

Articulating Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Transmasculine Identities:  
Life Trajectories, Bodies, and Personhoods

by  
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## **Dedication and Acknowledgments**

To the many study participants, my co-researchers, who shared their life experiences with me in a deep and thoughtful way. THANK YOU.

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“...the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and  
know the place for the first time.”

—T.S. Eliot

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ABSTRACT

Transgender and gender non-conforming transmasculine leaning bodies/identities have been taken up across a variety of literatures, yet their processes of identity formation remain underexamined. This qualitative study sought to explore transmasculine/gender nonconforming (transmasculine leaning) identity making processes in greater depth. Twenty-two respondents were recruited through the social networks of transmasculine key informants, local organizations serving transgender individuals, and through direct referral by study participants already enrolled. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via ZOOM, wherein participants engaged with meanings associated with their transgender identity, and how social interactions, biomedicine, and bodily perceptions played a role in their overall identity formation. Data analysis was conducted using grounded theory methods. Conclusions: Biomedicine, social interactions, and bodily experience all played a role in transmasculine identity formation, yet none of those elements was predominate. Rather than being a transition project, transmasculine identity-making emerged as a praxis of becoming that often began in childhood and remained active across respondent's lifespans.

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## **List of Terminology and Abbreviations**

**Assigned sex at birth:** The sex (male or female) assigned to a child at birth, most often based on the child's external anatomy. Also referred to as birth sex, natal sex, biological sex or sex.\*

**Cisgender:** A term for people whose gender identity generally matches the gender assigned for their physical sex. In other words, someone who does not identify as transgender. The word is derived from the Latin root "cis" meaning "on this side." \*

**Gender Nonbinary and GenderQueer:** People whose gender identity and/or gender expression falls outside the binary categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms. \*

**Gender Nonbinary transmasculine leaning (GNC (tm-l)):** A term used by people whose gender identity and/or gender expression falls outside the binary categories of man or woman, but whose gender expression leans more towards the masculine end of the sex/gender spectrum. \*\*

**Gender affirming:** Adjective used to refer to behaviors or interventions that affirm a transgender person's gender identity (e.g., a treatment using cross-sex hormones for a transgender patient may be called gender affirming, as can the use of a correctly gendered pronoun.) \*

**Transgender:** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender people may identify as straight, gay, bisexual or another sexual orientation. \*

**Trans:** A shortened umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. \*\*

**Transition:** An individualized process in which transgender people move from living aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth to living aligned with their gender identity. There are three general aspects to transitioning: social (e.g., presentation, relationships, employment, names/pronouns); medical (e.g., hormones, surgery, mental health) and legal (e.g., changing gender marker and name on legal documents and identification). Each person's transition path is unique. \*

### **Gender Affirming Medical Interventions**

**Bottom surgery:** Colloquial phrase to describe gender affirming genital surgery. \*

**Chest masculinization:** A bilateral mastectomy that removes most of the breast tissue, shapes a contoured male chest, and refines the nipples and areolas. \*

**Facial masculinization surgery:** Includes forehead lengthening and augmentation; cheek augmentation; reshaping the nose and chin; jaw augmentation; thyroid cartilage enhancement to construct an Adam's apple. \*

**Hormone replacement therapy (HRT), hormone therapy, testosterone therapy:** The process in which transgender GNC/ (tm-l) people choose to take a prescription of synthetic testosterone. \*\*/\*

**Metoidioplasty:** A surgical procedure that works with existing genital tissue to form a phallus, or new penis. It can be performed on anyone with significant clitoral growth caused by using testosterone. \*

**Penile construction/phalloplasty:** The construction of a penis generally includes several procedures that are often performed in tandem. They may include the following: a hysterectomy to remove the uterus, an oophorectomy to remove the ovaries, a vaginectomy to remove the

vagina, a phalloplasty to turn a flap of donor skin into a phallus, a scrotoectomy to turn the labia majora into a scrotum, a urethroplasty to lengthen and hook up the urethra inside the new phallus, a glansplasty to sculpt the appearance of an uncircumcised penis tip, and a penile implant to allow for erection.\*

**Top surgery:** Colloquial phrase to describe gender affirming surgery of the chest — either bilateral mastectomy or breast augmentation. \*

Sources:

\*The Johns Hopkins University's *LGBTQ Life*, Johns Hopkins Medicine, and *Healthline*, 2024

\*\*The Community Advisory Board (CAB) of this project and study respondents.

## Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review

The lived corporeal body as identity has been taken-up across a variety of literatures during the past several decades. Yet, regardless of discipline, or cross-discipline, the transmasculine/gender non-conforming transmasculine leaning (TM/GNC (tm-l) body/identity as a unique corporeal entity remains under examined. In their introduction to *Beyond the Body Proper* (2007), Lock and Farquar summarize these decades long explorations of a lived body/identity. What emerges, they find, is a body that is the “naturalized essentially passive atom[s]” of society (Lock and Farquar 2007:1). A body proper as it were, and one that despite its complexity as a “skin bounded, rights bearing, communicating, experience-collecting, biomedical entity” has left us with naturalized, commonsense bodies that are open to being continually “...reinforced by the operations of common knowledge and standard operating procedure” (Lock and Farquar 2007:2).

The TM/GNC (tm-l) body/identity, in all its transsexed-ness and transgender-ness, has never been a naturalized body/identity. As a commonsense body, these bodies are neither common, nor ones that makes easy sense. Their very existence calls forth the need to expand outward from the body/identity singular to bodies/identities plural. The TM/GNC(tm-l) body/identity is evidence that bodies/identities plural are bodies/identities that may be both subject and object, organismic and social, historical and political, and both local and global. These bodies/identities then, are bodies/identities among bodies/identities, rather than transgressive bodies/identities outside a static commonsense, naturalized mold.

Even as social scientists are making strong scholarly arguments (Grosz 1994; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Fine 2010; West and Zimmerman 1987) for the need to expand our understandings of sex and gender, the stranglehold of the sex/gender binaries continue to

predominate. As they exist now, they serve primarily only to conveniently order one body/identity in opposition to another. The TM/GNC (tm-l) body/identity across the literatures reviewed here stand in opposition to the hegemony of the cis-gender norm. This oppositional ordering creates a space wherein systems of bodily governance may flourish, giving power to the so-called natural/normal body/identity while stripping that agency from the abnormal/deviant one. This dichotomy necessarily “hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart” (Grosz 1994:3; Terry and Urla 1995).

But what if this widespread focus on transgender bodies and biomedical bodily adjustments is obscuring other important realities in the identities associated with being trans within the lives of TM/GNC (tm-l) persons. What if the hyper-focus on biomedical interventions upon bodies, that continually center a male/female binary, elides an individual’s more complex interpretation of what it means to be transgender, and have a TM/GNC (tm-l) identity? What if what it means to be trans is less body centered and more a socially relational position than has been illuminated in past studies? What if biomedical interventions are more an available service to transgender identity formation, rather than a means of body-settling across a static male/female binary?

The present study emerged through my clinical practice as a nurse practitioner and clinical director of the STRIDE Transgender Clinic, a primary care-based hormone and surgical referral clinic of the St. James Infirmary in San Francisco, California. St. James Infirmary was founded in 1999 as an Occupational Health and Safety Clinic for sex workers and their families. I was a co-founder.

The STIDE program is run by a primarily transgender staff and engages in shared decision-making regarding programs, services, and educational activities. From its inception STRIDE had, as an additional goal, to educate new doctors into the practice of transgender medicine thereby increasing the availability of competent transgender care across our community and around the country. Medical students and medical residents from the local University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) School of Medicine and Medical Residency Programs rotated through our clinic to learn transgender hormonal protocols and to establish comfort in providing clinical care to transgender persons and interacting clinically with trans bodies.

Out of these educational experiences discussions of body parts and how patients and clinicians “named” them emerged. Placing these discussions in an historical context is important. When we opened STRIDE, it was 1999, the more widespread availability of transgender hormone related medical care was just beginning, even in our progressive bubble of San Francisco. Transgender care at that time was still predominately a binary business. You were assigned male sex at birth and sought transition to female, or you were assigned female sex at birth and sought transition to male. For years the binary remained unconsciously entrenched, even in trans run organizations like STRIDE. The nomenclature of such terms as “gender non-binary” or “gender non-conforming” were yet to be in broad use.

As a focus on binarily positioned bodies continued to predominate, discussions about “naming” those bodies began to be explored as part of an increasing dialogue about how gender was affirmed by individuals, and by medical practitioners within institutions: “If a man has a vagina, is a vagina a male body part?” Or, “if a woman has a penis, is her penis a female body part?” From there, a move away from TM/GNC (tm-l) bodies as the sole metric for transmasculine identity emerged.

In 2015 I conducted a pilot study which was undertaken as an early requirement of the doctoral program of which this project is the final fulfillment. That unpublished study focused on gender affirmation and how transmasculine bodies served those processes. From that study my initial proposal for this present project returned to bodies. Yet as I explored related literatures, reading deeply into each, a nagging statement by a particular researcher would not shake free. Hausman (1995) theorized that a transgender identity may only exist within a framework of modern medical and surgical armamentariums, without which the trans experience does not exist as a legitimate placement of personhood or identity at all. From that theory the array of intersections between male/female/masculinity/femininity, personhoods inhabiting bodies, social interactions, and biomedical armamentariums, opened up as additional metrics by which what TM/GNC (tm-l) identities may be articulated and viewed.

Ultimately, it became the catalyst for the primary research question that this project attempts to answer: "What do transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) individuals perceive about what it means to be transgender?" and "How do biomedicine, social interactions, and perceptions of the body play a role in constructing their sense of a trans masculine identity?" Broadly, what makes a person transmasculine/GNC (tm-l)?

Looking across literatures for the transgender body/identity in general, and the trans male body/identity in particular, some key representations stand out. With the expansion of cross discipline studies that may take up concepts of sex and gender, however, it is sometimes difficult to separate these works into discrete categories based within specific disciplines.

The psychological literature has taken up the transgender body through the active and performative phenomenon of "gender affirmation", which is also discussed as "gender identity formation", and "gender construction." These works, described more fully in the literature

review that follows, take up processes of psychological and behavioral experience wherein a transgender person constructs a true gender identification and expression through interactive processes by which a person may receive outside support for their gender identity and expression (Bockting, Knudson, and Goldberg 2006; Melendez and Pinto 2007; Sevelius 2012). While these importantly articulated processes do involve a focus on the transgender body, they do so primarily by describing ways in which the body may be deployed in various ways to facilitate a psychological process.

Other psychological research regarding the transgender body has focused largely on the trans body as a site of psychological morbidities. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* delineates the authoritative nomenclature of psychiatric nosology across the developed world (Lev 2006:36). In 2013, with the introduction of the DSM-5, the term Gender Dysphoria replaced the previous most used terminology, Gender Identity Disorder. While the term gender dysphoria sought to remove the stigma of transgender persons as disordered, both terms describe a state of psychological distress that may require professional treatment to resolve (Lev 2006; Heylens, De Cuypere, Zucker, Schelfaut, Eluat, Vanden Bossche, De Barre, and T'Sjoen 2012). These dysphoric experiences of sex and gender as expressed in bodily habitus may include increased anxiety, depression, and dispositions toward suicide and self-harm (Budge 2013; Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, and Katz 2001).

In the public health literature the transgender body/identity remains a site of increased psychological risk, but is now also taken up as a site of risk for biomedical morbidities as well. (Clemments-Noelle, et. al. 2001; Horvath, Iantaffi, Swinburne-Romine, and Bockting 2014). In the sphere of public health, the trans body is a body particularly vulnerable to human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and other sexually transmitted infections (Clemments-Noelle, et.

al. 2001; Horvath, et. al 2014; CDC 2016). It is a body that exists at the margins of good health, at the margins of society, and in spaces of exclusion, violence, and stigma (Winter, Milton, Greene, et al. 2016; Sevelius 2012).

Outside the public health literature, the more purely biomedical literature takes on transgender bodies/identities as well. Here trans bodies are deviant bodies in need of the pharmacological and surgical armamentariums of biomedicine to merely exist as habitable bodies at all (Hausman 1995; Terry and Urla 1995; Davis and Meier 2014). Hormone protocols and blueprints for surgical alterations of genitalia place trans bodies in this literature as disordered bodies tied to strict binaries of male/female/masculine/feminine (WPATH 2012; COE 2016; Kline, Krane, and Paule-Koba 2018).

Gender Studies, Transgender Studies, and Masculinities Studies have all taken up the transgender body/identity in a variety of ways. Masculinity studies have explored the trans male body/identity mainly as a site of masculinity outside its hegemonic placement within the cis-gender male body (Halberstam 1998; Connell 1993; Gottzen and Straube 2016). Here though the focus is more on embodied masculine gender rather than trans male corporeality, though each is arguably intrinsically linked to the other.

Transgender studies may be seen as taking the trans body/identity into greater fields of inquiry. It has been described as a way of theorizing transgender subjectivity across “categories and movements” and attending to “emergent forms of personhood as well as traversals of existing categories, across scales that range from the intrapersonal to the transnational” (Stryker and Currah 2018:295-297). Here trans bodies/identities interact with public architectures in restrooms (Lucas 2012), are sites of “sensuous transactions” with the environment (Hayward 2012:92), intersect with race and class (Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin 1984), and stand vulnerable

to biopolitical forces through regimes of medicalization and biometrical analysis (Pugliese 2010; Magnet and Rodgers 2012).

Linguistic studies have taken up the trans male body/identity within language. Edelman and Zimman (2014:687) describes the language of the cum shot and the ways that trans men may embody homonormative ideals through their sexual language but do so “in ways that may simultaneously recuperate otherwise devalued bodies.” Morrish and Leap (2007) unpack the way in which language practices may convey messages about sexuality in cultural contexts.

Within the sociological literature the transgender body/identity has been engaged with through explorations of sex and gender, and through the wide literatures of the sociology of the body, covered in more detail in this literature review. Yet even here transgender male corporeality/identity remains understudied. Casper and Currah (2011) point out in the introduction to *Corpus*, that material bodies have become, “...endlessly contained by critical analysis, positioned as inert elements acted upon by disciplining apparatuses, and made “real” only through discursive projects, a kind of Velveteen Rabbit vivified by social interaction” (Casper and Currah 2011:17). It is the thingness of bodies as a whole, and the trans male body in particular, that not infrequently go missing from our theories of sex, gender, and body/identity. Because of this we may too often be left with an unsatisfying dichotomy wherein the body as object, goes missing amidst discussions of the subject body of the social world, but perhaps vice versa as well. The “thing” which is the actual body is at risk of disappearing within “...the interstices of biological and constructivist epistemological frameworks (Casper and Currah 2011:17).” Magnet and Rodgers (2012) remind us further, that in a world where virtuality is ever expanding, the body as thing remains important in that it is key to policies, borders, and technologies. The multiple complexities of TM/GNC (tm-1) identity formation, however, may

also go missing when bodies are centered without them. Using the conjoined term body/identity here is a device to keep bodies, the social world, and biomedical technologies linked in discussions of TM/GNC (tm-1) identity formations considered in this project. These ideas will be explored further in the literature review that follows.

The semi-structured interview guide, described in more detail in the methods section, sought to get at ‘meanings’ rather than simply life trajectory descriptions, though those experiences are obviously important in how meanings developed. Questions such as, what does it mean to be transgender, what does it mean to be transmasculine or gender non-conforming transmasculine leaning, what does it mean to be called a man, and what does it mean to be masculine, are at the heart of this undertaking. Bodies, however, have been centered here as well, including meanings associated with hormonal and surgical body changes, and genital meanings as those body parts were deployed for sexual pleasure or intimacy, alone or with others.

Three key themes emerged across interviews and will be described in separate chapters. They are named as follows: Separation: The Liminalizing Gaze, Liminality and Communitas: Un-Settling/Settling Bodies, Aggregation: Unsettling/Settled Selves and Identities.

## ***Literature Review***

Foundational knowledge for this project will come from an exploration of several theoretical literatures: Sex, Gender, Sociology of the Body, Testosterone, Sexual and Erotic Habitus, Identity Theory: Origins and Models, Gender Affirmation, Social Constructionism, and Foucault's Power/Knowledge Theories.

### *Sociology of the Body: Bodies and Embodiment*

Kate Cregan (2006), in *The Sociology of the Body* dates the emergence of a more formal sociology of the body to the period surrounding the publication of Bryan Turner's *The Body and Society* (1984) and Featherstone's, Hepworth's, and Turner's *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (1991). Before then more attention was paid to the verbal and symbolic meanings of interactions than to any intrinsic corporeality. The body was always "... 'there' in sociological and anthropological theories: it was just not explicitly accounted for" (Shilling in Cregan 2006:2; Schilling 2004).

Broadly, a sociology of the body focuses on the theory of embodiment, that "physical and mental experience of existence" (Cregan 2006:3.). Embodiment here is "a condition of possibility for our relating to other people and to the world (Cregan 2006:3.)." It is a context provided through prior circumstances, as well as outcomes of social formations through which we may gain social meaning (Cregan 2006).

Embodiment is that which is "...lived across all forms of community as a deeply embedded social relational category" (James in Cregan 2006:4). This lived experience provides an opportunity for individual ways of "living our bodies" (James in Cregan 2006:4). Through the process of our individual lived bodies we come to reconstruct ourselves in combination with

more established ways of being, thus forming an embodiment wherein the individual and the social come together to produce something new (James in Cregan 2006:4).

In *The Body*, Bryan Turner (1995) lays out a history of why sociology was late to placing the body as central to sociological thought when anthropology focused its attention there much earlier. In anthropology an earlier centrality of the body emerged in order to wrangle with relativism. But, it also emerged in response to the question of what it means to be a living person and how our organic nature relates to culture (Turner 1995). Within that question our organic being is placed front and center.

Classical sociology on the other hand was asking a different sort of question, which by its very focus placed the society, rather than the body/person in the forefront. Early sociology was searching for understandings of the new urban industrial world and the society through which it existed (Turner 1995). The body in early sociology was absent to the extent that the focus was an economic one, more "...concerned with the material production of goods rather than with the reproduction of bodies" (Turner 1995:7).

Turner describes three changes that laid the groundwork for a return to the body in sociology. First, shorter work weeks, more leisure time, and shifts in the positive value of leisure activities, made the importance of a work ethic that valued laboring increasingly irrelevant. Second, changing relationships between the sexes, fueled largely by feminist criticism of women's positionalities within society, served to shift focus towards issues of gender, sex, and physical bodies. And thirdly, as global issues related to aging bodies and their impact on markets emerged, issues of (aging) bodies consequently moved to the fore (Turner 1995).

Frank (1995) acknowledges that in contemporary theory considerations of the body do appear in the earlier work of Randall Collins, Pierre Bourdieu, Irving Goffman, and Marcel

Mauss, and within other disciplines which take up the ‘medicalized body’, the ‘disciplined body’, and ‘talking bodies.’ However, the integration of those issues was not undertaken for some time (Frank 1995:37).

Towards an integration of works that centralize the body two typologies emerged: Turners “societal tasks model” which looks at the body from the perspective of society, societies tasks, and its problems of government, and Frank’s “action theory of the body” which looks at the body as a problem *for itself* (Turner 1995:43). Turner’s typology looks from outside the body to within it, while Frank’s begins inside and looks out (Turner 1995).

Turner’s typology considers four cells of societal tasks with each cell focused on concerns of populations: populations in time are tasked with issues of reproduction, in space with regulation, bodily interiors with restraint, and bodily exteriors with representation. Here each task stands as a “prerequisite of society with regards to bodies, with each societal system being tasked with solving each sub-problem (Turner 1995:43).

In Frank’s typology the body lies at the center of an “equilateral triangle the points of which are *institutions, discourses, and corporeality*” (Turner in Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner 1995:49). Frank’s system posits bodies as having tasks that flow out into social systems that have no tasks in and of themselves. Bodies within discourses provide opportunities for understanding the range of possibilities for how bodies may understand themselves and their limitations, and within institutions as opportunities for placing bodies within space and time. And finally, through the corporeal body we may find opportunities to consider entry into life at birth, life changes while alive, and de-existence at death (Turner 1995:48-49). For purposes of this project Frank’s inclusion of bodily corporeality is essential as it reminds us of the possibility

of a “non-body bias of sociology”, which may allow the physical body to maintain its silence (Turner 1995:49).

Elizabeth Grosz (1994), in *Volatile Bodies*, similarly, speaks of bodies as never being either/or, corporeal/social. For Grosz the body is never “natural or raw, i.e., non-or presocial,” nor “...can the body itself be regarded *purely* a “...social, cultural, and signifying effect lacking its own weighty materiality (Grosz 1994:21).” Grosz is arguing against a corporeal/social dichotomy in favor of a theory that allows “seepage” across the two, maintaining the coexistence and necessity of a corporeal *and* a social body (Grosz 1994:21).

More recent work in this literature has continued to explore issues of the body (or missing body) and embodiment. Debra Gimlin’s (2006), qualitative work conducted with recipients of cosmetic surgery may be extrapolated to trans male bodies taken up in this project. Among Gimlin’s subjects cosmetic surgery was sought out as a solution to a pre-surgical body that was an “uncontrollable, obtrusive presence and a false testament to the self (Gimlin 2006:705).” Before a specific body part emerged as dissonant many subjects described being unaware of their bodies as separate from themselves as self. It wasn’t until a certain body part took over as a dominant point of awareness that their bodies came into full view as actual corporeal entities separate from what they experienced simply as a self. Here the body is absent until it comes into view through an experience of how an acceptable socially embodied self may appear.

Edelman and Zimman (2014), similarly grapple with keeping the body in view. In their work the trans male body is seen as both a space of embodied masculinity *and* an opportunity to bring a trans masculine corporeal body into view as it resignifies bodily difference. Here an invisible trans male body comes into view through the productivity of genitals. The corporeal

entity is allowed to emerge through an unpacking of interactions of “subjectivity, embodiment, intimacy, social institutions, and social interconnection (Beasley and Bacchi 2005:59; Edelman and Zimman 2014:675).”

In helping to keep the material body in focus we might also look to Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (Grosz 1994) and her device of the Mobius strip. The same device she uses to reconsider the relationship between the mind/body binary might be helpful in this project as well. For her purposes, the strip was used to demonstrate that “bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives (Grosz 1994:xii).” For our purposes, the strip may be used to represent the social body and organic body as being interconnected positions representing the inside/out and outside/in. It might also be a way to consider the seepages between male sex and female sex, and between the masculine and the feminine, allowing us to consider those binaries as not two distinct positions or two attributes of a single position, but someplace, or many places in between, and a “phantasmatic space, imagined very differently over time and across various cultural contexts (Terry and Urla 1995:3).”

This literature importantly allows us to see some of the ways in which the corporeal body was allowed to fade from view in sociology. Sociology emerged as a discipline focused on understandings of the symbolic meanings of social interactions, which by its very intent moved the physical body to a secondary position. Similarly, in an emerging industrial world order the effects of the new ordering of work allowed reproducing bodies to become less important than the material production of goods. What we are also able to bring into sharper focus by examining the literatures that make up sociology of the body is key: that neither the social nor

the corporeal exists without the other. There is never either the “this” or the “that”, but always the Mobius path back and forth across itself, from the outside to inside, and the inside to the out.

Moving to the Gender Affirmation Literature should allow us to see the action of the Mobius phenomenon more clearly. Here we may be able to witness the collision of the discursive of sex and gender play out through the body and by doing so perhaps gain a glimpse into one of the central questions of this project. Do constructions of sexedness and genderedness exist within the corporeal body itself, or are they always only embodied through the social?

### *Gender Affirmation Theory*

Since approximately the 1960’s, gender and sex have been consistently articulated in the scientific literature as discrete entities, with sex referring to biological markers of anatomy and chemistry, and gender referring to actions played out in the social, cultural, and psychological spheres (West and Zimmerman 1987). What is suggested by this separating of sex and gender is sex as a physical entity set at birth, and gender as a process that must be forever constructed, enacted, and re-enacted through the rituals of daily existence (Bockting et al. 2006; Fine 2010). For transgender men and women this duality of fixed biological sex and constructed gender has created a reality wherein sex and gender clash in ways which may dramatically impact physical, psychological, and social well-being (Clemments-Nolle et. al. 2001; Elifson 1993). But are the divides of sex and gender and the binaries implied and imposed by each category really fixed?

In West and Zimmerman (1987) gender is an accomplishment: “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category. Goffman (1963) calls this the display of an essential nature. This display, or performance of gender, varies given the context of time, space, and social interaction. The

enactment of gender roles is thus context dependent, with roles existing as situated rather than master identities (West and Fenstermaker 2002; Goffman 1963).

“Gender affirmation” is the widely used term to describe the process by which transgender men and women construct their true gender identification through interactive processes through which a person may receive outside support for their gender identity and expression (Bockting et al. 2006; Melendez and Pinto 2007; Sevelius 2012).

Gender affirmation as previously described, is discussed in other research by different names all of which describe essentially the same process: ‘Gender construction’ (Rodriguez-Madera and Toro-Alfonso 2005), ‘transgender identity formation’, (Rodriguez-Madera and Toro-Alfonso 2005). All related terms describe processes by which gender is affirmed through a variety of externalized gendered practices in conjunction with the internalization of received responses generated by those practices. The process may include many factors and can include responses of family, friends, strangers, use of pronouns, and the like (Sevelius 2012). In the *Gender* section of this literature review the work of Goffman (1959, 1963) further illuminates the process of gender affirmation.

Gender affirmation is not unique to transgender men and women, though it may be more important to them because of their minority status. For transgender persons there may be a more vital need for confirmation of one’s sense of self. Sevelius (2012) proposes a unique gender affirmation framework combining elements of objectification theory, stigma theory, and minority stress theory. While her study focused on transgender women, it may be assumed there would be considerable overlap with the process in transgender men.

In an unpublished pilot study looking at the gender affirmation process among transgender men (Cloniger III, 2015) demonstrated this overlap but also showed that while the

process of affirmation overall was similar, there were clear differences. As with the women in Sevelius' study, gender affirmation among the transgender male respondents in the Cloniger III (2015) investigation was seen to be a dynamic, multifactorial process wherein behaviors and actions, combined with hormones and surgeries, facilitated male identity internally and externally. Again, as with the women in Sevelius (2012), for men overall, the process of body/gender surveillance was the most problematic issue confronting transgender men. This process of taking in outside cues, then adjusting behavior in response to them, produced the most overall stress. However, it was also shown to provide the best information for successful enactment of maleness. In that regard it provided a key catalyst that facilitated "better" enactment of maleness going forward.

After body/gender surveillance, "body comfort=psychological comfort," emerged as the most important factor in the process of gender affirmation in men. For all respondents, testosterone therapy and body modifying surgeries provided, or promised to provide, the most important tangible evidence of maleness. For all, testosterone provided the most powerful tool for feeling male internally. All respondents reported that the internal sense of feeling fully male likely impacted how others perceived them, thus having a dual effect. Similarly, "top surgery" (mastectomy) provided for those who had had it, additional internal and external male affirmation that existed whether the chest was displayed to others or not.

Finally, sexual encounters for all respondents were only minimally problematic. All but one respondent used his vagina for sex without experiencing it as de-affirming his maleness. One respondent articulated it simply as a "bonus-hole". That is, an extra body part which could be deployed for sexual pleasure. Strap-on dildos were used by all but one respondent in various encounters and were pleasurable to all who utilized them, to some degree.

Among transgender men in the Cloniger III (2015) pilot project the effects of transphobia and social isolation were much less than for the women in the Sevelius (2012) project. Similarly, issues of sexual objectification were minimal whereas among the Sevelius cohort over 2/3's of respondents reported this as an important issue. Where identity threat, and stigma related safety issues, were significant among women in the Sevelius (2012) study, the magnitude of those threats in transgender men was substantially less, suggesting societal gender roles as a factor.

The gender affirmation literature covered here shows primarily how our present constructions of sex and gender may be played out through bodily performativity guided by psychological forces. They are helpful to this project in that they illuminate how the outside world of the sex and gender discursive moves into and through the body to adjust bodily movement, displays, and psychological standpoints towards orientations of safety and comfort, and away from problematic or dysphoric presentations. What continues to be elusive are adequate answers to questions central to this project. Specifically, do sexedness and genderedness exist within bodily corporeality to any degree, or do they exist always as only embodied constructs of the social? Moving into the next two literatures covered in this review those answers may become clearer.

#### *Erotic Habitus and Sexual Habitus*

Carla Pfeffer (2014) in her introduction to the Journal of Homosexuality's special issue, *Making Space for Trans Sexualities*, brings together works that focus on the coming together of trans bodies in sexual couplings and sexual spaces. She cites Walby (2012), on the importance of looking at sex from academic perspectives as a way to observe "bodies coming together, their parts and fluids, (and) the interaction between bodies and the meanings produced therein" (Walby 2012:10; Pfeffer 2014). The coupling of bodies within sexualized encounters and spaces

provides opportunities to examine exactly the issues this project is focused on, that is, the body as thing as it acts in spaces over-laid with the sexed and gendered embodied self.

A project focused on listening for the voice of the transgender male body through meanings they ascribe to their organic geography will need to include understandings of bodies and body parts as they are deployed during erotic and sexual experiences. More recent works focused on concepts of sexual and erotic habitus can provide a framework through which to explore how the sexual body and its bodily practice are shaped by the social and in turn how the sexual body shapes the social as well.

Green (2008) introduces the concept of “erotic habitus.” Framed through Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and field it is that “social, rather than natural, creation that develops over a lifetime and is shaped by inherited social locations, such as gender, race, and class position” and which allows a person to develop an “embodied ease” (Schilt and Windsor 2014:734). While sexual and erotic habitus may spring from sexual desires and desiring, they are always tied to the realities of “gender identity, bodily configuration, and domain of receptive sexual partners (Schilt and Windsor 2014:734) Habitus is a person’s taken- for-granted habitual way of thinking and as such is considered an un-reflected upon way of being through thought and action (Leander 2010). It is acquired through imitation and experience, and shapes bodies through practice, thoughts, feelings, and action (Bourdieu 1977). It is a structure that simultaneously structures, as it shapes understandings, attitudes, behavior and the body (Leander 2010; Green 2008; Bourdieu 1977).

Erotic habitus is Green’s (2008) attempt to realize a sociology of desire, which he has identified as missing from sexuality studies which have primarily focused on issues of sexuality and sexual conduct and have “gloss[ed] over” “psychodynamic processes and structures in favor

of an insulated analysis of interactions and institutions” (Green 2008:597). To realize his project Green seeks to take us into the “territory where social structure and the unconscious meet” (Green 2008:621) without trying to integrate the psychoanalytical fully. To do so he builds on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to include the psyche-society interface but does so without attempting a synthesis of the psychoanalytic with the sociological. Here the embodiment of the social structure is seen to establish a “deeply socialized intrapsychic life, bodily hexis, and...libidinal investment in the form of sexual desire” (Green 2008:621-622). What emerges therein is the terrain of erotic habitus, wherein the erotic habitus remains an unconscious process of the psyche but provides “a template of erotic schemes, appreciations, and inclinations” that may be deployed by the corporeal body through “conscious sexual fantasy, sexual scripting, and sexual improvisation” (Green 2008:622).

Schilt and Windsor (2014) differentiate their concept of “sexual habitus” from Green’s (2008) “erotic habitus.” They quote Green describing his theory as emerging from the social order, and existing as a residue in the unconscious, which then supplies a “social cosmology of eroticized objects...that orients the undifferentiated libido toward particular social forms” (Green 2008:599; Schilt and Windsor 2014:734). Further, while Green’s erotic habitus does not have to be tied to reality, as in sexual fantasy, sexual habitus does. Therefore, sexual habitus describes a relationship between “embodiment, gender identity, erotic desires, and sexual repertoires and practices” (Schilt and Windsor 2014:734), and as Foucault might suggest is constrained or enabled by the discursive of particular times and spaces. A person then, can desire “anyone or anything” but must also have “willing partners who validate these desires” (Schilt and Windsor 2014:734), and bodily configurations that enable them.

Schilt's and Windsor's (2014:734) qualitative work with transgender men provide evidence that sexual habitus is a dynamic rather than fixed process and may shift "often in radical and unexpected ways, across people's lives". Changes in trans men's physical bodies as they move towards inhabiting a body more aligned with their internal sense of sexedness and genderedness may "disrupt or affirm their sexual trajectories" and change their sexual "practices, identities, and partners" (Schilt and Windsor 2014:744). That is, the sexual habitus of a transgender man can be "affirmed, transformed, or challenged as their personal sense of maleness or masculinity becomes visible to others (Schilt and Windsor 2014:745)."

The work described here can serve two important purposes for the present study. First, it can inform the way trans men speak about their bodies, and bodily configurations, during and after engaging with technologies of transition. Hearing men's voices through the interviews included in the studies of Schiltz and Windsor (2014) and Green (2008) can inform the interview guide of this project by understanding the way these men speak about their bodies. Secondly, the concepts of "erotic habitus" and "sexual habitus" can provide a framework for the analysis of the trans male voices that will be engaged with in this project.

### *Bodily Sex*

In her encyclopedic work aimed at the untangling of sexed bodies, *Sexing the Body*, Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) chips away at epistemologies of the binary of male/female bodies, providing a framework of issues and questions important to our notions of sex. For Fausto-Sterling, the "...more we look for a simple basis for "sex", the more it becomes clear that "sex" is not a pure physical category", but always already includes entanglements between the "body signals and functions we define as male or female" with our notions of gender (Fausto-Sterling 2000:4).

Sexed bodies are not obdurate natural fixed objects, but rather objects that embody subjectivities that are inextricably linked to time and place. Any nature versus nurture, organic versus social, discussions must always be prefaced with the dictums: prove it; show me. As that which identifies us as sexed beings can neither be fully proved nor shown there is only the opportunity to look beyond that debate and return to Grosz's (1994) Mobius strip analogy of inside/out and outside/in. That is, seeing the social through the lens of the biological as we simultaneously see the biological through the lens of the social.

Judith Butler (2011) reminds that in talking about sexed bodies we must return to bodily materiality. We must acknowledge that there are real, living body parts and organic messengers and fluids that we use to place bodies in the binary of male and female. There are penises, and vaginas, and hormones, and ovaries and testes, chromosomes and genes, and pendulous breasts and flat ones. But finding a place in time and space when these physiologies and anatomies aren't already subsumed by social discourses of sex and gender is continually elusive (Fausto-Sterling 2000:22; Butler 2011). To uncover what, in and of the body, makes one body male and one body female it may be easier to look at those elements that don't fix a body into that binary.

Since Edwin Klebs first classified bodily sex according to gonad type in the mid-1800s that system of body sexing has remained largely central to the way in which bodies are classified as male, female, or other today (Fausto-Sterling 2000:37-38; Dreger 1993). Klebs' work was done before an understanding of chromosomes emerged, but once it did the classification system of sex continued as primarily concerned with gonads. Once phenotypic anatomical calculations were added in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, male/female categorizations become more confusing, as one could be seemingly classified as female based on gonads and male based on phenotypic anatomy. By the time sex-linked chromosomes were identified during that same period, an

additional confounding factor was added to the mix. Now, sex could be determined by three different calculations. However, as the various calculations frequently don't correspond to one another, the location of sex within individual bodies still cannot be determined with accuracy (Fausto-Sterling 2000:37-38; Dreger 1993).

Based on this reality, in *The Five Sexes*, Fausto-Sterling (1993) suggests that at the very least we should add three additional sex categories into which bodies may exist. In the five-sex paradigm, bodies where chromosomal, physical, and gonadal markers align as binarily male, or female could remain as one or the other. Added to those two groups would be, “the so-called true hermaphrodites, whom I call herms, who possess one testis and one ovary (the sperm- and egg-producing vessels, or gonads); the male pseudohermaphrodites (the "merms"), who have testes and some aspects of the female genitalia but no ovaries; and the female pseudohermaphrodites (the "ferms"), who have ovaries and some aspects of the male genitalia but lack testes (Fausto-Sterling 1993:69; Fausto-Sterling 2000).”

By considering three additional categories for sexing bodies, it should be implicit that, “...sex is a vast, infinitely malleable continuum that defies the constraints of even five categories (Fausto-Sterling 1993:20-24).” If sex, then, cannot be located in bodily anatomy or physiology in any reliable way, could it be that it is not locatable in the body at all? Or, if it is locatable, might it exist in all the spaces in between anatomy and physiology, that is, everywhere? And if not, might it not exist anywhere at all? Could we then adapt the old axiom “the penis makes the man to include “the penis makes the woman” too, or both or neither?

### *Testosterone*

Any project focused on bringing the trans male corporeal body into view must be informed by an understanding of the hormone testosterone. Hormones exist within all bodies as

chemical messengers that control bodily functions in both the short and long terms. Testosterone was first chemically identified in the early 1930's following centuries of research and observation into the function of testes in males. It is predominately produced in the testes of cis-men, but also in the adrenal cortex of cis-women. In transgender men testosterone primarily comes from exogenous sources introduced into the body by various delivery systems.

Testosterone is of a class of hormones called androgens, which primarily function to establish and maintain so-called male features. After the first few weeks of fetal life testosterone begins to be secreted by the testes of a developing XY fetus, generally classified as a genetically male fetus, and acts to masculinize the fetal brain (Booth, Douglas, Mazur, and Kivlighan 2006:168). Evidence from non-human studies has shown that XX fetuses exposed to high testosterone in utero develop male-like bodies while XY fetuses deprived of adequate testosterone develop female features (Booth et. al. 2006:168; Breedlove 1994).

Testosterone generally remains at low levels in males and females during childhood. During adolescence there is a surge in testosterone levels in both boys and girls. In males the testosterone surge is responsible for the emergence of secondary sex characteristics, which include an increase in penis size, muscle mass, body hair, and a deepening voice (Booth et al. 2006:168). After the adolescent surge, testosterone levels become diurnal with high levels in the morning that wane over the course of the day (Booth et al. 2006:168).

In transgender men taking exogenous testosterone, bodily changes are congruent with much of the bodily changes cis-men experience during puberty: increased muscle mass, decreased body fat, emergence of facial and body hair, and increase in clitoral size (Kranz 2015). Though often associated with aggression and violence, direct association of testosterone level with aggressive behaviors in men have largely been disproved in the literature (Booth et al.

2006:170; Tremblay 1998; Mazur and Booth 1998). While dominance behaviors may be associated with higher levels of testosterone, violent behaviors are not, with dominance measures more likely being related to increase physical size and socialized responses to those associated features (Booth et al. 2006:170; Tremblay 1998:772; Mazur and Booth 1998:356).

While testosterone does have direct brain effects, detected effects were not in favor of a direct “masculinization” of the brain (Burke, Manzouri, Dhejne, et. al. 2018:1594). Instead, it has been suggested that some of the brain effects of testosterone in transgender men are likely related to testosterone’s masculinizing effects on the body, and the ways in which improved congruence with bodily features and one’s sense of self as male may alter brain pathways. This lends credence to the argument that behavior changes may have direct effect on both structural and functional brain systems, opening up understandings of the way in which the social can affect the corporeal, and vice versa (Burke et al. 2018:1594).

Testosterone brain effects have also been shown to affect levels of anxiety and depression. Depression may be decreased in two ways. First, the bodily effects of testosterone in trans men, by decreasing overall gender dysphoria, may also relieve associated depression. Second, testosterone has a direct effect on the serotonin system in the brain, which is involved with the experience of depression (Kranz 2014). As regards to effects on anxiety, Hermans (2006) describes how testosterone’s brain effect can include reductions in anxiety, but that this effect is likely due to the reduction of fear and startle responses, rather than a more direct anxiolytic process. This process may be facilitated by the reduction in bodily dysphoria as masculinizing effects are realized (Hermans 2006; Kranz 2014).

In social interactions, Wierckx, Elaut, and Van Hoorde, et al. (2014) described an increase in sexual desire among trans men after taking testosterone. Again, these effects are

likely related to both the direct effect on brain chemistry and the decrease in bodily dysphoria after testosterone initiation. Finally, (Dozier 2005:307) noted that the most often noted social changes of testosterone “included being treated with more respect, being allowed more conversational space, being included in men’s banter, and experiencing an increase in women’s fear of them”.

Finally, Jordan-Young and Rumiati (2011) importantly challenge the “hardwired” paradigm which holds that “steroid hormones at a critical period of fetal development give rise to permanent structural and functional sex/gender differences in the brain and behavior (p. 307),” transforming the paradigm from theory into “fact”. Yet, while genitals may often be fairly reliable indicators of sex hormone differences, brains are not so. “In spite of the “much-trumpeted ‘female brain’ and ‘male brain’, the brain can simply not be ‘sexed’ as genitals can (p. 307).” By all indications, brains cannot be sexed by testosterone the way genitals can, as brains are simply not ‘sex-dimorphic’ (p. 307).”

A basic understanding of testosterone and its bodily effects is important to this project primarily as it provides important insight into the social/corporeal interface of sex and gender, allowing a glimpse at how each may affect the other. Perhaps more importantly, however, is the meanings that respondents associate with it. Is testosterone simply a hormone with practical masculinizing bodily effects? Or does it have meanings more specifically germane to a transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity?

### *Gender*

In *Doing Gender*, West and Zimmerman (1987) move gender outside of the individual and place it as “as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions

of society (p. 127).” Gender then, is that practice of managing conduct to fit norms of bodily sex (West and Zimmerman 1987:127). Gender here is not just a role or a trait, but rather a product of social interaction. If we are charged with searching for sex within the body, then must we search for gender outside it?

In Goffman (1959), gender exists as a performance dependent upon both the performer and an audience of observers agreeing upon that which is masculine and that which is feminine. The performer sets out with a set of techniques that seek to create and sustain an impression of that which is accepted as gendered (Goffman 1959:15). This gendered display is what Goffman calls the "front", a standard that is intentionally or unwittingly employed by an individual who is performing a gender position (Goffman 1959:23). This front may include elements such as "posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like (Goffman 1959:24).” A gendered "front" then can become “institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise and tends to take on meaning and stability (Goffman 1959:27).” A particular gendered “front" then, can become a “collective representation” and a fact in its own right” (Goffman 1959:27). The key factor in a gender performance is the “maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions” (Goffman 1959:254). For Goffman, gender may be seen as a “socially scripted dramatization of the cultures *idealization* of feminine and masculine natures, played for an audience that is already well schooled in the presentational idiom” (Goffman in West and Zimmerman 1987:130).

Doing gender then, “is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior *at the risk of gender assessment* (West and Zimmerman 1987:136)” It is “fundamentally interactional and institutional in character” (West and

Zimmerman:137), and insofar as our society is fundamentally separated first and foremost by sex placement within a male/female binary, “doing gender is unavoidable” (West and Zimmerman 1987:137). Ultimately, “sex category and gender are managed properties that are contrived with respect to the fact that others will judge and respond to us in particular ways (West and Zimmerman 1987:14).”

In *Delusions of Gender*, Cordelia Fine (2010), refers to our cultural beliefs about gender as “...that messy tangle of mental associations that interact with the social context (p. 235).” Through this interaction emerges “your self-perception, your interests, your values, your behavior, even your abilities” (Fine 2010:235). Everywhere in our lives gendered-ness nudges us in ways both obvious and subtle, in the use of pronouns, an advertising billboard, the dress of a boy on the street.

The gender imperative is so ubiquitous as to create what may seem an impenetrable wall against positions that may exist outside the masculine/ feminine binary. Just as sex cannot be winnowed down to a single source within the corporeal body, gender can’t be found as emanating from there either. But the effects of our gendered lives do get written there from an early age as our neurological circuitry reacts to the “physical, social, and cultural environment, as well as your behavior and thoughts (Fine 2010:236).”

Gender here does not lie naturally within the body, but instead is written into our biology through its interaction with the social world. Neural pathways, hormone levels, and gene expression are all affected by our continuous interaction with society and thus may seem to wire us in gendered ways. But any wiring that may exist should be considered as soft, rather than hard and “...flexible, malleable, and changeable. And, if we only believe this, it will continue to unravel (Fine 2010:239).”

More recent work on gender has ventured to take a fresh look at West's and Zimmerman's ubiquitous work. Connell (2010) describes a new central question in reconsidering the hegemony of the "doing gender" theory. Central to this new debate is the question: if gender can be done, can it be undone as well? For example, in considering a process of "doing transgender" Connell points out that trans people face "unique challenges in making interactional sense of their sex, gender, and sex category" within the context of West's and Zimmerman's process of doing gender as a process of managing situated conduct (Connell 2010:31). Therefore, isn't a person "doing transgender" evidence of undoing a previous gender?

Connell presents two sides of the new debate. One side argues as Connell does, that gender can be "subverted in interaction" (Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009; Connell 2010:31), and that highlighting a process of undoing gender may open a pathway to understanding the "feminist project of dismantling gender inequality" (Deutsch 2007 in Connell 2010:32). It may also serve to subvert transphobia, which analogous to homophobia, "refers to societal discrimination and stigma of individuals who do not conform to traditional norms of sex and gender (Sugano, Nemoto, and Operario 2006)." Therefore, a process of undoing gender, while moving us away from gender inequality broadly, may also serve to move us away from the sequelae of transphobia thus reducing sex/gender related violence, increased suicide risk, depression, drug use, and the increased biomedical risk for HIV and other diseases ((Budge 2013; Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, and Katz 2001).

On the other side, West and Zimmerman (2009) argue against the notion that gender may be undone. For them, gender can never be truly undone. They do concede however, that it could perhaps be redone to varying extents, to "accommodate less oppressive ways of doing gender... (West and Zimmerman 2009, in Connell 2010:32; West and Zimmerman 2009)."

Dozier's (2018) work on masculine females further pushes back at West's and Zimmerman's (2009) reaffirmation that gender cannot be fully undone. Here Dozier provides evidence that masculinity can be uncoupled from maleness. And that it can exist as a separate social location, rather than just some masculine attributes enacted by some women (Dozier 2018:16). Dozier's study with masculine females in the workplace suggests that while some masculine females faced sanctions when they were seen as not performing femininity adequately, others benefitted from it (Dozier 2018).

Finally, in Dozier (2005) gender comes into view in a new way as separate from sex. Here bodily sex is not the starting point upon which gender is written. Among Dozier's respondents attributions of gender came first. When those gender attributions were then paired with knowledge of the individual's bodily sex the way in which gender attributions were perceived emerged. For example, trans men who were perceived as men were rewarded when confronting sexist remarks and expressing understanding of women's social positions. If those same behaviors were understood as coming from a butch woman those rewards were absent.

It would seem from the discussions here that gender is solely an unavoidable, interactional performance that forces a this/or that, masculine/feminine dichotomy upon each of us. It can seem a settled question that gender is exclusively binary, and exists only outside the organic body, whose usefulness is only to enact Goffman's collective gender representations and expectations. Connell's and Dozier's work, however, opens the possibility of gender as something once done may be at least redone, and perhaps even undone as well. But the seeming absoluteness of these descriptions does not allow for the possibility of the seepages described by Grosz (1994). If we accept the possibility of Grosz's inside/out/outside/in, bi-directional spillages, then the notion of gender existing, at least partially, within the corporeal body remains

unsettled. However, moving to discussions of masculinities may open the notion of spillages further.

### *Identity Theory: Origins*

Though discussions of identity theory, as a unique focus, did not begin to appear in the literature until roughly the 1950's with Eric Erickson's work focusing on self-concept, it had its genesis in the emergence of social interactionism and remains grounded in that tradition. While George Mead's work is often seen as seminal to the emergence of symbolic interactionism and consequently of identity theory, Burke and Stets (2023) call out William James and Charles Cooley as early thinkers who pre-date Mead. Sheldon Stryker, on the other hand, emerged decades later, and was foundational to identity theory as a field of study in its own right.

James (1890 in Burke and Stets 2023:19) called attention to the "complexity of the self with recognition that people have multiple selves-as many different selves as there are different others that recognize the individual (1890, in Burke and Stets 2023:19)." Similarly, James discussed each person as being able to occupy "several positions in the social structure and thus have multiple selves (Burke and Stets 2023:19)." James was also addressing issues of identity in his discussions of self-esteem, where aspirations and successes work back and forth with one another to produce our individual sense of self as successful or unsuccessful (Burke and Stet 2023:20).

Charles Cooley's contributions, to what is now identity theory, centered on the how "sentiments and emotions" arise out of an individual's interaction with others. His notion of the "looking glass" described how people "see themselves reflected in the reactions of others towards them... (Burke and Stets 2023:20)." In identity theory as it exists presently, these

“reflected appraisals” constitute an important way in which individuals come to understand who they are.

With George Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934) the groundwork for social interactionism and identity theory was laid. At the core of his thought, descriptions of the mind as developing in conjunction with the self, were parts of a social process wherein individuals communicate and interact with others. These ideas were foundational to social interactionism, and ultimately to identity theory.

Mead was instrumental in moving discussions of the mind away from considerations that it existed outside the body, in some unexplained metaphysical sphere. Or, even as an entity that existed fully formed but within the physiology of an individual. Rather, for Mead, the mind was something that came into being only through the interactions of the human organism as it interacted with its social environment (Mead 1934 in Burke and Stets 2023:140). Mead saw the mind as existing through communication and language within the social world, and only there. Absence this cognitive interaction with the social world the self cannot develop, a key argument he had with the work of James and Cooley (Burke and Stets 2023:173). This social mind then *is* the self, and as such can become an “object to itself” (Mead 1934 in Burke and Stets 2023:140), while maintaining itself as a “social structure...that arises in social experience”. Mead’s process of illuminating the mind’s ability to “...reflexively recognize the self and treat the self as an object like an object in the situation”, is considered a key concept in both social interactionism and identity theory (Burke and Stets 2014: 21).

Additionally, Mead is, arguably, most widely known for his work on the “I” and the “Me”. For Mead, the “me” represents the social self. Those attitudes, role identities, and positionalities, experienced through the signs, symbols, and language communications of the

social world. The “me” then is “...the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes (Mead 1934:175)”. The “me” is the positive self, the negative self, the good self, and the scandalous self. As Mead states, “We may have a better self and a worse self”, and we may “...approve of one and disapprove of the other, but when we bring up one or the other they are there for approval as “me’s (Mead 1934:174).”

The “I” on the other hand, is the “response of the organism to the attitudes of others” (Mead 1934:175). “The “I” does not get into the limelight; we talk to ourselves, but do not see ourselves (p. 174).” The “I” is the “reactor”, in that it “...reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others (p. 174).” In taking these attitudes on “...we have introduced the ‘me’ and we react to it as an “I” (p. 174).” The “I” only really exists as a “memory image” (p. 176), that is, until a response to the “me” takes place the “I” remains uncertain. It is not until the time, “...when the response takes place...”, that “... it appears in the field of experience” (p. 176).”

Sheldon Stryker is unique in discussions of identity theory in that his focus is less on how social interaction forms identities and more on how social structure affects the “...the self and one’s identity, and in turn, behavior (Burke and Stets 2023:48).” Within four basic premises Stryker outlines his basis of identity theory. The first premise is that behavior is based on a “...named or classified world (Burke and Stets 2023:26)”, and that these names carry meaning out of which shared behavioral expectations emerge. Secondly, through these shared behavioral expectations, relatively stable “roles” emerge. The third and fourth premises suggest that we name others and ourselves in accordance with these roles. These self-labels then define individuals in terms of roles and positions and tie us to one another based on the implied roles (Burke and Stets 2023:27).

Erving Goffman's writings are strongly linked with symbolic interactionism and his importance in identity theory has its origins there. For Goffman, "...identity is *always* something that is done: it is achieved rather than innate (Lawler 2014:119)." As in social interactionist theory broadly, identity is "not something achieved in isolation", but rather, "...it is part of a social and collective endeavor, not an individual odyssey (Lawler 2014:119)."

Goffman (in Lawler 2014:118), arguably best known for his dramaturgical interactionist metaphor, refers to our identities as having a "frontstage" and "backstage" mask, representing spaces where we perform our identities in different ways depending on role expectations in each space. In essence, by "...means of this process, we become (social) persons through performing ourselves (p. 118)." It is, however, important to not misread what Goffman is saying here. While he talks about how performances of self will be different depending on whether they are "frontstage" or backstage", it is important to understand that *both* constitute the 'real' person. The "backstage", wherein the mask displayed on the "frontstage" may be removed, is not the space where the 'real' person is revealed (p. 121). Instead, it is an example that seeks to get at something much deeper about identity. That is, that performances and roles aren't masking a "true person", but rather are what "... *makes us persons* (Lawler 2014:121)." Hacking (2004), cited in Lawler (2014), further articulates the point, "The roles are not gliding surfaces that conceal the true person. The roles become aspects of the person, some more owned, some more resented, but always an evolving side of what the person is (p. 121)."

### *Identity Theory: Models*

Based on these theories and definitions of a personal identity, many discussions of identity processes focus on one of two main facets of identity: the categorical/role-based, and the

personal and individual (Real-Quintanar, Robles-Garcia, and Medina-Mora et al., 2020, Levitt and Ippolito, 2014, Lawler 2014, Stets and Burke 1996, Kuper, Wright, and Mustanski 2018).

For purposes of this project, I will adopt the suggestion of Lawler (2014) in thinking of ‘identity’ “...in a wide-ranging and inclusive way...” that encompasses both public or role-based categories as well as the “...more personal, ambivalent, reflective and reflective sense that people have of who they are (p. 7).” By keeping identity opened-up as part of a broad social scheme we may avoid locking individuals into a singular or imperfect category that simultaneously avoids the richness of individual subjectivity. Identities then may be best seen as “ongoing processes (and achievements) rather than as a sort of sociological filing system (Lawler 2014:10).” As this project focuses on transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) persons, and their personal understandings of what makes them trans, it will be helpful to look at identity theory models that are used when considering gender and transgender identity formation. Unfortunately, there is yet no single agreed upon model of transgender identity formation. Instead, discussions of transgender identity end up relying on models and theories that may be problematic in different ways. Levitt and Ippolito (2014) point out that inadequate models of transgender identity can leave trans individuals alone in their potential struggles with identity. Further, they suggest that inadequate representation is not simply an issue of “...quantity but one of quality as well (p. 1729).” Yet, while imperfect, having discussions based around related frameworks could play a role in moving sociological and psychological scholarship closer to a more unifying trans-specific identity theory.

Aaron Devor’s (2004) model of “transexual identity development”, called “foundational research” (Levitt and Ippolito, 2014:1729), is oft cited in discussions of trans identity formation. Now, nearly 20 years old, it is problematic in a few ways. Perhaps, most importantly, is that

while identity and the social world are acknowledged as linked, Devor's entire model is defended as only being possible with the essentialist acceptance that there are only two sexes and two genders: girl/woman, boy/man, and that successful performance of either side of that binary *must* include genitals associated the sex assigned at birth.

Importantly however, Devor (2004) points out in the introduction to his model that it "cannot possibly apply to all individuals (p. 42)", thus acknowledging that, "Some people may never experience some of these stages. Some may pass through some stages more quickly and others more slowly (p. 42)." Additionally, some may move through stages in different orders, while for others it may be "totally inapplicable" (p. 42)." And finally, he points out that the model "...is only intended to provide some insights into a commonly followed path", and that it is "...by no means the only path... (p. 44)."

In Devor's 14-stage model the first three stages attempt to describe a period of confusion and anxiety as the individual grapples the differences in their personal identity and the one that is reflected back by others. Stages 4-6 involve an awareness of transgender as an identity, and confusions around whether they fit here or not. Stages 7-9 describes acceptance of transgender as a viable identity in general, while continuing to evaluate its suitability to themselves in the real world. In stages 10-11 the individual is seen to accept transgender as their identity, but now evaluates decisions to medically transition or not. Post-transition steps 12-14 involve individual acceptance of the "new" gender identity and moving into "pride" in oneself.

Hiestand and Levitt (2005), again in a nearly 20-year-old paper, developed an oft-cited, and somewhat related, gender identity model describing butch gender identity development among lesbian identified women. Like Devor's model, early stages of the 7-stage model described conflict and confusion in coming to terms with identity. Stage one and two describe

gender conflict and gender conflict as it pushes up against sexual orientation. While stage three describes a beginning to sorting out “distinguishing differences (p. 79).” Stages four and five describe an acceptance and pride in a lesbian identity and gender internalization. In stage six and seven the individual experiences gender affirmation with pride in self, and integration of sexual orientation and “gender difference (p. 80).”

Both models outline an identity formation process that is centered around the notion of “otherness”. What if, instead, we started out with the assumption that sex and gender are false constructions of personal identity. Could we eliminate the need for identity models all together and let each develop as their own unique subjectivity?

### *Social Constructionism*

The discussions of sex, gender, and bodies, in this literature review all take-up constructionism in some way, and thus by their inclusion here place constructionist thought at the heart of this undertaking. Looking at the ways in which we co-create meanings and understandings of sex and gender with the society, and how those meanings and realities may be played out, with and through, our bodies make social constructionism fundamental here.

It has been said that there is not just one single way grappling with and defining a theory of social constructionism, but many (Burr 2015; Lock and Strong 2010; Berger and Luckman 1966). However, without one all-encompassing definition there are some overarching concepts that exist across interpretations of the theory, by different scholars and disciplines, which are helpful in clarifying the broader concept.

Lock and Strong (2010) describe key tenets of constructionism across definitions. First, social constructionism focuses its attention on “meanings and understandings” as central to human activities (Lock and Strong 2010:6; Burr 2015, Berger and Luckman 1966). Second,

meaning and understanding have their roots in social interaction and the “reality of everyday life”, and are a process (Berger and Luckman 1966:19; Burr 2015; Lock and Strong 2010). Third, meaning making is socially, culturally, and historically situated, creating meanings and knowledges that vary across time, space, and situation (Lock and Strong 2010:7; Burr 2015, Berger and Luckman 1966). Fourth, social constructionism is by its very nature anti-essentialist and anti-realist in that it argues “that there are no ‘essences’ inside people” and “no determined nature to the world or people” (Burr 2015:6; Lock and Strong 2010; Berger and Luckman 1966). Even as Berger and Luckman (1966) grapple with a social construction of “reality” that very “reality” is unpacked as arising from the “intersubjective (p. 20).”

Danziger (1997) in his examination of varieties of social constructionism uses the characteristics of “light” and “dark” to describe the major divisions within constructionist thinking (Danziger 1997:410; Burr 2015:24). In “light” constructionism people construct meanings of themselves and others through discourse and the process of doing so is “life-enhancing”, and orthodoxies which get in the way of this open engagement should be opposed (Danziger 1997:410, Burr 2015). “Dark” constructionism goes beyond discourse in meaning-making by acknowledging non-discursive aspects of human relationships (Danziger 1997:410). Danziger further suggests that the two main sites of non-discursive reality are the corporeal body and the “structures of society” (Danziger 1997:410; Burr 2015). For purposes of this project constructionism provides a framework through which to explore meanings of trans men’s bodies by encouraging a focus on meaning-making processes that emerge from, or are constitutive of, corporeal bodies.

The literatures covered in this review highlight much of what we know about the transgender male body/identity. Gender Affirmation studies have explored ways in which

transgender bodies use bodily alterations and behavioral adaptations to construct presentations of sex and gender identity that provides both comfort to the individual and creates a habitus and persona that is accepted as appropriate to that sex and gender to the outside world. Sex and gender studies have dissected the ways in which the sex and gender of transgender bodies/identities may exist as fixed or variable, based on time, place, and the social. The wide range of literature making up a sociology of the body has explored embodiment, corporeality, and relations of power within and between transgender and other bodies and the society. The biomedical sciences have taken up transgender bodies as sites psychological and biological risk for a variety of morbidities. Finally, when each of these literatures take up the transgender body/identity they do so primarily with the trans body/identity positioned as a deviant form of a hegemonic cis-gender body/identity.

Like all physical bodies, the trans male corporeal body/identity has been allowed to slip from the sociological gaze. A clear strategy for bringing these bodies/identities back in to view remains elusive. Additionally, the trans male body/identity as seen through the lens of these literatures is not a settled, obdurate entity. Therein lies the gap this project hopes to begin to fill.

This project hopes to contribute to filling in some gaps in these literatures in four primary ways. First, and most importantly, this study will attempt to place the trans male body as a hegemonic body by which sex and gender may be understood through the corporeal body. In much the same way that explorations of non-hegemonic masculinities may open up understandings of masculinity generally, having the trans male body as a hegemonic body may illuminate new understandings of sexed and gendered bodies not previously explored. Second, this study hopes to add to the gender affirmation literature by illuminating the meanings trans men ascribe to their bodies and body parts in a deeper way, thus adding to understandings of

maleness/femaleness/masculinity/femininity. Third, this study may provide a response to Hausman's (1995) dictum of what makes a transgender man by adding the voice of the trans male body to the conversation. Finally, by including trans male bodily meanings into the literature, understandings of power over, and governance of, bodies may be expanded. In the next chapter, Chapter Two, I will describe the study methodology for this project including sampling, constructivist paradigm, and theoretical framework.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

### ***Purpose of Study***

The purpose of this qualitative study seeks to engage transmasculine and gender non-conforming transmasculine leaning persons (TM/GNC (tm-l) narratives of their identities and bodies, as they relate to theories of sex and gender. Narratives about the gender related experiences of TM/GNC (tm-l) persons have covered bodily changes related to surgical and exogenous hormone utilization but have often not looked more deeply into the broader trajectory of gender identity across the lifespan. At least one researcher (Hausman 1995) has theorized that the transgender experience only exists within a framework of modern medical and surgical armamentariums, without which the trans experience does not exist as a legitimate placement of personhood or identity at all. By listening to the voices of the TM/GNC (tm-l) respondents in this study I hope to expand the understanding of a more complete sex/gender/body identity trajectory among these persons.

### ***Community Advisory Board***

I began the present study, and a small preliminary study (2015) that preceded it, by convening a community advisory board (CAB). The purpose of the CABs is to give comment on the overall approach for the proposed study, including the research questions and theoretical underpinnings. Additionally, CABs can "... help reduce the number of individual informed consent lapses, benefiting study participants and the scientific integrity of the research in question (Strauss and Sengupta 2001:1)." Community advisory boards commonly formalize the academic–community partnerships that guide community-based research by providing a mechanism for community members to have representation in research activities (Newman, Andrews, and Magwood et. al, 2011).

The CAB for this study has included individuals who identified as transmasculine and were drawn from various backgrounds: sociology, activism, medicine and nursing, and “at large” members who are not affiliated with a particular discipline or codified point of view. It was anticipated that these assembled advisors would offer viewpoints and input that would inform the creation of this present research plan, terminology formulation, and interview guide that encompasses the thought of a cross-section of transmasculine or GNC (tm-l) input. At any given time during the study period approximately 4-5 persons served as community advisors. Two CAB members reviewed the final data analysis of this project. Each gave useful input regarding limitations of the study as described at the end of this dissertation, and articulated their assent with the importance of the elements of 21<sup>st</sup> identity-making described in the conclusion section as important to the understanding of the nuances of how transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) individuals live their identities.

The CAB, by serving as a bridge between the researcher and the community of transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) individuals, helped assure that the rights of all research participants are respected in terms of how consent to participate is ascertained, and to gain an understanding of what aspects of the research process may represent a potential for harm to the individual subject or the community. Additionally, borrowing from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences guidelines for CABs, the assembled group advising this study helped in fostering an atmosphere of respect for the transgender community and in recognizing the transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) community as full partners in this project. In addition to other input that may emerge during their convening’s, the CAB for this project will also help assure that the research findings of this study are disseminated accurately and meaningfully to the scientific community, the transgender community, and the public at large (Quinn 2004).

### ***Constructivist Paradigm***

Foundational to this study is a constructivist paradigm. While there is no single process of applying social constructivism to a particular theoretical undertaking there are some principles that provide a unifying framework. While discussed in more detail in the literature review the constructivist paradigm that informed this project includes the belief that “meanings and understandings” are essential in human activities and exist as a process of everyday life. Further, meaning making is always situated socially, historically, and culturally, and will vary across time, space, and situation.

This constructivist project is epistemologically based in my understanding that any theories and knowledge that emerge through this undertaking are co-created with the study participants and myself as the researcher. The use of grounded theory as the research method is expected to allow meanings and theories about the experiences and worlds engaged with by the participants to emerge organically, thus helping to control for any a-priori beliefs, knowledge, or experiential biases I may carry into the process. Thus, this constructivist version of grounded theory can form a middle ground between realist and postmodern positions (Thornberg, Perhamus, and Charmaz, (2015) in Thornberg 2017).

However, like Charmaz (2006), I approach this project with the belief that “...neither data nor theories are discovered (p. 20).” As Charmaz notes,

“... we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices (Charmaz 2006:20).

### ***Positionality and Reflexivity***

Awareness of, and attention to, issues of my personal positionality were key to the present study and are part and parcel of a constructivist paradigm. Reflexivity is the process of

reflection that helped identify, construct, critique, and articulate my positionality within the research milieu of this project (Holmes 2020:2). Researcher positionality in contemporary research must be acknowledged and discussed, as it stands as the evidence that a researcher understands they are not neutral observers (Malterud 2001:483.), and that all knowledge is both partial and situated. Additionally, to attend to an evolving understanding my personal positionality I engaged in an ongoing practice of reflexivity through the research.

I began my process by engaging with Holmes (2020), who summarizes the method proposed by Savin-Baden and Major (2013) that offers three ways a researcher may identify their positionality. First, it is suggested that the researcher may want to locate themselves about the subject by "...acknowledging personal positions that have the potential to influence the research". Second, the researcher may seek to locate themselves regarding the participants. That is, "...considering how they view themselves, as well as how others view them...Holmes 2020:3)", while understanding that for each of us this process may be an inexact experience. And third, the researcher may want to locate themselves about the research process and its context as a way of "...acknowledging that research will necessarily be influenced by themselves and by the research context (Holmes 2020:3)." I continued my process of reflexivity by considering each of the three suggestions just described. Through that exercise, which was repeated several times before research interviews began, I developed the positionality statement that I discussed with each participant either at the time of our interview meeting or during another conversation that may have preceded it.

In the statement I described to each interviewee how I identified myself broadly as an older, cis gendered, gay/queer male who is a nurse practitioner specializing in sexual and gender health. I described my decades of clinical practice, and the founding of the St James Infirmary's

STRIDE Transgender Medical Program. Additionally, I discussed that I have worked with countless trans identified individuals during their sometimes years long processes of transition, and that while I am a cis-person, I am also not a novice in discussing the issues that I hoped each participant would be open to discussing with me during the research interview. Additionally, I made it clear that while my own experiences of stigma and trauma had sometimes seemed to have overlap with experiences some my trans identified family or friends had experienced, that I understood that my experiences as a gay cis man were inarguably different than their experience as trans identified individuals.

As a positionality statement I understood that it was a basic forward-facing description of who I was an individual, and what professional and personal experiences I brought to the encounter, and that it could by its nature never be an exhaustive disclosure. When interviewees indicated they might be interested in a deeper conversation about me and the research we were about to engage with together I was prepared to go deeper into my personal and professional story. Finally, positionality statements in research, if they are to have any true value to the research process, must be understood as an active and ongoing activity. Having a statement of positionality that is plugged in to the write-up of a research project is not enough. Increasingly, such statements are expected in qualitative projects and should, I believe, be expected in quantitative projects as well. Yet, unless the statements reflect an ongoing and active process of reflexivity throughout a particular research undertaking their value, if at all, is likely small. To assure active attention to my positionality I memo-ed about my thoughts and feelings about various interviews throughout the entire research process.

### ***Human Research Protection Program, UCSF***

The UCSF Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) acted as the Internal Review Board (IRB) for this study. Its mission is to promote the welfare and rights of human research participants, facilitate excellence in human research, and provide timely and high-quality education, review and monitoring for human research projects.

The present study met all HRPP requirements and was approved as **Study # 18-25693**.

### ***Theoretical Framework: Grounded Theory***

Grounded theory argues against an essential reality and sees theory as discoverable through the examination of “concepts grounded in the data” (Starks and Trinidad 2007:1379). For that reason, this study will be conducted, and the data analyzed, using the methodological processes of grounded theory. Grounded theory allows for real-world observation wherein a process of discovery is engaged in from which theory emerges (Strauss & Corbin 1998). As a qualitative method, grounded theory, can be used to uncover the “...nature of peoples’ actions and experiences and perspectives... (Glaser 1992:12).”

The defining components of grounded theory as originally outlined by Glaser and Strauss in Charmaz (2006) include, simultaneously collecting and analyzing data, contrasting analytic codes as they emerge from the data without preconceived hypotheses, utilizing a constant comparative method during all stages of the analysis, advancing theory development at each stage of the analysis, and using memo-ing throughout the project to elaborate categories and as a way of identifying gaps (Charmaz 2006:5-6).

Though Glaser and Strauss in Charmaz (2006) call for literature reviews to take place after data collection and analysis to guard against research bias, this project is being conducted in partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree. Because of that doing a literature review after data

analysis was not an option (Charmaz 2006:5-6). However, with that caveat, all codes and themes reported here will have emerged, to the best of the researcher's ability, in a completely grounded way through the voices of the respondents.

### ***Participants and Sampling***

Individuals who identified as transmasculine or GNC (tm-l) were chosen as the target sampling pool for this study based on the overall research question and the aims of this project as described here:

"What do transmasculine and GNC (tm-l) individuals perceive about what it means to be transmasculine/GNC (tm-l)?" and "How do biomedicine, social interactions, and perceptions of the body play a role in constructing transmasculine and GNC (tm-l) persons sense of identity?"

In total seven (7) inclusion criteria were necessary for approval of individuals to be participate in the study. As this study was focused on the experiences of transmasculine and GNC/ (tm) individuals the first criteria should be self-evident, as persons meeting this description would have been assigned female sex at birth and now identify as TM/GNC (tm-l).

Second, while not all persons who identify as TM/GNC (tm-l) will use exogenous testosterone, most who have access to it will explore its effects at some point in time. As the purpose of the study was to explore identity development and how biomedicine may impact that process the experience of testosterone's bodily hormonal effects was key. The decision to specify at least 6 months of testosterone use was based on the logic that for most individuals 6 months of continuous testosterone use would provide a significant experience of the bodily hormonal effects and its impact on identity. The six-month criterion was not a firm standard, and study applicants who had experienced testosterone for shorter time periods may have been included on a case-by-case basis. In the end, all study participants had a least 6 months of testosterone experience and most had been on it for several years.

Third, the age requirement of at least 18 years of age at the time of the study interview was a practical consideration in terms of IRB approval and informed consent. To assure that all participants were of legal age in terms of consent to talk about potentially sensitive topics related to bodies and sexual activity the age of 18 was considered acceptable by the key informants of the CAB.

Fourth, the requirement for English language fluency was a practical consideration as well. As the sole researcher conducting study interviews, I am a monolingual English speaker and would have been unable to conduct interviews in any other language. The decision to include sexual activity as the fifth study criteria was admittedly a more fraught decision. The small, related pilot study I conducted in 2015 focused specifically on male or masculine identified trans persons and their relationship with their vaginas as affirming or dis-affirming their male/masculine identities. While the present study explores broader identity formation factors and trajectories, an exploration of body parts and their deployment in sexual activity was included in this project as well.

The sixth and seventh criteria for study inclusion are self-explanatory in that they involve the ability for participants to give informed consent to participate in the study and a willingness to talk about potentially personal and sensitive issues related sex, gender, and their bodies. As a licensed nurse practitioner, I have the training and licensure to evaluate an individual's basic mental functioning as it relates to giving informed consent to participate in the study. This evaluation was made informally during initial conversations with potential study participants.

### *Recruitment*

Participants for this study were recruited in four different ways. First, a cohort of respondents was recruited from TM/GNC (tm-l) persons who utilize services of the STRIDE

Transgender Health Program of the St. James Infirmiry. The San Francisco based St. James Infirmiry, of which I am a co-founder and clinical director, is an occupational health and safety clinic for current and former sex industry workers and their families. The STRIDE Transgender Health Program is an informed consent model specialty clinic, providing hormonal treatment for gender congruence, including surgical referrals and mental health support and counseling.

Initially two key informants, both transmasculine identified staff members of the St. James Infirmiry STRIDE Program (SJI-SP), recruited participants from individuals visiting SJI-SP for services. The key Informants gave a brief overview of the study and provided potential subjects with a study flyer so they could contact me if interested. Key informants also obtained verbal consent from potential subjects allowing me, the investigator to contact them directly if they preferred that method of contact.

A second cohort of study participants was recruited from among individuals who use the psychotherapeutic services of the San Francisco Therapy Collective in San Francisco, California, that serves a large cohort of TM/GNC (tm-l) individuals. Posters with study information, inclusion criteria, compensation details, and researcher contact information were posted at the center spaces allowing interested individuals to self-select. The third cohort was accessed through the outreach of CAB members and transgender activists and professionals who agreed to send out study announcements to their various list serves, social media, and other online personal and professional networks.

A fourth cohort emerged through respondent-driven sampling as selected study participants made invitations through their personal social media connections and other contact networks. Respondent-driven sampling may be especially useful in accessing so called “hidden populations” where there may be broad privacy or safety concerns related to stigmatized

personhood or behaviors (Heckathorn 1997). To protect the privacy of study respondents and the individuals they might refer; I did not seek contact information for potential new study participants from present respondents. Instead, I invited respondents to pass on study informational materials to their networks of potential participants and waited to be contacted by anyone who was interested and thought they met the study inclusion criteria.

### *Inclusion Screening and Procedures*

All study participants were screened by me before being accepted to participate in the study, even if they had been pre-screened by a peer at SJI-SP.

Inclusion screening occurred in a variety of ways including in-person, by telephone, or electronically. All screening involved at least one telephone call or face-to-face interaction (in-person or in-person via Zoom) to assure that no factors related to an individual's ability to give informed consent was missed.

Once eligibility and interest were established, a mutually agreed upon interview appointment was set. Due to public health isolation precautions and protocols during the first 18 months of the world-wide CoVid-19 pandemic all interviews were conducted via ZOOM in private virtual ZOOM meeting rooms. Participants were asked ahead of time to present for our meeting in spaces that they deemed private and secure. I conducted all discussions from a private office space in Gastonia, North Carolina where I was residing during 2021.

Interviews were scheduled for 60-90 minutes and consisted of semi-structured interviews involving both broad open-ended questions and more focused inquiries. The opportunity for participants to opt in/out of follow-up interviews to provide further information on the research topic, or for clarification of responses, was discussed with all participants. A US \$100.00 cash payment was made to each study subject for participation in the study to compensate them for

their expert knowledge, time, and travel. In cases where interviews continued beyond 90 minutes further cash compensation was provided based on a US \$25.00 per 15-minute schedule.

Payments were made electronically in the manner preferred by each participant and included PayPal, Venmo, and Zelle.

All respondents accepted for inclusion in the study were provided with a copy of the informed consent materials that had been approved by the UCSF's HRRP IRB. They were asked to read through it in detail then sign, scan, and return a copy of the signature page to me. At the time of the interview, I reviewed each section of the informed consent materials face-to-face (via ZOOM) and answered any questions participants may have had. I reiterated then, and at intervals during the interview that they may decline to answer any question, or to stop their participation at any time during the interview without the need for explanation. Additionally, each respondent was assured that declining to answer any question or withdrawing from the study would not affect their agreed upon compensation.

While I discussed the recording of interviews during the consent process, I reiterated at the time of the interview that recording of our ZOOM meetings, both audio and video, with back-up audio-only recording, would occur. Subsequently, audio recordings would be professionally transcribed with all recordings locked in a professional-grade safe to which I had alone had access.

Though most participants knew my identity by the time we met for our discussion I reiterated my positionality as a white, cis-gendered, gay/queer male and UCSF doctoral candidate and researcher. I described my experience as the founder of the SJI-SP and my three decades of experience working with trans identified persons around related medical and mental

health issues as a way of letting participants know that, while cis, I was not a novice to issues related to the trans experience in both my personal and professional life.

### *Sampling*

As described by Corbin and Strauss (2015) theoretical sampling is a sampling method particular to grounded theory and is based on “concepts derived from data” (2015:134), and its sampling focus is concepts rather than people. For Charmaz (2006) theoretical sampling is a process of “...seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory “ and is a sampling method that “...prompts you to retrace your steps to take a new path when you have some tentative categories and emerging, but incomplete ideas (p. 96).” For Corbin and Strauss (2015) theoretical sampling is the way to gather data from “...places, people, and events that will maximize opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts (p. 134)”.

However, before a researcher can seek out situations and people from which to elicit emerging concepts, some initial data must be collected. To provide some initial data as the basis for the theoretical sampling which followed, I used a criterion based purposive sample. Criterion based sampling in grounded theory is simply a sample that provides some initial data based on criteria that has been established based on the research question.

For this study I used the data from a small (five interviews) pilot study I conducted in 2015 at UCSF as my purposive sample and as the springboard data for the theoretical sampling which followed. That unpublished study titled *Constructing Maleness* (2015), had as its primary aim an illumination of the factors impacting the gender affirmation process among a small group of transmasculine identified individuals. Using this pilot study as a criteria-based sample allowed me the opportunity to explore a data set that could produce enough data to guide me in building a

conceptually focused theoretical sample as outlined in descriptions of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2015:135).

Using the data from the pilot study allowed me to return to thinking about TM/GNC (tm-l) identity formation in general and reminded me to broaden my thought processes in ways that were not as self-evident when the pilot study was undertaken. Perhaps the most obvious example of the need to broaden my research perspectives was evident in the title of the study: *Constructing Maleness*. As soon as the present study began the fact that the concept of “maleness” was not necessarily a primary focus for TM/GNC (tm-l) persons emerged. Additionally, in re-exploring the pilot study data it became evident that it had placed all TM/GNC (tm) persons into a binary mold of transgender “men” rather than the more nuanced identity descriptions that have emerged in widespread use just these few years later.

Re-examining the pilot study data also allowed me to explore how interview questions might best be framed to keep interviews open to going wherever participants wanted to go with their responses. Re-reading pilot study transcripts pointed out how some questions in that process led to yes/no answers or may have injected my personal biases into participant responses. Similarly, revisiting the pilot study data made it clear that theoretical sampling in the present study would require an awareness of the importance of trying to get a broad sampling of study participants rather than the more socially and politically aligned sample in the pilot. While the data from the pilot study was coded, and a resultant story emerged, I did not include that data in the present study. In the end it served only as a criteria-based sample from which to inform my subsequent theoretical sample selection. As the present study is part of a doctoral degree the restrictions of degree requirements and HRRP IRB approval did not allow for

theoretical sampling to unfold in perhaps its purest form. The overarching principles of the sampling method, however, were followed to the best of my ability.

Analysis of the first two interviews of the present study showed right away that what had seemed like throwaway questions during the icebreaker part of the interview immediately opened up sometimes lengthy discussions of early childhood and adolescence and were clearly important to the respondent's identity formation process. Therefore, though I did not have a way to screen new participants for this factor, I was able to use the analysis of initial interviews to inform how much weight I gave to categories within the study questionnaire during subsequent interviews. Additionally, the order of topics and questions addressed in each interview changed after the first quarter of the interviews as a natural narrative flow of one topic into another began to emerge.

### ***Sample Size and Saturation***

The present study consisted of 22 in-depth interviews. No additional interviews were pursued after those interviews were conducted as saturation was deemed to have been met. My judgement of saturation was based on descriptions of it within the literature. Charmaz (2006) describes saturated categories as occurring when "...gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories (p. 113)". Corbin and Strauss (2015) describe saturation in similar ways and add that data collection should continue "...until theory is dense and logical and there are no gaps in the explanations (pp. 130-140)."

Hennick and Kaiser et al (2017) interestingly discuss saturation as occurring in two domains: code saturation and meaning saturation. Code saturation in their project came to indicate when researchers have "heard it all," that is, when no new codes are emerging. Meaning saturation, on the other hand, occurs when enough interviews had occurred to "understand it all"

(p. 591). In this project code saturation had occurred, by standards laid out by Charmaz (2006), after 22 interviews had been conducted and at least partially analyzed.

**Demographics Table 2.0**

Anonymized Name	Residence at Time of Interview	Age	Preferred Gender Pronouns	Primary Sex/Gender Identifiers
Finn	New York, NY USA	35	He/Him/They/Them	Non-Binary Trans
Cillian	San Francisco, CA USA	22	He/Him/They/Them	Trans Man Queer
Sal	Los Angeles, CA USA	41	He/Him/His	Trans Man
Declan	Tennessee USA	41	He/They	Non-Binary Trans Man
Taylor	Hague Netherlands	27	He/Him	Non-Binary Trans Guy
Mateo	Brooklyn, NY USA	>18	He/Him/They/Them	Non-Binary Trans Guy
Raffe	Oakland, CA USA	38	He/Him/They/Them	Transmasculine Queer
Emiliano	San Francisco, CA USA	49	They/Them	Trans Man
Leo	San Francisco, CA USA	22	He/Him	Transmasculine
Brady	Not noted	>18	They/Them	Transsexual Man
Rocco	San Francisco, CA USA	24	They/Them	Non-Binary Transmasculine
William	San Francisco, CA USA	39	He/Him	Trans Man Queer
Tank	New York, NY USA	36	He/Him	Non-Binary Transmasculine
Christian	Amsterdam Netherlands	35	He/Him	Trans Man
Elio	San Francisco, CA USA	23	He/Him	Transmasculine
Rio	Amsterdam Netherlands	30	He/Him They/Them	Trans
Charlie	Tokyo Japan	33	He/Him They/Them	Trans Transgender
Ciro	New York, NY USA	29	They/Them	Non-Binary
Alix	Maryland USA	22	He/Him	Man Trans Man
Roberto	Ecuador	>18	He/They	Trans
Conor	San Francisco, CA USA	33	He/Him They/Them	Trans Man Gay Man/Queer
Max	Not noted	22	They/Them	Non-Binary Transmasculine

\*Names anonymized for confidentiality

## *Interview Content and Interview Guide*

All interviews followed a semi-structured qualitative format regarding issues and practices related broadly to sex, gender, and bodies. Each interview began with broad questions about sex, gender and bodies to elicit a narrative response. Open-ended prompts were used initially to elicit participant experiences of the phenomena of sex and gender, and how these experiences may be connected to, or informed by their bodies and bodily practices. Additionally, the study will seek to explore the same issues, as they may have existed prior to transition.

### *Interview Guide*

Icebreaker (begin recording)

#### **1. As we begin, can you tell me a little about your life and background?**

Probes:

- Where did you grow up, how long have you lived here?
- What you do for work?
- Your family?
- Social relationships? Partners?
- Coping methods that involved substance use?

#### **2. (Identity) Can you talk a bit about how you identify yourself?**

Probes: pronouns, by sex, gender, sexual orientation, socially, professionally, etc.

- When did you first notice that your identity and interests were different than what was expected from someone assigned female sex at birth?
  - Can you talk about what that experience was like for you?
    - Frightening, exciting, confusing, restrictive...
    - How old were you, where were you living, etc.

- I know from our previous chat that you identify as a man/male/trans masculine/GNC (tm-l).
  - But do you identify as a “trans” man, or just a man/male without the trans descriptor?
  - What does the term “trans” or “transgender” as an identity mean to you?
  - What does the term/concept “masculinity” mean to you?
  - What does the term “male” mean to you.
    - If they have different meanings for you, can you identify one or the other as being a goal for your identity before/after transition began?
  - (chicken/egg question) Some trans men I’ve talked with describe realizing they weren’t female as happening before realized they were male. Other guys I’ve spoken with said it was realizing they were male that caused them to understand they weren’t female.
    - In thinking back to that time in your life, can you talk about your experience?
    - If you initially only realized you weren’t female, can you talk about how you came to identify as male?
- I’d like to shift gears back a bit now please, and ask you to talk about other ways in which you identify yourself? For example, by race, by geography (where you live), by education, by occupation, or class, by age, sexual orientation?
- Can you help me understand how these other ways you identify affect your experience as a trans man?
  - For example, a couple of African American trans men I’ve talked with told me their race intersected with their trans experience in ways that were surprising to them.

- Can you please talk about how the other ways you identify have impacted your trans experience?

**3. (The Body) The next topic I'd like to talk about may feel a bit more personal or private to you, so I want to take this opportunity, to say again, that if any question feels to personal or private please tell me and we'll move on right away.**

**I'd like to talk now about your physical body, and body parts, to understand how you experience your body, and understand what your body means to you as a male.**

- You've already told me you're on testosterone.
  - Can you help me to understand why you decided to use "T"? What does "T" mean to you?
  - Can you talk with me now about how the "T" changed your physical body?
    - Hair growth, muscle development, etc.
  - What did these changes to your body mean to you?
- In addition to being on "T" have you had any gender-confirming surgeries, and if so, can you tell me which procedures you've undergone (or plan to undergo)?
  - Can you help me to understand why you decided to undergo that/those procedures?
  - What did the changes you made to your body mean to you?
    - (If top surgery) What did the new shape of your chest mean to you?
    - (If bottom surgery/hysterectomy) Can you help me understand how that/those procedures changed how you thought of yourself as a person/man? What did these changes mean to you?

- Other, than the use of “T” and surgical procedures, can you talk about whether or not you’ve changed anything else about yourself during transition?
      - How you dress
      - How you move or hold your body
      - How you interact with others
      - How you interact with others in differing spaces
- While we’re talking about bodies and what they mean, I’d like to ask you a couple of questions that again may seem quite personal. So, feel free to tell me to move on.
- If you don’t mind, can you share with me whether or not you are sexually active?
  - If so, with whom do you have sex?
    - Trans men?
    - Trans women?
    - Gender non-binary?
    - Cis men?
    - Cis women?
    - Other persons?
  - If so, do you ever use your vagina for sex?
    - If you do, what meanings do you associate with being a man with a vagina?
    - If you don’t use your vagina for sex, can you talk about why not?
    - Were you sexually active before you transitioned to male?
      - If so, did you use your vagina for sex during that part of your life?
    - Can you help me understand how the meanings you associate with your vagina have changed before and after you began your transition?

- Finally, in talking about bodies, I'd like to ask you about something you may or may not have thought about before. Can you help me understand what makes you a man? Were you a man/male before your use of "T" and any procedures (if you'd had any), or was it the "T" and procedures that made you a man?

**4. (Power relations) As we're wrapping up our time together, I'd like to shift gears again and talk about the notion of power as it relates to your understanding of yourself as male or masculine, and as it relates to the meanings you associate with your body.**

- How did identifying yourself as TM/GNC (tm-l) person make you feel in terms of your power within your life, or over your life? And by power, I mean whatever that word/concept means to you.
  - Can you first talk about what power, in this context, means to you? How would you define it? How was it important or not important?
- What changes in your notion of power did you experience within
  - Your personal life,
  - Family life,
  - Work life,
  - Romantic or sexual life,
  - With your engagement with the world in general?
  - Can you describe how any of these changes in power relations were related to your physical body?

**5. Wrapping up-Finally, are there issues related to being a TM/GNC (tm-l) man and your body that you believe are important, but that we haven't covered already; or any issues that you think are important to the understanding of trans men in general that we haven't discussed?**

That's about all I have to ask you about today. Thank you so much for being so open and honest in thinking about and relating your experiences with me. (End recording).

I want to just reiterate, once again, the details of how all your responses will be protected. (Review consent materials)

Thanks again for participating.

### ***Data Analysis Process***

In keeping with the data analysis principles of grounded theory I conducted initial data analysis concurrently with participant interviews. After each interview an audio recording was sent electronically to a professional transcription service. Transcribed interviews were returned to me within 24-48 hours at which time I did a non-coding read through of each interview. The initial read through allowed me to get a general sense of what was being talked about in the interview and what story, if any, was emerging. My HRPP IRB approved interview guide included pre-determined questions, but opportunities for open-ended questions and prompts existed throughout each interview. Because of the pre-approved questions there was often a familiarity in how the stories of each participant emerged in the transcripts. However, because there was ample opportunity for open-endedness during each area of focus within the interview, individual stories could be weighted by the importance of those topics for the respondents.

Following the non-coding read through of each interview memos were undertaken to explore thoughts and themes that I had encountered. After the general read through, transcribed

interviews were analyzed using line-by-line open manual coding followed by in-vivo coding. In Corbin and Strauss (2014) the open coding process is a way of “breaking data apart and delaminating concepts to stand for interpreted meaning of raw data (p. 239).” Then, as I prepared to move towards more focused coding I engaged in gerund coding of each interview. While gerund codes had already been emerging during the previous open coding processes, focusing specifically on that code type provided a natural lead into the focused coding process. Glaser (1978) describes gerund coding as helping to identify processes rather than descriptions, and Charmaz (2006) says, “We gain a strong sense of action and sequence with gerunds (p. 49).”

Focused coding was used in the next phase of analysis in this project as an intermediate coding method and served as a bridge between the initial open-coding processes and the theoretical coding process I used later in analysis. Glaser (1978) described focused coding as illuminating more directed and selective codes than the ones that emerge through various open-coding processes. For Charmaz (2006) focused coding means, “...using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data” ...and “requires, decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense... (p. 57).” As with grounded theory in general, focused coding is non-linear process and is a process that succeeds through a “concentrated, active involvement” with the data (Charmaz 2006:59). It allows for considering data and codes across interviews and in the case of this project provided for a rich pool of inquiry for the memo-ing that accompanied this portion of data analysis.

Subsequent to the open coding and focused coding processes, theoretical coding was undertaken as way to, as Charmaz describes, conceptualize “...possible relationships between categories you have developed in your focused coding (Charmaz 2006:63).” Further, Glaser (1978), describes theoretical coding as bringing into view “...how substantive codes may relate

to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory (p. 72).” Before I made the decision to use of theoretical coding, I initially explored Strauss and Strauss and Corbin’s process of axial coding. Anselm Strauss (1987:64) describes the axial coding process as “building a dense texture of relationships around an ‘axis’”. The ‘axis’ in axial coding is the category. The axial coding process then, is prescribed to bring forth the “properties and dimensions” of categories that emerged during the focused coding process (Charmaz 2006:60, Saldana 2021:308).

However, Charmaz, Glaser, and others, have taken issue with axial coding as proposed by Strauss and Strauss and Corbin. In his response to Strauss and Corbin and the introduction of axial coding as a component of grounded theory, Glaser (1992) describes axial coding as a process that “...excludes and ignores...”, undermines and confuses...” (p. 61) the theoretical coding process which had been at the heart of the grounded theory method he and Strauss co-created. For Glaser, Strauss and Corbin’s axial coding was a “...conceptual elaboration...” allowing the researcher to impose their axial codes “...on the conceptual products to put them together however the analyst wants (Glaser 1992:62).” Through axial coding, theory generation which the original grounded theory method promised would emerge through the data, was now manipulatable by the researcher.

For Charmaz (2006), axial coding was less a heretical bastardization of original grounded theory, and more a “...frame for researchers to apply...” that may either “...extend or limit your vision... (p. 61).” Essentially, for those who prefer a pre-set structure axial coding can provide that frame. For others, it is not necessary as they can follow the leads “...that they define in their empirical materials” (Charmaz 2006:61).”

It is with Charmaz’s thoughts in mind that I undertook theoretical coding as a final part of my analysis and memo writing for this project. When writing about the data in memos I asked

questions of myself and the data to assure that what I was seeing had coherence and context and to explore social worlds that were inhabited by respondents. I weaved in and out of Glaser's lists of coding families as I wrote memos about what I was hearing in transcribed participant interviews, allowing them to spark thought about the stories as they were being told. As Charmaz reminds, theoretical codes are "...integrative..." and "... they lend form to the focused codes..." already collected (Charmaz 2006:61). Theoretical codes can add "...precision and clarity-as long as they fit your data (Charmaz 2006:62)", and that they always earn their way into the theory.

The next three chapters will engage with the issues and meanings the TM/GNC (tm-1) participants in this study describe as associated with their personal identities and subjectivities. These chapters will explore how the variables of biomedicine, social interactions, and bodies have played a role in constructing those identities. They will follow the structure of Victor Turner's (1969, 2017) theory of 'ritual process', as a way of providing a structure through which to consider the process of transgender identity formation among the respondents in this project. In Turner's work the ritual process consists of three stages: separation, liminality/communitas, and re-aggregation. These next three chapters, then, will be organized around those stages.

It must be noted, however, that while utilizing the framework of Turner's ritual processes and phases, this project does not intend to suggest that the data presented here is, in any way, meant to describe a rite of passage narrative in a religious, or pubertal/adolescent coming of age sense. It is employed solely as a framework. Its usefulness as such, then, lies in its utility in allowing the data to answer the research question through a narrative thread around which it may coalesce.

### **Chapter Three – Separation: The Liminalizing Gaze**

This chapter describes the first phase of Turner’s ritual process: separation, in that it describes the emergence of a separating divide between the respondent’s early subjectivities and personhoods, and that which labels them as ‘other’. All respondents’ relayed stories and remembrances of childhood and adolescent experiences related to sex/gender/body issues. Initial participant recollections regarding these experiences were in response to the first questions in the interview guide that sought to elicit those narratives as a way to open-up the interview process that was introductive to the questions, pace, and form, of the interview format. They were ice-breaker questions: As we begin can you tell me a little about your life and background? Where did you grow up?, How long have lived here?, What do you do for work?, Can you talk about your family, your social relationships, your partners? What resulted, unexpectedly, were stories that came together to generate one of the major themes of the study.

Gagne, et. al (1997) described the type of narrative recollections respondents in this study engaged in, as ‘reconstructed biographies’, a re-telling of stories that allow a looking back at childhood and adolescent experiences with the language and knowledges of adulthood. Enfolded within the ‘reconstructed’ remembrances, fragments of present identities, beliefs, and meanings, likely have a genesis in the relative weight particular stories may have carried forth into the sex/gender/body experiences each recalled.

The title, *Liminalizing Gaze*, is a joining of concepts from two well-known theories: Michel Foucault’s theory of the ‘gaze’, and Victor Turner’s ‘liminality’ theory. The term ‘liminalizing gaze’ is coined here to create a framework that illuminates how Foucault’s power/knowledge and bio-power processes of the sex/gender/body discursive create a gaze that

exerts a de-settling power over individual lives, forcing an engagement with what Turner describes as a period of liminality.

Foucault first introduced the notion of the gaze in *The Birth of a Clinic* (Foucault, 1973), then expanded upon it as he wrote about the panoptic gaze in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault 1977). In both works Foucault is tracing a shift in a system of power over bodies and identities, from one wherein a sovereign exercised absolute power over individuals through the wielding of the sword, to one in which the locus of power moved into the disciplining power of institutions (hospitals, prisons, universities, etc.) and discourses of medicine, law and order, and docile, right-behaving bodies. Foucault traces this shift to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as the needs of increasing industrialization required a new system of discipline and control to produce a populace and workforce that bent towards the needs of new systems of power. These new systems of power became primed to create a duality: fit subjects, able to fit in (Lock and Strong 2010:247; Foucault 1978).”

Victor Turner, a social anthropologist most active during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is most well-known for his theories of the ritual process. First codified by Arnold van Gennep at the dawn of the 20th century, it was not widely taken up until it was translated into English in the 1960’s. As an ethnographer and folklorist, much of Van Gennep’s work focused on rites of passage, and it was from that work the concept of the ritual process emerged for engagement by a wider audience (Wels, Van der Waal, Spiegel, and Kamsteeg 2011).

In *The Rites of Passage* (1969) and *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974), Turner, like Van Gennep, takes up the ritual process as a three-part ‘rites of passage’ experience. Rites of passage, or transition rights, are described as those rites “which accompany every change of state

or social position, or certain points in age (Turner 1974: 231).” They are traditionally marked by three phases: separation, liminality/communitas, and re-aggregation.

In ritual processes the first phase comprises a separation. Turner describes it as “symbolic behavior” signifying the detachment of the individual or the group, from either an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from an established set of cultural conditions (a “state”) (Turner 1974:232)”. For purposes of this chapter, the use of the term ‘liminalizing gaze’ will rely on the Latin derivation of the term *limen* which is a term signifying *threshold*. It indicates here a gaze-forced reckoning by respondents with their identity, that pushes them outward from what had felt familiar, and up to a threshold into the unfamiliar.

Therefore, this chapter does not describe the liminal/communitas phase of the three organizing ritual phases used in this project, as those processes will be explored in Chapter Four. Instead, the term ‘liminalizing gaze’ is used here to describe how the sex/gender/body gaze acts to separate the respondents from the norms of the sex/gender/body discursive, creating them as ‘others’, and propelling them to the *limen*, then ultimately into a period of liminality/communitas.

In the interview data presented here the ‘liminalizing gaze’ will be shown to be an active, non-static process that is both forcing and propelling. As respondents describe their earliest recollections of self, as that which initially felt like an authentic personhood, they encounter the sex/gender/body discursive gaze in ways that un-settle those identities. This unsettling of the self launches the respondents forward onto a liminal threshold, wherein that which became un-settled is left to be re-settled elsewhere, and that which was an identity is left to be identified anew.

To better understand the use of Foucault’s and Turner’s theories in this project it will be helpful to review those theories. Description of Turner’s (1969, 2017) theory of the ritual process will be discussed as it unfolds across each phase of the ritual process in Chapters Three, Four,

and Five. Foucault's discourse and power/knowledge systems utilized in the present study is described here.

### ***Foucault's Discourse, Power/Knowledge, Bio-politics, and Bio-power***

The theories of Michel Foucault are important to this study in that they move discussions of social constructionism into understandings of how power flows through that which is socially constructed. As this project focuses on sex, gender, identity, and corporeal bodies, understanding how Foucault theorized these concepts as emerging through discourse, and getting their power through it, will be key. When Foucault takes up the issue of bodies he does so through his theories of discourse and the power/knowledge framework. An historical method, the power/knowledge/discourse framework is used to get at understandings of the history of knowledge, and ultimately to illuminate the way in which some knowledges become dominant sources of social power. As a method it was largely antithetical to the usual traditions of history in that it does not rely on chronology, or determinations of cause and effect. Instead, it has as its focus the ways in which "...the conception of a subject and its domain...is constituted within knowledge as a concern central to a specific age, society or social stratum (Hewitt 1995:226; Foucault 1980; Foucault 1972)."

Foucault's theory here is not focused on "...elucidating fundamental timeless truths" (Lock and Strong 2010:245), but rather the constitution of knowledge as it exists within a particular time and space. Lock and Strong (2010) describe Foucault's discourse as the "worldview of a culture as it is established in practice at a particular time and place (p. 246)" and which comes together with an "internal consistency" which defines what may be expressed, and in doing so ends up defining that which may not be expressed as well (p. 246). Within a power/knowledge/discourse system, power regimes emerge which may serve to expand or

constrain power (Foucault 1983), while simultaneously allowing us to believe that which has become established in discourse as being the “true and natural characterizations of the ‘way things are’” (Lock and Strong 2010:246; Foucault 2005). Ultimately, by looking at the history of discourse across time and place, what may be revealed is how a discursive is grounded in processes which “make people into ‘fit’ subjects as well as subjects who fit (Lock and Strong 2010:247; Foucault 1978).”

In describing the knowledge/power framework Foucault lays out three discursive principles for how people are objectified as subjects of a particular discourse: dividing practices, scientific classification, and subjectification (Lock and Strong 2010:247-252; Foucault 1977). Dividing practices are those beliefs that exist in a particular culture at a particular place and time, and govern which beliefs and practices come to define what is acceptable or unacceptable in that space (Lock and Strong 2010:247; Foucault 1977). An example of dividing practices in this project would be the ways in which non-trans bodies/identities are taken up as the natural/normal body/identity, leaving the trans body/identity positioned as the deviant/unnatural body/identity. Similarly, binaries of sex and gender in this project focus on the discursive of sex and gender that have become the standpoint body/sex/gender, thereby dividing bodies/sexes/genders outside those binaries as undesirable. Discursive power allows the flow of power to that which stands as the normative, and away from that which is divided off from it. Once the discursive of bodies/sexes/genders are established the discourses surrounding them allow systems of social and bodily discipline to emerge.

As systems of scientific classification began to emerge in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries bodies/sexes/genders could now be codified further, making them easier still to be placed into essentialist discursive frameworks. Bodies were now being sorted and disciplined

based on acceptability and usefulness to the society on multiple fronts, a process of normalization necessary to maintain industrializing cities and states (Featherstone, Hepworth, Turner 1995: 229). Here non-trans bodies/identities become the natural bodies/identities, trans bodies/identities the unnatural, male sex the natural sex, female sex the variant. Masculinity could now be further proscribed as the natural gender configuration for a non-trans male body, and femininity as the natural gender configuration of the non-trans female body. Within this newly privileged field of scientific knowledge, bodies/sexes/genders which are outside the naturalized discursive become fixed within the science/society discourses as the unnatural, deviant, non-essentialist configurations of the norm.

Finally, objectification in Foucault's knowledge/power system is a process wherein the individual becomes a subject to itself. The individual may be seen here as becoming an active participant in maintaining systems of dividing practices and scientific classification, by assuming practices of self-surveillance. To fit within the prevailing social and biological discursive we begin to police our own bodies and behaviors, ever moving towards, and away from, one discursive or another, to find the moving target of the essential (Foucault 1977; Lock and Strong 2010:250-251; Delamater and Hyde 1998).

When the body/identity can be relied on to govern itself, power may be seen as existing everywhere. It "...inheres in all relations from one moment to the next...not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 1978:93, Hewitt 1995:231). This everywhere-ness of power is Foucault's "force relation" and represents the "energy of power by and upon the body" (Hewitt 1995:231, Foucault 1980). The body stands as "...a metaphor for the anatomical focus and embodiment of power; a materiality that acts as a source and target of power...", it is not "...assigned a binary value as either active or passive...", but instead,

“...operates within the confines of force relations... (Hewitt 1995:211-212; Foucault 1978, 1980).”

As the discursive of sexes/genders/bodies became increasingly settled through codification techniques it became necessary to develop practices to constrain their deviant forms, allowing regimes of governance and discipline from science/law/society to emerge. It is these regimes of governance and discipline that Foucault takes up in his work on governmentality. Technologies of the self, bio- power, and bio-politics all spring from Foucault’s knowledge/power construct and the governance and discipline practices that emerged to sustain power relationships created through it.

How we conceive of our true self, and construct it for ourselves, is always constrained by the discursive of particular places and times. While we believe in our own free will to construct our identities as we understand and experience them, the tools and technologies of the process remain limited to that which is available through an existing discursive. That is, the technologies available to each of us for self- monitoring and self-formation are inextricably linked to the presiding discursive of any particular time or place. (Foucault 1977; Lock and Strong 2010:244-256; Foucault 1988; Kelly 2013; Oksala 2013).

Bio-politics and bio-power in Foucault, are explorations of the ways in which science and law wield power over bodies. Bio-power is defined “by its corporeal nature; it {is} power over bodies and by bodies” (Hewitt 1995:229-230, Foucault 1980). What is most important here is not just that bodies came to be the focus of disciplinary practices of the society, but that the power of these practices comes to constitute the subject itself. Ultimately, social disciplinary powers are not simply enacted *upon* the subject, but *through* and *by* the subject as well. Once inscribed on

bodies (social body/individual body), they are taken up by those bodies and perpetuated forward, through and by them (Hewitt 1995:230-231, Foucault 1980).

Bio-power, bio-politics and notions of governmentality in general, all privilege expert knowledge. They succeed not just because of the imposition power and governance through social institutions and science, but when a particular knowledge/power is embodied and enacted through self-governance. Trans identified persons may alter their bodies and outward displays of sex and gender to adjoin with their self-identities, but they are still constrained within these transition experiences by the prevailing discursive for those forms. That which we believe is “our meant-to-be” self is ever constrained and governed by the dominant “ought-to-be” discursive of sex/gender/bodies.

The sex/gender/body gaze in this project acts as the disciplining agent of the discursive of the sex and gender binary, creating an external mirror within the social world that positions this cohort as the un-natural trans ‘others’ of the non-trans natural standpoint. As respondents become self-policing subjects to themselves, they are thrust into a liminal threshold. Crossing the threshold, they may enter a space of liminality/communitas in search of an order in which to fit.

The liminalizing gaze as a parent theme, emerged from several codes and sub-codes within the data that indicated evidence of sex/gender/body surveillance within the reconstructed biographies recounted by study participants. The codes articulated surveillance across time points, at varying geographic locations, across social institutions, and through most all social interactions. They included surveillance of personal behaviors and positionalities, as well as non-animated elements such as colors, clothing, and hairstyles, all of which placed respondents in opposition to the sex/gender/body discursive.

Additionally, within the liminalizing gaze parent theme, other codes and sub-codes emerged that indicated the alienating and constraining power over personhood inherent within the sex/gender/body discursive. Level one-open coding included codes indicating fear, misunderstanding, frustration, sadness, blocking, being mad, being surveilled/observed, forcing away from self, alienating, and doubting self, among others. These initial open codes came together to represent the constraining power of the gaze. Ultimately, through continued data analysis, the ubiquity of the gaze across social institutions and through social interactions, demonstrated the constraining power of the sex/gender/body discursive, and came together to codify the theme of the liminalizing gaze.

Throughout this chapter I use the terms surveillance and gaze somewhat interchangeably. However, it should be noted that surveillance is an experience of the subject. While the gaze is a product of the social world's sex/gender/body discursive as it enacts its power upon the subject, making it into an object at times as well. The liminalizing gaze exerts its propelling and de-settling constraining power over the respondents in this project through its ubiquity across time and spaces. It is widely enacted within social institutions, and the social interactions encountered therein. It may be seen as existing everywhere, and through everyone.

A few respondents recalled memories of sex/gender/body surveillance from as early as their preschool years, though those recollections were more general recollections of being 'othered', rather than the effects of a specific sex/gender/body discursive. Others experienced it most powerfully during their grammar school years, or at puberty. Some experienced it overtly in homelives they described as 'troublesome', while the few who described homelives as 'liberal' or 'supportive', experienced its effects outside the home, from teachers, schoolmates, friends, other parents, and from random other individuals encountered in their daily lives.

Most all respondents described interactions with others as the dominant source of surveillance of their personhoods. Several, however, spoke of surveillance as evident through the in-animate as well. For many, clothing they were required to wear, the length of their hair, or even the pink paint color of their bedroom walls, was experienced as troublesome. Taken together, all the interactions and elements described in respondents' stories come together to expose a gaze wherein individuals who initially experienced a comfortableness in their personhoods, end up as self-surveilling 'others' within the discursive of the sex/gender/body.

### ***The Liminalizing Gaze and Social Institutions: The Family***

During initial open coding, for all respondents, parents, followed by non-parental family members were the earliest source of surveillance. External to family members, teachers and school staff, playmates, and non-familial adults were all identified as sources of surveillance across respondents. However, across respondents, it was the family gaze that was the most notable across respondents.

For most all respondents, home-life recollections varied from generally more strict experiences overall, to less strict. Even among the few who reported having childhood home-lives specifically described as 'open' or 'liberal', there were still experiences of the liminalizing gaze. Even as these experiences were not experienced as troublesome, they were at least of notice.

As had most respondents, Raffe and Christian describe experiences of parental surveillance. Raffe recalls getting, "...a lot of negative comments during my childhood about how I wasn't performing the way I was supposed to, the way that people thought I was supposed to perform. So, my mom was mad." Similarly, Christian describes growing up and being made to wear a dress to church, "...even though I hated [wearing] the dress."

Alix, describes a mother whose own life turmoil was projected back on him through the gaze.

My mom is, I don't want to say the worst, but the worst. It has gotten way worse. My mom is really disrespectful. My mom is already a disrespectful type of person anyway. But now it's like she says all kinds of things out of her mouth. Like, I'll never be a man, no medicine would change me. For nothing too. We can just have a regular argument, or she could be having a bad day. I just come in and it's just like she reads, like bam. I can block her from one phone, call up on a million phones. So I can say my mom has prepared, even before the transition, she has prepared me for if society was going to be cruel and worse and bad, I got it from home.

Alix, 22

His recollection here is a more extreme example of how the liminalizing gaze is an active process involving de-settling and a forcing away through constraint of one's personal subjectivity. As his mother's words deny his identity in the most powerful way, essentially saying you will never 'be', his sense of self is de-settled from itself. This de-settling acts by forcing him to the liminal threshold in search of a path to re-settle that which had been his settled subjectivity.

Consider also, Cillian's and William's interactions with their mothers, as each articulate what several other respondents who experienced this sense of general confusion felt. The memories recalled by these participants were among their earliest childhood memories. William recalls being four or five; Cillian no older than six.

...it felt like something that people were projecting onto me. ...It's like I was all caught up in feelings of frustration and defensiveness and sadness that it was really hard to think clearly about myself and what I wanted or how I was being perceived by people. It was just very foreign.

William, 39

I just wanted to wear swim shorts and no shirt, and that's all I wanted to do. And my mom was like, "You can't do that. You're a girl." And I was like, "I don't understand that concept, I don't understand you saying that I'm a girl." I was honestly mostly confused because I think as a little kid, I just didn't have a perception of what gender was. You're telling me this, but I don't get it.

Cillian, 22

Cillian's powerful quote begins with, "I just wanted to wear swim shorts and no shirt..." as simple a sense of individuality and self as might be imagined, as simple as childhood itself. Compare then, the gentleness and simplicity of Cillian's sense of personhood with the jarring opposition of the gaze as represented by their mother's response: "... "You can't do that. You're a girl."

In this one, small, remembered encounter, an example of Foucault's power of the sex/gender/body discursive is brought to life. In essence, by means of the liminalizing gaze, Cillian's singular subjectivity, like Alix's, is starkly de-settled. Again, in a nearly totalizing way, exercised through an interaction with a trusted parent, an alienating edict of the sex/gender/body discursive strips Cillian from that which had been their comfortable subjectivity: you may not be who you are.

The power of the sex/gender/body discursive just described by Cillian, Alix and William, is represented as a constraint of subjectivity. Here again are, Foucault's 'dividing practices', seen through his power/knowledge system, and writ large in real life. As previously mentioned, within 'dividing practices' the subject is "...either divided inside himself or divided from others (Foucault in Faubion 2002, 2020:326)." In essence, it causes the subject to become objectivized as an 'other'. In these cases, the 'dividing' occurs by means of the constraint inherent within the ubiquity of the liminalizing gaze. The constraining power of the sex/gender/body discursive is now a system of power relations, that in this case "...question the status of the individual (Foucault in Faubion 2002, 2020:330)."

Brady and Conor, two of the few respondents who described their recollections of childhood as lacking pushback against their interests and behaviors, were being surveilled even without an awareness of it during childhood. While recalled as a positive experience, Conor's

awareness of their mother buying books and doing research related to sex and gender difference, was a form of surveillance in its own way. It represented Conor as 'other', and as someone who needed to be studied. In talking with their mom recently, Brady says, "...she told me that there were signs and markers that she saw when I was a child that now they make sense, that I was very much a boy at the time."

In both Brady's and Conor's recollections there is specific evidence of the ubiquity of the liminalizing gaze, even when there is no obvious pushback. Brady's mother is watching, comparing, and quantifying differences between her child's behavior as it exists in opposition to the sex/gender/body discursive. There is no articulation to her child about his otherness as she observes it, but the fact that she is processing her impressions of him through the sex/gender/body discursive is evidence of its presence everywhere, and through everyone. Here parental/child social interactions did not occur as obvious or overt constraining factors, but constraint can be seen as existing ever nearby.

Social interactions with non-parental family members were also sources of sex/gender/body surveillance. Conor and Roberto, talk about family members outside their immediate household, being sources of the liminalizing gaze. For Conor the gaze was experienced more from his larger family, "...I come from a very Roman Catholic Italian family, it's sinful sort of thing and perverse and things... I'm a 13-year-old kid, I don't know". It was much the same for Roberto as he recalls, "...my aunt once was like, "When are you going to start dressing as a grown up, a grown woman? Because I'd just dress like a boy. Then I felt all this pressure."

Siblings too, were a source of early experiences of surveillance for most respondents. Rio describes surveillance from siblings, an experience common to several respondents.

I was also raised within a very gendered society where it's also a huge division between boys and girls. So, everything that my brothers wanted to do... I have a twin brother and me, and my twin brother were the best buddies up until I was five, and suddenly I was recognized as a girl. And that's where we wouldn't play with each other anymore. So can you imagine that you were twins, you're like this. And then suddenly I have an older brother and he always took on quite a hierarchical role in our family. And he said to my younger brother, "Don't play with Rio anymore because Rio only is a girl."

Rio, 30

Finn had a similar experience when his siblings shunned him. "...I think me being out as queer and trans, they don't like it. And so, they just stopped talking to me, which is fine".

***The Liminalizing Gaze and Social Institutions: School, Church, and Extra-familial Adult Interactions.***

As with all respondents, Christian and Cillian recall experiences of sex/gender/body surveillance from adults outside their families. Cillian recalls school officials calling them in for conversations that reflected a sex/gender/body gaze, while Christian talks about the gaze through church elders performing exorcisms on him.

I remember distinctly being in fourth grade and having to go in and talk with, I think it was my teacher, who was like, "Cade, so you do need to start wearing something on your chest because you're developing." And I was like, "What are you talking about, ma'am? That's not happening to me I was fully in denial of it. So it was very confusing, and it was a very upsetting time."

Cillian, 22

I felt a lot of guilt because I was grown up in the church and this was unnatural. I've been through quite a number of exorcisms". Yes. Sometimes there were willingly because I was really troubled, like, why am I doing something wrong? Why am I doing something wrong? I'm going to hell, please help me. And then sometimes they would just say this thing to me, at nights always pray for me in that regard, they wouldn't pray for anything else because the denomination I was in, it was very known that I had these tendencies... they would kind of scrutinize me and want to pray for me and my sexuality.

Christian, 35

As mentioned, part of the ubiquity of the liminalizing gaze is its evidence across time. Among all respondents, an experience of the gaze was evident at varying time points. Initial

open-coding produced level one codes that indicated gaze related experiences: Early childhood, pre-understanding, grammar school, middle school, high school, leaving home, burgeoning gender/sexual awareness, and puberty all emerged in early coding.

For some respondents an awareness of being subject to a surveilling gaze did not initially occur within childhood home-based experiences, but within the framework of school related experiences. For all respondents, by the time of middle school, high school, and the emergence of pubertal changes, an awareness and experience of the gaze related to the sex/gender/body discursive had occurred.

For Conor, it was a middle school crush that began to bring his awareness of gender gaze into sharper focus.

I think it was more so confusion for me because everyone's telling me this one thing that I'm supposed to be, but I'm definitely like, "No, I'm not that at all." I remember even 11 and 12 years old, I had a crush on this boy and I was like, "Oh, well, does that make me gay then?" People were like, "You're not gay because you're a girl." I'm just like, "Well, that doesn't feel right. Pretty sure that's not the thing." I think a lot of it was just more of confusion from social cues outside of me when I knew I was like, "Oh, that's not correct."

Conor, 33

Similarly, Declan's and Tank's awareness of being externally observed consolidated at around the same age and was a result of the body changes of puberty.

It started round 11. It was a lot of things. I don't know. I didn't love it. It was intense for me. I think it made me realize that I had certain liberties. I felt really neutral in my body, I think. It was not like I ever was like I'm a boy, I'm a girl. I really got to just be myself and so, I think, when I hit puberty and I got so much feedback for being a woman and so much attention, I didn't like it. I did not like having breasts and I didn't like the attention that people gave me for my body.

Declan, 41

So, I hit puberty when I was like ten, I kind of got my period around then, so I got... I'm not as tall as I am now, which is like, I'm 5'8", and I was maybe a few inches shy of that when I was like ten or 11, so that was pretty awkward and unpleasant. I remember I definitely kind of just looked, spending time looking in the mirror and just being like "I don't perceive this."

Tank, 36

For a few respondents a deeper understanding of the sex/gender/body gaze was not a ‘front and center’ issue in their lives until after high school, or after entering the world outside of their childhood homes. Taylor talks about their experience not happening until they went away to university, a time when they felt like “...I had a bit more freedom to begin to genuinely feel my own emotions.”

Finally, across respondent recollections, inanimate elements contributed to the effects of sex/gender/body surveillance as well. While Foucault did not include the inanimate within his theorizing about the gaze, Lacan did. First line codes regarding inanimate surveillance included gendered clothing, hairstyles, hair length, and gendered colors like pink or purple. While this project will not engage with Lacan’s theorizing about the inanimate, it is mentioned here insofar as inanimate objects may be seen as completing a 360-degree encirclement of sex/gender/body surveillance that taken together create the liminalizing gaze.

In all the highlighted recollections of a liminalizing gaze, Foucault’s theory of objectivization is evident. As we followed the gaze across time and spaces, and through people and things, we see bodies being drawn out from their subjectivities into object form. Here is the body/identity as ‘thing’, held out at arm’s length by the sex/gender/body discursive, for examination of its fitness to exist therein.

The process for meeting the criteria for fitness within the liminalizing gaze are not dissimilar from the process of meeting the criteria for fitness within the medical gaze, for example. The medical gaze brings scientific parameters of weight, height, chemistry levels, and disease status as measures of fitness, without the nuance of individual subjectivity. The liminalizing gaze, similarly, brings parameters. But here the parameters are social ones,

established through discourse as the sex/gender/body discursive, and again, excluding the nuance of individual subjectivity.

To be assigned female sex at birth is to be assigned dresses as acceptable attire, playing with dolls as acceptable behavior, and having pink painted bedroom walls as acceptable spaces in which to exist. These are Foucault's dividing practices operating through social relations. They divide the acceptable from the unacceptable, the proscribed from the other.

Everything respondents encountered as existing in opposition to their personhoods may be seen as the liminalizing gaze zeroing in on ways in which their subjectivities are unacceptable within the sex/gender/body discursive. In essence what is being said is: you are a girl/female, not a boy/male. And, as a girl/female, you must act in the proscribed girl/female ways, and in girl/female spaces, in order to belong. If you conform and construct your subjectivity within these confines, you may have the benefits of belonging. If not, you will remain the deviant object, ever a threat to the discursive norm.

As has been articulated, for most respondents, this process of objectification created an experience of confusion and alienation from self. Foucault has articulated this process of objectification as a system of power relations. For Foucault (Foucault in Faubion 2002, 2020) they represent struggles that "...question the status of the individual (p. 330)." The power relation illuminated here, is a "...mode of action that does not act directly and immediately upon others (Foucault in Faubion 2002, 2020:340)." Instead, it "...acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions (p. 340)." It acts "...upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks, it destroys, or it closes off all [other] possibilities (p. 340)."

In the main, objectification of oneself may seem singularly dire, as it alienates and constrains the individual from their personhood. But is it a process completely devoid of usefulness in construction of individual subjectivity? As it, forces and bends, breaks and destroys, does it really close off all other possibilities of personhood? Is it truly without any agentic usefulness in constructing individual personhood, or identity?

Haug (1987, 1999) explores the power of object work as different from basic re-created autobiography, or Gagne's (1997) re-constructed biographies. For Haug both of those methods have their limitations. In each, diversity may be "...compressed and presented as unified evidence... that we have 'always' been hindered..." by "...this or that person, this or that circumstance (pp. 46-47)." Or as regards this project, hindered by the liminalizing gaze or the sex/gender/body discursive. Object work, and agency will be taken up in Chapter Four, *Settling Bodies/Settling Selves: Liminality/Communitas*, as both are part of the work of those process.

Expressions of confusion, alienation, and constraint by respondents, may be seen as the genesis of many years of exposure to the power/knowledge system each respondent is recognizing their otherness as they become surveilled by the social world within the liminalizing gaze of the sex/gender/body discursive. By the time each has begun to move towards becoming a self-surveilling subject of that discursive, they will have arrived at the *limina*, the threshold. Crossing that threshold, each may be propelled into a period of liminality/communitas.

In the present study, there is an implied assertion of the ultimate right to be different, yet the sex/gender/body discursive attacks everything and "... separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way (p. 330)." Discursive power through the liminalizing gaze represents a governing of individual identity and subjectivity through shear repressive force.

The liminalizing gaze as identified and presented in this chapter, is important to the present research for three reasons. First, and chiefly, it illuminates the ubiquity of the sex/gender/body gaze throughout the life span and how it works to shape life experiences and personal identity. For several respondents, sensing this particular surveillance of their personhoods was among their earliest memories, confirming the power of a discursive of any kind on identity development.

Second, the liminalizing gaze comes into view in this project as a constraining and repressive force, existing through most all social interactions, across the entirety of spaces and social institutions we inhabit, and across time. It is through this pervasiveness that the liminalizing gaze maintains its power over personhood. It represses and breaks down ties of kinship, community, and individual subjectivity. As these respondent narratives show, those who recollected sex/gender/body surveillance gradually become self-surveilling. How could one not? When the gaze becomes present everywhere, and through and by everyone and everything, it seemingly crushes paths to an any identity outside it. Finally, the liminalizing gaze is a gaze that is active. It un-settles, rattles, strips away comfort, and propels. It forces movement outward to the limina and beyond. It forces redress, and a re-settling of that which mostly had felt settled all along.

As I conclude Chapter Three, it can be helpful to return to the research question for this project: “What do trans men perceive about what it means to be a man?” and “How do biomedicine, social interactions, and perceptions of the body play a role in constructing trans men's sense of identity?” Both parts of the research question emerged from the literature as a response to Hausman (1995) and her biomedical absolutism of what it means be transgender.

Hausman's (1995) work flattens transgender identity and experience by excluding the voices of transgender identified persons.

In Chapter Three, as respondents are introduced through their remembered experiences, this project begins the process of filling that gap. By adding TM/GNC (tm-l) voices Chapter Three is already demonstrating that that which makes a trans person trans is richer and more complex than the biomedical alone. The experiences recalled here describe TM/GNC (tm-l) subjectivities as existing long before most respondents even knew of the biomedical.

This chapter, however, does not stand alone in addressing the research question. In *Liminality/Communitas: Un-settling/Settling Bodies* (Chapter Four), part of what I will show is how for a power relation to exist, there must always be at least two elements. In the relationship that exists in Chapter Three, and in other power relations, there is "...the 'other' (the one over whom power is exercised) [that must be]...recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts; and that faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, and results, and possible inventions may open up (Foucault 1977:340)."

That which 'opens up' in Chapter Four, is individual agency. One of the aspects of agency is what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe as projectivity. Projectivity is that process through which individuals may create new "*trajectories of action*" in which the constraining power of the liminalizing gaze of the sex/gender/body discursive, may be "...*reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future* (p. 971)."

## Chapter Four– Liminality/Communitas: Un-settling/Settling Bodies

In this chapter I will continue to use Turner's (1969, 2017) three stage 'ritual process' as a framework for organizing and considering the themes that emerged from the data of this project. As previously described, those stages are separation, liminality/communitas, and re-aggregation.

The data presented in Chapter Three, ended at the *limina*, the threshold between the separation stage of the ritual process, and before entry into a liminality/communitas stage. After the ubiquitous and repressive power of the sex/gender/body discursive had de-settled the respondents from that which had been experienced as their most comfortable subjectivities, they were faced with two choices: acquiesce to the discursive and become a subject within its confines, or move outwards and away from it in search of the safety and confidence of an identity that may be re-settled in its own image and likeness, and embodying its own singular agentic power.

The use of the terms 'un-settling' and 'settling' to name this theme were chosen because the root 'settle' may be used as both a verb and an adjective. As a verb "settling" may describe a process by which a body/identity in transition moves from one positionality to another, allowing it to be understood corporeally in a new or more acceptable way by the person inhabiting it. A body/identity finding it's comfort zone, as it were. Similarly, the term 'settled', used as an adjective, may describe a body/identity that has completed a transition process and is established in its present corporeal/identity state as acceptable. While all the respondents in this study engaged with some manner of medical bodily transition (exogenous hormones, surgical procedures, or both), not all TM/GNC (tm-l) persons do. Yet, even among those persons the term 'settled' may apply to a process of bodily consideration wherein that person's present

corporeal/identity state is accepted and acknowledged as appropriate as is, existing without a need for adjustment.

Using the metaphor of liminality/communitas to explore the themes discussed in this chapter lends itself to describing the action taking place through the data during this stage. Turner (1969, 2017) describes liminality/communitas as a stage that is ‘betwixt and between’ that which came before, and that which has yet to become. To consider the data presented in this chapter through the lens of liminality/communitas, it will be helpful to review those concepts here.

### ***Liminality/Communitas***

As previously mentioned, the theory of liminality/communitas comes from the work of social anthropologist Victor Turner’s work *The Rites of Passage* (1969) and *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974), and are based on the works of Arnold van Gennep from the early 20th century. Both describe ritual processes, or rites of passage, that often manifest when a change of state, age, or social position, is engaged with. Liminality/communitas, the second stage of these ritual processes, is arguably the most unique, and distinctly the most active of the three.

### ***Liminality***

In Turner’s work (1969, 1974) the liminal, or ritual space, is often a physical space outside the usual living spaces of the tribes and cultures he studied. Across the literature these spaces may be a ritual hut, lodge, or a clearing in the land away from the usual gathering or living spaces used by ones’ life group or kin. A ‘free’ space as it were, though not one without defining properties.

Properties of liminality, and liminal spaces and groupings, often include “...homogeneity, equality, anonymity, absence of property...reduction of all to the same status

level, the wearing of uniform apparel..., sexual continence (or its antithesis, sexual community, both continence and sexual community liquidate marriage and the family, which legitimate structural status), minimization of sex distinctions (all are “equal in the sight of god or the ancestors), abolition of rank, humility, disregard for personal appearance, unselfishness, total obedience to the prophet or leader... and so forth (Turner 1969:111-112).”

Obviously, the metaphorical liminal space used here as a framework for this data, is not a physical space in the same way that a ritual hut or lodge would be. Liminality here, may be a college campus, spaces of young adulthood outside the childhood home, or a gathering anywhere of like-minded individuals grappling with similar experiences within the sex/gender/body discursive. It may be any space that fosters a sense of eliding the repressive power of that discursive broadly, and may exist during short, or extended, encounters with others gathered there. In general, the liminal space used as metaphor here, is anywhere within the social world that an individual may feel a relative freedom to talk about, listen to, think about, or observe, to the end of moving towards a personal subjectivity, and settled self. The openness with which the respondents engaged with the interview process of this study is evidence that even a private tele-meeting space may exist as a protected place of liminality.

Consider respondent Christian’s transmasculine support-center project in Amsterdam, where the stated goal ... is to create a safe(r)/vulnerable space for Black, People of Color, refugee and immigrant background Transmasculine/Non-binary people within the Trans community and society at large... (Man.ish Cave website November 08, 2023).” Here is Man.ish Cave as a liminal space. Clearly, Man.ish Cave is not extra-societal, and the suppressive power of the sex/gender/body discursive is operating just outside its doors. But, inside the discursive ‘rules’ may fade, and the principles of liminality as just described may manifest, to create a space

for considering identity and personhood, considering corporeality, and building agency through what had been once labeled 'otherness'.

### ***Communitas***

Communitas, is a phenomenon existing within liminality. Turner uses the Latin *communitas*, rather than community, to differentiate what happens within a period of liminality from the more common meaning of an 'area of common living', implied by the term community. Whereas liminality may be seen as a 'moment in and out of time', *communitas* stands as a state of being wherein, "...a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties (Turner 1969:96)." *Communitas*, as it comes into focus within the liminal, shows us that there are "...two major models for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating (Turner 1969:96)." For our purposes, one model may be the social world that has produced the sex/gender/body discursive, while the second is of society as liminality/*communitas*, "...an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders (Turner 1969:96)," with the ritual elders here cast as TM/GNC (tm-l) individuals who have come before them, or exist beside them.

When Foucault describes objectification, he is describing a process wherein the sex/gender/body discursive splits individuals away from their subjective ties to self. It is this splitting away from self that allows the individual to be created anew as 'other'. Once objectified as other the individual is compelled forward to become a subject within the confines of the discursive or remain forever outside it. I suggest that the liminality/*communitas* experience explored in this chapter may create an opportunity for a different sort of objectification. One that

in this case, is creative, generative, and agentic, allowing for an individual subjectivity that may exist outside the sex/gender/body discursive.

Using the metaphor of the liminality/communitas ritual experience here, is to see the data presented in this chapter as a process wherein the respondents have a time and space of relative safety, to consider themselves objectively as they are, rather than as an ‘other’ to that which is proscribed through the sex/gender/body discursive. Here is a space in which each may hold oneself at arms-length, exploring top to bottom, side to side, that which is the totality of their unique corporeal body and subjective identity. Seen through this lens of objectivity, liminality/communitas is a time and space in which the discursive of corporeality may be examined in light of its characteristics as compatible with one’s sex/gender subjectivities, as in need of adjustment, or existing already satisfactorily, with identity.

Frigga Haug (1983), as previously mentioned, talks about this type of positive objectification as a sort of personal historicization (p. 49), though a type of historicization not to be understood as interchangeable with the concept of autobiography. In chapter one, I cited Gagne (1997), and his description of “reconstructed biographies”, as a re-telling of childhood and adolescent memories, through the language and knowledges of adulthood. While helpful in recalling experiences of the scrutiny of selves within the liminalizing gaze, Haug cautions that autobiographical remembering may ‘doom’ an understanding of personal subjectivity (1983:46).

Although it appears as a structuring intervention into the chaos of remembered experiences, the autobiographical method is in fact based on a theoretically untenable presupposition. To view childhood and adolescence simply as causal phases of today’s person is to assume that actions follow one another logically, that human beings are more or less contained within children, that external events produce little more than minor modifications (Haug 1987:46).

Again, for Haug (1987), any autobiographical object project will need to involve a ‘disentangling’ of ‘knots’ that can become endless (p. 47). To remedy this endless entanglement,

Haug suggests making the process of exploring ourselves objectively, the project itself. By co-mingling Haug's objectification process with the framework of liminality/communitas in this chapter, the work of the later comes into clearer view.

Using liminality/communitas as a metaphorical process rather than one with specific cultural traditions and practices, leaves it as a process in need of strategies of usefulness. Haug (1987) suggests that in her work, and that of her colleagues, a focus on "...one particular situation, rather than life in its entirety (p. 47)", is helpful.

Once we have begun to rediscover a given situation-its smells, sounds, emotions, thoughts, attitudes-the situation itself draws us back into the past, freeing us for a time from notions of our present superiority over our past selves; it allows us to become again the child-a stranger-whom we once were (Haug 1987:47).

Notice how Haug's suggestion of becoming a "child", and a "stranger", mimics the 'liminand' experience as described in Turner's liminality/communitas phase of the ritual process. Both processes foster an experience wherein we may "...find ourselves discerning linkages never perceived before: forgotten traces, abandoned intentions, lost desires, and so on (Haug 1987: 47)." It is from these forgotten traces, and through the relative 'betwixt and between' freedoms of liminality/ communitas, that each may experience themselves as objects in a way that does not suppress or re-press individual subjectivities or identities, but instead fosters language, perimeters, and contours of corporeality/identity, that create agency out of otherness.

What follows are narratives of experiences of liminality/communitas as processes of agentic self-objectification. Here, respondents are free to wrangle with meanings associated with their corporealities, their sex/gender identities, and sort through language embodying their subjectivities, defining contours of selfhood as they existed in personal historic memories, and into present time lived realities, free of the pressures of the sex/gender body discursive.

Whereas Chapter Three, articulated the intrinsic constraint of the sex/gender/body discursive through the liminalizing gaze, this chapter, by exploring the processes available during liminality/communitas, may be seen as articulating an agency that emerges through that constraint. Before exploring the un-settling/settling of meanings associated with key aspects of the respondent's corporeal personhoods, it may be useful to review some of the ways in which agency is defined within the literature.

### ***Agency***

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call out agency as a source of "...increasing strain and confusion..." in social thought (p. 962). At the center of that confusion is often the definition of the term itself. Traced back as far as the enlightenment and its religious morality, there existed even then an allowance for the individual "...as a 'free agent' able to make rational choices for (him)self and society (Lukes 1973 in Emirbayer and Mische 1998:964)." Subsequently, from John Locke and his "...new conception of agency...that affirmed the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live.", agency has been considered down through Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Kant. In early Talcott Parsons agency was "...captured in the notion of *effort*...the force that achieves..." (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:964-965).

In answering their question, 'What is agency?', Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define it as "...the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments-the temporal -relational contexts of action-which through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (pp. 970-974)." Further, within this agentic process three constitutive elements are articulated: iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation

(p. 970). Roughly, they correspond to “...forms of action...” that are oriented to the past, the future, and the present (p. 971).”

The first of Emirbayer’s and Mische’s (1998) dimensions of agency, iteration, refers to “...*the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thoughts and actions, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time* (p. 971).” The second dimension, the projective element, “...encompasses *the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future* (p. 971).” The third dimension, practical evaluation, “...entails *the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations* (p. 971).” Finally, all three dimensions of agency are to be found within action, and while they exist chordally, they do not necessarily always act as “...harmonious tones”, as one dimension may always predominate another (p. 972).”

Considering again, George Herbert Mead’s work, these processes may be seen as taking up Mead’s consideration of agency through his ‘I’ and ‘me’ theory. For Mead, the ‘me’ may be seen as representing the self as object, that self that is created through early exposure to discursive knowledge/power schemes and learned automatically from parents and early interactions within the social world, here the child “...fashions his own self on the model of other selves...The child’s consciousness of its own self is quite largely the reflection of the attitudes of others towards him (Mead 1982a:54 in Baldwin 1988:156-157).” The ‘I’, in counterpoint, is that which is the creative self. It is the ‘I’ which “...provides the creative and

sometimes non-conformist inputs that allow each individual to be a unique..." self (Mead 1982a:54 in Baldwin 1988:156-157). For Mead, agency is the creative self-arising through reflective intelligence from the habitual self, to blend seamlessly into a fully social self.

As mentioned already, Foucault too, leaves spaces open to agency in the disciplining regime of the sex/gender/body discursive. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), in describing how docile bodies are made, Foucault ends up describing how agentic processes may also exist. They participate in "distributions" within groups, "collective dispositions", and within "...confused, massive or transient pluralities". Individuals resisting discursive constraint, may be found in "...imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation... (Foucault 1977:143-144)." In resisting discursive constraint here, individuals may literally, or symbolically, be found "...wandering about the country in unpredictable ways...", in, "...agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, [and] coalitions (Foucault 1977:219)."

In *The Subject and Power* (1982) Foucault continues to take up the resistance of constraining disciplinary power, calling these processes "struggles". Struggles may be seen as that which "...question(s) the status of the individual: on the one hand they, assert the right to be different, and they underline everything which makes individuals truly individual (p. 781)." On the other hand, as previously mentioned, they break the individual away, and apart from, all that earmarks his personal subjectivity and personhood.

For Foucault (1982), these struggles between agency and constraint, are not "...for or against the 'individual' but rather they are struggles against the 'government of individualization' (p. 781)." They are in "...opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification: struggles against the privileges of knowledge",

and are an opposition to the "...secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people (p. 781)" through the constraining power of the discursive. In total, the struggles are around the question "Who are we?"; and stand as a refusal of "...abstractions...which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is (p. 781)."

### ***Biomedicine and Embodied Masculinities***

As the research question for this project includes considerations of the role of biomedicine in transmasculine/GNC (tm-l), all respondents in this project had utilized biomedical interventions (testosterone and/or surgical procedures) of some kind as part of their sex/gender experience. Having used testosterone was an inclusion criterion for participation in this study. Present use of testosterone at the time of their interviews was not a requirement, though all participants were in fact using it consistently when our discussions occurred. Additionally, all participants had completed top surgery (bilateral mastectomy) or had active plans to do so.

For all respondents biomedical interventions provided a comfort in the body that facilitated a welcomed psychological comfort. These findings once again, confirmed a main theme that emerged in the pilot study *Constructing Maleness*: 'body comfort=psychological comfort'. Various described as a 'freeing', a liberation from a corporeality that never felt completely 'right', a 'comfort' and a 'settling', biomedical engagement was sometimes described as a means to an end, though never solely as that which established any respondent's TM/GNC (tm-l) identity.

Bodily habitus, and corporeality in general, was also central to respondents' personal understandings of masculinity, and included how their bodies were dressed, how their bodies

were deployed socially in the workplace and other social spheres, and how biomedical bodily changes brought a masculine/transmasculine sense of self, to whatever degree, into sharper focus. For most respondents, bodies served as a way of performing a particular form of masculinity that felt most comfortable for them in aligning with their sense of self. Consider Conor, for example, as they describe a period of performing hyper-masculinity with a hyper-masculine bodily stance, and how it served as a safety mechanism in a space that felt otherwise uncertain. Bodily presentation and stance in their case served as a protective mechanism.

...for a moment in time, I had tried to be hyper-masculine because I felt that if I pass as that out, then people wouldn't bully me and would leave me alone in that way. So yeah, it was very much like I worked factory, and warehouse jobs, and tough construction work and like tough guys stuff.

And I think the way that I presented myself was very tough guy. Definitely not one of my prouder sort of things-it was just like, I guess with factory work, a lot of CIS men will say like chauvinistic or very sexist remarks. And for me to go along with that, just to fit in with that is like not my finest moment. I think, yeah, just trying to like immerse myself in that sort of CIS male world in that moment.

I think it was kind of like a safety cover in order to, I guess, just pretty much go in camouflage of who I truly was, and trying to fit into this world so that I would evade any sort of bullying or questioning of who I am. For the hyper masculine, it was, I guess, to kind of eradicate my trans part of myself in it in that way.

Conor, 33

In these passages Conor is describing hegemonic masculinity as a performance of masculine identity that is modeled on the behaviors of the masculine discursive being played out around them by CIS male co-workers. What stands out in their comments is that as a transmasculine/GNC(tm) person, the behavioral trappings of hegemonic masculinity are ill-fitted to their particular masculinity. Conor's comments also open a window into how all masculine identified persons, both trans and cis, may grapple with the masculine discursive. That is, finding some features of it not suited to their specific identity, but practicing them anyway as protective camouflage against being called-out as "other."

Similarly, Cillian and Finn describe more specifically the way in which body and transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity were linked for many respondents.

I think about what traditionally masculine things are. I think about being outdoorsy... about things, trucks and video games, short hair, ...but then it also comes back to body, and I think about my chest. Like I said, short hair. I think about facial hair. I think about these things that our society has made it an entirely big thing, and those are always things that I gravitated towards as a child, and still gravitate towards as an adult. And I see those things as being comforting to myself, so I think that the way I view masculinity and maleness for me is comfort.

Cillian, 22

I definitely wanted facial hair, and I wanted my voice to deepen, ...Yeah, I just wanted to be physically more brawny or muscular or something at the time. And I guess I still do appreciate those things, like having facial hair and muscles and stuff. Yeah.

Finn, 35

### *Testosterone*

The meaning of testosterone for most respondents was associated with physical changes in their bodies, and a facilitator of their individual personhoods. William considered testosterone's meaning in a way that reflected other respondents' complicated thoughts about it.

Yeah, it is such a culturally loaded hormone. I think it makes me think... What does it mean? Other than my experience with it as something that has helped me be happy with what I see in the mirror and feel more like a real person in the world, it really hasn't meant a lot. Yeah, mostly, I see it as a hormone that you can say, "Well, it's associated with masculinity." But when I think of masculinity, what does it mean? Because the hormone means something.

William, 39

In thinking about it further William had a moment in which a clarity about its meaning seemed to open up for him. Ultimately, testosterone was a substance that facilitated his ability to not feel ridiculous any longer.

For me, it is a means to an end. It is... I knew that. It turns out I also, for my own reflection, it makes me happy, but I see it a means to an end that I am very grateful for that, pharmaceutically.

And it made me feel less like having to wear a goofy hat all the time that you don't even like. That's what it felt like, like I was forced to have this costume part on like it was Halloween or something... It's the absence of feeling ridiculous.

William, 39

The testosterone related bodily changes of facial hair growth, muscle development, lowering vocal pitch, cessation of menses, and increased sex drive among other changes, provided tangible bodily effects across the experiences of all study subjects. For Cillian, as for the other study participants, the effects of testosterone also provided somewhat less tangible, though perhaps more meaningful, changes: a pathway to their selves that came with a comfort, confidence, and freedom through the body. Cillian, saw it as helping with his anxiety and lack of confidence.

...T has been like this door that has opened into being able to actually function as a human being, ...I feel so much more comfortable within myself and within my body...for me, I think in general, it's kind of just like a gateway.

Cillian, 22

For a majority of other respondents meanings associated with testosterone were similar. For Declan, it was a feeling of being "...more free in my body...". Conor experienced testosterone as lifting a "...weight off my shoulders...", and for Leo it was "... just a freedom to exist, uninhibited, in a way that I didn't feel before", and a "...sense of possibility."

For Emiliano testosterone was an anchoring. "...after T, I realized that I'm anchored. I'm anchored where I need to be in my body. I move around more freely now." For Tank...it just means stability." Finally, in talking about the meanings of testosterone, Cillian and Elio sum up a profound understanding of transgender bio-medical interventions and personal identity that existed to some extent across all interviews.

I think all of the changes I've had for my medical transition haven't really pushed me away from being female or towards being male, because I've always been my gender. My gender has never changed. It is just the secondary sex characteristics that people have seen be put on me because of the hormones in my body that have determined the way that I look. And I think for me, anything that's happened with my medical transition has just been me looking more and more like me, and not trying to look more one way or another. And I feel very strongly that when people transition, they're not transitioning to look more one way or another, they're just transitioning to look like themselves”.

Cillian, 22

I decided to try it and see how I felt. But ever since my first injection, just something felt right. The best way I heard it described is it's like you've been cooking in someone else's kitchen, and then all of a sudden, you're in your kitchen and you're cooking and you know where everything is. You're like, ‘Wait, this is my kitchen’. You know what I mean? That's really how it felt.

Elio, 23

### *Top-surgery*

For respondents in the present study top-surgery (bilateral mastectomy) emerged as a fundamental bio-medical intervention in terms of their transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity experience. Yet, while testosterone use was layered with various meanings associated with maleness and masculinity, top-surgery was described in more practical terms. For most, breast development at puberty was experienced as an unwelcome female defining biological change, but also as an annoyance requiring attention and management in order achieve a bodily comfort aligned with their sense of self.

Looking back on puberty, Mateo recalls, that when he

...grew boobs, I very much was NOT into it...”. “...then I wore sports bras, my entire, like being a teenager. And then I remember as I got little bit older, I tried out like a regular bra, but it just, it didn't look or feel right. But I was doing it anyways. Cause I was like, what other choice do I have? But I mostly try to stick with sports bras ‘cause they were a little more like boyish or whatever. And then when I moved to New York I remember riding my bike a lot and hitting a bunch of potholes or bumpy roads in like feeling my boobs, like bounce. And I was like, oh, I hate the way that feels.

Mateo, >18

After having top-surgery, Mateo felt as most other respondents did post-surgery. That is, “...one step closer to how I envisioned my body looking and the way a shirt would look on the body I envisioned there wouldn't be the protrusions of breasts. Yeah. It's just, yeah, it was just like another step in as part of this like longer journey.”

For all respondents breasts conferred some degree of dysphoria, though again, top-surgery was predominately described more as a practical matter of in facilitating bodily comfort and congruity with their identities. Sal conveyed the array of feelings he experienced related to their breasts.

...I really had major dysphoria about my chest and not looking how I wanted to look in clothes. And then binding, just being so terrible and having all these ingrown hairs and all was disgusting, just hot, between living in LA, sweating, it's terrible, terrible. It stunk so bad! I almost forget how terrible it was”.

Sal, 41

Post top-surgery Ted went on to describe the difference that the absence of female breasts conferred. Essentially, he felt,

...a lot better in clothes..., and “...as I started working out and filling out more, I felt hot in my own body in my way... Yeah, the way I moved and not slouching, and not sweating to death, and I'm not worrying about people giving me a hug and feeling my binder and yeah... I think it gave me way more confidence, if anything.

Sal, 41

For Cillian, as for most other study participants, top surgery was described in some way as a freedom.

Yeah, I think for me having top surgery was a freeing experience. I had been binding off and on for the better part of a decade to the point when I had surgery. So it was really just being able to just be free. I had never been comfortable with my chest before”, but post top surgery,

...I am just so much more comfortable every single day. I was binding for like 14 hours a day, because I just couldn't handle it”.

Being shirtless, not having things be flat, except for when I was going to sleep. So it was really just so much more comfortable. Last summer was the first summer I ever had where I was able to just be comfortable in my body and just wear a t-shirt and

not like a hoodie and a t-shirt every single day when it's a million degrees out. So, it's just been really great and affirming.

Cillian, 22

Finally, Raffe summed up the notion of top-surgery being a basic practicality, a plastic surgery procedure that could create better congruency between bodily habitus and their particular sense of self.

I feel like top surgery is like any other plastic surgery. I don't necessarily feel like it's like... I don't know. I feel like I didn't like this thing about my body, and I felt like I would be more comfortable if my body was a different way. And I feel like a lot of people, trans or not, make that decision about their bodies. So I felt like it was like, yeah, I'm having this elective plastic surgery. Lots of people have elective plastic surgery. That's America.

Raffe, 38

### *Genitalia*

Genitalia when deployed for sexual engagement, alone or with others, was broadly seen as non-problematic as regarding vaginas and vulvas being hegemonically associated with bodies assigned female sex at birth. Of the few participants who did experience some degree of dysphoria when engaging in sexual activities with their vaginas, two were related to childhood sexual trauma, one was related to a perceived uncomfortableness from partners as the sexual activity occurred, and one had simply never found pleasure in engaging with their genital anatomy ever.

Respondent experiences with bodily genitalia again mirrored findings from *Constructing Maleness* (2015), but also provided evidence of a historical change from that studies' group of respondents to the present one. In this study there was a much more open and enthusiastic acceptance of genitalia as being different from hegemonic male/masculine genitalia that was special and unique to themselves as TM/GNC (tm-1) persons. Two participants talked about occasionally desiring the experience of a birth assigned male phallus, but neither considered it as an omnipresent desire beyond an occasional fantasy, dream, excitement, or erotic desire.

While only two participants had engaged with bottom surgeries (one scrotoplasty, one hysterectomy) the genital effects of clitoral enlargement were part of the changes experienced once testosterone was initiated. While this change was desirable among many who experienced it, it was experiences of their genitalia regardless of testosterone effects that was primarily discussed. Would bodily anatomy most associated with persons assigned female sex at birth be experienced as dysphoric when those genitalia were deployed in intimate or sexual encounters with themselves or others?

Broadly, primary dysphoria was not an issue. For two respondents who had dysphoria related to sexual engagement, their dysphoria was related to sexual molestation or assault trauma during their youth. A third respondent never felt interest in their genitalia from puberty onwards and was unrelated to their sex/gender journey. A few others had occasional dysphoria related to a partner's tentativeness or uncertainty with the respondents' body during intimate encounters.

Declan described what many study participants discussed as well, that occasional sexual dysphoria did not necessarily equate with bodily dissatisfaction.

I sometimes get dysphoric. I mostly don't wish my body was any different, but it is ... I think, for me, it comes more from other people's tentativeness where I wonder if they wish my body was different or something”.

Yeah. I mean, I do sometimes wish I could have a big dick like that, but not enough to wish my body was any different than it was, if that makes sense. I think if phalloplasty was a really chill thing that didn't cost that much money and it was just easy breezy, I would like to have all things, but I don't ... It's like way too ... I don't ... And I don't even know that I need. Most of the time I feel comfortable with what I have, and I like my body as it is, but I do from time to time. Especially early on, I think, because I think a lot of people do fetishize transmen because it's exciting. Especially people who come from a dyke-centric, situation. It's like they get to dabble with a man but then it's like, I don't know.

But, yeah, I think-... I don't know if I associate a meaning. I think that ... I don't know. I mean, for me a hole is a hole in some ways, and I think that is partly because my sexuality is really open, and I have sex with both cisgenders and also literally everyone in between. So, I don't know if ... I mean, I like being a man with vagina

and I also like having my little trans dick. I feel like I get to have both. I feel like I get to have some experience of having a dick on my body and also I get to have ... I don't have any issues with my hole”.

Declan, 41

For Conor too, their genitalia were a source of empowerment. “...Honestly, I find it very empowering in the sense of when I sleep with CIS men, we have these body parts that go together that both create sensations that feel good for each other. I think that's empowering in that way. Anytime if I've felt I was in a sexual situation and felt shamed or anything about it, I'm like, "Okay. Then leave. If you don't like it, then get out."

For Tank, as for some others, if genital dysphoria was experienced it was in relation to the perceived comfort level sexual partners were experiencing while interacting with them sexually. When hooking-up for sex, it was ideally with partners who “...are familiar with trans bodies, or are trans, or something like that along those lines. I think the only time it really becomes a source of dysphoria, or something is hooking up with people who for example, a cis gay man who really has only ever been with other cis gay men. People can be very open-minded, and to some people it doesn't matter at all to them, but still no matter how supportive someone is, sometimes it still feels like I can worry, like, "Is this not what you want?" Or "Do you feel like something's lacking?"

Taken together these data provide evidence that for the participants in this study bodies as corporeal entities, and personal identities are importantly, if not inextricably, linked. Personal identities as transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) persons existed in participants before biomedical interventions. But bodily alterations with hormones and surgeries were additive to those identities in ways both practical, psychological, and sociological.

Biomedical interventions alone did not create settled identities among participants, but for all a settling of bodily bound features associated with a TM/GNC (tm-l) corporeality

facilitated a physical comfort and freedom that allowed for more attention to their process of trans identity formation. It seems apparent across a comprehensive read of all interviews that trans identity was not solely dependent upon the availability or utilization of biomedical armamentariums. However, utilization of those armamentaria, in general, provided profound additions to the furtherance and maintenance of more settled trans identities.

In considering these data further, it will be useful to return to the theoretical constructs upon which they are grounded. In their most basic form, the sections within this chapter reflect answers to questions regarding meanings of corporeal positionalities among respondents. Each bodily related question was explored in service to this project's ability to answer its research question in the richest way. As the responses are collected here, they can already be seen to be doing just that. If, however, we consider them only in the more plainly descriptive format in which they are presented here, nuances of what they represent may be lost. For that reason, it can be helpful before moving forward into Chapter Three, to once again review the responses elicited here through the lens of the theories which this present project has relied upon.

To begin with, Chapter Four used as its structure the second phase of Turner's (1969, 2017) three stage ritual process. It is during this period of liminality/communitas, that respondents can be seen to have entered the 'free space' of liminality that is protected from the constraints of the sex/gender/body discursive. Used as a metaphor for transgender identity development this 'betwixt and between' period (Turner 1969, 2017) existed as any space that respondents engaged with that allowed them to consider their bodies/identities without the pressure of the liminalizing gaze system that had assigned them as other. For most respondents liminal spaces were spaces they moved outwards and into as they left the constraints of early home and school life. They were university campuses, spaces of general socialization as young

adults, work sites, and communal gatherings of like-minded individuals, to name a few. While *communitas* in Turner's work generally described *liminads* engaging with elders, in this project respondents engaged in *communitas* with peers engaging in similar identity processes, community elders, and community allies. Across interviews 'elders' were described as anyone who had entered into a trans identity-making process before them, regardless of age, and were identified as elders in an experiential sense rather than generational one. While *communitas* has as a core meaning of a learning experience in which interactions with more knowledgeable individuals, among the respondents in this project there are hints that *communitas* may also occur through extra-human interactions with print and electronic media as well.

Additionally, the bodily meanings conveyed by respondents in this chapter, evoke Haug's (1987,1999) memory-work discussed previously. Used here, memory-work is object work. As happens in liminality/*communitas*, object work is that work wherein an individual may essentially hold oneself at arm's length and objectively examine one's full history of personhood, thereby illuminating the meanings of one's experience and clarifying an individual self. As with *communitas*, Haug's process is meant to be engaged in with others. The questions, and participant responses, in this project are based on Haug's requisite for such work, that "...memory is the assumption that we know much more about ourselves than we normally assume. Many things have been censored out of our self-image because we deem them not essential, too painful, or too chaotic... Inasmuch as our self-image is a part of our daily ability to act, it can also hinder expansion and continued learning. It tends to balance us to some degree. Removed from these assumptions is the challenge... (Haug1999)."

Importantly, the participant responses presented in this chapter, stand as fully as Foucauldian agentic work in response to the constraints of the liminalizing gaze of the

sex/gender/body discursive in Chapter One. By utilizing spaces of liminality/communitas respondents were able to engage with an un-settling of terms used to describe their corporeal embodiments as TM/GNC (tm-l) individuals. These un-settling of identity terms are part of what Foucault described as the struggle between agency and constraint. In opposition to disciplinary power there may be actions that represent, "...suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized, allowing a quite different truth to appear (Foucault 1977:197)." In un-settling, then settling, defining terms related to personhood, a power is created that may exist as countervailing to constraint.

Finally, the data in this chapter can be seen as linking the responses back to theories of embodied corporeality within a broader sociology of the body. Here, the lived experiences of respondents embodied selves can be seen as that which is "...lived across all forms of community as a deeply embedded social relational category (James in Cregan 2006:4)." Through these processes of living their bodies, respondents describe ways in which they came to reconstruct themselves in combination with more established ways of being, allowing for the formation of an embodied corporeality wherein the individual and the social come together to produce something new (James in Cregan 2006:4).

Arthur Frank's work, described by Bryan Turner in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (1991), presents a typology of bodies as existing at the center of an "equilateral triangle the points of which are institutions, discourses, and corporeality" (p. 49). Within Frank's system bodies within discourses provide opportunities for understanding the range of possibilities and limitations for how bodies may understand themselves, and within institutions such as biomedicine, as opportunities for placing themselves within space and time. For the

transgender/GNC (tm-l) participants in this study, Frank's theory may also serve to keep the corporeal body in-view across birth, life changes while alive, and ultimately de-existence at death (pp. 48-49).

Edelman and Zimman (2014) similarly grapple with the importance of keeping the transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) physical body in-view as integral to identity work. Importantly, their work frames the bodily unsettling/settling described here as enabling both spaces for degrees of embodied masculinity *and* an opportunity to bring respondents bodies into view to re-signify bodily difference. Here what may have been an invisible trans body can come into view through the productivity of genitals. As transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) corporealities engage with biomedicine articulations of identity can emerge through an unpacking of interactions of “subjectivity, embodiment, intimacy, social institutions, and social interconnection (Beasley and Bacchi 2005:59; Edelman and Zimman 2014:675).”

Moving forward into Chapter Five, Aggregation: *Unsettling/Settling Selves*, I consider the device utilized in Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994), to help in bringing together the complexities of transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity that have emerged within Chapters Three and Four. While Grosz's work centers on sorting mind/body binaries, her use of a Mobius strip metaphor may serve here as well. For purposes of illuminating answers to this project's central questions, the strip may be used to represent the intricacies of understanding transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity processes. Here the strip's overlapping, inside-out/outside-in configurations may help visualize the complexities of uncovering those answers. Grosz's Mobius strip represents the unbroken interconnectedness emerging in this project between social interactions, biomedicine and embodied corporealities. The Mobius metaphor, however, may also be a way to consider seepages between the interconnections of those elements of the

research question, providing even more nuanced understandings of the sex/gender and masculine/feminine binaries in identity making. The Mobius metaphor may ultimately suggest that a final answer to the questions asked in this project might not simply be a single distinct position for transmasculine/GNC (tm) identity, or even two attributes within a single position, but someplace, or many places in between.

## Chapter Five– Aggregation: Unsettling/Settling Selves and Identity

Moving into Chapter Five, I will again use Turner's (1969, 2017) three stage 'ritual process' as a framework for organizing and considering themes. As previously described, those stages are separation, liminality/communitas, and aggregation/re-aggregation. Again, it must be noted that while utilizing the framework of Turner's ritual processes and phases, this project does not intend to suggest that the data presented here is meant to describe a rite of passage narrative in a religious, or pubertal/adolescent coming of age process. As in Chapters One and Two, it is employed solely as a framework for the narrative thread of this data.

In Chapter Three, *Separation: The Liminalizing Gaze*, the data provided descriptions of childhood and early life experiences wherein the power of the sex/gender/body discursive separates respondents out as 'others' and propels them to a threshold. Chapter Four, *Liminality and Communitas*, subsequently describes the middle phase of the ritual process and shares that title. It explores data that articulates experiences that occur after crossing the liminal threshold described in Chapter Three. It describes an undoing/redoing process wherein respondents begin as ambiguous 'travelers' who "...elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space (Turner 2017:94)."

This chapter, *Aggregation: Unsettling/Settling Selves and Identity*, corresponds to the third phase of Turner's process: re- aggregation, or post-liminality (Turner 2017:166). For this project, however, I have chosen to use the term aggregation rather than Turner's re-aggregation to represent one important distinction from Turner. For Turner (2017) re-aggregation represents a returning to the social world after the period of liminality that was defined in his work as a complete separation from it. For Turner, the period of liminality represents a total break with the social world. This is the "betwixt and between" state that was discussed in Chapter Four, a state

“likened to death...” where individuals possess nothing and have “...no status property or insignia” (p. 95). In essence the *liminand* leaves the social world completely, requiring, once that ritual stage has ended, a period of re-aggregation into new roles within the social sphere.

In this project however, the liminal period described in Chapter Four, is not a complete separation from the social world. It exists rather as a period of relative freedom from the constraints of the sex/gender/body discursive wherein exploration of individual personhoods and corporealities may be considered and explored. Rather than leaving the social world behind, the liminal period in this project may be seen as a deeper dive into its “betwixt and between” spaces and broader social interactions, as participants move outside the family home and into the adult spaces of university, work, and other social settings of their choosing. Therefore, because the social world is never abandoned there is similarly no need to re-aggregate to it. Instead, I have substituted the term aggregation for re-aggregation.

For purposes of this chapter *aggregation* denotes its primary definition as referring to a bringing together of elements into a unit that can be considered together. To that end this chapter returns to the primary research question guiding this entire project: How do biomedicine, social interactions, and perceptions of the body play a role in constructing transmasculine and gender non-conforming (tm-l) identities? Or, more simply, what makes you transmasculine or gender non-conforming (tm-l)?

In Chapters Three and Four, some of the elements related to the research question have been illuminated. In Chapter Three for example, vivid descriptions of social interactions during childhood and adolescence, and how they existed as propelling forces into an early grappling with the sex/gender/body discursive, provide evidence of identity awareness from earliest life experiences. Similarly, in Chapter Two, questions regarding the bodily discursive of hormones,

gender-affirming surgeries, and trans bodies in general, open-up other important elements in the articulation of personal transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity.

In this chapter I will return to the research question by returning to social interactions as they play out regarding masculinity and bodily identity. I will begin by ‘aggregating’ the findings from Chapters 3 and 4 with additional data describing respondent’s meanings related to terms associated with masculinity, maleness, transmasculinity, and the shifting power dynamics associated with those positionalities. I will begin with a foundational discussion of masculinity/masculinities to provide a framework for respondent explorations of those theories, concepts, and terms here. Secondly, I will begin by presenting data exploring the meanings that emerged through respondents troubling of the specific terms man/male and masculinity. Finally, I will present data regarding notions of power as they relate to transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity, as they emerged through the unsettling/settling work with transmasculinity related terms.

### ***Masculinities***

The history of masculinities studies as a focused area of study is widely linked to R.W. Connell and their work first published in the 1980’s. Connell (1987) conceived a model for understanding masculinity that pushed back against the notion of a static male sex role and introduced new thinking which explored masculinity as being more than one position (masculinities), with more than one position in power relations between men and women (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:30) The term “hegemonic masculinity” is attributed to Connell (1987) and has been understood as a “pattern of practice...that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832).” It was masculinity as practice that made this idea new and important, as it moved considerations of masculinity

outside a simple set of role expectations or identity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832).

Hegemonic masculinity was that which could now be seen as normative, the “most honored way of being a man”, and through it subordinated masculine forms, or masculinities plural, could be identified.

Hegemonic masculinity (the term hegemony being adapted from Gramsci) describes the ascendancy of masculinity to its normative position as being “achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion.” Soberingly, it can be seen as legitimizing “the global subordination of women to men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832).” The authors themselves describe this as a “rather bleak theory”, but as hegemonic masculinity placed gender relations within an historical framework, there remained an opening for change as “older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:833).” Since being introduced in the eighties many scholars have taken up the concept of hegemonic masculinity across disciplines, and criticisms have emerged.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) themselves highlight the major areas of critique. The underlying concept of hegemonic masculinity is challenged as “blurred...uncertain in its meaning” and as “deemphasizing issues of power and domination” (Collinson and Hearn 1994; Hearn 2004 in Connell 2005:836). Additionally, it may be seen as “essentializ(ing) the character of men” by imposing a false unity on a fluid and contradictory reality (Petersen 1998, 2003; MacInnes 1998, in Connell 2015:836).”

Donaldson (1993) challenges hegemonic masculinity with being too ambiguous and lacking in substance as to what the masculine in masculinity really is. Martin (1998) challenges the inconsistency in Connell’s hegemony as sometimes fixed and at other times as being time and place dependent. Wetherell and Edley (1999), note the absence of what hegemonic

masculinity actually looks like in practice, and Martin (1998, 2001) points out that men may practice different masculinities at the same time, with not all being of hegemonic form.

Considering critiques of the concepts Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), reaffirm their fundamental concept of masculinity as a plurality (masculinities), and a hierarchy of masculinities existing as a pattern rather than a domination maintained by force. Additionally, they affirm a historical nature of hegemonic masculinity as having been shown to be open to challenge by women, men, and by factors of time and place (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Finally, among the concepts that Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggest may reformulated from the original model, two are most pertinent to this project. First is the need to bring the body back into focus as more than just an object of social practice but as an active participant in “delineating courses of social conduct (p. 851).” And secondly, these thinkers call upon researchers to bring trans masculinities into focus to more clearly explore how hegemonic masculinity may be embodied, rejected, or contested.

Halberstam (1991) was one of the first who fully described a masculinity not tied to the male body. In fact, they made the case that the best way to see the shape of what Connell’s (1987) practice of masculinity actually is, is to see it in the light of the “subordination of alternate masculinities (Halberstam 1991:1).” Female masculinities then, and other subordinate masculinities (black masculinity, gay masculinity, trans masculinity), are framed as the “rejected scraps of dominant masculinity, in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing (Halberstam 1991:1-2).” In other words, identify the paradox and the real becomes legible.

Arguably the first step in understanding masculinities plural is to dislodge the concept from its attachment to the heterosexual cis-male body. By allowing masculinity to remain attached to that which has been its hegemonic form we leave all other masculine forms

subordinated to it as those scraps of the dominant, so that the hegemonic form “may appear to be the (only) real thing (Halberstam 1998:1).” That which we call masculinity can finally become “legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white middle class body (Halberstam 1998:2).”

For Halberstam (1998), the project of defining masculinity must first leave behind the hegemonic legend of white cis-masculinity and maleness, and instead turn towards “masculinity’s iconicity not in the male matinee idol but in a history of butches in cinema” (Halberstam 1991:3). Ultimately then, what masculinity may actually be, is best observed through its expression in its female (or other non-hegemonic) forms. From the tomboy to the lesbian stone butch, to the transgender male, and the modern performance of drag kings, masculinities can be seen as emerging through experiences of race and class, culture and individual experience (Rubin in Halberstam 1991). These borders between various forms of masculinity are permeable, though, as no one form of classification can account for them all.

Through the identification of masculinities outside the birth-assigned male body masculinities plural takes on additional meaning. By virtue of the fact that masculinity may now be seen as freed from ties to biological sexual anatomy or chemistry, masculinity may become visible not just within a hierarchy of hegemonic masculinities, but in other physical *bodies* as well. What is allowed to come in to view then are masculinities heretofore otherwise obscured, but now may be seen in all their hybrid and minority forms (Halberstam 1991).

In *Constructing Maleness* (2015), masculinity outside the cis-male body was observed among trans male respondents. All participants in that study identified masculinity as separate from maleness and differentiated being “read” male as separate from being read as masculine, with maleness rather than masculinity as their goal. Among these study participants, masculinity

was associated with negative aspects of patriarchal privilege, and dominance over other persons and bodies, and was seen as antithetical to their production of maleness.

Abelson (2014) in her work with transgender men expands on this line of thought by describing two forms of trans masculine practices: defensive masculinities, and transformative masculinities (p. 562). The men in her study described a process of defensive masculinity as a response to a threatened sense of self in response to a threat of violence, as a practice of conforming to the hegemonic gender order. That is, in the face of danger the safest practice is to perform hegemonic masculinity if you are being categorized as male.

When threats are absent the enactment of transformative masculinities may come to the fore. Trans men in Abelson's (2014) study when not under identity threat felt able to perform masculinities that enacted the gender relations they would like to see. That is, a maleness that does not require a dominating masculinity stance, and that may be practiced "in concert with other men with the intention of changing those men" (p. 566).

### ***Man/Male***

For all respondents the terms 'man' or 'male' were at least somewhat problematic. Being a man, or being male, were terms most associated with cis-gender persons assigned male sex at birth, and often were not central to respondent's personal identities. Additionally, the meanings of man/male across interviews could not be completely dissembled from their meanings associated with the term 'masculinity'.

Taylor considers the question that all respondents engaged with.

What is a man? I think a man is so many different things. Just like, what is a woman? A woman is so many different things. I just think it's a lot of different things. There are a lot of different types of men, you know? Yeah, we have the jokesters, you have people who are always cracking jokes. I really liked these types of guys. You have the softer guys, you have a bit more serious guys. You have guys

who are kind of hippy-dippy. You have guys who are... I don't know, doing something new for the first time. I know it's just all these different types of energy.  
Taylor, 27

As already highlighted in the literature review, “sexed bodies are not obdurate natural fixed objects, but rather objects that embody subjectivities that are inextricably linked to time and place. Any nature versus nurture, organic versus social, discussions must always be prefaced with the dictums: prove it; show me. As we can neither fully prove nor show that which creates us as sexed beings, we must seize the opportunity to look beyond that debate and return to Grosz’s (1994) Mobius strip analogy of inside/out and outside/in. That is, seeing the social through the lens of the biological as we simultaneously see the biological through the lens of the social.

Taylor’s response articulates that which is at the heart of what all respondents were grappling with when asked what the meaning of man/male was for them. Essentially, respondents were asked to un-settle those terms for themselves and for me, and they used the freedom of the liminal-like space we created together to get at meanings that resonated with their individual sense of self. While Taylor laid out a cross-section of meanings and typologies, most zeroed in on meanings that were more self-referential.

For Declan, meanings of man/male represented a placement along a spectrum of sexed identity. For them there was not a fixed identity. That which may often be defaulted to as one’s sex, was more a feeling within corporeality, “I fall more on the spectrum of being a man than I do the spectrum of being a woman in my transness...I think more than some specific sort of male thing I was looking for other than the feeling in my body.”

For Conor, meanings of man/male are contextually dependent. Again, like Declan, for Conor, meanings associated with man/male are not fixed. Depending on a particular social situations man/male identity may change. “I identify more as a man, I guess you could say. But

when it comes to my body, my sexual health, my sexuality, I consider that trans man. Because, yeah, I have different body parts than CIS men do, so that is a different sort of thing. I think, yeah, I think I kind of parallel both of those and it really just kind of depends on, I guess, the conversation piece of it.”

Conor opened up a concern that most respondents grappled with to some extent: man/male as cis-referential, cis-centric terminology. Roberto opens up the ways in which this is often problematic.

I think honestly, I associate man, and part of the reason I hesitate to just identify as a man point blank is just because I associate it with men who I know and just cis men especially, who are shitty, or just who have not treated me or people I care about well. I don't know. Even in spaces I have to be in now, it's usually the cis men who are just really frustrating to work with in a lot of ways. We talk about it a lot with other people and figure out how to push them and hold them where they are. I think that's part of why I want to distance myself from that.

Roberto, >18

Further, the use of the terms man/male were seen by many respondents as perpetuating the sex/gender binary. Christian addressed that issue as they un-settled the meanings of man/male during our conversation, “I do identify as a trans man. Because I want to honor my experience that's associated with my transness and it's also a deliberate fuck you to the gender binary. So, yeah. I'm beyond the gender binary and there are existence and experiences outside of the gender binary.”

For Ciro, perpetuating the sex/gender binary also serves to flatten the complexities of the transgender experience, “So, I was assigned female at birth, and I don't identify as female. I also don't necessarily identify as male. So, that's why I identify as non-binary, because I don't think that either of those categories really holds the complexity of my experience in the world. And yeah, even though I'm on hormones, and people have tried to put me in the box of trans man have tried to use, he, him pronouns for me.”

As a counterpoint to those who found the terms male/man to be inadequate in varying ways, several other respondents found them less problematic overall, and in some ways considered them as acceptable, or even preferred as identifiers. For Brady, the terms coincided with corporeal traits that were desirable.

...this sounds shallow thinking about it, but I think for me as well too, it's like secondary sex characteristics. Although obviously those aren't necessarily just confined to being a man but being hairy, having a penis and balls, having facial hair. The physical embodiments. For me personally, but then it's like I sleep with people who have not had bottom surgery but who are trans men, and I still fully see them as men.

I think it has to do also with perception. Like looking at somebody else as a man, I think it has to do with my perception of them as far as even things about how they carry themselves. Like little ticks and cues that I guess I don't really think about as I see them happening but that present themselves as male to me. I guess they've just been like wired into my brain.

Brady, >18

As Sid engaged in the un-settling of the terms man/male for himself he came to understand them as validating how he wished to be 'read' as male by others, though within his narrower social circle he eschews those terms in favor of an identity outside the sex/gender binary.

I would like to be read as male. It is very validating for me to be read as male or masculine. I was traveling this past week, and I was really excited and happy because I got read as male going through TSA. I'm like, this is validating. I want strangers and people to just read me as male. I don't like to use the term passing.

I don't like the language around that, so I tend to say, "Read as." ...for friends, I want them to know that I'm nonbinary, I want them to know that I'm genderqueer. I use exclusively they/them pronouns. For just strangers and general interactions he/him is fine, and I want to be read as male....my baseline or my concept of myself in my head is closer to male, what people perceive as male.

Rocco, 24

Alix represented the two respondents who identified simply as man/male, and for the most part always had. For A, the term man was always his preferred identifier and had been so long before he began using testosterone. While he understood that maleness and certain

masculine traits were often problematic, his personal view of the terms reflected his role as a father, and as a provider and protector to his daughter, and to his cisgender-female partner who carried their daughter through pregnancy.

A man to me is more so like a dominance thing. I don't know, like a provider, just strength and all those types of things. I just mean to me, a man is supposed to be a leader and things of that nature. So when I say dominance, I'm just saying basically just having some type of control and some type of factor. It doesn't need to necessarily mean in your relationship or anything, but just being able to have control of yourself, your finances, whatever the case may be.

Alix, 22

Finally, Tank sums up what the terms/ male/man meant for most respondents. “I think that [the terms man/male] kind of... Don't really mean anything anymore, except they just feel accurate enough, you know what I mean? If you assumed I was cis, I don't think anyone would think I'm a masculine person, but like coming from the process of being a person who was female, I'm like, well, I'm masculine there so it's like a trajectory more than anything else. Necessarily a part of my gender expression, you know what I mean? So like, man-made masculinity [and maleness] is more about in how I dress, the way I sound, what most human life perceives as relative masculinity.”

### ***Un-settling Gender: Considering Masculinity***

Among respondents in this study the term masculinity was frequently used interchangeably with the terms man and maleness, though most articulated a difference in at least parts of their responses. What emerged throughout however, was that for all respondents at least part of their understanding of ‘masculinity’ was problematic. Of those features of masculinity that were troubling all related to elements of masculinity that are often encompassed in descriptions of the terms ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and ‘toxic masculinity.’”

Hegemonic masculinity has been generally described as masculinity’s normative position within institutions and culture, and that which allows for and sustains a subordination of female

identified persons to male identified persons (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832; Connell 1987). Halberstam (1991) was among the first to begin to more fully wrestle masculinity away from the cis-male body, arguing that masculinity may exist in many forms (female masculinity, black masculinity, gay masculinity, trans masculinity) and that by bringing masculinity in those sites into focus a white, heterosexual, cis-male singular masculinity fades as a hegemonic form.

All respondents in the present study positioned themselves in opposition to their understandings of the term toxic masculinity, that is, aspects of the masculine pose that may subordinate women and persons inhabiting masculine positions outside the normative hegemonic sphere. Here what masculinity may actually be, is better illuminated in its non-hegemonic forms, as these participants move from female sex assigned at birth into more masculine or gender non-conforming aligned personhoods.

Again, returning to the pilot study for this project, *Constructing Maleness* (Cloniger 2015), masculinity outside the cis-male body was observed among trans male respondents. All participants in that study identified masculinity as separate from maleness and differentiated being “read” male as separate from being read as masculine, with maleness rather than masculinity as their goal. In the present study, however, there is more nuance in considerations of meanings of maleness and masculinity. In both undertakings, however, masculinity was associated with negative aspects of patriarchal privilege and dominance over other persons and bodies and was seen as antithetical to their production of trans masculinity or masculinity within a gender non-binary identity.

Respondents in the present study all struggled to some extent to articulate their thoughts on masculinity. What emerged as the underpinning of this un-settling process was that masculinity could mean many things. Some things like the bodily attributes of facial hair, deeper

voices, increased musculature were easier to define, as were the negative attributes and behaviors associated with the term toxic masculinity. The positive and affirming attributes of masculinity, however, were often more difficult to put into words. When taken together however, what ultimately emerged from the varying descriptions of masculinity, and their trans masculinity in particular, was a settling into their sense of the personal identities and personhoods that had existed since their earliest memories.

For all respondents an ability to identify and discuss attributes of masculinity that were perceived as negative and undesirable dominated discussions of masculinity. An absence of these negative traits served as the counterpoint to illuminate the desirable attributes of masculinity. Tank's response speaks to what most other respondents were getting at in articulating masculinity's negative connotations.

I'd say the parts of masculinity I don't identify with are the poisonous lack of self-awareness and aggressive way of living. Violence, in every way. You know, things that are expected of people, they have to perform their masculinity and enjoy it or don't, enjoy it in that way or don't want to question, I think that... Yeah, I think lack of self-awareness and lack of self-reflection is a really [the core]. Yeah, but otherwise, any dominant [traits].

Tank, 36

Raffe continues with Tank's notion of masculinity as a violence. Again, it is a violence that focuses harm inwardly as well as outwardly. For Raffe, as for many other respondents, "... [toxic masculinity] I think of as internalized, I think of sexism, homophobia, transphobia, just the need to perform this way of being in your gender that is violent and not affirming of other people's existence. I guess that's how I would describe it. I think of it as very violent, not just like physically violent, but also, or not only, it can be physically violent, but also psychologically violent."

Finn too, speaks to the meaning of the term masculinity in terms of its negative connotations. Like most other respondents, for Finn masculinity has aspects that are "hard", and

“...harmful to other people, and to me....” As a gender stance, it was a positionality that was never desirable.

Yeah, I hate the culture of toxic masculinity and not just that men perpetuate toxic masculinity. I mean, it's just so rooted in our socializing, I guess, that anyone could embody it, but especially men, especially men are pretty capable. And yeah, I definitely did not...I knew going in, I did not want to be like that.

Finn, 35

Finally, Roberto sums up much of why masculinity's negative effects are so broadly problematic. It is not just that masculinity is often “hard” and “violent”. Rather, much of toxic masculinity's negative impact comes from the way in which it manifests itself outwards into social interactions in ways that can be totalizing. Roberto puts it this way, “... I don't know the root, but a pattern with a lot of the toxic traits I see or with stuff like that, when they're angry or feel insecure or upset, they'll externalize it onto other people and make it other people's problems. Then everyone else has to make space for it and deal with it.”

As respondents continued to un-settle the meanings of masculinity for themselves, positive traits and meanings came into clearer view. For Christian and several other respondents masculinity was described as a sense of a particular type of energy. Here Christian describes it as a “...practical energy...”, and “It's more like, it's kind of, how do I put this? It's like of a doer energy. It's more one that's very practical, that doesn't really embody much emotions per se and feeling, but it's just more present in the now, very like a doer practical energy. Yeah. That's how I identify masculinity to be.”

For William, masculinity is a “...non-girlness...” energy, “...I don't necessarily agree with that cognitively or as far as if I were to analyze gender, but it's like a feeling of not-girlness and deciding my gender for myself. It's a feeling of what comes naturally to me, even though it might not be the most masculine thing to other people on the outside...”. Elio's, un-settling of

the term masculinity can be seen as summing up what others were saying about masculinity as an energy as well.

It means a lot of things, depending on who you're talking to and the context. To me, it carries an energetic meaning. I don't know, it's more of a gestalt thing. I don't know that you could parse out exactly what it is, but there's an energy that comes with masculinity and similarly with femininity. For some reason I do feel that masculine energy is authentic to me, but because of the society we live in, I think also there's a lot of heaviness that is carried with masculinity or the term and the connotations and the cultural legacy, you know?

I don't think anything is inherently masculine. I think it depends on where it's coming from in you. For me, my beard is sometimes masculine, but sometimes it's feminine. I don't know. You know what I mean? I think it's all about the energy that you carry behind it and how you're holding it, how you're walking with it, if you will.

Elio, 23

For most respondents, masculinity was also interpreted as a way of grounding their lived subjectivities in ways that defined their position within the continuum of sex and gender. It was that which felt most comfortable as an identity, and as such was that which brought a confidence in their personhoods. Masculinity was that which re-settled an identity that had been jarred loose from them by the constraints of the liminalizing gaze of the sex/gender/body discursive, propelling them into a period of liminality. This is masculinity as agentic. It is masculinity as an opening and release from constraint. It is a masculinity that is configured away from the “violent” and re-molded as confidence in self instead. It is a clarification of identity as a position unique to each.

Rio's response to the meaning of masculinity sums up most of what all other respondents described among the positive aspects of masculinity. For Rio masculinity is a way to “...position myself in the world. It's a way to recognize my gestures that I have been rehearsing, gestures that I think are beautiful, a gesture through which I also link myself to a particular word. That is masculine, male, whatever you want to call it. And I think why I use trans masculine is to say I

am masculine, but then my representation is really clear. So then I can clear up the idea of masculinity. That's purely why I use masculine. I insist on male-hoods because I want to say, with how I am, with the way I present, how my body is, how I move through spaces, the way I make relationships, that is masculine, that is male. And nobody's going to take that away. Because I want to clear the understanding of male. I think for me, masculinity reflects upon gender or upon an energy and upon gestures and upon... But then male, male feels more that it reflects more upon a positionality. So that one is reflecting upon masculinity reflects for me more upon an energy. And then male-hood is a positionality in the world.”

### ***Transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) Identity and Power***

As this chapter moves towards an aggregation of the elements of transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity, a focus on the notion of masculine power is essential. Connell (2005), among many others, describes power as inherent in all considerations of masculinities, both in its hegemonic forms and outside it. Hegemonic masculinity at its core is that phenomenon that privileges the dominant power of men over women and other femme identified persons. Importantly however, in masculinities outside their hegemonic form, power does not disappear from discourses regarding them and must be reckoned with. As the respondents in this project engaged with articulating their meanings associated with male/masculine/masculinity, an awareness of masculine power in their lives was articulated.

How sex/gender related power in transmasculinity exists as an expression of identity is not widely explored within the existing literature. Some key studies, however, provide a foundational basis for discussions of power relations the respondents in this project considered. Schilt's (2006) work on transmen and work-related experiences of sex/gender power differentials showed a consistent increase in power when working as men rather than women across three

strata: authority and competency, respect and recognition, and economic gains. Participants in that study reported experiences of more respect being paid to their thoughts and ideas when they presented as male, increased recognition for the same amount and quality of work, and greater economic gains from promotions at work or opportunities for entrepreneurship.

Similarly, participants in Dozier's (2005) work noted shifts in determinants of power, such as being generally treated with more respect or being given more conversational space (p. 307). Others described experiences of gaining an insider's status as members of the "boy's club" (p. 307) which came with opportunities to hyper-perform hegemonic masculine stances or seize opportunities to stand in opposition to sexist locker-room style banter. In her work on transmasculinities and safety, Adelson (2014) expanded on Dozier's findings, reporting that transmen in her project, shifted their performance of masculinity based on feelings of safety within differing settings and situations. Here again power as a factor in transmasculine identity forefronts itself. As previously mentioned, Adelson uncovered in her work with trans men that their experiences of relative safety, and thus their relative sense of masculine power in a particular situation, determined whether they took on more defensive hegemonic masculine postures, or whether they felt safe enough to move in opposition to those postures in a way that might be transformative.

In this project, all respondents reported an awareness of shifts in personal and communal power related to their identities as transmasculine/GNC (tm-l). As I explored sex/gender related masculine power with Conor, their responses represented what many of the other respondents had noticed, chiefly that being recognized and accepted as personifying some degree of maleness and having a sense of male privilege emerge from it, was complicated.

I think, yeah, feeling empowered in your body gains competence in that sense. (But), there's also like the outside aspect of being seen as male, that dynamic and like the societal standards, and that sort of power play. Certain things it's like I'm given more of an advantage now at this point over women or women-identifying... people. I think like, yeah, it's a double-edged sword because I feel empowered in my body and I feel good about it, but then it's also reaping benefits that oppress others...

Conor, 33

Additionally, like most other respondents, Conor recognized a personal responsibility to remain vigilant about how their male privilege impacts others around them.

I think it was just like acknowledging every day when I step out the door that I have a privilege over somebody else in the way I present that gives me other opportunities or makes me safer in some aspect. I think it's like taking that into account every day.

And then also even though I'm a trans man, I am not a trans woman. I am not a woman or a femme person and which may not feel as safe going outside, and things like that. And I think just being an ally to those people and creating safe spaces for them kind of deconstructs that toxic masculinity.

I think sometimes I consciously have to do it. Because when you're in your own body, you don't necessarily all the time, you're not necessarily, I guess, self-aware all the time of how you're perceived....

Conor, 33

Tank too, talks about experiencing male privilege, as a challenge in incorporating it into their identity.

Initially, it really was a challenge to understand myself as a person who is acquiring privilege, but that is still true. Not liking that doesn't change the fact of your reality based on the choices you make around your body, your life.

Tank, 36

In getting to know a transmasculine identified gay elder, however, Tank came to an understanding that male privilege could be embraced and harnessed for good. In speaking about what they learned from this gay elder, a physician, Tank went on to say,

(He) helped his trans family by speaking from a position of power (in his role as a physician) ...he used that privilege for good and obviously, that makes a lot of sense...

...I was like, oh shit, this is a mantra you can take on, and you can do the best good and not just rail on against a privilege that we were acquiring that many people die

without, so just try and don't be sad about it, use it, where it is appropriate obviously.

Tank, 36

Leo too, found their new experience of male associated power as a complicated. After beginning to identify more consistently as masculine/male they noticed that identity as bringing with it a new sense of power and control. While the overall experience was affirming to their identity, some aspects of the experience brought a sense of unintended conflict.

For the most part I would say it was a positive. I remember feeling, once I was on testosterone, feeling like my life was back in my hands, like I could finally envision a future for myself in a way that I wanted my life to look". "...power, and masculinity, (bring a) feeling like it's easier to dominate spaces or relationships, or things like that, even when you don't intend to." "...in some ways I think that's fairly harmless, that's just me being confident and comfortable, and on the same of that though, that can be harmful to others.

I have been in situations where because I don't identify as a man, and I know that I'm not a cis man, and all that, it's easy to feel like some rules don't apply to me. Or that a woman won't see me as the same threat, but that's not true a lot of the time. And I've experienced that where I just didn't even think that I could be perceived as a threat or anything like that because I try to reject that toxic masculinity. But that's not only in my hands...it's definitely a learning process.

Leo, 22

Rio, in describing their experience of masculine power, began by remembering their awareness of the female power they previously experienced and how it could be used, "When I was femme presenting, I could get away with a lot of things by, you know these little things of seducing my way around things, and people would do all sorts of things for me. I just needed to smile and be cute. And I did use that. I was actively using those strategies, and I didn't feel ashamed for using those. So on the one hand, people see me more as a danger, and a threat (presently)...So you get some (power) and you lose some. But mostly, definitely there is a lot of power with the role of patriarchy."

Rio continues by articulating differences in feminine versus masculine power as he experienced it as part of a transmasculine identity.

But yeah, people are more patient, there's much more of a sense of being taken seriously... You get a lot of praise for saying something good, or you say something basic, and people are like, "Wow, that came out of your mouth?" If a girl or femme would say something really important, it would be marked way differently than when a guy says something feminist.

(If I said something feminist, the response would be) "Wow, he's a really good guy. And when a girl says something feminist, like, "You're just a fucking killjoy".

Rio, 30

When asked if this shift in sex/gender power was something they had aspired to as part of their move towards a transmasculine identity, Rio replied, as all other respondents who discussed it, had.

No. Not specifically the space of power. What I intended was again, this feeling of agency, the feeling of freedom, feeling of pleasure, and connection with my body.

Rio, 30

Given that, however, Rio was critically aware of its potential negative effects, "And the power that is connected to male-hood, and patriarchy is something that I am incredibly, I have a microscope vision on it. I am constantly aware, if I say something, where does that come from? How do I interject myself into spaces? Whose voice am I taking away by speaking up right now?"

One third of the respondents in this project could have identified as persons of color based on ethnicity and race, though not all did. Of the two that did not identify as such, one gave their reason as related to their light skin color or the white-like privilege it afforded them.

Consider Charlie's important and more nuanced comments about why he does not identify as a person of color.

I identify as a Japanese-American person specifically. And I'm really deliberate in that because similar to...just being categorized as a trans man or as non-binary or whatever...or the ways people just use he pronouns for me...it's not me being positive about myself. It's just kind of like a little bit of surrender to the powers that be or something, because I know that is not what defines me to myself.

Charlie, 33

...I think that 'person of color' is a term that can be used to gloss over the specificities of our experiences...it can be a way to flatten the experience of what it means to be a Black [or non-white] person.

And I think that when we talk about race in America, it's important to talk about white supremacy and anti-blackness and where we all fall into that. And I think even with Asians...there's so many different experiences.

Charlie, 33

Of the remaining respondents in that group, only two cited the intersection of race and male power as intrinsically linked with their engagement with male/masculine power or their transmasculine identity. When asked if his Black race impacted his life as a trans man and his experiences leading up his transition, Alix reported that, "I can honestly say that I didn't think of that when I was transitioning, like how society is going right now and all those types of things", though in retrospect he did recall experiences that articulated maleness and Blackness as coming together in specific ways.

But I did experience police brutality before I even transitioned". ...I was searched and because they thought I was male...they searched me". They didn't really want to hear what I had to say. I was kind of tossed around. I was thrown around and that was as a kid, I was like 16, you know what I mean?

But because I looked a certain way (male) and then I was Black, or whatever the case may be, or just being a male, it just kind of caused me to kind of be treated in a certain type of way you know"?

Alix, 22

Christian, when asked whether he had experienced a change in sex/gender power from a male standpoint, their speech became louder as they stated with conviction, "Definitely. Definitely. Definitely!" For him, the intersection of male power and Blackness was front and center, with one inextricably linked to the other.

There is male privilege. There is this power that comes with being a man. However, I discovered that there are levels to this power. So, because I identify as a man means I have to access everything that's associated with that part of being a man. Because I'm a Black man, which being black comes before that power, which is unfortunate but the way of this world. So there is definitely levels to this power.

Do I still have (new) access to certain things? Yes, but not to the fullest capacity of this word...that's something that's not talked about even in trans circles...there's talk about you being a man and having male privilege and having access to that, yes.

But it really takes away from my experience as a Black man and I'm managing the limitations (of power) that come with being a Black man.

Christian, 33

For Christian the intersection between Blackness and living with male power was fraught and was made more so by the fact that he often couldn't speak about it in spaces where it was being experienced, without being called out on male fragility, "Sometimes it's not met with acceptance because you're a male and you're a man and you have male privilege." Yet, in a real way Christian felt triggered by the complications inherent in navigating the male/female power divide at the intersection of race. As a Black man who had also lived as a Black woman it caused confusion.

...in my experience, it (male power) triggers the space that I had, the space I didn't have identified as a woman because then you are, in my experience, is one that you're a man you're taking up to much space, you need to step down, you need to do that.

But my experience as a woman was also a parking lot. I've taken up to much space. You need to be silent, you need to be seen and not heard. So it's very challenging a very challenging place to be when it comes to power.

...being a man, and being a trans man, and being a Black trans man ...there are levels of power.

Christian, 35

Each of the respondents cited in this chapter demonstrate what Adelson (2014) was getting at in her work, namely that by being aware of how masculine power can work to oppress others, they could choose to be agents of either transformation or perpetuation. By acknowledging the constraining effects of masculine patriarchal power in this project, Leo, Tank, and Conor, and others, may be seen to take a transformative stance as part of their identity. This new awareness of masculine associated power and the decision that they will use it as a

transformative force, is an articulation of agentic power like that discussed in Chapter Two. As previously mentioned, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call out agency as a source of “...increasing strain and confusion... (p. 962),” just as the respondents in this project described it as complicated or conflicting. Yet, as in the responses just presented the center of that confusion is often the definition of the agency itself. Like the second dimension of agency in Emirbayer’s and Mische’s (1998) work described in Chapter Two, what is being described by the respondents here is that same creative and transformative agentic power which works to push-back against the sex/gender/body discursive in ways that may foster a new way of configuring male/female/masculine/feminine power, and how and where it may exist.

What has emerged through all interviews in this project is that identity making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more than just a few concepts that can be articulated with a single unifying definition. This idea is what Lawler (2014) was getting at when she described the “slipperiness” of what identity is, and how it is formed. How identity is defined and theorized depends chiefly upon the lenses and perspectives of those who aim to define it. In Chapter Three, social interactions within family and school life were the drivers of identity and identity troublings, as respondents recalled how the gaze of the sex/gender/body discursive was instrumental in clarifying who they weren’t as they were simultaneously propelled towards the liminal space to clarify who they were. In Chapter Four respondents unsettled meanings associated with their corporeal identity/selves as they engaged with biomedicine in various ways. As respondents deployed their bodies in the social world, corporeal identities came into clearer view. In this chapter, Chapter Five, respondents troubled meanings of terms historically used to describe maleness and masculinity, and the sex/gender power differentials implicit in their enactment. But the ability to say who one is does not stop at any of these junctures. Identity is more complex. Participant meanings

associated with these terms reflect what Lawler (2014) calls the “public manifestations...roles or identity categories” (p. 7). of identity What is omitted if identity definitions end there is the entire scope of the “...more personal, ambivalent, reflective and reflexive sense that people have of who they are (p. 7).”

Moving forward I will discuss the implications and draw conclusions that have emerged through the data within this project as they have come together to engage research questions. Additionally, I will discuss potential limitations to the data presented here in hopes of bringing it forth in the clearest manner. Finally, I will explore recommendations for future study that may build on the work of this project and the studies that have informed it.

## Chapter Six- Conclusions and Discussion

Prior to this project transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity formation in the existing literature was chiefly centered around transition narratives, gender-affirmation processes, and attempts at creating staged-models into which all trans identity experiences might be inserted. This project was undertaken to explore the processes that create a transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity, and how those identities may be shaped by social interactions, biomedicine, and individual perceptions of lived corporeal bodies. Importantly, however, it was also conceived to answer those questions by eliciting the voices and experiences of the respondents themselves rather relying on observations or theorizing outside the trans perspective. Hausman (1995), for example, argues that a transgender stance is only legible through the modern armamentariums of exogenous hormones and advanced surgical procedures, and that without them there is no transgender identity at all. While Hausman describes transgender identity formation from an outside in perspective, the positioning of this project was deliberately constructed to seek insight into transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity formation from the inside out. Consider too, Devor (2004), who offers a 14-stage transgender identity formation model that, while coming from a wide range of observations and discussions with trans identified individuals and from a transmasculine identified author, provides that which may be seen as a static model attempting to corral a fluid process. By leading with the voices of the transmasculine participants in this project a more nuanced understanding of their identity processes may be articulated.

This project was also conceived to narrow the gap in how transmasculine and gender non-conforming (transmasculine leaning) bodies and identities are considered overall. It aims to bring these bodies and identities into sharper focus as discrete entities, rather than allowing them to simply stand in opposition to the hegemony of a cis-gender norm. As mentioned in the

introduction, this oppositional ordering creates a space wherein systems of bodily governance may flourish, giving power to the so-called natural/normal body/identity while stripping that agency from the abnormal/deviant one. This dichotomy necessarily “hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart (Grosz 1994:3; Terry and Urla 1995).”

Importantly though, this project was not only created as an attempt to expand outwards from the projects such as the ones just mentioned, and narrow those knowledge and understanding gaps, but it was also built *upon* the scholarship of others. Dozier (2004), Green (2006, 2020), Denny (1997), Sevelius (2012), Doyle (2022). Adelson (2014), among many others, have mined transmasculine experiences to create a literature of those positionalities. Similarly, this project is also built upon many overlapping literatures, covered in the literature review, and within the body of this paper. Bodies of work taking up masculinities, sex, gender, sociologies of the body, and gender affirmation, are all foundational here.

What is known going into this project includes expert scholarship on how masculinity is defined and how, and where, it may exist outside its hegemonic forms among cis-gendered men. We know that understandings of sex and gender suffer when constructed as static binaries of one another, and come alive when considered as pluralities, each as unique identities, affirmed in ways that make sense for each unique personhood. Additionally, we know that bodies are the meaty vessels within which we each live out our singular identities and are thusly inextricably linked to one another as body/identities.

The findings of this project have emerged through explorations of the research question and thus articulate how social interactions, biomedicine, and issues of corporeality come together to create the transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identities of the study participants who engaged with

this project. The findings also illuminate many of the features of late modernity identity-making: collectivity, community, vigilance, relationality, intersectionality, fluidity, and ultimately, praxis. I will describe those processes of late modernity identity making in more detail following the study findings.

In Chapter Three, *The Liminalizing Gaze*, social interactions predominate. All respondents described the constraining power of the sex/gender/body discursive gaze as emerging through interactions with others. Here social interactions are ubiquitous constraining forces, exerting repressive power over personhoods across home, school, and church life, by means of interactions with trusted adults and others. As identity-facilitators, these social interactions during respondents' earliest memories break down communal ties and individual subjectivities, singling each out as an 'other'. This is social interaction as a crushing force to processes of identity formation.

However, as described in the conclusion to Chapter Three, one element of the liminalizing gaze, is that it is also active and propelling. Therefore, as social interactions may repress lived personhoods during childhood and adolescence, that same repressive power propels respondents forward into a sphere of liminality and *communitas* wherein social interactions outside the liminalizing gaze serve to facilitate the articulation of their transmasculine/GNC (tm- l) identities anew. Across Chapters Four and Five social interactions are also predominant. In Chapter Four respondents emerged into the world outside the confines of childhood home lives and into a world where they sought out others like themselves. Through these new social relationships personal identities could be grappled within the relative safety of the liminal spaces they inhabited, with others who grappled similarly.

Importantly, the social interactions described in Chapters Four and Five, rather than being repressive as in Chapter Three, are instead agentic. Both chapters provide examples of the object work that Foucault and Haug put forth as pathways to agency in identity establishment. In Chapter Four, respondents describe deploying their bodies during sexual engagement with others and how those corporeal engagements facilitated further understandings of their transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identities as emerging through bodily interactions with others. Additionally, social interactions were key in decision making around whether to utilize biomedical interventions in the facilitation of transmasculine identities, and how those interventions may affect individual senses of self. In Chapter Five, it was social interactions in the workplace and other social settings that critically shaped the meanings associated with their masculine, or masculine leaning individual positionalities, by demonstrating elements of masculinity that were both appealing and disaffecting.

As described in Chapter Four, bodily habitus and individual corporeality were central to respondents transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identities, both before engaging with biomedical interventions and after. How their bodies were dressed, how their hair was cut, and how their bodies moved through space as they engaged with others in the workplace and other social spheres, all participated in the enactment of transmasculine identity. In sexual encounters with others, except for a few specific reasons for a few respondents, most described deploying their hegemonically female-associated genitalia without dysphoria. Among those participants, if dysphoria did emerge, it was related to a sense of their partners perceived unease with their bodies rather than their own. For most, female-associated genitalia were articulated as transmasculine genitalia of a different configuration. Overall, bodily configuration and

presentations, served as ways to perform different forms of masculinity that served their transmasculine identities best across social settings.

What comes into view when considering social interactions and transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity formation across Chapters Three, Four and Five, are those elements of 21<sup>st</sup> century identity mentioned previously. Specifically, that from its genesis, all identity work in today's world is difficult, slippery, and hard to pin down. It is so because increasingly, as Bauman (2000) points out, there are always more choices to consider. As the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century draws to a close, identity options elide corralling within static boundaries. Because they are increasingly relational and communal one identity is always playing to, and off of, others. Intersections of identity once organized and considered around race and sex, may now need considering across lifestyles, politics, or even affiliations felt within the available contemporary media terrain (chat groups, social media affiliations, and pop star identification). The respondents here may be seen to always be grappling with how they are being 'read' across social interactions, ever chasing the perfect, or most exacting, transmasculine identity.

Finally, the role of biomedicine in transmasculine identity formation, described by respondents in Chapter 4, is clear. Both exogenous testosterone and top-surgery were repeatedly described by respondents as facilitators of their transmasculine identity, though not dependent on them. Overall, biomedical interventions provided an increased sense of bodily and psychological comfort within their already established transmasculine identities. As testosterone generated lower voices, hair growth, and muscular development, and top-surgery created a flatter, more stabilized chest, respondents sense of their transmasculine identities felt increasingly settled. Importantly though, it bears repeating, that those identities were not dependent on either biomedical modality, but on identity-making projects and praxis that I will next describe.

This project, while variously focused on bodies, social interactions, and biomedicine, brings those themes together to articulate identity-making processes, and because of that the identity literature has centrality here. During data collection and analysis for this project, it became clear early on that an understanding of identity-making among respondents in this project would require abandoning what Wetherell (2009) calls traditional “identity packages”, based in more static criteria of cultural or geographical associations. Bauman (2004) too, argues the futility of the older totalizing theories of the modern period amid our 21<sup>st</sup> century realities thusly, “Any attempt to placate the inconstancy and precariousness of the plans men and women make for their lives and thus explain this sense of disorientation by parading past certainties and established texts would be as futile as attempting to empty the ocean with a bucket.”

To answer this project’s research question, it was necessary to turn to the more fluid 21<sup>st</sup> century identity theories that could help frame the richness and nuance this data required. The data presented in this project provides clear evidence that personal identity can no longer be considered in static or fixed terms, as it may shift from one social position to another in a ‘liquid’ manner (Bauman 2000). In our 21<sup>st</sup> century society where “...social, cultural, and sexual identities...” have been made “uncertain and transient, any attempt to ‘firm up’ that which has become liquid through a politics of identity would inevitably lead critical thought up a blind alley (Bauman 2004:6)”.

Further, Lawler (2014) calls 21<sup>st</sup> century “identity” a difficult term, “slippery” even, and one that is often called out only when it is “seen to be missing” (Lawler:1). Think “identity crisis” for example. Yet if identity is fore fronted only when it is troubled where does it exist and maintain its processes of formativeness when it is seemingly not in crisis? For Lawler, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even the troubling of static identity theories is not enough. If identity is only emphasized

when it is troubled it “underlines a belief in a normative (silent, non-troubling) identity...”, but also that “taken-for-granted forms of identity are unworthy of sociological or other scrutiny (Lawler 2014:2).”

Burke and Stets (2014) call identity “...the set of meanings that identify individuals as occupants of roles in society, members of groups or social categories, or unique persons with characteristics that identify them (p. 1).” Identity theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century then, is that which which “...seeks to explain the specific meanings that individuals have for the multiple identities they claim, how these multiple identities relate to each other for individuals, how their identities influence their behavior, thoughts, and feelings or emotions, and how their identities tie them to society at large”. Lawler (2014) calls all identity-making in late modernity an ‘accomplishment’ within the social world, where there is no “silent, untroubled, normal or natural identity (Lawler p. 2).”

As identity theory moves forward from Wetherell’s (2009) more traditional “identity packages” (p. 6) new features have emerged. One newly taken up feature of late modern identity, is that identity-making now be understood as a “collective” process, rather than simply a “unique and individual process” (Lawler 2014:2). By leaving identity-making uniquely as a process of each individual we risk abandoning the “many” of identities to the “some” which are fore fronted, and the “others” which may slip back into obscurity as the troubled versions of the norm. That is, rather than seeing identity as a phenomenon of the individual alone, we broaden the formative expanse to include all the social world, thereby protecting all identities as normative.

Building on identity as a collective process, in late modernity, ‘community’ may be illuminated as an important element too. While during earlier periods of the modern age identity

may have ended with communal associations of geography and culture, in late modernity those communal contributions to identity may now be “welded together solely by ideas or various principles (Bauman 2004:11)”. Because there are now so many ‘ideas and principles’ available to processes of identity making in our “variegated and polycultural” world “one has to compare, to make choices, to make them repeatedly, to revise choices already made on another occasion, to try to reconcile contradictory and often incompatible demands (Bauman 2004:11)”.

Vigilance, another characteristic of identity in the late modern age, is also tied to the demands of choice making just described and is evident across respondent’s discussions in this project. Settling into an identity, especially one that may be liquid and shifting, can be fraught and exhausting in the constancy of the attention that may need to be paid. Bauman (2014) speaks to this constant need for alertness, “There is always something to explain, to apologize for, to hide or on the contrary to boldly display, to negotiate, to bid for and to bargain for; there are differences to be smoothed or glossed over, or to the contrary made more salient and legible (p. 13).”

Liquid identity making is also relational. Answering questions such as ‘who am I’ requires relationships for comparison. Answering that question in whatever way it may be answered “cannot be formed unless in reference connecting the self to other people and the assumption that such bonds are reliable and stable over time (Bauman 2004:68)”. Relationships with others in our social world allow for the nuances of our own identity to emerge through the push and pull with other identities. Not only do they illuminate other identity choices available to us, but they also spur articulations of the identity choices we have already taken on when they clash with other identities around us.

Wetherell (2009) builds on this relational aspect of late modern identity making in her description of the process as ‘communicative’. Borrowing from Judith Butler she takes up Butler’s theory of ‘social intelligibility’ as a process of “... ‘gathering together’, a communicative embodiment, encapsulation and stylization (p. 3).” It involves the task of self-observation which can be fraught, “What counts as a successful series of gestures (of identity) is ambiguous, and indeed success can be a mixed blessing. Being recognized as a particular kind of ‘someone’ can entail engaging with normative expectations of identity which demean, oppress and blight... (Wetherell 2009:3)”. Identity making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century takes courage, and a willingness to go with the complexities of the process rather than retreat.

Part of the complexity of identity making in today’s world is that it is increasingly intersectional. As one grapples with the placement of themselves as particular sexed and gendered subjects most must simultaneously grapple with “the entangled affiliations people articulate across identity categories” and the “diversity of standpoints in response to ethicized and other classifications” (Wetherell 2009:4). Further, the identity categories that divide many of us today may go beyond the standard intersectional categories of race, class, and culture, and often involve “issues of lifestyle, music choices, consumption patterns, values and politics” that can be unruly and untidy, and all of which must be negotiated alongside sex and gender subjectivities (Gilroy 2005:438, Wetherell 2009:16)”. These grapplings, taken in total, can be “radically misleading”, as subjects bounce between understandings of social identity and personal identity, and as they may chafe or struggle under the pressure of a perceived call for ‘compulsory identity’ and the requirement to be an ‘extraordinary subject’ (Wetherell 2009:4-14),

What has emerged across all interviews in this project is that 21<sup>st</sup> century identity is more than just a few concepts that can be articulated with a single unifying definition. This idea is the “slipperiness” of what identity is, and how it is formed. How identity is defined and theorized depends chiefly upon the lenses and perspectives of those who aim to define it. In Chapter Three respondents considered the meanings of terms historically used to describe man/maleness and masculinity. Yet, the ability to say who one is does not stop there. Identity is more complex. Participant meanings associated with these terms reflect what Fowler (2014) calls the “public manifestations...roles or identity categories” (p. 7) of identity. What is omitted if identity definitions end there is the entire scope of the “...more personal, ambivalent, reflective and reflexive sense that people have of who they are (p. 7).”

### ***Implications***

Ultimately, what emerges in this project, is that transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a praxis. Praxis has been described variously, but for purposes of this project I will use the definitions that Dede (2002) cites in her work. That is, praxis as "enlightened human action" (Denhardt, 1984), or "thoughtful doing" (Turner, 1992), which suggests a process wherein “theory, individual experience, reflection, history, and action are mutually reinforcing (O.White, 1977; Denhardt, 1984, D. White, 1998).

Respondents, across this study, embody a praxis wherein thoughts, actions, and behaviors of identity making are ever liquid, and on the move. Each may be observed as continually engaged in vigilant processes of observation, evaluation, and decision making, about what bodily gestures, biomedical adjustments, linguistic descriptors, or social responses require additional reactions in kind. Social interactions, biomedicine, and physical bodies, function together like Grosz’s Mobius strip metaphor, with each element moving from the outside in, and the inside

out, to achieve and support particular personhoods. Transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity here, even when settled into, maintains itself not in stasis, but in the dynamism of praxis. In the end, across readings of all interview transcripts, what stands out among all else is that from earliest memories, through repressive and agentic social interactions, biomedical interventions, lived corporeal bodies, and ongoing identity praxis, individual identity often remained, to its greatest extent, seemingly where it began while lived anew each day in an ever-changing liquid world. This finding marks a significant change from studies cited in this paper, and others, that engage with the life trajectories of trans identified individuals. In much of that scholarship it is transition narratives that predominate. In those narratives the core of identity making was centered around a binary of “before and after”. That is, moving from a female centered body/identity to a masculine/GNC (tm-l) one. The life stories that emerged in this project, however, describe identities that emerged in respondent’s earliest memories, entered a period of unsettling and adjusting, before then settling back towards the personhoods they began with. Here transition as a “before and after” phenomenon is less predominant replaced instead by bodies/identities engaging in a sex/gender/body praxis across the lifespan. In these data a process of becoming is forefronted as a counterpoint to transition narratives. Here individuals moved from personhoods that emerged during childhood and facilitated through praxis, moved through a process of becoming their fully articulated identities.

These data also stand as a call to action to clinicians practicing in the biomedical sphere. Understanding that transgender identity is a multi-faceted and nuanced praxis across the lifespan argues for a repositioning of thought about how biomedical practitioners may be of service to transgender individuals who seek medical and surgical armamentariums in support of their personhoods. Thinking of hormones and surgical procedures as supporting transgender identity

rather than creating it, is key. Similarly, an openness to considering more nuanced hormonal treatment regimens in partnership with the individuals they serve can open-up care to individuals who may not seek an all-or-nothing, before and after, “transition” experience. Finally, all clinicians providing gender affirming care in the biomedical sphere should be prepared to speak with evidence-based knowledge when issues of biology and sex arise in politics, policy, and access to care, and always do so in conjunction with individuals with a lived trans experience.

### ***Limitations***

This study has potential limitations. To facilitate the greatest transparency, I will outline them here. In reviewing the memo writing I engaged with throughout this project, four potential limitations to the reliability of this research stood out.

First, grounded theory as a research method in qualitative research appropriately argues that all research concepts be grounded in, and emerge from, research data. Any theory that emerges from the research may then be seen to come directly from participant responses to interview questions. Threats to this goal include a-priori assumptions or hypotheses that the researcher may unwittingly bring to the project from prior knowledge of scholarly literatures related to the research topic.

As this project was conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree at the University of California, San Francisco, a literature review across several bodies of knowledge was required. To guard against this potential a-priori bias I did two things. First, the way that I engaged with study participants during research interviews acknowledged certain theories and concepts I encountered during the literature review and asked their opinions and thoughts related to them. And secondly, and likely most importantly, I wrote memos after each interview and subsequent coding, that allowed me to focus on, and grapple with, any potential

knowledge bias that might have emerged. By doing those two things I feel as certain as possible that the themes reported here were grounded in the voices of the individuals who participated in this project.

Second, a potential age bias may impact in the results of this study. As outlined in the *Methods* section, participants for this study were recruited in 4 different ways: through participants seeking services at the St. James Infirmary's STRIDE Transgender Care Program, through posters at, and referrals from, the San Francisco Therapy Collective, San Francisco, California, through list serve postings by the CAB members of this project, community activists, and trusted colleagues, and through respondent driven sampling from accepted research participants.

Recruits from all these sources skewed younger. Because of that, a majority of the final respondent pool for this project were in their 20's or early 30's. While data saturation was hearty among this group overall, it may not represent older transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) individuals who engaged with issues of the sex/gender/body discursive during generations preceding the present period of widespread trans visibility. Social interactions, availability of biomedical interventions, and bodily visibility and deployment, may have been markedly different among those potential respondents. To address this limitation, I made contact with a transmasculine community elder in hopes of including their community in this project. However, while early leads to capture older research participants initially seemed promising, they ultimately did not bear fruit.

Third, as issues of intersectionality, even with probing, were only superficially taken up by all but three respondents, my inclination was to reconnect with respondents to try and understand potential reasons why. Unfortunately, when I applied to the UCSF IRB to extend the

period of approval to conduct this project, my extension was granted only for work directly related to completing the dissertation writing, disallowing further contact with study participants. In the recommendations for future research outlined previously, I have included intersections of transmasculine/ GNC (tm-l) and race as a potentially valuable focus for deeper understandings of identity-making.

Finally, the fact that I am a white, cis-gender, older gay queer male, may present a bias in how I proffered research questions and conducted research analysis. In order to counter these potential positionality biases, I did four things. First, I acknowledged my position across race, sex, gender, age, and sexual orientation in the *Methods* section of this paper. Secondly, I articulated those positionalities with each study participant at the beginning of our discussions together. Thirdly, at the end of each research interview, I returned to the subject of my potential positionality biases, by asking each respondent if they thought there were any questions that I should have asked but didn't, or if there were questions that I did ask that were inappropriate, offensive, or ill-informed regarding our shared task. Finally, I again engaged with memo writing around these issues after each interview. While positionality bias, can never be completely avoided, by remaining actively engaged with the potential for those biases throughout this project I hope to have minimized its effects.

Despite the limitations described here, the results of this project should be seen as a success. The individual participants in this study emerged as fully engaged co-researchers, eager to dig deep in articulating their life experiences and trajectories, in our shared goal to illuminate transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity making in all its richness and nuance. Each shared a similar intent that their insights might stand in service to others.

### *Recommendations for Future Study*

In seeking to uncover the ways in which social interactions, biomedicine, and lived corporealities contributed to the formation of transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identities among the respondents in this project, three areas of related future research emerged for me. First, while exploring the elements of 21<sup>st</sup> century identity-making, the concepts of relationality, communicativity, and community, stood out as points of particular interest. All three of these elements could be tracked across participant interviews as I explored the role of social interaction in transmasculine identity formation. Taken together they represent some the reasons for the slipperiness of identity. Future research with transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) individuals focusing on those overlapping elements, and the interplay among individuals they represent, could open-up more specific knowledge about how those elements contribute to the ever-evolving nature of identity formation.

Second, while this project included specific questions about intersecting identities, few participants considered the concept of beyond stating their age group, ethnic background, place of residence, religious affiliation, and the like. Admittedly, racial and ethnic affiliations were not inclusion criteria for this project. However, of the two respondents who spoke in in more depth about the intersection of Blackness and trans masculinity, both articulated a profound interconnectedness between the two. As intersectionality has traveled outward from its origins within the Combahee River Collective, emerging across the globe and taking on increasingly divergent intersections, it has arguably lost some its primacy as the structure that centers race. Studies which re-focus on the intersections of race and sexes/genders, specifically trans masculinity and race, may expand our knowledge base, not just around those intersections of identity, but around identity-making broadly. Bowleg, Malekzadeh, AuBuchon, Ghabrial, and

Bauer (2023) argue that deepening our focus on intersectional frameworks open-up a “...bounty of new, complex, and nuanced knowledge about SGD [sex/gender/diversity] (p. 4).”

Third, the idea I have put forth of transmissivity/GNC (tm-l) identity formation as praxis, will benefit from additional research that focuses on praxis theory in transmasculine/GNC (tm-l) identity formation. Wainwright (2022) argues that we should not get caught up in the notion that praxis is separate from theory saying, “Praxis refers to almost any sort of human activity, any doing”. Developing transmasculine identity theory by exploring it as praxis should not be seen as at odds. Wainwright (2022) encourages that if our mission is “...developing a common understanding, we must engage in collective abstraction and effective communication, activities that require labor time, attention, patience...”

Additionally, the data on masculine/feminine power differentials in Chapter Five, is ripe for further study. While all respondents experienced it, and some described it in more detail than others, the nuances of how those changes, from a once lived feminine position to a present transmasculine one, are underdeveloped. Additionally, research exploring those nuances undertaken by masculinities scholars in collaboration with identity scholars could open-up both literatures.

Finally, the stories and life trajectories recounted by participants in this project articulate full, lived lives in the process of becoming. Amidst life struggles and traumatic experiences there are also stories of positive relationships, sexual fulfillment, educational and job success, satisfying friendships, and parenthood. As Shuster and Westbrook (2024) importantly remind, “Joy is a fundamental aspect of social life (p. 804).” As social scientists and medical practitioners, taking up Shuster’s and Westbrook’s call to include questions about experiences of life-joy can be transformative for transgender studies and biomedicine. Much of sociological and biomedical

research centered on transgender lives is positioned around experiences of trauma and marginalization, often importantly so. This, however, creates a trans narrative of negative experiences that may be perpetuated forward, creating a ‘joy deficit’ in considerations of trans lives (Shuster and Westbrook (2024). Focusing only upon the negative aspects of “...being part of a marginalized group may actually harm members of those groups as it perpetuates beliefs that marginalized groups live in misery (Shuster and Westbrook:804-805).” Charlie describes one of the ‘joys’ of being trans as gender euphoria, “...it’s things being fun or feeling good about yourself. I like things just not feeling bad...” Ultimately, by remembering to include lived experiences of trans joy, nuances of identity-making and trans personhoods may come into a richer, sharper focus.

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