective).

Seamont (2018) proposes that trans masculinity and trans femininity need to be understood in a framework that accounts for both an individual's socialisation as one gender and subsequent lived experience identifying as another. Seamont's thesis affirms Faelan's lived experience as a trans man, showing that trans embodiment is complex and nuanced, requiring a similarly nuanced understanding of it.

*

*I feel like that's an issue with how trans people are portrayed, it's just **such a heavy focus on medical transition or transition in general**, [to the point] that I know people who think trans is short for transition.*

*It's good to talk about these things but **sometimes I wish that when trans stuff gets brought up, could we just not mention transition for one thing?***

***It's not the only or even the most important part of being trans** and I feel like sometimes it [leads to] really uncomfortable questions.*

*

Whilst not seeking to add to the already extensive discussion of transition, it may be useful to clarify what Faelan is referring to here. Transition refers to the medical and social changes that an individual can undergo to align their external gender presentation with their internal gender identity (Stryker, 2017). As Faelan says, transition is generally understood to refer to medical procedures but can also refer to non-medical changes such as clothing choices, a new name, and different pronouns. Some of the medical processes that trans people often undergo include hormone replacement therapy (HRT), 'top' surgery (augmentation or removal of breast tissue) and 'bottom surgery' (genital reconstruction).

Both in social and medical transition, Faelan has followed a 'conventional' timeline. His account of the wait to start hormones, and then his surprise at receiving his first dose during what he thought was just another consultation, is given calmly, in a

matter-of-fact tone. This is well-trodden territory for Faelan, and the lines flow as if from a rehearsed piece or poetry. However, there is nothing truly rehearsed about it.

Transition is a pervasive trope of trans narrativization and for good reason. It slots neatly within the 'wrong body' narrative and thus is seen to serve a corrective purpose as "the clinical narrative of transsexuality is both founded on and perpetuates the notion of sex as singular" (Latham, 2017, p.179) whilst also making individual processes of body alteration intelligible. One consequence of such generalisation is that it metaphorizes individual gender identity and presentation into a language that TGNC individuals must use to articulate their personal desires for modification. It becomes something external to themselves and therefore 'objective'. The contours of transition are well-worn, creating expectations about what people will do with their bodies, and when, but also for what reasons. However, the cost of making this process linear and the presumption that it is applicable to all is a palpable loss of nuance and individuality.

*

*Even the point I'm up to now, where I'm pretty happy with everything, there's not really much else that I want to do transition-wise, **there're still days where it's rough, it's not all positive [or], great all the time.***

*

In Faelan's case, having his life "bifurcated by medical transition" (Malatino 2018, p.193) erases the everyday experience of being a fat and gay, trans man. It ignores the horrible treatment he experienced living on campus as a pre-transition trans man. It obscures the callous comments of medical professionals, sneering at him to lose weight before his top surgery. It minimises the solace he found in a Queer

Society and its members. It removes the intersubjective dimension of life, replacing it instead with a reductive medical lens that focuses on glossy before and after shots. Most pertinent to my purpose here is the erasure of his personal relationship to the label of trans, his experience of being trans and his relationship with broader narratives of trans identity.

*

*A lot of trans people start off with 'I wish I wasn't trans, I wish I could be cis, things would be easy'. Yeah, things would be easy, but also, **I view being trans the same way I view [being] gay.***

I don't wanna be straight, I also don't wanna be cis.

I like being gay, I like being trans.



*You can't really take that away from me without yknow...**I'd be a very different person. You kinda can't divorce me from that.***

So, very open with it. I'm very proud of being trans, very happy to talk to people about being trans. As long as they are being respectful and it's an appropriate time for it to be brought up.

Yeah, it's quite important as a label to me.

Especially when you've had this feeling, I had feelings of 'I'm not cis' - I obviously didn't know [the term] at the time, since I was 5 - as soon as I can remember.

Having the label, and with that label, a community, is very important.

*

'Trans' is not just a descriptor of individual gender identity but represents community and shared understanding, including the potential to connect with others with similar life experiences and perceptions.



Figure 1 - The trans(gender) pride flag, created by Monica Helms.

(Source: Wikimedia Commons).

Blue represents men, pink represents women, and the white stripe is for those who are either transitioning or another gender identity as non-binary or genderfluid.

For Faelan, the importance of this label is clear. He proudly states that he is trans and that much like his queerness, he'd be a totally different person without it. Against a powerful narrative of wrongness, Faelan refutes this and weaves a new story instead. As the opening quote states, Faelan's body cannot be wrong because it is his body, end of story. Consequently, the all-consuming focus on transition with its extreme emotion and close analysis of bodies needs to be supplanted. Transitioning is not the start or end of being trans, it is simply a stop along the way, and one that not every trans person takes. Faelan's emphasis on the label's openness, on community, and the everyday experience of being trans, that is what counts.

The ordinary days, the gaps in between big life events, this is where the contours of being trans are experienced and understood. To ignore them is to ignore the inescapable fact that day in and day out, we navigate our lives through our bodies, not just in moments of rupture that occur on hospital beds, or within GP offices.

*

*I don't wanna be one of those people that's like 'I'm gonna lose weight' because I'm sick of being like that. **I'm sick of the mindset where, oh you lose weight and then you'll be happy.***

*I'm trying to attack it the same way as my line of thinking about being trans. **It's not a bad thing or something that I need to change.***

*

Against a narrative of wrongness and within a community of self-acceptance, how does Faelan experience his body in everyday life? The thing that makes Faelan's embodiment so remarkable is that it is unremarkable.

Body neutrality is a growing social movement, often positioned as a pushback against the extremes of body positivity and self-acceptance (Darwin & Miller 2021). Whereas advocates of body positivity argue that all bodies are beautiful, sexy, or otherwise attractive, body neutrality draws a line in the sand and refutes notions of beauty. As Darwin and Miller summarise, "society does construct certain bodies as pathological – and it can be difficult to love a body that society hates" (2021, p.884). Instead, body neutralists oppose the idea that their physical appearance is the most important thing about them, or that they should celebrate their flaws. The significance of such a refusal becomes clear in light of the fact that bodies are also political entities, whereby "the creation of a socially acceptable body is in effect the creation of a socially acceptable self because the body reveals the self" (Underwood 2013, p.381).

Not only does Faelan reject dominant discourse regarding weight and appearance, but he does so under the inescapable gaze of others, including within the gay community. Fatphobia is pervasive in the gay community, where toned abdomens are the ideal and body types are codified into certain sexual preferences (e.g., twink, twunk, bear). Further to this, Faelan remarks that he was told persistently to lose weight to pass better as a man, contrary to the fact that men, like any other gender,

come in all shapes and sizes. For Faelan, who has always been on the heavier side, body positivity has failed him.

*

I feel like it's better being positive about these things rather than the whole 'I hate my body' thing.

It's not it. We're not doing it anymore.

*

For individuals who have been pulled between gratuitous self-acceptance and a world that shames them for being different – for being trans, fat, or disabled for example – body neutrality is a breath of fresh air. They are allowed to just be. This non-judgement about one's body is nothing less than a radical act of self-love and respect. In Faelan's case, body neutrality is a poignant symbol of resistance, gesturing towards an understanding of trans bodies that surpasses a dichotomy of right and wrong, something that is long over-due after many, many years of medically sanctified transphobia.

*

*Working on it, working on it, but **it's hard when you live in a society that's very fatphobic and very transphobic.***

Yeah, I'm trying to be positive, getting there, I'm getting there.

Yeah, most of the time I'd say I'm pretty neutral.

Just trying to be kind to yourself is best, I think.

*

In surveying trans narratives, there is a persistent lens on the extremities of emotion. Dysphoria and euphoria. Before and after transition. Disclosure or the moment of sharing one's trans ness with a colleague or new friend. Alongside these two extremes is a third equally important feeling that is often left unsaid.

The mundane essence of being in a body - of waking up and rubbing the sleep from one's eyes, of stretching out a backache or nursing a hangover – is equally important and worth discussing. Our bodies are operational not only in times of sorrow or joy, but all the rest of our lives, physically anchoring us to this world. Embodied, we mediate our friendships, our relationships, and our sense of identity.

*

You're told, 'Oh, it's always gonna be great. As soon as you transition it'll be great'. It's not great when you're in the process of doing that [and even afterwards].

*Having that message of it's all gonna be great, **well what if you have a few negative days?***

*I think that's where a lot of people have doubt that of oh well then, I must not be trans. It's good to get a realistic picture of it, **things aren't going to be always amazing just because you transitioned.***

*

As Faelan demonstrates, being trans doesn't begin or end with transition but instead could be a step along the way. His account and this thesis at large uphold this, focusing instead on the oft-overlooked experiences and perceptions of everyday life.

These are the boring bits, the mundaneness of being in a body that micro-changes day in and day out. These minute details really are the most important to our phenomenologically on-again, off-again sense of self because they are so unremarkable, so enmeshed with our activities, and therefore, the most taken for granted.

In order to understand just how important bodies are to our sense of self, I believe that we must take note of the full spectrum of affect that they contain. Alongside this, we require a serious acknowledgement of the power of others in an individual being recognised as conscious, agential subjects, and the power of the self in reclaiming this terrain. Only then can a neutral articulation of embodiment, with all its messiness and contradictions, be communicated. But in order to do so, the conventional way of talking about trans ness must be refuted and replaced. I am, in a sense *not doing this anymore*.

Mina (they/she)²

[I know you were maybe joking but I was gonna ask,

How do you feel about your body now?]

*Oh, I was gonna say shit, a little shit, **not as shit as before.***

Much better, much, much, much better.

It is so much easier than it was before.

*

Mina is a bright young adult, with a quick-wit and empathetic perceptiveness that quickly warms you to her. Her clothes are soft and cosy, encompassing jumper sleeves that are pulled over her fingers and linen skirts that brush the floor of her small home.

Underneath these layers, there is a person who is an embodied work in progress and happily so. Gradually, with each new piercing or tattoo, Mina creates a physical body that is entirely her own. Each morning that she awakens and actively chooses to love herself, to take care of her body and value herself in spite of dysmorphia, Mina is enacting a type of embodiment rooted in self-love and bodily comfort.

*

² Mina requested the use of she/her pronouns.

*I think if I could speak to why I went for a reduction rather than top surgery, **it does help that I don't have to define it externally to other people but also there's also only so much I can do before it is a question of gender to others.***

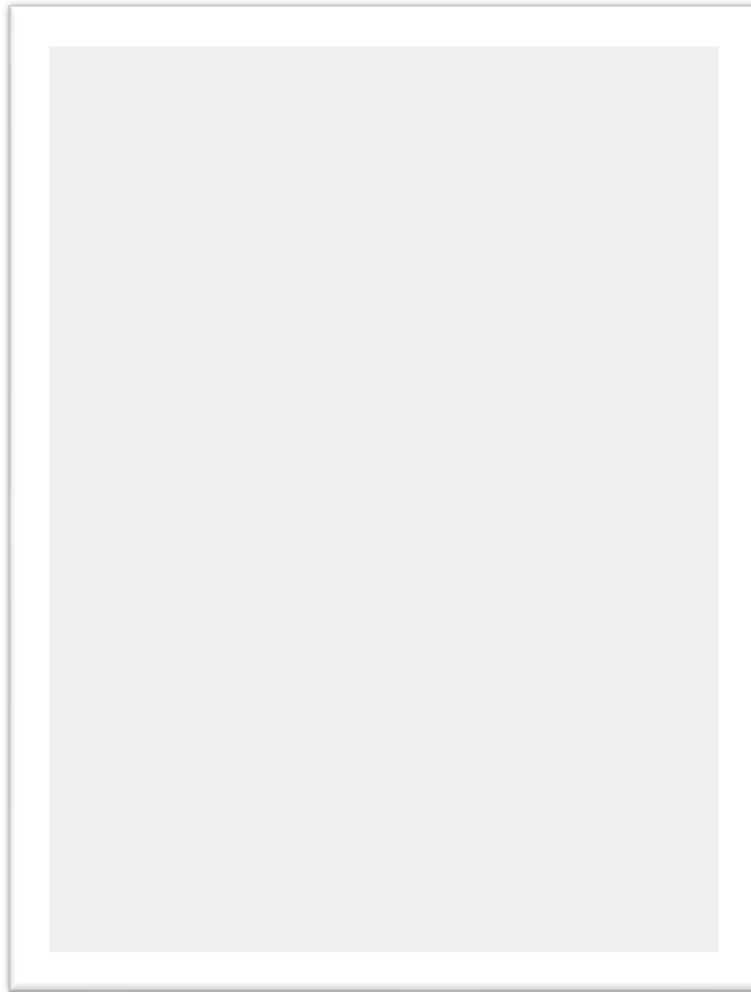
*And by not having to broach that subject, my choices, how visually obvious they would have been, **I maintain ambiguity in my identity, and I do value that.***

I do value the ambiguity in the sense that I don't have to justify myself because it's not so obvious.

*

Unlike Faelan, Mina does not want to transition to another binary gender. However, her ongoing experience of body modification in the form of surgery, tattoos and piercings demonstrates that individual embodiment is complex, ever-changing, and situated in the here and now. Her account reveals how the experience and perceptions of those on the precipice, the not cis but also not trans individuals are just as noteworthy as those who are cisgender or trans.

*



*I can feel what it means, I don't know if I can intellectually [explain] ... **it feels like a pleasant absence of womanhood.***

I don't have to debate whether I identify as a man, I don't think that's such a question for me as much as how much do I identify with being a woman.

*I think it's that comfort, that acceptance, **I'm at home and I can accept what I've got.** What's a positive way of framing complacency? /laugh/. It's sufficient.*

At present, studies that concern the experiences of TGNC individuals in Australia are largely conducted through a medico-legal lens with a focus on mental health (Hyde et al., 2014 and Jones et al., 2015). Subsequently, very little anthropological work in Australia has focused on gender non-conformance. However, gender non-conformity is noteworthy, not only for the capturing of the diversity of individual bodily perceptions and experiences, but also in demonstrating the insufficiencies of language in articulating the intricacies of embodiment.

One such fallacy is revealed via Henry Rubin's endorsement of Jean-Paul Sartre's proposed understanding of bodily ontology. As cited by Rubin in his introduction to the phenomenological methodology of *'Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men'* (2003), Sartre structures bodily ontology into three levels, Body-For-Itself, Body-For-Others, and Alienated Body. The first level, Body-For-Itself, operates purely in the domain of the everyday, the immutable and invisible. If Rubin's articulation of Sartre is taken as given, this form of embodiment is purely lived, distinct from the body that is experienced and perceived by other people. It only becomes possible to recognise ourselves as objects of perception and affect through the other two ontological levels of Body-For-Others and Alienated Body.

Furthermore, it is only through the Alienated Body that the individual can come to know their body as others perceive and experience it. This type of embodiment is horrifying, with Sartre arguing this level of consciousness creates "constant uneasiness... [caused by] the horrified metaphysical apprehension of the existence of my body for the Others" (Sartre, 1956, p.353 as cited in Rubin, 2003, p.27).

Alessandro Duranti (2010) and other scholars of embodiment (e.g., Jackson, 1998 and Desjarlais, 2018) turn this individualistic conceptualisation on its head and revert back to a much more neutral usage of the Body-for-Self ontology. Through an intersubjective lens, individual embodiment is not only related to the perceptions of others but is in fact most fully known through dialogue between the self and others. I

will examine intersubjectivity later on in more detail in relation to Aaron, who is Mina's partner. For now, it is important to note that Mina's individual sense of self is not created independently but is impacted by and enacted within a wider sphere of influence that includes her family, friends, and colleagues.

*

The day of [the surgery], I went in really early, they put hot steaming blankets on me, I actually fell asleep because I was so warm in the blankets. They woke me up, took me in.

I saw my doctor; it was freezing cold standing in my underwear as he drew on me with a sharpie that was super brand new so really sharp.

I thought, 'Oh god this is the last unpleasant feeling I will have because of the size of these things'.

*

In the university winter break, Mina underwent a significant breast reduction, reducing her breasts to under half of their original size. In our first interview, Mina describes her initial uncertainty over how much she wanted 'chopped off'. To help decide how much she wanted taken, Mina had her partner take photos of the surgeon demonstrating a reduction of 'less than half' and 'more than half'. In Mina's words, she is beaming in the 'more than half' photo.

*

And I think that is the joy of it, is trying on my old t-shirts that I felt I looked like a pornstar in.

It felt like anything I wore was instantly vulgar, instantly sexualised in that woman kind of being objectified way. Like I could put on a cottagecore³ dress and it would still look vulgar, look pornographic.

Like they were really out there. And in some ways, I know they weren't entirely, but it was still enough that mattered to me.

*

Body modification, colloquially shortened to bodymod, refers to techniques and processes used to either partially or holistically alter one's body (Featherstone, 1999). It includes but is not limited to piercings, tattoos, plastic and cosmetic surgeries, hormone therapies and so on. Modification can be culturally prescribed or desired for aesthetic, religious, 'superficial', and many, many other purposes, and is subsequently both pursued and rejected with vigour. In practice, body modification is never neutral or apolitical. As Featherstone (1999, p.2) posits body modification is about "the sense of taking control over one's body, of making a gesture against the body natural". Modifications do not take place within a void but are always informed by our own perceptions and experiences, as well as the views of others. I purposely invoke this inclusive definition because it's the one that Mina uses. Her perception of body modification may appear to be intensely focused on the individual self, yet it is shaped by the views of others, both positive and negative. In this way, her

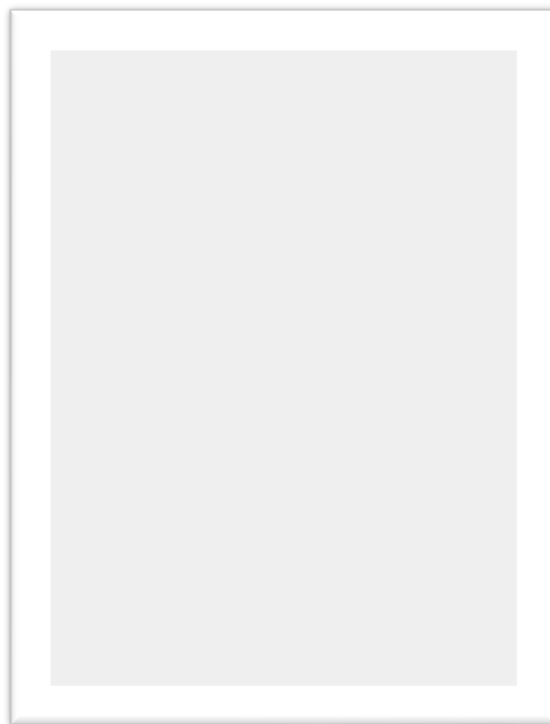
³ Cottagecore is an aesthetic associated with blouses, long dresses as well as forest creatures and imagery.

wholehearted embrace of body modification is a re-contouring of the territory of her physical self, by rejecting the presumption of gender conformity and partaking instead in a whimsical, often impulsive curation of the body.

*

*When I woke up, after texting Aaron, my **immediate** priority was putting all my piercings back in.*

Like the moment the nurses were out, I was feeling around me for the paper bag that my piercings were in. It felt like half my eyesight was blocked but [I had] my tongue out, screwing it [the piercing back into place].



*I took out my own oxygen, **I don't need this, /laugh/ I need my nose piercing obviously.***

I was very pleased by how easily I put them all back in because usually I need help.... I just remember once there were back in, I could relax.

To wake up and be so small, to put my piercings back in, it's like ok /relieved laugh/ no regrets. I'm happy.

*

This curation of self that Mina is participating in is not limited to attending to therapy or deciding to take a year off to rest and recuperate post-degree, but is also enacted on the physical surface of her skin. Mina not only delights in altering her body but derives a sense of purpose from doing so. Bearing both piercings and tattoos, she speaks at length about the circumstances of each alteration and her desire for future work. The motivations behind each piece vary: a hastily inked grumpy cloud sits alongside a custom-made cherubic piece, but all are valued, all have meaning, and all are a part of Mina.

Not only does each portion of ink-stained flesh bear meaning but also each ring, stud, and bar that adorn Mina's body. Piercings are both a culturally and individually significant form of physical alteration yet remain somewhat overlooked in the literature on body modification and embodiment. For example, Sweetman (1999) compares piercings and tattoos and finds piercings to be a more 'superficial' modification, despite the extra effort that piercings require to heal successfully. Instead, the focus has been on tattoos (e.g., Back & Halliday, 2004, also Miller, 2008) and how they function as both physical storytelling devices as well as pieces of art.

In our interactions after her surgery, Mina repeatedly emphasises how important these small pieces of metal are to her sense of self, her perception of her body, as well as the love and acceptance she feels towards herself. She expresses relief at

being able to retain most of her piercings during the procedure and the immediate need to return her absent piercings to their home on her body. Through the puncture of piercing guns and the buzz of tattoo needles, Mina makes her body a home.

*

Surgery doesn't fix everything, and my issue was that I took that mindset to the complete opposite end and rejected the possibility of surgery because I thought that was giving in to my dysmorphia... which literally thrives on me reducing my size and reducing the space I take up.

*I was really worried that all I was doing was giving into that and there was **some other kind of miracle way, like therapy, that might take me to this point to love having massive tits** /laugh/ It just wasn't there for me.*

I'm glad that I took the risk that I was giving in.

*

Whilst Mina wholeheartedly embraces other forms of body modification such as tattoos and piercings, surgery is a complicated subject. Stating a fear of giving in to her dysmorphia, Mina was afraid that making a major modification to her body like a breast reduction would validate these thoughts, leading to a new wave of harmful behaviour. In addition to these concerns, Mina felt that opting for a total removal would lead to familial discussions around gender and presentation, a can of worms that she does not want to nor feel the need to open. In addition to this, Mina

remarked that by having a reduction rather than a complete removal, the procedure would be understood by outsiders as something to do with bodily comfort, rather than assumed to be related to her gender identity and presentation.

The intersubjective aspect of Mina's fear, how the people around her might interpret the choice to undergo surgery, can be understood with reference to the ideology of transmedicalism. Transmedicalism (Heyes & Latham, 2018) refers to the belief that in order to identify as trans, one must be pursuing, undergoing, or have already undergone body modification with the intent to transition from one binary gender to another (i.e., man to woman, or woman to man). Whilst this terminology may be unfamiliar to scholars outside of trans studies, the entrenchment of the ideology in medical practice has consequences for both those who wish to transition but also, as in Mina's case, those who do not.

In describing her decision to undergo a reduction, Mina emphasizes that *there's also only so much I can do before it is a question of gender to others*. Transmedicalist logic dictates that individuals undergoing certain forms of body modification such as hormone replacement therapy or genital reconstruction, are only doing so because they wish to transition to the opposite binary gender. But this is untrue and leads to individuals like Mina carefully tiptoeing around these expectations. Through this chain of references, surgeries such as genital reconstruction and breast reduction (or removal) become issues of gender and identity, necessitating psychiatrist evaluation and care, rather than being seen to be pursued for physical bodily comfort or aesthetic desire. Importantly, this is not a linkage that Mina herself makes and she explicitly fights against such constructions.

*

I could go smaller and still be happy, honestly, I could probably see myself going flat and being happy. I don't think

I could be any bigger and be happy.

So, I'm in this weird, kind of middle ground where I think I've found the most happy I can be with the most breast I could handle. And when I wear a bigger shirt [now], it is so much more discreet. If I want to whip the girls out, like I feel like it's more of a choice now.

*

For Mina, the decision to get a breast reduction was influenced by multiple factors. Bodily comfort, or the sense of being at home in her body, was a major impetus in her decision but it was also about her desire to have more control over how others perceive their body. Prior to surgery, Mina felt that the appearance of her chest was out of her control, citing it as *pornographic* and *vulgar*. Combined with the experience of growing up with a mother with a similar chest-size, Mina speculated that her own chest would continue to grow and morph, much to her displeasure.

In this way, body modification can be an act of regaining agency over one's own body. As Featherstone summarises, "the attraction of body modification practices for many people is that they are permanent and irreversible. In this sense they are to be seen as an attempt to fix and anchor the self by permanently marking the body" (1999, p.4). Whilst Featherstone argues that only major modifications are able to fully affirm an individual's sense of self, I believe that all techniques of modification carry this potential. Whether major or minor, we cannot diminish the role of body modification in individual embodiment. Further to this point, Mina retains the possibility of further modification through chest binding or simply wearing loose or

tight-fitting clothing. Not only does the breast reduction help relieve Mina's feelings of discomfort, but it also opens up new avenues for experimenting with dress and presentation to further 'anchor' the self.

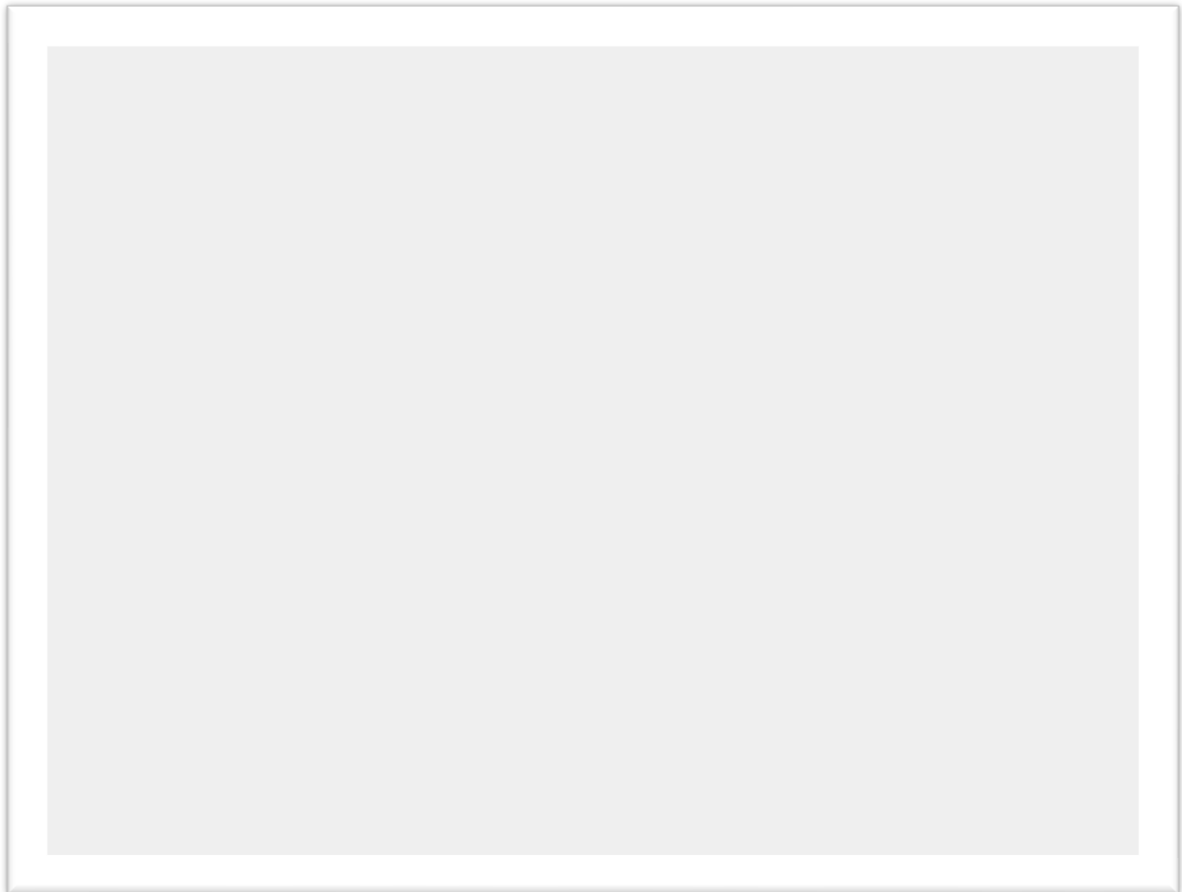
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*When I had it, the reduction, done, there was just **this overwhelming sense of 'I was always meant to look like this'.***

I was always meant to look exactly the way I do now.

And it's ridiculous to think that I didn't, god knows how that happened [referring to puberty] /laugh/.

*There was definitely this sense of **I can accept this body easier.***



***[For] someone who has worms in their brain, I feel like I
have such a rational perspective otherwise.***

***Intellectually and politically, I reject conventional standards and
I reject the idea that what I look like has any impact on my
worth.***

...

***But I feel like even if I don't have that kind of
transcendental self-love, I can accept and live in this body
so much more comfortably than I could have at last.***

In speaking to gender non-conforming individuals such as Mina, both the individual and intersubjective dimensions of embodiment are revealed. By examining how broader processes of socialisation, such as transmedicalism, impact individual decision-making and sense of self, a better contextualisation of these decisions is gained.

Mina's experience undergoing a breast reduction reveals that body modification can be motivated by a number of influences, including bodily comfort and the perceptions of others. Alongside her feelings towards other forms of body modification such as tattoos and piercings, it becomes clear that body modification operates not only as a one-and-done process but is part of her sense of self. She continually creates the person she wants to be, not only in moments of rupture such as surgery and hospitalisation but also in the everyday, by dressing a certain way or by simply choosing to speak kindly of herself.

In doing so, Mina enacts a type of embodiment that is just left of centre, not cis but also not quite trans, opening new avenues for bodily perception and experience that evade existing categories to create a pastiche of self that is tempered by herself, her partner, and her peers.

August (they/them)

***I know when I use my voice that I'm fine.** I am fairly visibly queer. I dress a certain way, I look a certain way, I act a certain way that straight men could just never.*

*I do have confidence that when I interact with people, they understand that **I'm more than just male.***

*

August is a friend of mine who I met through the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons. Its basic premise is that you sit down at a table with like-minded people and utilise imagined characters to manoeuvre your way through a similarly imagined scenario. The scene-setting and creation of these scenarios is done by a Dungeon Master, someone who leads the table and guides the progression of the story. The reason I highlight this relationship between Dungeon Master and player is because it's one August and I have shared now for over three years. That's three years of near weekly 4-hour sessions where we sit in a room or Zoom with other friends.

When we talk about bodies or gender in-game, it's part of a broader discussion around world-building. The Dungeons and Dragons menagerie contains a universe of bodily forms, ranging from regular humans and two-horned tieflings to eight-foot-tall giants and otherworldly spectra. Bodies are primarily understood as motile objects, with characters occupying a five-foot-square and moving 30 feet at a time across a dry-erase mat. Plastic miniature figures of characters are often the only physical tether to this imagined space. In contrast, the experience of sitting at a table to talk about August's own physical body and their identity was something

unavoidably material. Whilst this new topic was not unwelcome, these conversations were separate to our usual interactions, even as aspects of the imaginary and storytelling remain present.

*

*Non-binary just means, in the truest sense of the word, **I***

identify with neither male nor female.

But for me, it is not, and it is quite specifically, not agender, it is not the absence of gender.

*It is that I pick and choose, **I have traits from masculinity and femininity that create something more.** That is both more and less than male or female in certain aspects.*

*So, I have a gender, don't know what is. **There is no label for it, but there it's outside of the binary as we know it.***

*

My interviews have shown that the label 'non-binary' encompasses a multitude of things to different groups of people, most commonly as embodiment outside the binary of male-female. Non-binary individuals do not identify with the categories of male and female, but rather have experiences and perceptions of their bodies that fall outside these binary constraints. Non-binary functions as an identity in its own regard but also may be utilised alongside other labels such as agender, genderfluid or genderqueer.



Figure 2 – the non-binary pride flag, attributed to Kye Rowan.

(Source: Wikimedia Commons).

Yellow represents gender outside the binary of male and female, whilst white represents those who identify with multiple genders. Purple represents those who are genderfluid, identifying both with and in between male and female, and lastly, black represents agender individuals, or those who have no gender.

The earliest use of the associated pride flag is dated to the early 2000s, which might be seen as a watershed moment for discussion and recognition of non-binary as a situated self-experience in its own right. Whilst bearing comparisons to other gender identifiers such as the South Sulawesi *bissu* due to the similarities in how *bissu* and non-binary both transcend a simple male-female dichotomy (Graham Davies, 2004), non-binary is first and foremost a Western creation. Borne of the space between male and female, or the Western gender binary, non-binary exists both within and outside this dualism. This contradictory nature allows for a whole spectrum of gender identity and presentation to exist within its domains. For August, there's an implied curation at hand, a careful selection of certain aspects, whilst refusing to enact other gendered characteristics.

*

*A line I love dropping is – **Your binary words cannot describe the splendour that is my gender identity.***

*Just because there's – **I'm** – so much more, and so much less than, male and female.*

★

In a fashion not dissimilar to Brooke (whose account follows), August is joyfully non-binary. They delight in the blurred lines, the refusal to fit into one rigid category or notion of being. As they remark to me both in our first interview and frequently in other conversations, they are *so much more than your labels*. There is a sincere delight in their voice when they utter this phrase. For August, the declaration of being non-binary is an opting out of the gender binary, a cheery 'no thanks!' when asked if they're a boy or a girl. There is joy in being non-binary and August radiates it.

When people are given room to make themselves, to express themselves as they please and dress how they choose, the door opens to euphoric forms of being that surpass the gender binary. Beischel and his co-authors (2021) provide an excellent community-derived explanation of euphoria, describing it as a phenomenon that is "a joyful feeling of rightness, in one's gender/sex... [that] can be external, internal, and/or social" (p.8).

What exactly does euphoria look like for August though? The inherent intangibility of "feelings of confidence, attractiveness, and affirmation" (Beischel et al., 2021, p.13) makes it hard to pin down without resorting to advertising cliches, which is fitting given August's marketing degree. For August, there is an ethereal quality to their joy. It's not that they don't desire or enjoy material things but that other ideals are equally dear to their heart. Layers of self-love, acceptance and desire intermingle and

meld. When August speaks about the parts of themselves that they love, it's in reference to ideals and fantasy, the more-than-body aspects of them.

*

The imaginary exists not only in our Dungeons and Dragons games but also as an integral part of August's identity. A storyteller at heart, they embrace the mantle of Dungeon Master and even within pre-written modules, actively create swathes of fleshed-out, complex characters. Even a bandit who is set up as a possible distraction to be disposed of, gets a name and backstory, with his dreams of becoming a dancer dashed when a rogue and monk duo quickly kills him.

As an experienced Dungeon Master, August is comfortable inhabiting multiple characters in quick succession. They near effortlessly swap between the guises of bartender, patron, and member of a criminal organisation, each with their own distinguishing voice. This fluidity is impressive but also is expected of Dungeon Masters, whose role it is to flesh out imaginary worlds and its characters with just a few lines of dialogue. There are pieces of August in each character – it is inevitable since they are the one who made these characters and must embody them – but that does not mean that they necessarily reflect August as a person.

Instead of asking them which character best represents them or is the closest to how they see themselves, I drew on the spirit of the radical imaginary and asked August: What do you want to be? Instead of offering a laundry list of desired body modifications or describing their body, they laughed and told me the following tale.

*

*I have a very specific narrative in my head where **on the surface it has absolutely nothing to do with gender.***

The subtext, of the main character who isn't me, but y'know... is me who has long auburn hair and a big blonde streak in it.

It starts out with a pirate ship [that] gets raided and the captain assimilates the crew, as a lot of people did, offer them places in their crew and they continue to operate the ship.

He's like going around, assessing what everyone does, everyone's role is and getting to know them and shit. And then there's just one member of the crew who doesn't fucking do anything on the ship. So, he's like 'what the fuck, throw this cunt in the ocean' and the rest of the crew are like 'no don't, we [will] mutiny'.

*The evening rolls around and the captain goes to his quarters, this individual who's someone is getting ready for bed in the captain's quarters. The captain's like 'what the fuck' and [the person] is like 'this is my role here on the ship, I'm the paramour for the captain'. And they don't frolic because I'm asexual, I'm not about that life. **But this individual is just so sexy, and leads all the sea shanties and shit, and is the fucking bard and the morale booster of the entire place.***

*

As they recount this fantasy, I can clearly visualise it. I see August on the well-trodden deck of a galley, their arms outstretched as they embrace the salty breeze. Their auburn hair flies behind them, they exhale and sigh in satisfaction. They're dressed in a crisp linen tunic, the sleeves fluttering in the wind as they stretch and crack the bones in their hands. They exhale softly, at peace as they soak up every inch of sun available. The horizon stretches out before them, an endless realm of possibility and potential. Behind them, a motley crew laughs as they work the deck, adjusting sails and yelling commands to and fro.

When August states that they wish to be *the fucking bard and the morale booster*, there are two levels of meaning at work. First is the obvious comparison with the Dungeons and Dragons archetype of a bard, who is a charismatic performer or artisan. Embedded in that comparison, however, is something perhaps more salient and personal, the evocation of a certain ideal they wish to embody. As Gozlan argues, the imaginary plays an important role in the construction of gender as it provides a non-somatic domain in which personal identity is "signified and invested with meaning" (2014, p.20).

*

*There's something [there] both physically and socially, and I just love the word, **grace is very important to me.***

*In a personality context, **it is quite important to my gender,** and it harkens back to my whole majesty is not definable by your pitiful human words, of just regalness, and power in a sexy way.*

Power in an inspiring way, winning people over.... They're paying attention to you and respecting you because like you've earned [it]

*

Not only does August draw on elements of fantasy in how they visualise themselves, they also explicitly point to the notion of grace. Grace, like any other ideal, presents a conundrum in defining its common use versus what exactly it means for August. Perhaps the most resonant understanding for August is that grace is often associated with finding peace in calamity or retaining one's manners in the face of pressing circumstances. I propose that grace operates as a kind of tether for August in that it provides an "an intermediate area of experience between discovery and creation" (Gozlan 2014, p.25) of their ideal self, explicitly in embodying a sense of self that transcends a male-female distinction.

*

I always come back to the word 'grace' just because it's absolutely [me].

*Grace and kindness, grace in charity, grace in empathy, consideration, grace in the way a dancer moves, **I think it's a very enviable quality.***

*

To exhibit grace under pressure implies a certain level of composure and control. In August's case, this grace is exercised in the tact with which they navigate relationships and specific conversations, such as the (non) disclosure of their non-

binary identity. It also means that certain topics or ideas are skirted over in order to maintain a certain mood or image of themselves. Anything that contradicts or perhaps challenges this notion of August as a graceful individual is skilfully sidestepped. In the midst of our dialogue, there is a topic that disappears as quickly as it emerges, August's sense of physical self, in particular the way they perceive their body in parts and as a whole.

*

One thing that is hard and does make it hard - I'm literally scratching my facial hair as a thought of that - is the separation of the physical and identity, 'cause obviously I am biologically male.

*I have a fairly deep voice, there is no mistaking what my voice comes across as. **I'm not androgynous in the way that I would like to be at least.***

*

The calling card of trans literature, dysphoria comes in a seemingly endless array of forms and has been extensively written about by other authors (e.g., Beischel et al., 2021, Seamont 2018, and Wright Shultz, 2015). Simply, gender dysphoria (Beischel et al., 2021) describes an incongruence or discomfort at the mismatch between one's gender identity (internal) and gender presentation (external). The dressings don't match the window. Similarly, body dysphoria describes a discomfort with one's body, whether that be the entire frame or specific features such as shoulders, legs, or jawbones. This sensation often coexists with or is fed by a feeling of body dysmorphia, the feeling of being out of place with or disembodied from one's body.

The presence of one or both conditions can make it very difficult, if not impossible, to be happy with or even to look at one's body.

*

*I experience dysmorphia, **I think I experience dysmorphia but I'm not entirely certain.***

*I have an eating disorder, I have OSED [Other Specialised Eating Disorder]. I have more specific issues... they pull from various realms. **A lot of that comes from me feeling a very strong desire, I'd say compulsion to look a certain way,** which is skinny.*

I'm happy with a lot of my body, there's a very specific section of my body that I'm not happy with, so it's hard to feel [content].

*It's weird because if I remove that part, if, **if I surgically fix that, I think I'd be so much happier with my body,** the way I look, as an expression of my gender identity.*

I don't mind being titless, my privates [remaining the same].

*

The feeling of being born in the wrong body or desiring to look a different way is remarkably common within TGNC individuals, both within my small sample and the larger population. The first broad-scale assessment of mental ill-health in TGNC

individuals, the First Australian National Trans Mental Health Study (2013) substantiates this claim. In the subsequent Summary of Results, there is a clear indication that hormone replacement therapy and surgery – which alter the body both externally and internally – are widely desired. As Hyde and her co-authors note, “those with the highest proportion of clinically relevant depressive symptoms were participants who had not taken hormone therapy but wanted to (58.4%).” (p.23) alongside a clear preference for surgery across both those who did and did not report clinically depressive symptoms (p.24).

Whilst it is clearly reductive to focus on dysphoria as the sole characteristic of TGNC personhood, it is also irresponsible to disregard the consequences of both dysphoria and dysmorphia in shaping a person’s sense of self and their relationship with their body when that person explicitly invokes such terms.

These experiences of discomfort and shame are not limited to TGNC individuals. Brooke, who we meet next, argues that most cis people experience gender dysphoria, pointing to the discomfort some cis women have with their breast size. The work of Mair Underwood (2013) gives credence to these claims, demonstrating the embedded nature of negative body image and behaviour amongst young adults in Australia. However, the extreme focus on dysphoria experienced by trans people brings both benefits (easier access to surgery, hormone replacement therapy, and counselling for example) and harm (labelling gender dysphoria as a mental illness emboldens trans-exclusionary rhetoric and perpetuates stigma against trans individuals, while always drawing attention to gender). Despite these possible drawbacks, it is unsurprising that August uses this language to refer to their body and the feelings associated with it, as doing so makes this very personal, almost phantasmal pain socially intelligible and able to be grasped by others.

*

I can feel dysphoria now that I'm thinking about 'I look like a man, and I'm perceived as a man'. And when I think about it that way, I think about looking at myself in the mirror and being displeased with what I see.

Most of time I'm fairly happy with what I see.

I do not think, I do not rationally think I am ugly, I do not rationally think that I am unattractive.

I do emotionally feel that way though when I look in the mirror.

*A lot of the time when I specifically look at myself, like **BOY!***

*

In the briefest of moments, August is able to articulate the everyday nuance and messiness of being in their body. They lament being easily identified as a man, the fact that their long hair could be understood as a sign of laziness rather than active effort, alongside having a voice that is purportedly male. But alongside these complaints, there is a self-assuredness – *I am fairly visibly queer* – that speaks to the comfort of being recognised as the non-binary individual that they are.

One question that emerges from this entanglement is how do dysphoria and euphoria coexist within everyday life? Transmedicalism dictates that true happiness and relief from dysphoria is found in transition, but what if transition isn't desired? August does not wish to become a binary woman nor a binary man. The same things that are a source of discomfort for one trans individual can also be veritable fountains of joy for another. How do we reconcile this? One way of addressing this tension is simply to refuse to reconcile them and to let these disparate notions and subsequent conflicts exist.

Not only does August experience dysphoria and euphoria, but they also experience joy, frustration, sadness, and anxiety. They experience their body in a fantastical way but also wake up each day and stretch out their limbs before booting up their computer and starting work. In the domain of everyday life, August's gender, and body swing between objects of intense fixation and on better days, the dull tone of white noise, present but easily ignored.

*

In a different cultural context, we wouldn't even be having this conversation with these words [trans, non-binary, etc.]. Because we would just have different language entirely.

I wish we could just kind of accept people and just be like, ok, this is what they're doing.

*

Rather than understanding euphoria and dysphoria as opposites, I propose that we view bodies like climates within and around which these feelings emerge and interact. This enables us to reconcile August's exuberant confidence in which they proceed throughout life and also note the more subtle facets of their being. Rather than being content to not see the forest for the trees, let us make space for the shrubs and bushes that also occupy this space. Their existence is not a contradiction or something that detracts from the holistic image of the forest but rather enriches it, pointing to the complexities of individual experience and sensation.

As an individual, August expands and inhabits multiple subjectivities, they are a friend, co-worker, family member and Dungeon Master. Across these different relationships, the sense of an idealised self, grace, permeates, colouring their place in the world and their understanding of it. In terms of gender, they oscillate between

masculinity and femininity, creating something that is entirely their own. In this space between male and female, feelings of desire and acceptance meld together, resulting in a carefully curated and maintained sense of self.

Brooke (she/her)

All these decisions about how we want our bodies to be, don't have to be gendered.

For me, it's outside of gender, it's what I prefer.

*There's also an aspect of it that is just **rebellion against what you've been told to do**, to gender yourself, which is also perfectly valid and useful.*

*

As an undergraduate media student and provocateur of 'bad allies', Brooke is a delightful conversationalist with astute responses in our interviews. She's interested in the concept of time and chrononormativity, directing a short film on the subject matter that is nuanced without sacrificing style. She's vocal about self-care, invested in her appearance without being vain, bearing skin that even a beautician would envy. She's well-spoken and articulate, heartfelt without being overly emotional and honest without being rude or out-of-turn.

She is sharply attuned to the purpose of this project, piercing to the heart of the matter with a mere sentence or two in our interviews. Despite our unfamiliarity, she is open and insightful, eager to contribute. She is part of a generation of trans and gender non-conforming students who are not content with being tolerated. Instead, she and so many others work tirelessly to create room for themselves and all those who they extend a calloused hand to. She is trans-feminine non-binary, ever-growing and evolving. This is Brooke, as I met her in mid-2021.



So, I say I'm a trans woman but I'm not.

*It just makes navigating, makes getting people to interact with me easier. Cause I don't strictly identify with trans womanhood, I'm more like trans femme non-binary. **But if I say I'm a trans woman, it gives me greater access, easier access to the medical interventions that I want.***

Instead of having to explain to a psychiatrist the nuances of my gender, I can say 'yeah, I'm a trans woman, I have dysphoria', get approved for hormones and surgery and I prefer female and woman-gendered adjectives, nouns, pronouns.

*If I just say I'm a woman, that's shorthand for people to be able to do that to me. **I don't have to explain all that mishmash.***

*

As a trans feminine non-binary individual, Brooke experiences her body and identity in complex and charged ways. Her choice to use feminine pronouns is a calculated one, a self-identified Wittgensteinian that turns language into a game of cat and mouse. Each comment she makes is either a pregnant statement or a provocative question with no room to spare. No words are minced when Brooke speaks, with a clear yet unyielding tone. Even her physical posture communicates her self-assuredness, appearing to slouch against a chair back then disarming the listener with the surety of her voice. She delights in bass undertones of her voice, the pause as a barista reconciles the rough alto with her long brunette tresses. Brooke is disruptive and gleefully so.

*

*When most young trans people think about [gender], most end up like, **even if they present in a binary way like I do most of the time, like it's from a place outside the binary.***

...

If you dis-identify with it enough to be like 'yeah, I'm trans', chances are you find the whole idea of the gender binary stupid as well.

*Being trans in a certain way requires **a lot of intelligence that you just gain through your lived experience** and that kind of intelligence **also tends to lead people to not respecting the gender binary.***

In our interviews, Brooke explicitly refers to the social utility of the label 'non-binary' in communicating her experiences. Non-binary individuals are as diverse as their binary peers in identity and presentation. Individual experiences of dysphoria and euphoria are similarly diverse and varied, adding to the difficulty in pinning down working definitions of either (demonstrated by Beischel et al., 2021) but also forcing us to reflect individually on what affirms our sense of self and what disarms or disrupts it.

This internal variation is made explicitly clear by the co-presence of August (the preceding account) and Brooke within this space. Both are non-binary, both experience dysphoria and euphoria and both spoke with me. This is where the similarities largely end and as Brooke points out, in a mission to categorise and account for all forms of sexual and gender diversity - *we've kind of forgotten that gender is something people do, not just some kind of theoretical ideology*. In their everyday lives, Brooke and August are vastly different people: one works full-time whilst the other juggles casual employment and undergraduate study. However, both have found the label of 'non-binary' to be a useful term in navigating the social world by serving as shorthand for a lifetime of experiences and perceptions that transcend the categories of male and female.

In short, non-binary identity is mobile, plural, and fluid, even as a single word is deployed to represent a spectrum of identity, perceptions, actions, and presentations. My interviews shows that one analytic consequence of this is the insufficiency of language at present to represent these diverse experiences. Rather than pulling the category 'non-binary' apart, I believe that it is far more useful instead to recognise the discourses and arrangements of the broader society that necessitate such a label. When male and female are fixed as binary entities then non-binary must be unfixed and unstable, as a consequence and virtue of its operating against this categorical reduction (Malatino, 2018).

If the meaning of non-binary is unstable, then why have so many people adopted it? Instability is not intrinsically a negative quality and may even be a positive attribute in casting as wide a net as possible in enabling individuals to articulate their personal understandings of identity and bodies (Latham, 2017).

*

***I'm very adamant on doing things because I want to,
especially with my transition.***

*I deconstructed as I had it done, like I'd go through 'Well, why?'
and any response that is **'I wanna look more feminine' isn't
good enough.** Because then I go 'Why would that make you
more feminine? What's feminine about that?' And most of the
time, the answer is Eurocentrism /laughs/.*

*

The question of linguistic ambiguity and convention weaves itself throughout each account presented here but none perhaps more prominently than in Brooke's. Continuing the thread of instability, Brooke rips at the seams of cisnormativity – the presumption that all people are cisgender, that being cisgender is normal, and the privileging of cisgender identity above other forms of identity – through her process of deconstruction.

Both philosophical theory and praxis, deconstruction refers to the process of breaking down a given idea or object into its constituting parts. Through this process, we are better able to understand both the individual parts and the construction as a whole through a thorough, meticulous analysis.

For Brooke, deconstruction is part and parcel of how she exists in the world, explicitly positing the concept as being central to her understanding of herself, her body, and her desired modifications to it. In Brooke's eyes, deconstruction is a process that is perpetually incomplete. For her, it is not enough to simply desire change, the accompanying 'why' is subject to thorough interrogation. Why do I want this? Why do I feel I need this? Why is that my nose feels off or wrong? Why is that my face feels masculine when I know cisgender women have a variety of bone structures? What forces are making me feel this way? Why am I giving these forces power over me? Every decision she makes in relation to her body is filtered through this system of analysis. When she's satisfied that she's doing something for her, and herself alone, only then can she give herself the final approval to proceed.

*

*I used to have [facial dysphoria] but then I was like '**Hang on, where are these feelings coming from?**' and they were coming from ill-informed assumption and stereotype, an expectation of what someone who identifies more with womanhood than manhood's face should look like.*



*But wait, **you look at all these women from around the world and their faces don't look the same way.** They have different proportions in their facial features, more pronounced this bit or less pronounced that bit.*

'Why is it important for me to look specifically like a white woman?

Why is that my default of what a woman should look like?'

*

Through this intense process of analysis and self-critique, Brooke is able to affirm that everything she does, any alterations or changes, are being made because she wants them. The effect of this is that Brooke is stalwart and forthcoming with these changes. Every alteration that she makes reflects a strong sense of ownership and

autonomy over her body. Brooke grew out her hair because she wanted to it to be long, deriving pleasure from its maintenance. She pursued bottom surgery because having a penis was impractical in her day-to-day life. In said surgery, Brooke chose a vulvoplasty because she wants to challenge people's ideas around the purpose and aesthetics of genitalia. These are things that Brooke, and Brooke alone, wants to do.

*

I'm going to get a physically different vagina to what a lot of trans people do, like I'm not getting a vagina, I'm just [getting a vulva].

I like to say vagina because people, most people engage with that word better than they do vulva. Relying on the word vagina centres reproduction over pleasure because most of the pleasure centres are on the vulva, not in the vagina. It centres it in a reproductive way instead of a sexual way.

*But like once I get it, **I will be calling it my vagina because it's clearly not** so then it'll be like **ok, what do people actually mean when they say vagina?** I am calling this my vagina in order to point out the fact that you've generalised reproduction to the entire female typical genitalia.*

*I'm not sure what I want to do more – whether I want to like **make people question these ideas or just make them feel***

*uncomfortable, or even feel ashamed for being
[presumptuous] /laughs/.*

*

Genital reconstruction, also known as gender affirming or sex reassignment surgeries, refers to procedures that alter one's genitalia. For people who are born with a penis, a vulvoplasty or vaginoplasty enables the recipient to transform their nether region's appearance and function. Whereas vaginoplasty is a total alteration, surgically manipulating the skin of the scrotum into a vaginal cavity, vulvoplasty creates a vulva without the accompanying cavity.

Due to some fortuitous timing, Brooke underwent vulvoplasty during the period we were in contact. After her surgery was delayed due to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, she was able to travel to Melbourne from Sydney in the winter of 2021. Similar to Faelan, Brooke reported a year-long wait time for her surgery.

Brooke's decision to undergo vulvoplasty and label the accompanying genitalia as a vagina fits neatly with her personal understanding of gender as folly. In doing so, she achieves two things, alleviating genital discomfort but also deliberately frustrating the presumed form and function of female-typical genitalia. This is due in no small part to the fact that vaginoplasty continues to be the bottom surgery of choice for trans feminine individuals (van der Sluis et al., 2020).⁴ Brooke's body serves an extension of her personal beliefs, the words of her scripture written in flesh via her brand-new, custom-made vagina.

*

⁴ This study found that whilst 1,326 trans feminine individuals underwent vaginoplasty between 1990 and 2020, only 17 underwent vulvoplasty in the same span of time. Whilst the institution at the centre of this study is located in the Netherlands, the preference for penile inversion vaginoplasty is also seen in Australia.

*You expect because of how trans people have talked about it, **that it would have some sort of feeling to do with my identity, [but] it hasn't.** It's just more functional now. **It's a functional change that I made.** And I also have to take less hormones now, so that's a plus.*

...

*Sometimes when I look at it, **[pitches up voice] 'Oh Yeah! That's Cool!'** But it's never a big emotional response, it's more of an aesthetic response.*

*

In speaking to Brooke in the weeks before her surgery and then afterwards, there is a somewhat subtle but still perceptible shift in her thinking about her body.

*

*I have dysphoria for that bit and **I'd rather that [her penis] not be there** but all the other bits are [fine] ...*

I prefer to look like a woman just because of my past with being a man. It's more of a distancing from that [manhood] as opposed to wanting a proximity with this [womanhood]...

*If my penis isn't there, less things to think about [for example] if I want to go for a swim, if I want to wear nice jeans, [it will be] **so much more comfortable with it not being there.***

*

Prior to her surgery, Brooke was fairly ambivalent about her body as a whole. When we speak about her body, she talks at length about her hair and dress sense, joking that she dresses like a depressed twelve-year old. Through the lens of her post-surgery recovery, her sentiments on her genitalia are sharper, more explicit. She moves from hesitating to call her discomfort with her body 'dysphoria' towards an empathetic vision of her pre-surgery self.

*

*It's weird because it very much felt like dysphoria at the start. Or at least how I experience[d] dysphoria. But then as I actually thought about it and 'cause **I wanted to understand what was me being uncomfortable with something and what was me making associations in my brain that I was uncomfortable with.** So, like, is it [that] I don't like this penis because that's a man thing, like I wanted to make sure it wasn't that and it wasn't that 'cause I don't believe that it was all this other stuff.*

And it's weird because when we talk about dysphoria a lot, it becomes, we talk about it as this like ethereal, almost undeconstructable feeling. Just like no, it's discomfort with your

*gender identity and body don't align. We often talk about there
[as] is no specific 'why'.*

*Often the 'why' is like [because] this genders me and I don't like
it. **But I don't – for me personally, that isn't enough.** Because
it doesn't have to gender me. I'm confused by that concept. **It
makes it feel less like dysphoria when I am able to pull
apart the specific things I don't like.***

*

This change becomes much more significant once paired with Brooke's intense focus on the ambiguous power of language. Brooke is the only individual interviewed that focuses on dysphoria as a linguistic conundrum, frustrated by the restrictive criteria employed by bodies such as AusPATH⁵, which made her initially hesitant to label her experiences with her body using these labels/vocabulary/as such.

Despite her breadth of reference points and analogies, our everyday language falls short in describing Brooke's experience. The practiced discourse of binary womanhood and manhood can't encapsulate the full range of her experience and perceptions. Instead, it reduces into weak mimics the vivid colours and imagery she conjures.

*

At the end of our first interview, I ask Brooke if she has any comments or impressions to conclude with. Having comprehensively stepped me through her understanding of herself and her body in a mere 90 minutes, she doesn't have much to add at first.

⁵ AusPATH, or the Australian Professional Association for Trans Health. Among their other advocacy work, AusPATH provides Standards of Care for health practitioners in Australia.

But then a beat passes, she pauses before smiling at me knowingly and replying,

oh, I identify with tranny.

*

*Outside of contexts such as this, in talking to my mum and medical stuff, I'm gonna call me transgender or trans. [But otherwise] yeah, I'm gonna call me tranny. **I don't know – it's provocative and generally, I tend to [use it],** not so much in every room but if I know there are other trans people, who are uncomfortable if I self-referentially, might take it off.*

I use tranny, that's how I engage with it, engage with my identity, with absurdity and vulgarity in a lot of ways. That's the word that sums up, not only my relationship to my assigned gender at birth **but also my feelings towards the structure [of gender] as a whole.**

*

The use of transgender to describe an individual who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, is largely uncontroversial and a given fact. Similarly, the reverse – cisgender as identifying with the gender assigned at birth - is mostly uncontested. The older term 'transsexual' continues to be utilised in the community and possesses important historical linkages (see Stone, 1987 and Stryker, 2017). Despite this, this term was not employed by any of the individuals included here.

Previously, the label transsexual was ascribed to individuals who were simply 'deviant' whether that was because they dressed in the clothes of the opposite sex, concealed their gender, and lived a public life of the opposite sex, or wanted a 'sex change', all the way through to those who were homosexual (Malatino, 2018). The centrality of biological sex is clear in these usages, at the expense of intersex individuals, but also anyone who was not heterosexual or cisgender.

The progression from transsexuality to transgender and now trans, is an interesting one precisely because it appears to be linear and straight-forward yet is anything but that. Each new label emerges in response to changing social conditions and understandings of the self. Biological sex is no longer understood as an entrenched anatomical fact but rather as a binary reduction of a plethora of biological and cultural influences (Stryker, 2017). However, these shifts are not wholly consistent and to this day, people continue to use transsexual in conjunction with an ongoing debate over what trans means or should mean and if we should even be using it at all when it continues to operate as a perpetual form of alienation.

Language is not employed in a vacuum. Instead, the meanings of words are often opaque and contested depending on who uses what term, when, and in what context or company. As argued by Popa-Wyatt (2016), "Words don't describe the world, they alter it" (p.156). The most telling example of this power is slurs. Slurs are a set of terminology or descriptors that are commonly understood as being used to other, belittle, or objectify the recipient (Popa-Wyatt, *ibid*). Commonly is emphasized here, as labels are transformed into slurs both by the speaker intending a negative use and the recipient understanding it as a negative descriptor. Thus, slurs are a powerful, emotionally charged example of the intersubjective nature of labels and language as a whole. In order for something to be offensive, it is ascribed as such, by way of the relationship between the individuals present or in relation to a larger sociohistorical context that deems the both the recipient and descriptor as lesser or 'wrong'.

This sort of nuance can be missing from debates over which term to use for people who are not cisgender, whether it be trans, gender diverse or the acronym of TGNC. It quickly rears its head when the reclamation of slurs occurs, as exemplified by Brooke's usage of tranny.

*

*Yeah, I love it. It's another reason why I call myself tranny because cis people [are] like 'no, you can't say that word' and I'm like '**who are you to tell me that**'...*

*It feels strong to say. I don't know what it is, maybe because it's a slur, umm maybe that's why it feels visceral... **I say it to see the look in people's eyes when I say it.***

And then when they try to correct me, I'm like [mocking] you're so dumb. You're a cisgender baby. You're so dumb.

*

In our second interview, Brooke is more than happy to detail her personal relationship with the tranny label, viewing it as a gateway into more frank and intimate discussion of gender as a concept. Unlike August who drew on the vagaries of the imaginary, Brooke's experience of herself and her body is firmly grounded in the material world via the media of her childhood.

Rather than the queer-coded villains and staunch reinforcement of gender roles present in Disney films, Brooke relays that her *very much not queer* parents enveloped her younger self in queer media that was filled with outrageous and fantastical characters. Brooke doesn't see herself in the 'palatable' trans person who

quietly assimilates but rather in the debauchery of *Cats* (1981) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), as well as in the excessive homoeroticism of the *Thunderbirds* franchise. She praises movies where gender roles are turned on their heads, toyed with, and mocked, where a crossdressing man bats his eyes at an unsuspecting gentleman, and performers in skin-tight leotards writhe on stage. Everything on display is loud and ostentatious, frankly delighting in subversion and in themselves and one another.

*

*I live for **the disruption of gender**, and I live for **the discomfort of cis people**.*

*Not like I want to make them uncomfortable in a normal sense
but sort of like, unsettle their understanding of the world.*

I get great joy in eliciting those internal discussions.

*

It is in this delightful subversion, of making a mockery of traditional gender roles, that tranny exists and operates, therefore making its adoption fitting for Brooke, as someone who mocks and questions the notion of 'gender'.

At the same time, Brooke is sharply attuned to the broader social context of the term and its implications for others (see Wright Shultz, 2015 for a personal account). Tranny has been and continues to be weaponised to ostracize trans people, especially trans feminine individuals such as Brooke. It is only after my insistence that its use will be relegated to her, and her understanding of it, that Brooke mentions the term and her relationship to it. Another fold in the temporal dimension of her existence is revealed through this label. Simultaneously a slur with a charged history

and an identifier, 'tranny' demonstrates how language operates at multiple levels, causing friction as labels are reclaimed by some but not by others. Within this broader context, Brooke's usage of tranny to describe her identity and body takes on a fiery and deliberately provocative tone.

*

It means people have to put more effort into their deliberate transphobia. The slur won't work.

*Also, one of the big things with my sense of rage and activism, is that because of my presentation and how I talk, the voice I use, **it's not politically viable for me to be a trans person who convinces transphobes, convinces conservatives, [instead] my job is to challenge allies.***

*

Brooke's activism does not end with her reclamation of 'tranny' nor with the internal deconstruction of her gender and body. It flows outward into her external world through her actions and her words, all of which play a role in her quest to right the wrongs afforded to her and other TGNC individuals. This queer anger, the sheer emotional toll and charge of daily life in an overwhelmingly transphobic world, weaves its way through each conversation I have with Brooke.

*



My gender is my anger, my rage and I don't think it's a negative thing because it's not an unhealthy one.

*A lot of anger that we feel is unhealthy and needs to be worked through, whereas **this is an anger that is functionally a drive towards change.***

It's what motivates me to stand up for myself and other people, to make demands that will lead to queer liberation.

*

Anger in itself is usually seen as a negative or destructive thing. But anger can also be righteous and productive, providing momentum and energy to proceed forward. In Brooke's eyes, it becomes clear that her anger is all of these things simultaneously. By embracing anger as a necessary force for change, Brooke joins a long line of trans

feminine individuals who have recognised the power in not playing nice – these include Sandy Stone and her discipline-defining reply to trans-exclusionary radical feminism ('The Empire Strikes Back', 1987) and Susan Stryker's call to arms in 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein' (1994).

Brooke's anger is tempered and wielded with a steady hand, ready to strike as needed. It's her anger at her peers' refusal to acknowledge their privilege and to learn whose land they occupy. It's her anger with a college representative, who tells Brooke to mind her tone and be more lady-like. While there is control and agency to her anger, her outpouring of emotion is measured. She is strategic, mulling over the potential outcomes of an email as she writes it. Further to this point, Brooke is incredibly well-spoken and versed in theory. She is across all manner of terminology and ideas, easily pivoting from subject to subject. Rather than this knowledge serving as an indication of intellectual apathy, Brooke has a viewpoint on everything because she cares about everything. She has spent time and energy researching issues and educating herself, frustrated by a society that serves to alienate those who are [in]different to some promulgated norm. In a politicised space that demands she be emotional and potentially stutter, she is calm and articulate. Persistently and near tirelessly, she wields her sense of rage and indignation in order to create something greater than herself.

*

My body isn't sacred to me. It's to be moulded by me.

I'm not born in the wrong body, I'm just moulding this flesh clay I've been given in a way that a lot of, that most people do, but just not in this [specific] way.

*

This sense of ownership, of autonomy, ripples further. In describing her desired alterations, Brooke explicitly invokes imagery of cyborgs and mechanical limbs, a future where bodymod is the norm and spans a dizzying array of options.

She invokes a transhumanist future (a la Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto', 1983), in which humans overcome the dithering concepts of 'gender' and gender binaries, and perhaps even transcend the human-animal-cyborg divide. Brooke asks: Why limit ourselves to prosthetic limbs? Why not modify our bodies to be more efficient or robust? Let's integrate microchips into neural pathways to allow limitless knowledge and capacity for recall, or perhaps, roller blades embedded into or replacing one's feet.

*

***The idea of blessed flesh, of being human, is something
that I don't vibe with.***

*It's funny because people make robot jokes about non-binary
people because it has the word 'binary' in it, but I'm also like
genuinely yes please /laugh/.*

Genuinely yes please, I want to shape this flesh clay.

*

This holistic approach to body modification is innately political by virtue of including any and all modifications. Intentionally liberal and inclusive, Brooke does not hesitate to label body naturalism or selective adoption of body modification as inherently ableist and transphobic.

The body natural or the belief that one's body is sacred and perfect as is, is present within many cultures, including the Eurocentric mainstream of Australia. Often used

to argue against being tattooed, getting piercings, or plastic surgery, body naturalism is so entrenched in conservative society that its status as a cultural ideology is often forgotten. Body naturalism is inherently political with certain modifications being accepted or even desired, and others being discouraged. One example of this is ear piercings: a single lobe piercing on the lower ear is performed on infants in many countries, seen as a rite of passage for young girls. In contrast, other piercings such as a helix or eyebrow piercing mark the bearer as strange or odd for altering their body in such a way.

Progressing down the body, the demarcation of acceptable body modification affects the body in its entirety. The alternative, a radical inclusion of any and all body modification, springs to life in the hearts and minds of those who are made to feel lesser for the way their body looks or functions. The cyborg future becomes less a threat to humanity and more of a promise of a future free of ableism, of transphobia, of the need to police bodies according to cultural standards.

*

*If I want to change my body for whatever reason, I should be able to just do that. **There is nothing sacred about this form I've happened upon,** without my being consulted on it.*

*

Through the lens of a cyborg future (Haraway, 1985), it becomes clear how Brooke's personal experience of her body and her politics interact and feed off one-another. Much like a muscle attached to bone, the separation of the two is messy and impractical. Brooke speaks with astounding clarity about assimilatory politics and the confines of heteronormative time because these are not simply words on a page to her. She lives and breathes them. The prospect of a world where people can do

whatever they like with their bodies genuinely excites her, not just because of the personal implications but also for the equity it may afford.

Tracing a map of her personal beliefs onto her flesh, the lines will blur and darken as the contours are repeatedly layered in the same spots. Such a convergence is perhaps only natural in a world where your very existence as a gender non-conforming individual is politicised, both by enemies and allies alike.

Aaron (they/them)

Yeah, I think we've just encouraged each other to snowball it.

We're transing each other's gender.

Just having someone to talk to and be like 'my gender is lesbian' and Mina is like 'mine too', it's very affirming.

*We're **really just egging each other on** at this point, to push ourselves to various degrees of transing genders, which I think is endlessly entertaining, I'm very here for it.*

*

If embodiment refers to the experience of being in a body and its impacts on individual perception (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011), how do I then remember and reconcile my interlocuters' current horizons of desire and becoming?

One option is to write retrospectively, drawing from people's words and actions to create a sense of self that represents their past and present. Like the still of a video camera, this snapshot cannot be removed from the circumstances in which it was constructed.

But what about those whose sense of self is 'unfinished' (Biehl & Locke, 2017)?

Unfinished means a nascent way of living, like a sapling emerging and shaping the ground it arises from. Equal parts tentative speculation and hopeful manifestation, Aaron's sense of self and body is found in the 'What if?'

At age 21, Aaron stands on a precipice of young adulthood. In a steady relationship and living in a homely flat with a gaggle of pets, Aaron looks to the future with a sincere optimism. This optimism stems not from her employment or newly bestowed media degree, but instead from a potent sense of self, of being at home in a body that is slowly but surely changing. These changes are gradual and slow but also intentional and noticeable, worthy of our attention.

*

*Most of the time [I] don't think about it. **Because it's easier to just push it to the side.***

I think other things are more important personally. I want to do well in uni, and I'm working. I don't wanna be sitting at work and thinking "My gender is SOOO important!"

*I'm probably lucky to be able to ignore it and I'm happy for people to clock me as female in public, for people to clock me as a sexy man. **But I love the gender euphoria of being recognised as not-woman.** That hits so good.*

*It feels ambiguous, probably **something I'll be figuring out for ages.***

*

Not only does Aaron sit on the precipice of post-uni life, but they also find themselves at the beginning of an exploration of body and identity. In the time between our two interviews, there is a definite sense of growth and progression, reflected in the

differing pronouns they use to refer to themselves. Beginning with she/they, then to they/them, and now having their partner Mina to try using he/they, such changes in language emphasize a person whose self-perception is shifting, as they gradually grow into themselves.

Hil Malatino (2018) offers a salient name for this mode of being: 'gender as becoming'. For Malatino, it is not a question of where TGNC individuals fit into frameworks of 'gendered intelligibility' (i.e., the gender binary), but rather what harms and erasure such frameworks cause. As both Malatino and I see it, the presumption of gender being binary alongside a commitment to linear processes of transition signifies "an understanding of corporeality that directly denies the existence of intersex subjects, as well as one that can only cognize trans persons as performing a gender *at odds with birth sex*" (2018, p.193, emphasis in original).

Conceptualizing gender and identity as mobile, ever-changing and in flux, Malatino argues that unstable conceptions of self are not something to shy away from but rather phenomena to document and celebrate. Trans gender non-conforming embodiment accompanies this modality, presenting possibilities for understanding bodies and subsequent identity beyond the confines of 'man' and 'woman'.

To understand how this idea reflects Aaron's own perceptions and experiences, we need to start at the beginning and work our way forward, noting the grooves in the ground. Following Michael Jackson's insistence that "an empirically faithful concept of experience has first to recognise this multifaceted character of the person" (1996, p.27), I begin by drawing on Aaron's relationships with others, specifically their partner Mina.

★

I just think it's cool that my gender isn't set in stone.

The thing supersedes it or override it is – It's not how I personally identify with gender but... my relationship with Mina.

I feel like it's more of a conversation between how I interact with other people.

*

Perhaps the most striking feature of Aaron's account is how their sense of self has not been generated independently of others. Although each of the individuals in this thesis pepper their accounts with references to other people, none of them dwell on it in quite the way that Aaron does.

Borrowing from Alessandro Duranti's return (2010) to Husserl's original articulation, intersubjectivity refers to a conceptualisation of subjectivity and agency that is not limited to a focus on individuality. Instead, the impact of other individuals and communal affiliations is brought to the forefront, recognising that our sense of self, however individual or unique, is not formed in a void. As Schutz (1967, as cited in Duranti, 2010, p.10) puts it, "a man experiences his neighbours even when the latter are not all present in the bodily sense".

Rather than refer to decades-old debates over the precise relations between the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of our lives and personhood (Jackson, 1998), I draw upon intersubjectivity because it provides a salient indication of how Aaron's sense of self is co-curated with other people, in particular their partner Mina. Perhaps for some this dependency seem contradictory to established ideals of adulthood as being the pinnacle of growth and development. However, as Duranti shows, intersubjectivity does not always result in mutual affect but rather represents its possibility, being 'an existential condition that can *lead* to a shared understanding

– an important achievement in its own terms – rather than being itself such an understanding’. (2010, pp.6-7, emphasis in original). Michael Jackson takes this even further, arguing that the intersubjective orienting of our lives to others is an ontological aspect of human being (1996).

*

There is one name that is uttered over and over by Aaron. Mina and I, Mina and I, Mina, Mina, Mina. Each time they say her name, Aaron smiles the briefest yet warmest of smiles. In Aaron’s words, Mina has emboldened them to be silly and experiment. When COVID-19 first shut down public life, the pair embraced the respite from respectability – both dying their hair brilliant shades of pink, Mina a soothing cooler tone with Aaron favouring a fiery magenta. Not only do the two of them complement each other, but they also counsel one another, challenge one another, and day in and day out, work to create a better future with each other. It is within the space of this stable relationship that Aaron finds the freedom to toy with new ways of being.

*

I think the easiest answer is ‘my gender is lesbian’, which I love as a concept.

And I feel like if I tried to explain this to a cishet [cisgender-heterosexual] person, their brain might melt out of their ears.

Yeah, in a hot sexy way, just blown away by how cool of a concept this is.

It’s not like, (sarcastic) wow, I am a woman who loves vagina and I sure love other women with vaginas.



My gender is like kinda irrelevant?...

*But the thing I think defines it most is my attraction to women,
non-binary people, pretty much anything that isn't man.*

*

Much like Faelan's emphasis on trans and Brooke's identification with tranny, lesbian acts as a short-hand for finding others with similar experiences and as a single-word summation of what Aaron finds to be the most important aspects of themselves.

The definition of lesbian that Aaron employs is a broad one, referring to anyone who doesn't identify as a man. The label then is an opening of arms to a wide variety of

people: cis woman, trans woman, trans feminine non-binary, femme, genderflux and genderfluid, non-binary and so on. Anyone who finds solace in the term lesbian or in its celebration of femininity, homoromanticism, and homoeroticism is welcome.

*

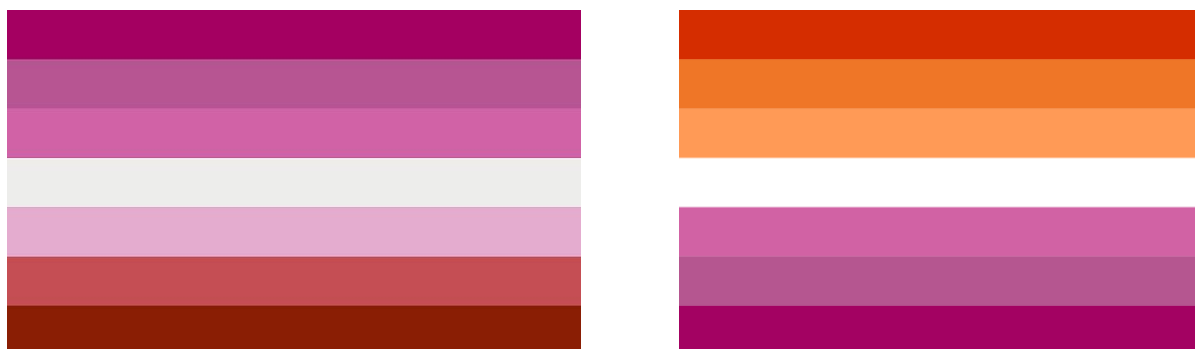
Mina and I both, we are lesbians.

Like neither of us would probably identify with woman.

*

When Aaron identifies as a lesbian, it's with a nuanced understanding of the history of the label and of LGBTQIA+ identity more broadly. Not only do they understand what it once represented but also what it represents now and what it can represent in the future. The lesbian community that Aaron positions themselves within is an inclusive one, far from the Womyn-centrism of the mid-20th century (as personified by Janice Raymond's 'The Transsexual Empire' 1979).

As Aaron sardonically points out, it's not about loving vaginas but instead concerns a spectrum of sexuality and self-expression that is inclusive not only of women but also of non-binary and other gender identities. This particular understanding of 'lesbian' is not uncontroversial but particular and contested as evidenced by the contemporary co-existence of two lesbian pride flags that stand for different things and are used by different groups of people.



Figures 3 and 4 – the 'lipstick' lesbian flag (left) and the 'community' lesbian flag.

(Source: Wikimedia Commons).

The left flag is a modified version of a flag originally created by Natalie McCray in 2010.

The 'community' lesbian flag has its origins on social media website Tumblr as a butch-femme flag created by user Castastray, before being used as a lesbian flag.

In a single word – lesbian – a dizzying multitude of experiences is conveyed, creating tension but also strengthening communal bonds and creating linkages between different generations of people. Gesturing towards multiple understandings that toy with language and history, Aaron's usage of the term lesbian demonstrates how beautiful and complex non-binary, non-cisgender conceptions of the self can be. In doing so, individuals like Aaron are able to carve out space for new ways of being that celebrate gender expression and identity in all of its nuance, complexity, but also curiosity, and pleasure.

*

I think, first and foremost I love playing a man.

*That really kind of gets out some, I don't know, it just feels fun, it's fun and nice. **I love kind of stepping into that little space.***

I'm not a man but god, it feels good to play a man.

*

Whilst Aaron doesn't identify as man nor feels attraction towards them, there is a clear pleasure in their stepping into the role of one in our DnD sessions. 'Man' is just one of many roles Aaron has occupied: including a book smart lesbian wizard, a polyamorous centaur, and a dexterous slime-cat hybrid. What sets the illustrious

Dante Xalvador apart is how he functions explicitly as a realisation of Aaron's gender envy.

Instead of mulling it over ad nauseum, Aaron's relationship with their gender and body is one of playful exploration. One form this exploration takes is through the characters they create for DnD. Whilst August utilises the game exclusively as a storytelling vehicle, Aaron employs the game for both personal and communal narrativization. Gender envy, the fantasy of how one could enact their gender, is a crucial piece of this framework, blurring the lines between creativity for creativity's sake and creativity as personal desire and future.

Not only does DnD provide a vehicle for such speculation and exploration, but it is embedded in interpersonal interactions and relations as the game cannot be played alone. In Aaron's case, myself and other players embrace this exploration wholeheartedly, allowing them to try things out and play at a new version of themselves. In return, Aaron is an enthusiastic and dedicated role player, fully engaging with whichever character we bring to the table, whether drawn heavily from ourselves or simply a concept that seems interesting to play.

By virtue of the game's nature and our group dynamics, these interactions are reciprocal and affirmational, allowing for a rich exploration of potential ways of being in the 'real world'.

*

*It's something Mina and I say to each other all the time - **if I was a cis man, I don't think I'd like women, I think I'd be gay.***

I just feel like no matter what I was, I'd be gay, if that makes sense? Which is complicated and convoluted but I feel like no matter what I would be a gay little bitch.



So, Dante is me kind of living that out. He's a little bitch, like whorish, honestly way more effeminate than I am but in a hot, sexy way. So definitely all my gender envy.

*Dante's voice that I do, I love doing. **I love having the opportunity to drop my voice down** and having the accent makes it a lot easier.*

*

Up until recently, this was the only form that I saw Aaron take, a chameleon-like role-player morphing their mannerisms and dress to suit the task at hand.

Dante is a beautiful man whose calm and collected aura hides pervasive paranoia and panic, the metacontextual reference of his namesake deliberate and intentional.

In each calm argumentation or escape from an incubus's curse, Aaron not only toys with their self-perception but also with the perceptions of those who play alongside them, opening the door for others to also explore their sense of self and who they'd like to be.

Aaron's gender envy is encapsulated by their character Dante, not only in physical appearance but also in actions and words too. Bearing navy blue skin littered with gold star-like freckles and long flowing dark hair, complete with cool, confident faux-British accent, Dante is the most extreme Aaron that Aaron can be. Through the vehicle of roleplaying, Aaron gets to be themselves *on steroids*, delighting in every brash comment made or hedonistic tendency indulged. The imaginary of DnD provides a rich vehicle to experiment with the self, being a safe space to try something new, stumble or falter in a way that is removed from the permanency of real-life body modification.

*

I think seeing Mina go through her surgery made it a little bit more like tangible, like oh ok it doesn't look crazy bad, she bounced back and was walking around within a couple of days,

And Mina, every week or so she'll be like 'have you thought about it [top surgery]?' I'm like, stop shooting me with that beam, go away /laughs/.

I like that she prods at it because it keeps it at the front of my brain. Because otherwise I will just kind of ignore it and forget about it. But I don't know, just fucking take them, I don't need them [their breasts]

Body modification refers to any and all modalities of physical self-alteration. Perception and acceptance of modification techniques are political, tied to larger discourses about body naturalism and what bodies should (not) look like. This question pervades each account presented here but through Aaron's eyes, it takes on a speculative, curious tone. What should a body look like? And what would I like mine to look like?

Subsequently, body modification offers a buffet of possibility with Aaron perusing and deliberating over their options, ranging from the seemingly miniscule to wholly transformative. Whilst COVID-19 has tempered this exploration, this process was already underway with Aaron donning multiple piercings of the lip and ear alongside a delightfully macabre skull on their inner arm that proclaims, 'Ah Well'.

In addition to highlighting these features, Aaron happily discusses a variety of bodymod that they might consider pursuing. In our interviews, they flitter between the thought of using Regaine (hair growth cream) to grow facial hair, microdosing on estrogen or testosterone, or of putting in the work to buff up their arms.

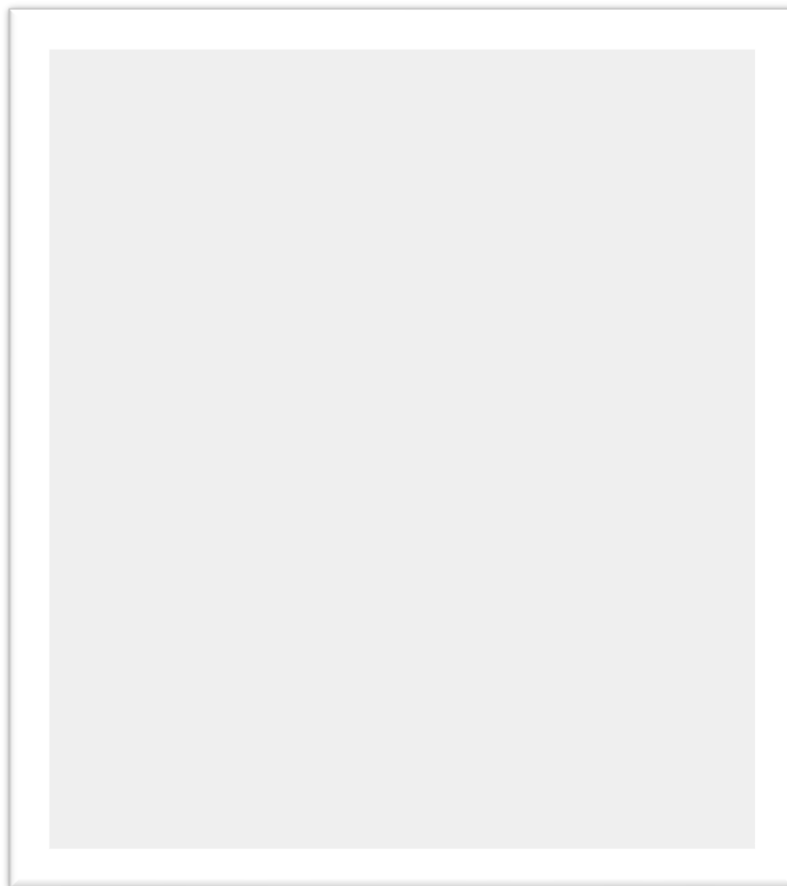
These considerations, as fleeting as they may seem, are quite important to Aaron. Their partner Mina has registered this, 'poking' at the topic of modification in everyday. In addition to this, Mina's own pursuit of a variety of modifications including tattoos, piercings, hair colouring and chest surgery, has had concrete impacts on Aaron's conceptualisation of their body and of what it could become. This mutually considered and enacted modification is poignant and noteworthy, visible both in everyday life and in its much more impactful moments such as Mina's breast reduction, which Aaron was an intimate participant in. By accompanying Mina to consultations and advocating for her when a surgeon strayed from what Mina wanted, to caring for Mina in the days that followed and physically being her arms when Mina was unable to properly lift her own, Aaron knows, better than any

onlooker can, what this type of modification means to someone and the relief it can bring.

*

It's the kind of thing, which to mull it over in your own brain and not talk it out loud with someone is difficult.

But when we're both kind of going through pretty much the exact same thought processes 'cause we're the same person.



*It makes it more tangible, and **it isn't just a crazy thought I'm having, Mina is having it too.** So, it's real and I can do something about it.*

*

Surely and slowly, Aaron is unfinished, a work in progress, and delightfully so.

What exactly they will become and on what timeline is anyone's guess, but there is a clear indication of things to come. As Aaron says, *thoughts are being had*.

As evidenced by their account and all of the accounts of others, there is tangible joy in this process. Being unfinished is emotional, pleasurable, scary, and always happening in the background of our daily lives, whether we are cis, trans or thriving on ambiguity. In every moment we live, in every decision we make to dress a certain way or to use particular pronouns, our sense of self is shifting. Aaron's sense of self is embedded in the past and present, but also in the future, in what is to come and who will be by their side.

The impacts of Aaron on Mina, and Mina on Aaron, cannot be understated. Whilst being two individuals, they are also enmeshed in certain ways too, as many long-term couples are. These enmeshments do not complicate or detract from their individual embodiment but contextualise it, by bringing to light the reality of intersubjective experience and affect. People do not form themselves in soundless voids but amidst raucous choruses, affirming choices and challenging beliefs. Aaron is no different.

Conclusion

From Faelan to Mina, to August and Brooke, and finally, Aaron - this thesis captures a small sample of how trans gender non-conforming individuals enact embodiment in ways that are simultaneously messy and mundane. By including only a very small group of people, this thesis presents a series of intimate accounts that emphasize the highly individual nature of trans gender non-conforming embodiment.

To conclude, I offer additional discussion of topics that were raised by multiple individuals in complementary or conflicting ways: namely, transmedicalism, transexceptionalism and embodiment. In doing so, I situate these accounts within broader discourses of bodies and embodiment whilst ultimately highlighting the need for further inclusion of TGNC voices within anthropology.

The entrenchment of transmedicalism

Transmedicalism (Heyes & Latham 2018) refers to the idea that in order to identify as trans, an individual must be pursuing, undergoing, or have already undergone medical intervention with the intent to transition from one gender to another (e.g., man to woman, or woman to man). At its core, it presupposes a binary view of gender. In addition to this, it also presumes that medical intervention is not only easily accessible, but also that such intervention is unequivocally desired.

Highlighting this phenomenon and putting a name to it allows us to see transmedicalism for what it is – a culturally derived yet widely adopted assumption that impacts, if not directly harms, individual decision-making in regard to bodies and identity (Heyes & Latham 2018).

Not only a theoretical concept, transmedicalism has concrete impacts for the lived experience of trans and gender non-conforming individuals, most notably in the gatekeeping of trans identity. According to transmedicalist logic, to be trans, you

must want to modify your body in a holistic way, with hormones and surgery. If you don't want to (or cannot) modify your body, you are not trans.

This ideology, and the fear of being aligned with it, is present in every single account. Aaron and Mina both explicitly use the term 'transmed' in a derogatory fashion, rebuking it in their discussions of what body modifications they would like. Faelan laments a persistent emphasis on transition, arguing that it reduces the entirety of one's life into a single moment at the expense of broader systemic issues such as medically sanctioned fatphobia. Both Faelan and Brooke also reject the idea of assigning a gender at birth. Brooke takes this criticism a step further by labelling body naturalism and any ideology that either prescribes or restricts body modification as folly. Whilst not using the term directly, August notes a personal hesitancy to use the label 'trans', saying that non-binary people have different issues and struggles, ones that are often deemed lesser to those faced by binary trans people. This line of thinking not only signifies the impact of transmedicalism but also of transexceptionalism.

From transexceptionalism to TGNC embodiment

Transexceptionalism refers to the idea that trans and gender non-conforming individuals are exceptional, their characteristics unique and incomparable to others (Heyes & Latham 2018). Like transmedicalism, the explicit label may not be familiar to readers, but the ideas will be. Transexceptionalism acts as a form of discrimination by seeing trans and gender non-conforming individuals as wholly separate to their cisgender peers. It may also explain why the exclusion of TGNC individuals from anthropology has persisted even as the field of trans studies has flourished. The historic absence of 'local' trans and gender non-conforming individuals in anthropology, both as interlocutors and scholars, reinforces transexceptionalist logic by divorcing the perceptions and experiences of trans and gender non-conforming people from other individuals.

This thesis challenges this notion by demonstrating how 'transgender' techniques of body modification, clothing choices and relationships to gender are enacted for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to a desire to transition. Therefore, these processes are analogous with cisgender forms of embodiment and should not be separated from broader processes of socialisation and intersubjective affect. The only thing that is exceptional about this thesis is that this type of analysis, focusing on the everyday lived experience of trans and gender non-conforming individuals, has been largely absent from anthropology.

Through the framework of phenomenology, the presumption of transexceptionalism is turned on its head and the true nuances of TGNC embodiment is able to be conveyed, in all its beauty and mundanity. The everyday experience of being in a body is reinserted into the narrative, replacing a focus on points of rupture, as is typical with trans narratives, with an understanding of embodiment as being continuous and fluid (Malatino 2018). Furthermore, Duranti's articulation (2010) of intersubjectivity helps make explicit the oft-intangible influence of other people on our everyday lives and sense of self. Through this reading, embodiment is no longer viewed as something that happens in an internal vacuum (i.e., the biological body), but rather as borne from ongoing processes of subject formation and individual agency, a dialogue that oscillates wildly from person to person.

Trans gender non-conforming embodiment

The term 'embodiment' encapsulates the experiences of being in a body, of altering that body, of hating it, loving, or simply trying to be peace with it. It reflects the fact that human bodies are messy, chaotic, prone to illness and injury, and constantly in flux. The work we produce as scholars should reflect these nuances. Such ethnographic empiricism has been less apparent in anthropology in Australia regarding trans identity and experience.

One way of accounting for these diverse forms of embodiment is through Hil Malatino's articulation of 'gender as becoming', as presented in 2018's *'Queer*

Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience'. Bearing some comparison to Biehl and Locke's unfinished sense of self (2017), Malatino critiques rigid, restrictive understandings of embodiment. Malatino's understanding of identity is corporeal without sacrificing emotion: equal parts internal sense of self via labels and pronouns, and equal parts physical presentation via haircuts and surgery scars.

My interviews show that this understanding of embodiment is not only applicable to Malatino and their personal experience, but also to the group of individuals detailed here. As Malatino states "what unites various queer and trans becomings is that each of them, in their own way manage to affect a disarticulation of the organism, a wrenching of the body away from the stranglehold of dimorphism" (2018, p198).

Whilst Malatino is an intersex trans scholar and each individual here is endosex⁶, their words point to the communal struggle that trans and gender non-conforming individuals face in articulating a sense of self not bound to the binary of cis male and cis female. By using a definition of trans embodiment that does not defer to the presumed gender binary nor focus on transition, the true nuance of trans gender non-conforming embodiment is not only recognised but also celebrated. Such an inclusive definition is vital to authentic representation of my interlocutors, as none identified exclusively as trans - Faelan is a gay trans man, Brooke a trans-feminine non-binary individual, August is non-binary, whilst Aaron is a lesbian; and Mina a not-cis lesbian.

Through understanding embodiment as an ongoing process of exploration and desire, something that is deeply personal yet often influenced by those closest to us, we pave the way for recognising the nuance and complexity of TGNC embodiment whilst also addressing the entrenched nature of transmedicalism and transexceptionalism in our legal procedures, medical systems, and anthropological discourse.

⁶ Endosex refers to an individual whose physical (sex) characteristics are considered normative for a typically 'male' or 'female' body.

Final words

This thesis is a series of uplifting, affirmative and authentic accounts. I hope that on a personal level, it can help foster self-love and acceptance among my interlocuters.

On a broader level, I hope to foster in the reader an empathetic understanding of the nuances of TGNC embodiment, and beyond that, a critical awareness of the discourses of body modification, naturalism and transmedicalism that shape individual understandings and experiences of bodies in Australia today.

Whether read by an anthropologist, trans scholar, or community member, this thesis reminds us of the beauty and complexity of individual embodiment. It is felt here and now, both in the gender binary and beyond it. It is felt in our bodies and those around us, and in the speculative future, to come.

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Appendix A: HREC Approval

07/04/2021

Dear Associate Professor Chris Houston,

Reference No: 52021942226405

Title: 9422 Trans-embodiment: Aesthetics of Being

Thank you for submitting the above application for ethical and scientific review. Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee HREC Humanities & Social Sciences Committee considered your application.

I am pleased to advise that ethical and scientific approval has been granted for this project to be conducted by Associate Professor Chris Houston and other personnel: Lucinda Boxall.

Approval Date: 07/04/2021

This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007, updated July 2018) (*the National Statement*).

Standard Conditions of Approval:

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the National Statement, which is available at the following website:

<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research>

2. This approval is valid for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval for this protocol.

3. All significant safety issues, that adversely affect the safety of participants or materially impact on the continued ethical and scientific acceptability of the project, must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.

4. Proposed changes to the protocol and associated documents must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Should you have any queries regarding your project, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on 9850 4194 or by email ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au

The HREC Humanities & Social Sciences Committee Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures are available from the Research Office website at:

<https://www.mq.edu.au/research/ethics-integrity-and-policies/ethics/human-ethics>

The HREC Humanities & Social Sciences Committee wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Karolyn White

Chair, HREC Humanities & Social Sciences Committee