UNDOING HETEROIDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE ON YOUTUBE: TRANS MASCULINE VLOGGERS, SHIFTING BODIES, AND UNCATEGORIZABLE ORIENTATIONS

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by
Stephanie N. Berberick

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The dissertation of Stephanie N. Berberick was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Michelle Rodino-Colocino
Associate Professor of Film/Video and Media Studies and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Dissertation Adviser
Chair of Committee

Russell Frank
Associate Professor of Journalism
Member of Committee

Matthew P. McAllister
Professor of Film/Video and Media Studies
Chair of Graduate Programs
Member of Committee

Nancy Tuana
Professor of Philosophy and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Member of Committee

Ford Risley
Associate Dean of Undergraduate and Graduate Education
Professor of Journalism

*Signatures on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

Representation of transgender people has increased in the contemporary mediascape. While this is an improvement from the days when transgender communities were erased from both entertainment and news narratives, there still remain critical questions scholars must interrogate regarding the types of representation available to viewers. The majority of representations are trans feminine, leaving trans masculine folks largely invisible. Also, a good deal of transgender content is spectacularized in entertainment and news media, leaving little room to cover the bleak material realities that many transgender folks face. Yet individuals must be aware of the prevalence of discrimination against transgender people if society is to work against marginalization; media silence becomes rhetorical violence.

This dissertation first argues for a recognition of the paradox of trans visibility, phraseology I use to highlight the process whereby glamorous, celebrity trans individuals attract media attention while the dire material realities of everyday trans people are erased. Secondly, I argue that such paradox is one of the consequences of narrative’s heteroideology (Roof, 1996). However, because this dissertation focuses more on content and message (ideology), as opposed to narrative’s structure and form, I instead use the term “heteroideological narrative” after establishing narrative’s heteroidology as that which makes heteroideological narratives possible. I further argue that such paradox is attractive for media makers because certain aspects of experience must be omitted to return audience members to comfortable, normative tropes. Specifically, heteroideological narrative returns consumers to normativity politics of sexual identity through obfuscating queer, fluid bodies that deviate from “proper” heterosexually charged iconography that supports sex, gender, and sexual orientation binaries. Furthermore, binary sexual orientation is also locked into place through removing amorphous bodies that challenge the foundation of either male/female. It is through the shifting body that one can begin to complicate the attraction toward a particular sex, as no stable sex is present.

Through combining textual analyses of some mainstream transgender representations with a virtual ethnography of three trans masculine YouTube video bloggers (vloggers) and in-person interviews (Oregon, California, and Maryland), this project illustrates how these producers work against heteroideological narrative. These YouTube channels work against hegemonic categorization schemas that lead to stigma, gender policing, and discrimination through their explicit focus on their shifting forms. Their focus on malleable bodies then results in discussions of orientation and attraction that unravel widely accepted imaginaries of binary, stable sexual orientations.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures ........................................................................................................... v  
A Note on Looking ..................................................................................................... vi  
Glossary of Terms ..................................................................................................... vii  
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................. ix  

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 2. THE PARADOX OF TRANS VISIBILITY UNDER HETEROIDEOLOGICAL  
NARRATIVE ........................................................................................................... 16  
The Paradox of Visibility ......................................................................................... 18  
Heteroideolesical Narrative Inspired by Narrative’s Heteroideolesical ............... 38  
Heteroideolesical Narrative at Work: Media Examples ....................................... 47  

Chapter 3. RE-IMAGINING VIRTUALITY AND CORPOREALITY THROUGH HYBRID  
METHODOLOGY ..................................................................................................... 55  
Hybrid Methodology ............................................................................................... 58  
Virtual Potentialities: Trans/Figuring Participant-Observation, Traveling, and  
Virtuality .................................................................................................................. 64  
Data Collection ........................................................................................................ 79  
Introducing Trans Masculine Vloggers: Xavier, Jason, and Dade ................. 82  

Chapter 4. A RETURN TO SEX ............................................................................... 91  
Independents Illustrating Authenticity through Shifting Bodies ....................... 92  
Sex the Flesh: Jason, Xavier, and Dade Ascending while Sophia Returns ........ 102  
Ascension and Return: Concluding Thoughts .................................................... 132  

Chapter 5. UNCATEGORIZABLE ORIENTATIONS .............................................. 135  
Media Erasure as Being and Becoming Dispossessed ...................................... 139  
Erasing the T: LGB Coupling on the Television Screen .................................... 142  
Partners and Participatory Transition: Tiffany and Bianca ............................... 155  
Queer Bodies Finding Queer Love ....................................................................... 169  
Uncategorizable Orientations: Concluding Thoughts ....................................... 174  

Chapter 6. CONCLUDING THE CHANNEL .......................................................... 177  

References ............................................................................................................. 187
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A White transgender man poses for the camera to protest bathroom discrimination on his Twitter account ................................................................. 28

Figure 2: Four White, trans masculine people pose for the camera while making silly faces or laughing ............................................................... 52

Figure 3: Xavier, a Black trans masculine YouTube vlogger sits in a car while recording ............................................................ 84

Figure 4: Jason, a Latino transgender man, lies on a bed looking up into a camera ........ 86

Figure 5: Dade, a White transgender man, stands in a bedroom looking straight into a camera ............................................................................. 87

Figure 6: Jason stands in a cream-colored room looking into a camera ................. 105

Figure 7: Xavier stands in front of a desk looking into a camera. The words "being a sister, a niece or a daughter. We share a title to an identity. Man, male, masculine" appear on the screen ................................................................. 119

Figure 8: Dade stands outside with a mountain range behind him ....................... 129

Figure 9: Tiffany, a White woman with long, curly hair sits in a room with a tiled background looking into the camera ................................................................. 157

Figure 10: Tiffany stands in a room with green walls looking into the camera ........ 161

Figure 11: Jason and Bianca stand outside at night, Bianca looks at Jason as he looks straight ahead .......................................................................................................................... 165

Figure 12: Bianca and Jason ride in a car looking to their left .................................. 168
A NOTE ON LOOKING

“The challenge of proper looking is converting the impulse to stare into attention, which is socially acceptable. To grasp our world and get things done right, we need to manage our orientation quite rigorously. The neurological process of sorting visual stimuli is demanding work, but like breathing, a largely unconscious and habitual one”

-Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009, p. 22)

In addition to analyzing video, this dissertation includes utilizes still images gleaned from the videos to give readers a sense of the vloggers (Dade, Jason, Xavier, Bianca, and Tiffany) whose video blogs I discuss. With the exception of screen shots from social media activism around transgender access to bathrooms, most of these are screen shots from the video blogs discussed within this work. Part of the praxis behind this research is to resist erasure, thus it was important to me that the producers I worked with were not faceless. However, inserting still images into a lengthy project that centers fluidity comes with its own set of problems and ethical concerns. Mainly, I – the researcher and writer – must wonder how you – the reader and critic – are looking at these images without having the knowledge of all that came before and after this one moment in time.

Hegemonic ideologies, such as heteroideology, work through people in culture. This means that even the most progressive of individuals will come to this work with their own set of assumptions and ways of looking that are informed by the very social forces that trans produced video blogs often subvert. The images of the vloggers I worked with are a moment – a singular moment – in a long narrative. When you see a still image you are seeing a fraction of a story, a story that unfolded over years. It is important to remember that as you look. The changes I saw over the course of two years of research are impossible to archive in this dissertation, and – I argue – in any work that seeks to theorize how change happens over time. Also impossible to capture is the way that temporality is altered by these video blogs – I do attempt to explain this in certain portions of the dissertation, but words always fall short when discussing time and space. Still images fall short when discussing moving pictures, but moving pictures get us closer to envisioning the complex relationship between time, space, and change. We must understand these limitations and work diligently to allow words and still images to exist as a testament but never an encapsulation.

Images are necessary in this dissertation. They are meant to give face, but they can also erase the fluidity that exists on each channel discussed within. A still image is a breeding ground for assigning categories that deny nuance and complexity and, like Garland-Thomson says above, organizing visual stimuli is often an unconscious habit. Yet one thing this dissertation stresses throughout is the importance of reflexivity when looking. I implore readers to take a moment – or even a few moments – to process the ways in which you are organizing these still images according to your own orientation. Be attentive not only to what you see, but also to what informs the way you see. Let us, together, turn from habitual and unconscious looking to reflexive and progressive attention. Let us hold space for the denial of categorization.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*Cisgender* – A person who identifies with the gender identity that correlates to their designated birth sex. A cisgender person is designated female or male at birth, identifies as woman or man, and prefers pronouns she/her or he/him.

*Transgender* – A person whose gender identity is in conflict with their designated birth sex. Transgender is an umbrella category. Therefore, a transgender person may prefer pronouns that do not match their designated birth sex but do match the sex opposite their designation (someone designated female at birth uses him/he pronouns), or they may not identify in the gender binary at all (uses they/them).

*Genderqueer* – People who do not identify as woman or man or wholly feminine/masculine use this description to illustrate that they do not fit into a binary rubric of gender. Some genderqueer people also identify as transgender while others do not.

*Queer* – A term that has largely been reclaimed and was once a slur, queer represents folks who do not identify within the “norm.” This can take a number of forms. Queer can mean: queer sex presentation (a large chest with a pronounced crotch), queer gender expression (body read as male but expresses femininity or sometimes expresses femininity while expressing masculinity at other times), or queer sexual orientation (not heterosexual, but can be LGB or pansexual, which means attracted to all sexes and genders).

*Transman* – Someone designated female at birth who is or has transitioned to male and lives as such (also referred to as FtM/F2M – female to male).

*Transwoman* – Someone designated male at birth who is or has transitioned to female and lives as such (also referred to as MtF/M2F – male to female)

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1 List generated by author’s knowledge. More language resources can be found at: [http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/transgender-terminology?gclid=CjwKCAjw5YfHBRDzjNnioYq3_swBEiQArj4pdB1FDI0e9j_dCt77CqB4k71g3V07PrD1z_F2RB0T9oaApNO8P8HAQ](http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/transgender-terminology?gclid=CjwKCAjw5YfHBRDzjNnioYq3_swBEiQArj4pdB1FDI0e9j_dCt77CqB4k71g3V07PrD1z_F2RB0T9oaApNO8P8HAQ)

Or


Remember to always ask a person their preferred pronouns and form of address, as no one list can speak for every person.
Trans masculine – Someone designated female at birth and socialized under the rubric of femininity who is oftentimes more masculine than feminine. Trans masculine is utilized in this dissertation because one of the participants does not identify as a transman but instead identifies on the spectrum of gender identities, referring to their sex and gender as “fluid,” meaning sometimes they honor their femininity and illustrate as much, other times they honor their masculinity.

Trans feminine – Someone designated male at birth and socialized under the rubric of masculinity who is oftentimes more feminine than masculine.

Transsexual – Someone who is or has transitioned their sex to the sex opposite of the sex designated at birth through various medicinal procedures. Transsexual people may also identify as transgender and some transgender people may identify as transsexual. However, there is a contentious debate surrounding these terms, known widely as the “Border Wars.” Some transgender people have charged transsexualism as being too lodged in binary identities of sex and gender. Likewise, some transsexual people have charged transgender as being an umbrella category that denies the importance of “home” in one’s sexed body.

NOTE: None of my participants identified as transsexual, some even looked down on the term
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On February 27, 2016 Demarkis Stansberry, a 30-year-old Black, transgender man, was shot point-blank in the head in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He died. The gunman, Nicholas Matthews — a registered convict who could not legally own a firearm — told authorities he thought his clip was empty when he raised it to Demarkis’s face and pulled the trigger. The mainstream media was largely silent. Conversely, a very different transgender narrative blew up the media the next day when Caitlyn Jenner “stunned” at her first Oscars celebration in a cherry-red dress adorned with a necklace of layered diamonds (Rayne, 2016). The invisibility surrounding the murder of Stansberry alongside the hypervisibility of Caitlyn Jenner lends itself as an example of “the paradox of visibility” (Seizer, 1995; Tseelon, 1995; Jones and Pugh, 2005; Barnhurst, 2007) underneath what, in 2014, Time magazine labeled “the transgender tipping point” that focused on “the recent rise in transgender narratives” (Molloy, 2014). Simply put, transgender media narratives are steadily increasing, but so are homicides of transgender people. Yet corporate news coverage investigating this violence remains scant2. Still, corporate media lauded their representation of trans communities despite neglecting the prevalence of homicides against transgender people. Lending a sense of triumph, Vogue even declared 2015 as the “Year of Trans Visibility.” Given the invisibility of violence against transgender Americans, the trans visibility to which Vogue referred to begs complex questions such as: what bodies and material realities are seen, what bodies and material realities are ignored or erased in corporate media

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2 The number of homicides of transgender people has increased every year since 2010 with the exception of the year 2014 (Unerased, n.d.). In August of 2015 Time magazine reported that 15 transgender folks had been murdered in the United States —breaking records for the highest number of homicides of transgender people to date (Steinmetz, 2015). By December of 2015 that number had jumped to 21 homicides, with GLAAD reporting that 67% of LGBTQ-related homicides occur against transgender or gender-nonconforming people and 54% of all LGBTQ homicides occur against women of color (Schmider, 2016). These numbers increased in 2016, with 26 reported homicides occurring before October (These are, 2016).
productions? This dissertation focuses on the first of these questions by exploring constructions of trans masculine visibility in YouTube vlogs. To convey the significance of this topic, we should first consider the climate of risk and danger that transgender individuals encounter in the US.

Transgender individuals are, for example, four times more likely to live in poverty than cisgender individuals. One comprehensive study, completed by the National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, found that 51% of transgender individuals faced job loss due to a refusal to recognize gender identity as a category worthy of protection – leading to unemployment rates twice as high as the general population. Finding shelter at the intersection of poverty and radical gender politics proves especially troubling for this community, with 19% experiencing homelessness at some point during their lives. Community programs offer little respite for transgender seekers, with 55% of respondents reporting harassment by shelters, 29% reporting that they had been turned away, and 22% reporting sexual assault at the hands of the staff or other residents. Assault against trans persons is rampant - 61% of respondents reported physical assault and 64% reported sexual assault (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011). Nor do these statistics include instances of health care discrimination, bullying in schools, and the conflux of daily microaggressions. Various intersections of systemic discrimination, in combination with interpersonal aggressions, lead to disproportionately high rates of suicide or attempted suicide in this community, with 41% reporting at least one suicide attempt (Grant et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, the climate for transgender people in the U.S. has not improved since the 2011 report. Importantly, there is not, nor has there ever been, federal protections against discrimination on the basis of gender identity, though some states do offer such protection. In
2014 the Obama administration moved toward a more progressive stance on gender identity and issued an executive order that protects federal employees and contractors from discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. However, a draft of an executive order under the Trump Administration leaked in February of 2017 would undo the protections granted under Obama’s 2014 executive order while potentially allowing for discrimination in states with protections in place (Blumberg, 2017). Meanwhile, representations of trans individuals in the media “suggest that those within this community currently enjoy unprecedented levels of success, access, and inclusion in a manner that elides the often-bleak reality” of transgender people outside of celebrity (Glover, 2016, p. 351).

Mainstream trans narratives assist in the continuation of a cultural narrative that appears to have progressed much further than it realistically has. It is the paradox of visibility that highlights (and at times exaggerates) particular narratives while silencing others in an effort to propel narrative’s heteroideology. Narrative’s heteroideology is a theoretical concept that emerged from the intersection of English and sexuality studies that underscores the link between heterosexuality and narrative. Narrative’s heteroideology establishes that homosexuality exists as (a) deviant to heterosexuality and dangerous, or (b) through a narrative that mirrors heterosexuality and thus returns the audience to normative forms of coupling (Roof, 1996). Importantly, narrative’s ownership of heteroideology (designated by the apostrophe) draws attention to the connection between sexuality and narrative – they cannot be undone from one another. As posited by Roof, narrative has a heterosexual sexuality that is expressed not only through content but through form and structure. Furthermore, because narrative contains and propels ideology – while being informed by dominant ideologies – narrative acts as a device that shapes and organizes culture. If narrative continues to be informed by its heterosexuality then
heteronormativity will continue to be a normalizing apparatus that seeks to police through reinforcement of binary ways of being. This is an especially important theory to revitalize in contemporary times because narrative is “omnipresent” and as such “its shapes, assumptions, and operations manifest a complex, naturalized, process of organization, relation, and connection” (Roof, 1996, p. xv).

I argue that narrative’s heteroideology is still central to the ways in which people tell and consume stories, despite two decades of shifting media representation that has seen an increase in LGB representation and trans representation. For instance, *Modern Family*, whereby two of the gay male protagonists (Mitch and Cam) get married, buy a house, and adopt a child, illustrates the ways in which homosexuality is utilized as a mirror of heterosexual reproductive rituals, albeit with a slight twist. The narrative does not provide the audience with a “non-heterosexual metaphor,” (Bierne, 2008, p. 176), but instead relies upon returning the audience to a familiar scenario of monogamy, child-rearing, and life in the suburban everyday. The narrative of coupling, consumption, reproduction, and acceptability is not shaken, aside from the sex of one character and the gender expressions of both Mitch and Cam.

This dissertation first argues for a recognition of the paradox of trans visibility, phraselogy I use to highlight the process whereby glamorous, celebrity trans individuals attract media attention while the dire material realities of everyday trans people are erased. Secondly, I argue that such paradox is one of the consequences of narrative’s heteroideology. However, because this dissertation focuses more on content and message (ideology), as opposed to narrative’s structure and form, I instead use the term “heteroideological narrative” after establishing narrative’s heteroidology as that which makes heteroideological narratives possible. I further argue that such paradox is attractive for media makers because certain aspects of
experience must be omitted to return audience members to comfortable, normative tropes. Specifically, heteroideological narrative returns consumers to normativity politics of sexual identity through obfuscating queer, fluid bodies that deviate from “proper” heterosexually charged iconography that supports sex, gender, and sexual orientation binaries. Furthermore, binary sexual orientation is also locked into place through removing amorphous bodies that challenge the foundation of either male/female. It is through the shifting body that one can begin to complicate the attraction toward a particular sex, as no stable sex is present.

Independent, digital media productions created by transgender people complicate dominant, hegemonic ideologies commonly found in mainstream media narratives by subverting heteroideological narrative and the resulting paradox of visibility. This work looks specifically at trans masculine video blog (vlog) producers on YouTube because the channels occur over years and are incredibly personal and intimate (Horak, 2014). The care with which the trans masculine YouTube vloggers I worked with during this dissertation craft their public channels draws a wide audience who often learn from the vloggers and are, at times, inspired to declare their own trans identity (Raun, 2015b). Furthermore, looking at audio/visual, independent media such as YouTube assists in the imaginary of what popular, mainstream television and film representations could look like were they to resist heteroideological narrative. This dissertation argues that these vlogs complicate heteroideology by bringing the body back from its vanishing point (Halberstam, 2005) to center fluid, amorphous forms. These trans masculine producers refuse to lock their body into binary ways of being (i.e. male or female) through consistently showcasing the body through visuals or through discussion. In so doing, they complicate binary gender expressions and sexual orientations. Trans masculine vlogs on YouTube have created queer virtual spaces that resist the “whitewashing” that commonly follows mainstream media
productions of queer identities (Peters, 2011). These productions also illustrate various ways in which media studies scholarship can be expanded through attention to transgender independent media productions, particularly in regards to expanding the “authentic” turn in critical media studies and the scholarly analysis of LGB representations that, much like the representations themselves, obscure sexual orientations that exist beyond the dichotomy of gay or straight.

The YouTube vlogs I discuss here draw attention to the everyday experiences of trans individuals and, perhaps without knowing, show the potential to dismantle sexuality that demands a return to identifiable sexual orientation. And, because sexuality that enforced a heterosexual orientation has long been utilized as a policing mechanism, or a “crucial target of a power organized around the management of life” (Foucault, 1990, p. 147), this becomes a counter-hegemonic moment in contemporary culture. Yet, it also becomes a moment whereby – through intensive study and attention – we can see the ways in which various forms of hegemonic power – state, social, and discursive - work through bodies that simultaneously subvert hegemony. In short, astute attention to trans produced content on YouTube is a powerful way to understand everyday life for trans individuals who face erasure (Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2007), symbolic annihilation (Valentine, 2007; Serano, 2007), exclusion from anti-discrimination laws (West, 2014), and overwhelming rates of poverty and violence. Through their attempts to make “their core identities visible and recognizable to the public” (Rubin, 2003, p. 145), vloggers have much to teach the public and media studies scholars.

Chapter Outline

Chapter Two: The Paradox of Trans Visibility Under Heteroideological Narrative

Chapter Two examines the paradox of trans visibility as a contemporary offset of paradoxes discussed in sexuality studies. I argue the paradox is a result of Roof’s (1996) theory
of “narrative’s heteroideology” that emerged from the intersection of literature and sexuality studies. However, I use Roof’s theory as a point of departure to outline “heteroideological narrative/s,” because this dissertation centers message moreso than narrative structure or form. Transgender narratives that are present in our mainstream mediascape propel heteroideological narratives through “returning” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 94: emphasis his) the trans character to binary systems of identification via the body, gender performance, and/or sexual orientation. As unpacked in Chapter Two, heteroideological narrative operates as a mechanism under heteronormativity, a branch if you will. A paradox of visibility is created during this process of return, resulting in the erasure or silencing of portions of experience in favor of presenting one-dimensional, progressive narratives that provide an illusion of a society far more equitable than it is. This chapter argues that heteroideological narrative is the driving force behind simultaneous visibility and obfuscation. Heteroideological narrative is centered in this work because it has both micro and macro impact in society. Stories teach people about themselves and about one another – influencing personal interactions in the everyday by “help[ing] us make sense of our experiences” (Frank, 2003, p. 172). Additionally, being made aware of injustice through visibility (repeatedly telling the story) may act as a catalyst for great political action. The Black Lives Matter movement, for example, began as a hashtag following the murder of Trayvon Martin and the resulting acquittal of George Zimmerman. A community of anti-racists then took the hashtag to physical demonstrations as the police brutality against bodies of color became increasingly visible via repetitive, progressive narratives (Garza, 2014). If narrative plays such a great pedagogical role – for good or ill – it is vital to call out and trace the mechanisms within story that propel ignorance.
Following a definition and explanation of heteroideological narrative, the chapter moves to media examples whereby narrative’s heteroideology is found (these scholars utilize narrative’s heteroideology as opposed to heteroideological narrative/s), discussing the films *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), and *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998) alongside 20/20’s *The Brandon Teena Story on 20/20: The Truth Behind “Boys Don’t Cry”* (2000).

Heteroideology makes an appearance through these productions in various ways – either within the production itself, critics’ reception of the production, or scholarship that engages the production. The prevalence of the return across voices indicates the embeddedness of heteroideology within the cultural fabrics of the United States and begs the question of: if media is pedagogical (Jhally & hooks, 2002) and trans individuals do not see complex representation in mainstream productions then where can they turn for narratives that speak to their experiences? Furthermore, where can the public turn? The answers lie in emerging, digital media.

Independent trans-produced narratives have flourished on YouTube (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2015), Tumblr (Fink & Miller, 2013), and trans-centered websites (Cavalcante, 2016) because such productions offer trans people and allies truly queer, complex narratives absent in mainstream media. The second chapter explores one of these productions through examining the scripted webseries *Brothers* that was hosted on YouTube for over a year before being acquired for distribution by four different streaming services. Chapter Two argues heteroideological narrative and the resulting paradox of visibility as the impetus behind the creation of the successful, award-winning webseries. Yet the webseries is now unavailable on YouTube, where it was widely accessible to anyone with a computer, and has since moved to subscription-based services that many in the trans community may not be able to afford given the intersection of gender identity and poverty. However, the chapter argues that personal narrative vlogs on
YouTube also offer nuanced, three-dimensional representations of life in the everyday for trans masculine producers and, as such, work against heteroideological narrative and the paradox of visibility through centering fluid bodies (Chapter Four) and complicating binary sexual orientations (Chapter Five).

**Chapter Three: Re-imaginining virtuality and corporeality through hybrid methodology**

This dissertation centers and discusses trans visibility through textual analyses, virtual ethnography, and interviews – labeling the fusion of these qualitative methods as hybrid methodology. This methodology chapter seeks to establish hybrid methodology as a viable tool for the study of subcultures through merging feminist philosophy with methodology to illustrate the ways in which methods inform and affect the scholar. Most scholars are familiar with the term “mixed methods research,” as it has become a third category within the research paradigm (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner, 2007), but this dissertation refuses this descriptor. As discussed by Johnson et al., there are various definitions of mixed methods research – they themselves uncovered 19. These definitions are nuanced and, at times, at tension with one another. Yet consistency lies in that every definition discusses the utilization of both quantitative and qualitative methods – with quantitative or qualitative dominance also discussed (Johnson et al., 2007). While this dissertation did indeed review a great deal of quantitative sources, these sources were secondary; all data collection for this dissertation was through various qualitative methods. Utilizing hybrid methodology as a descriptor also works to avoid the dichotomous thinking that undergirds various facets of cultural experience, including academic production. The dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods is long-standing and functions as a divisive measure in ways similar to the dichotomy between sex and gender. Dichotomies work as
sites where one end is privileged at the expense of another and, as a result, have “remarkable significance” in their propensity to divide or demean (Dahlberg, 2013, p. 8).

The utilization of hybrid methodology is not only a means to draw attention to the dichotomy within methods, but also an attempt to answer to and hopefully resist the temptation to remove trans people from their everyday (Namaste 2000, Rubin 2003) by astutely observing the portions of their everyday made public. In short, precise and reflexive attention to trans produced content on YouTube is a powerful way to understand everyday life for trans individuals who face erasure (Namaste, 2000; Namaste, 2009; Serano, 2007), discursive violence (Valentine, 2007; Serano, 2007), legal exclusion from governmental protection against discrimination (West, 2014), and overwhelming rates of poverty and violence as they attempt to make “their core identities visible and recognizable to the public” (Rubin, 2003, p. 145).

Chapter Three also answers the question of what virtual ethnography offers knowledge projects by arguing that virtual ethnography may assist scholars in reconsidering their own biases based upon discursive imaginings. In particular, through evoking feminist philosophies of Miranda Fricker, Maria Lugones, and Shaka McGlotten, this chapter positions virtual ethnography as a method that enables a researcher to re-imagine what it means to travel and act as a participant-observer. However, a caveat exists in that re-imagining these terms must exist alongside a re-imagining of the virtual, arguing that the dichotomy between the corporeal and the virtual is unnecessary and quite detrimental to knowledge production.

To immerse myself into the everyday of trans masculine producers I watched the channels of three YouTube vloggers – Dade, Jason, and Xavier – while taking detailed fieldnotes (Jason and Dade sometimes have their partners in frame with them or creating their own vlogs alongside them). Roughly 180 vlogs were watched and detailed for this dissertation, resulting in
over 300 pages of 1.5 spaced, typed fieldnotes complete with screenshots. Fieldnotes were complemented with in-depth interviews with each of the producers whose channels were viewed. The transcription following these interviews created over 150 pages of notes to complement the field notes for a total of 450 pages of fieldnotes and interview transcriptions. All of this work was completed following exemption from Pennsylvania State University’s Institutional Review Board.

Chapter Four: A return to sex

Chapter Four argues that the vloggers I worked with during the course of this research resist heteroideology in their narratives in both subtle and overt ways through focusing attention on the shifting body while in pursuit of their authentic selves. Their constant discussion of the body – as it betrays, as it gives hope, as the voice drops, as the chin stubble begins to appear – reminds viewers that the body is not only important to one’s identity but also births and destroys the self again and again. The body is necessary for self-actualization. Yet true focus on and discussion of the body in academic scholarship is relatively rare (Halberstam, 2005; Grosz, 1995; Tuana 1997). This chapter seeks to bring the body into focus given the ways in which trans masculine producers center their own forms. This is of great import as erasing the body also serves as an erasure of the people whose bodies betray their gender identity and expression.

Furthermore, attending to bodies, the grave detail with which vloggers discuss their malleable and always changing forms, is the vital step in complicating heteroideology. It makes uncomfortable the static, binary sexed body our cultural imagination has locked in place and makes room for discussion of the body as more than a form defined by cultural expectations of gender roles. Additionally, and explored following an in-depth analysis of how these creations radically center sex and complicate the binary, this focus on the body also calls into question
gender roles – both vital to working against heteroideological narrative. Additionally, a textual analysis of one episode of *Orange is the New Black* is completed to contextualize the ways in which more progressive mainstream media productions return to heteroideology through their narrative. A textual analysis of this episode also serves as a comparison point between mainstream and independent media productions. Therefore, this chapter (while discussing moments that illustrate the intra-relatedness of sex and gender) centers the body. It takes care to discuss the body as it is represented by its wearers through their subverting, re-writing, and tracking the ways in which their forms exist as malleable and amorphous. This discussion is made possible through detailed description and analysis of various vlogs created by Dade, Jason, and Xavier.

This chapter also evokes the authentic turn in media studies whereby political economists critique authenticity as a tool in self-branding that serves the culture industry. That is, to be authentic is to be “real,” an “everyday” person (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2015; Hearn, 2008). While such critiques are of great import to understanding the utility of emergent media for users and corporations, they also leave behind those who exist outside of binary ways of being. Binary, birth-designated sex and gender was not authentic for these producers despite heteroideological constructs of identity that position birth sex and cisgender expression as “natural.” Transgender producers’ YouTube tags signify their self-identification as transgender, these tags deny the binary as “real.” This chapter also critiques Judith Butler’s theory of the subject/abject she raises in her canonical text *Bodies that Matter*. I argue that if scholars continually define terms (subject, realness, authentic) in regards to how such words are used to exploit labor, police, demean, and leave behind, then valuable stories and ways of knowing that are inspired by and evolve from a quest for self are also left behind. Where then does that leave transgender people in search of
their authentic selves? How does the body configure into authenticity? Subjecthood? The YouTube vloggers centered in this dissertation answer these questions through their shifting bodies. This makes room for discussion of the body as more than a form defined by cultural expectations of gender roles. Additionally, and explored following an in-depth analysis of how these creations radically center sex and complicate the binary, this focus on the body also calls into question gender roles – both vital to working against heteroideological narrative.

**Chapter Five: Uncategorizable Orientations**

The foundations of sexual orientation (as widely understood in a heteronormative society with vast heteroideological narratives) begin to shake when amorphous, fluid bodies and shifting gender expressions are centered. Heteroideological narrative, which positions sexual orientation as an either/or (LGB/straight), is invalidated or – at the very least – severely complicated when sex and gender shifting is seen and discussed. A non-categorizable orientation comes to exist in the space that homo/bi/hetero once existed. However, this unraveling of binary orientation is an uncomfortable and painful process, and YouTube vlogs illustrate that. This chapter explores the ways in which Tiffany (wife to Dade) and Bianca (fiancé to Jason) navigate the change of their long-standing self-identification as their partners transition. The vlogs that feature Tiffany and Bianca illustrate the ways in which omnipresent heteroideological narratives act as a mechanism of identity construction so poignant that partners go through a mourning period when orientation is questioned. Yet Tiffany and Bianca were with their partners before Dade and Jason began their transitions, and both Dade and Jason identify as transgender men and state that they often pass as cisgender men. This brings into question what love looks and feels like for people who are sex and genderqueer. Vlogger Xavier often explains what coupling is like for someone with a fluid sexual identity and, in doing so, takes great care to elaborate for viewers that there is a difference
between sex, gender, and sexual orientation despite their frequent conflation. Through analyzing Xavier’s vlogs it is shown that people who embody queerness also carry the burden of educating their partners about their body and separating their body from their gender expression and sexual orientation to avoid objectification and compartmentalization. Xavier illustrates that the cords of sex, gender, and sexual orientation must be untangled to understand how heteroideological narrative has persisted through simultaneous attention and erasure.

Through exploring these vlogs, alongside a literature review of sexual orientation representation in the media, it is argued that mainstream media’s obfuscation of a spectrum of bodies creates an erasure of truly queer coupling both in corporate media (Callis, 2014) and in academic literature. It is argued that the invisibility of queerness across categories of sexual identity acts as a form of dispossession (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013) that works alongside state-sanctioned forms of dispossession. Paradoxically, this may also serve as part of the inspiration behind trans masculine independent media productions (along with other emerging queer productions) as dispossession – the process of “undoing, being undone, and becoming” (p. 193) may prompt folks to speak up, to act, and to collectively assemble toward a vision of society that does not propel the “regulatory fiction of gender and sexuality” (p. 44). In sum, the very systems of regulation that have displaced and stigmatized gender outliers – such as heteroideological narrative – have (inadvertently) inspired a new class of new media users and producers. These producers are, through their care and vulnerability of telling their stories, doing the important work of unraveling complex identification schemas that act as ideological policing mechanisms.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The conclusion offers readers a final synthesis of the ways in which trans masculine, independent personal narrative vlogs are largely counterhegemonic because of their refusal to
return to tropes established by heteroideological narrative. However, the conclusion also explores the ways in which normativity politics work through trans masculine vlogs in regards to what is seen and shared. I argue that popularity on YouTube is dependent upon normativity. That is, vloggers most likely to go viral are those who are passable as the “opposite” sex of one’s birth designation, have fit bodies, and are economically comfortable. This theory is explored in depth in the conclusion as a means to offer suggestions for future research as my methodology makes such a claim ungeneralizable. Yet there is value in taking more time to investigate this as it begs the question: are audiences ready to diverge from heteroideological narrative? Would an analysis of the audience bring us closer to answering these questions?

The following chapters formulate where paradoxes of trans visibility happen and speculates about the impacts those paradoxes have on transgender people. They also seek to illustrate the ways in which heteroideological narrative is often challenged by trans masculine YouTube vlog producers while also being propelled. Through watching these vlogs the audience can see how heteroideology works through people and how people challenge heteroideology. I also argue that these producers make visible the material realities of transgender people that are obscured from mainstream media given that the paradox of trans visibility is born from heteroideological narrative. Trans produced social media offers a promise of what mainstream trans representations could look like were they created from lived experience. They also offer scholars of various disciplines within the arts and humanities a means with which to understand how the study of a chronology of narratives can complicate the hegemonic ideologies often returned to in academic production.
CHAPTER TWO: THE PARADOX OF TRANS VISIBILITY UNDER HETEROIDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE

This chapter explores the paradox of trans visibility under heteroideological narrative in an effort to nuance mainstream trans representations. Through textual analyses of various mainstream media products, this chapter argues that the mere presence of transgender characters in corporate media does not correlate to progress in larger society. Ultimately, this chapter argues that media visibility – what many individuals would consider representation – is vital, as “for some sections of society, at least, the media have largely replaced older institutions (such as the Church, or trade unions) as the primary source of understanding the world” (Talbot, 2007, p. 3). One cannot understand what is not visible. One cannot come to acceptance of something that is beyond what they have encountered in their unmediated lives. Media is, as bell hooks proclaimed, “the primary pedagogical medium for masses of people globally who want to, in some way, understand the politics of difference” (Jhally & hooks, 2002). However, this is mired in complication as the media landscape – ever more saturating by the day – exists in a state of spectacle that is a “concrete inversion of life” (DeBord, 2000, thesis 2). In this “inversion” representations have the potentiality to become the “enemy” of the group they appear to archetypalize (thesis 100) through obscuring narratives that highlight marginalization and oppression in favor of presenting celebratory narratives that satiate audience members’ desires for progress in society (Becker, 2006). This tension between what is seen and unseen is referred to as paradoxes of visibility, understood metaphorically as a veil.

The paradox of visibility (Seizer, 1995; Tseelon, 1995; Jones and Pugh, 2005; Barnhurst, 2007) is a theoretical phrase that seeks to explain the ways in which portions of existence are accepted, narrated, and sometimes lauded while others are left under-represented or invisible. An example being current transgender narratives in popular, mainstream media that are devoid of
representation that highlights the material realities that members of the subculture face. As roles for transgender talent increased in the mediascape (largely accepted and lauded as progress even though most roles went to cisgender actors), so too did homicides of transgender individuals. Unlike the media blitz surrounding celebrities such as Caitlyn Jenner, these crimes were left largely unreported (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Other devastating material realities faced by transgender folks are also obscured, such as increased likelihoods of systemic discrimination that lead to homelessness, job loss, and refusal of health care. Members of this community are also more likely to be assaulted at home, in shelters, or on the streets as poverty intersects with their gender identity. Transgender youth also report high instances of bullying and familial disownment following announcement of their transition. The conflux of these various manifestations of transphobia, alongside bodily dysmorphia, has led to a suicide epidemic (Grant et al., 2011). These glaring instances of marginalization remain largely undiscussed in the corporate media complex, yet there are more transgender narratives than ever before.

The paradox of visibility, as it has been used as a grounding theory in sex and gender scholarship, is unpacked here so scholars fully understand its utility and can operationalize it for use in investigating the paradox of trans visibility. A lineage of the phrase is offered to create a space for necessary addendums that account for shifting cultural attitudes. When scholars began exploring visibility as paradox they did so in a cultural moment whereby lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations (LGB) were just emerging from invisibility to visibility and, in some cases, hypervisibility. The concerns that fed orientation paradoxes were (and are) different than the concerns that undergird transgender narratives. Yet transgender narratives were made possible only through the heightened visibility of LGB narratives because various facets of sexual identity (sex, gender, and sexual orientation) are interwoven. Therefore, this chapter contributes a
definition of paradoxes of visibility, considerations to the paradoxes of visibility for transgender communities, and a concise historiography of the phrase through its various, contextualized usages.

**The Paradox of Visibility**

In the mid-1990’s Susan Seizer published a reflexive essay regarding her experiences as a lesbian anthropologist traveling with her partner through South India, where queer sexual orientations were not legible and as a result lesbian partnership was re-written as intimate friendship (1995). The essay, a culmination of fieldnotes, storytelling, and theory, detailed the many ways Seizer’s self-accepted identity as dyke was misread in Madurai given the inability of local culture to understand queerness as a form of sexual intimacy between people. As stated by Seizer, her lesbianism was erased from her identity. Her romantic partner was erased from her life and placed instead as a revered confidant (1995):

> It [lesbianism] is a no-thing, quite literally. There is no way to say ‘lesbian’ in Tamil . . . There is already in Tamil, however, a rather unique term for denoting the female companion of a female . . . A toli is a woman’s dear friend, her confidante, her co-worker and her chaperone, but not her lover” (pp. 87-88).

Susan’s partner, Kate, was therefore seen by people of Mandurai as essential to Susan’s life, someone who ensures “a young woman’s proper evolution into a bride,” but not someone who could be a same-sex bride. Yet Susan and Kate operated in a space where their relationship was hypervisible given its undeniably special intimacy (they were never apart, unlike other tolis) and even given the special descriptor “uyir toli . . . ‘female life companions’ or ‘female soul mates’” (p. 88). However, their love was only visible in the locally understood context as two close friends who prepare one another for future marriage to a man. Therefore, Susan’s sexual
orientation identity was both visible (indicated by the addendum to toli following fascination with the women’s consistent proximity to one another) and invisible (their love could be psychically intimate but not physically so). Tseelon also discussed the paradox in 1995 when discussing sexual identity, focusing not on sexual orientation but instead gender performances that encourage heterosexual coupling. Tseelon did not use the phrase “paradox of visibility” but instead continually referred to a paradox of womanhood that is both invisible and visible. Tseelon interrogated femininity, positioning mediated accounts of this gender performance as hypervisible when a hyperreal heterosexual femininity is represented for conquest. Tseelon’s paradox rested in the omnipresence of the mediated, ideal woman whose body is always seen and many times positioned as an object on display. However, feminine bodies were rarely represented in positions of power — both because fewer women hold leadership positions and also because representing powerful women in the media removes them from the status of object to be obtained and places them instead as an agentic subject. Like Seizer, Tseelson offered no working definition of the paradox of visibility but instead utilizes the phrase as something inherently intuitive.

Yet Seizer and Tseelon offer a consistency in their work, despite their different focuses stemming from sexual identity. They illustrate that paradoxes of visibility often work through highlighting one facet of sexual identity while obscuring another. For Seizer orientation was centered but discussion of the sex and gender were subtly evoked as an aside—examples utilized to illustrate the incomprehensibility of queer sexual orientations. Seizer discussed in detail the rituals between her and Kate (sleeping in the same house for example) that left folks puzzled, but did not provide detailed analysis of how the reading of the sexed body created the space for paradox. In Tseelon’s account the reverse happened. Tseelon centered the body with discussion
of how coupling worked alongside hyperfeminine gender performances. Both accounts offer tools for the analysis of the paradox of visibility as it presents itself within scholarship: as an entanglement between facets of sexual identity that often leave one area highlighted while the other is present only as support. Privileging sex, gender, or orientation does not deny the multi-faceted nature of sexual identity. It can be argued that privileging one at the expense of the other illustrates how much work must be done to tease apart the ways sex, gender, and sexual orientation work together when conflated and thus maintain hegemonic identity constructions.

Jones and Pugh (2005) utilize Tseelon’s work one decade later and re-invigorated the theory following its hibernation, adding safety as another paradox that results from visibility. Their exploration of the intersectional nature of the paradox of visibility shifts focus back to sexual orientation, interrogating gay orientations as they intersect with age. Like Seizer and Tseelon’s work, the essay is bereft of a working definition of the paradox of visibility. Yet like Seizer and Tseelon one facet of sexual identity, orientation, is privileged while sex and gender are given far less space and discussed only in relation to orientation, creating another paradox. While Jones and Pugh also neglect to provide a point of departure with which to think about the paradox of visibility, they do introduce safety as an important component to consider when discussing visibility. Visibility can mean greater acceptance for subcultural communities as the narratives work toward familiarization of the unknown. It can also create greater dangers for subcultural communities. Jones and Pugh point out that as gay spaces became prominent so too did their appeal to heterosexual women looking for respite from the heterosexual masculinities with which they are often confronted. Therefore, these spaces become visible to heterosexual men hoping to pick up potential partners, and as such conflict can occur between these queer and hetero masculinities and, of course, bodies.
Barnhurst (2007) adds to Jones and Pugh’s concerns over safety when writing of “coming out narratives;” as “coming out is supposed to reap benefits but often destroys personal relationships and may lead to social death in some circles or physical harm in others” (p. 1). Barnhurst draws critical attention to celebratory tones undergirding the visibility of coming out, arguing that romanticism does incredible work for heteronormativity in that it camouflages the material realities queers face following coming out, such as disavowal by loved ones and employment discrimination (the list is far more extensive, of course). Barnhurst adds another important component to the workings of visibility narratives—they assist in a progressive mythology of unconditional acceptance or, at the very least, tolerance through operating like a veil. Praising coming out narratives as acts of bravery and progress acts as a surface-level celebration of diversity, becoming the frill of the material that catches eyes and aesthetic senses. Yet the fancy fabric, delightful as it may be, also allows for the obscuration of myriads of discriminations and aggressions in need of attention and intervention. Power is left largely intact through this cloaking mechanism that disguises abuses and highlights small victories. The narrative becomes “well, there is a transgender star on Orange is the New Black, so clearly we don’t have to worry about bathrooms,” or – one more familiar “but we had a Black president, so racism is clearly not an issue anymore.” Laverne Cox – or Barack Obama – are visible, but that visibility is just as dangerous as it is captivating.

The metaphor of visibility as a cloaking device is not a situational tool used to establish visibility as good or bad, progressive or regressive. Instead, the metaphor acknowledges the potency of visibility (giving individuals language and a framework for understanding or at least envisioning difference) while also drawing attention to the fact that narratives obscure just as they make visible. Ironically, visibility narratives are quite similar to the metaphor of the closet
in that they operate on and assist with propelling binaries that erase the nuances of experience and the multi-dimensional nature of identity and social relations. In short, binaries collapse people into boxes that exist in relation to one another and then normalize one of the boxes while casting the other as deviant or Other:

Condensed in the figures of ‘the closet’ and ‘coming out,’ this very specific crisis of definition has then inefaceably marked other pairings as basic to modern cultural organization as masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation . . . So permeative has the suffusing stain of homo/heterosexual crisis been that to discuss any of these indices in any context, in the absence of antihomophobic analysis, must perhaps be to perpetuate unknowingly compulsions implicit in each” (Sedgwick, 1990, pp. 72-73)

Just as the closet is a figure of linear progression from being in hiding to being out – with an imaginary end point – so too is visibility a specter of presence as acknowledgement. To be visible is to be looked at, but it is not to be seen. The failure to interrogate these differences (to be looked at vs. seen, to be heard vs. to be listened to, etc…) and establish a nuanced analysis of visibility particular to the situation/s under discussion pushes forward dangerously uncritical notions of progress. The imaginary of progress then maintains an exclusionary status quo mired in heteronormative (and sometimes homonormative and now, arguably, transnormative) compulsions in various and intersecting ways. In the case of the “year of transgender visibility” (and the various transgender narratives that exist in the current popular media environment), mainstream representation of transness is not assumed a given enemy to transgender people as DeBord asserted when he declared representation an “inversion” (thesis 100). Trans representations in mainstream media have done good. Yet these representations are positioned
here as icons that, like the metaphor of the veil, often obscure the material realities of transgender people while simultaneously being lauded as evidence of progress and acceptance.

The Paradoxical Year of Transgender Visibility

*Vogue* published a story entitled “Why 2015 Was the Year of Trans Visibility” on December 29, 2015, which detailed the increase in transgender narratives across mainstream media platforms (Taylor, 2015). The list highlighted both transgender celebrities (Caitlyn Jenner, Jazz Jennings, and Laverne Cox) and entertainment products released in 2015 (*Tangerine*, *The Danish Girl*, and *Drunkentown’s Finest* and streaming shows *Transparent*, *Orange is the New Black*, and television show *I am Jazz*). Listed, also, was trans activist Jennicet Gutiérrez and whistleblower Chelsea Manning. The list also named model Hari Nef, the first openly transgender White House legislative staffer Raffi Freedman-Gurspan, high school student Gavin Grimm, and fitness model Aydian Dowling (Taylor, 2015). The inclusionary list – drawing from celebrity culture, sport, activism, and politics - is quite impressive. Taken at face value it seems, by and large, that the transgender community has much to celebrate as culture appears to have moved toward greater acceptance of gender bending people and practices. However, analysis of the list illustrates glaring invisibilities to interrogate. These invisibilities include (1) an absence of trans masculinities; (2) positioning the body as static and unmoving or returning to culturally understood notions of binary sexed forms and gender expressions; (3) violence against transgender people; and (4) daily microaggressions leading to systemic poverty and displacement.

**Paradox: What of trans masculinities and moving bodies?**

The first invisibility discussed here, and the one that acted as catalyst for this research project, is the lack of trans masculine narratives alongside the increasing visibility of trans
feminine narratives. Grimm and Dowling are the only trans men on Vogue’s list. Grimm entered the media spotlight when he filed a lawsuit in collaboration with the American Civil Liberties Union against his school district’s policy that forbade him access to the men’s restroom. The suit resulted in a victory for Grimm when, on June 23, 2016, a federal court ruled that he must be allowed access to the men’s restroom (Jacobo, 2016). Dowling was featured in the story because the bodybuilder was the first transgender man to grace the cover of a special edition of Men’s Health, with a cover story headlined “The Reader Issue: Real Guys, Real Results” with Aydian listed as “The Pioneer.”

Even the films and television shows highlighted in Vogue’s article, regardless of exhibition on web-streaming or cable television, featured trans feminine-centered narratives. Tangerine, an independently produced film available through Netflix, follows two trans women of color as they attempt to locate the pimp who cheated on main character Sin-dee while she was in jail. Drunkentown’s Finest (also independent) follows three main characters living on a Navajo Indian reservation, one of whom is a transgender woman named Felixia. The award-winning film The Danish Girl, the most notorious of the films on the list, fictionalizes gender warrior Lile Elbe’s groundbreaking transition in the early twentieth century. The television shows follow the same trend, highlighting trans feminine narratives with no references to trans masculinities. Both Orange is the New Black and Transparent, available through Netflix and Amazon, follow the lives of two fictional transgender women. I am Jazz, in contrast, is a reality-based television program on TLC that chronicles the life of transgender teen Jazz Jennings, who began her transition at two years old.

There was little change in the paradox between the hypervisible trans feminine narratives and largely invisible trans masculine narratives in 2016. The narratives of trans masculinity
conform to a very particular discursive formation of trans bodies that are perceived less threatening to binary bodies given the passability of the form. The trans male bodies centered in *Vogue’s* story obscure the presence of malleability and fluidity (the spectrum between legibly sexed bodies). These stories offer comfort to established imaginaries of what sexed bodies *should* look like. Grimm and Dowling do not appear transgender; it is only through their verbal outing as transgender that this portion of their identity becomes visible. Erased from their narratives is the malleability of their bodies, the historiography of change that marks them as bodies in motion, complicating binaries dependent on designated birth sex. The imagery of static bodies (legibly sexed according to a binary) leads to a disappearance of shifting sex, therefore it is the shifting that begins the critical work of untangling binary (and arguably trinary) forms of being, as later discussed in Chapter Four.

Highlighting the victories of Dowling (a toned and lauded body) and Grimm (a teen taking on the school board over bathroom access) aids in the paradox of visibility through offering discourse to already familiar issues at the expense of discussing oppressions. Grimm’s challenging of bathroom policies, for example, made far fewer waves than Dowling’s appearance on the cover of *Men’s Health* – illustrating a cultural celebration of toned and healthy bodies, forms that appeal to idealistic notions of appearance and performance. Stories that discuss political action (activism surrounding the politics of restrooms) receive far less attention, yet even within these narratives we are able to trace what aspects of our cultural norms and values are supported just as they are challenged. In the transgender bathroom debate gender binarism – particularly traditional, hegemonic codes of masculinity and femininity – are supported while simultaneously being deconstructed by activists opposing discriminatory spaces. The bathroom
debate also illustrates one of the few spaces in contemporary media where trans masculine narratives are visible.

**Paradox: Bathrooms as bastions of acceptable bodies**

The bathroom is, quite frankly, an apt metaphor for the ways in which space is designed to keep individuals oriented in a straight line – that is, performing according to necessary rubrics that reinforce the binary of sex and of gender (Ahmed, 2006). If you piss standing up, you should look and act as if you piss standing up. Yet, if you look and act as if you piss standing up but must alter the normative posture associated with upright pissing (there is also a great deal of ableism inherent in bathrooms) then you are alien, despite the design that indicates that we all – regardless of sex or gender – shit sitting down. Halberstam (1998) who referred to a similar hysteria over a decade ago as “the bathroom problem,” writes that the problem - when attended to - is indicative of how much work is left to be done in regards to sex and gender-based acts of discrimination and division, as “it illustrates in remarkably clear ways the flourishing existence of gender binarism despite rumors of its demise” (p. 22) That is, the bathroom unveils the paradox of visibility when critically considered because it puts progress narratives to the test by illustrating real-life consequences to gender outliers who seek a gender-affirming safe space to relieve themselves in. Halberstam posits that ambiguous bodies can be read as threatening when entering gender-specific places. This threat leads to a hypervisibility that becomes quite dangerous to the dismantling of systems of categorization that have long been used to police bodies and actions through “punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (Butler, 2007, p. 190). Systems of power, however, cannot name the refusal to submit to gender binarism as the root of the danger of nonbinary people. Instead these bodies are posed as threats to the everyday
“natural” person. This forms the basis of ideological hegemony (Gramsci, 2000) as the narrative of difference as danger, i.e. the transgender woman could be a man trying to molest children in the restroom, encourages people to police for the systems that divide them. The policing of difference then collapses potentialities for conversation and education that could undo categorical imperatives designed to divide.

What has changed since Halberstam and Butler’s writings is that now the “bathroom problem” is hypervisible – in such a way that both trans masculine and trans feminine narratives are present in the debate, especially following North Carolina’s 2016 discriminatory legislation (the “bathroom bill” HB2). The ways in which bodies are designed for urination prohibit or inhibit entry into certain locations, and gender expressions should correspond properly or face policing. In short, the “bathroom problem” presents a mediated narrative that makes trans masculine persons visible, but only in so much as their sexed body is legible (passable) according to a binary, with gender expressions complementing the binary sexed body. Indeed, opponents of measures such as North Carolina’s controversial HB2 bill³ often rely on a narrative of “passing” that maintains both hegemonic bodily appearances and hegemonic gender expressions that reject ambiguity. This is evidenced in the transgender-led social media activism against North Carolina’s egregious, Jim Crow-like segregation bill whereby many transgender activists utilized imagery and text to ask, “Would you put me in that restroom?” In one of the most famous examples, photographer Meg Bitton posted an image of Corey, a young, White transgender girl with long blonde hair on her public Facebook page⁴. The original caption

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³ Senate Democrats have been battling with this bill since its introduction. In February of 2017, a repeal motion had been filed, but there remains concern with the repeal passing the General Assembly (Binker & Leslie, 2017). Also worth noting is that HB2 not only discriminates against gender identity but also removes race and national origin employment protections (Glazier, n.d.).

⁴ You can see Meg’s post here: https://www.facebook.com/MegBittonPhotography/posts/10153063771317395:0
accompanying the image read “if this was YOUR daughter, would you be comfortable sending her into a men's bathroom? Neither would I. Be fair. Be kind. Be empathetic. Treat others how you would like to be treated,” (Bitton, 2016). The post went viral. Many stories similar to Corey’s appeared – such as James Sheffield’s:

Figure 1: A White transgender man poses for the camera to protest bathroom discrimination on his Twitter account

These narratives, both trans masculine and trans feminine, followed an earlier, yet far less visible round of trans social media activism concerned with restroom issues. In June 2015 Michael Hughes initiated the #wejustneedtopee hashtag to draw attention to proposed Florida legislation that sought to prohibit transgender individuals from using the restroom that
complemented their identities. These instances of social media activism utilize bodily visibility to draw attention to discriminatory and dehumanizing spatial ordering. Indeed, these narratives are expressing a courageous and explicit disdain and, as such, are part of a wider social media network of activism around transgender issues. However, these images still presuppose that men and women – whether trans or cis – should look a certain way. That is, while these images subtly work towards dismantling the notion that women and men are formed and understood by genital designation, they also promote the idea that – even if one is to alter their sexed body – a body should be legible at a glance as male or female. The body should support assumptions of a binary sexed body that supports a binary gender expression.

These moments of expressive, pedagogical embodiment also play on tropes of fear and propriety that have long held normativity in place through spatial ordering based on gender performativity. The gender performativity presumes a “Victorian morality” insistent upon a “public propriety” through separation (West, 2014, pp. 61-62) wholly dependent on heterosexuality and therefore upon legible, sexed bodies that have a clear opposite. It is the widespread normalization of heterosexuality that presumes separate spaces for separate sexes must be maintained for such propriety. This normalized mythos of acceptable bodies and resulting orientations is so entrenched that even radical plays on sex and gender unconsciously support it. Trans activism against bathroom policing is radical in that it places the trans individual into a highly public sphere, thus endangering them (visibility and safety) while simultaneously turning conversation to real consequences for real people (effectively centering trans experience).

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5 You can see one of Michael’s tweets here: https://twitter.com/_michaelhughes1/status/835992580416499712
However, like the gender-neutral bathroom that relies on single stalls and space segregation, these moments of speaking out are also indicative of the deep entrenchment of “heteronormative, bigendered logics of public propriety” (West, 2014, p. 62) that impacts even marginalized members of society. This ideological entrenchment does not erase the radical potential of the memes above. Yet it does illustrate how embedded bigenderism is in the collective cultural conscience, so embedded in fact that even those actively working against such logics unknowingly promote them while complicating them. Examples such as those above are visible and arguably effective because, while they subtly disturb understandings of binary sex and binary gender, they also mitigate such disturbances through the reliance on tropes of vulnerability (femininity) and threat/protection (masculinity) that reinforce the very binary just complicated. However, the reinforcement of binary gender is not taught but instead elastic. It allows for bodies “readable at a glance” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 23) to enter spaces that remain a “violent enforcement of our current gender system” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 25). Lastly, while the “bathroom problem” complicates arguments of trans masculine invisibility during the “transgender tipping point,” it also points to another paradox of visibility: certain trans bodies are hypervisible while others are erased from seeing/knowing. The bodies that are visible are gender policed in an even more extreme manner than cisgender folks, alerting us to the relationship between visibility and safety as discussed by Jones and Pugh (2005) and Barnhurst (2007).

**Paradox: Cultural expectations of trans femininity as transmisogyny in motion**

The trans celebrities who take center stage in the mainstream mediascape of the United States are Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox, as indicated by press accounts informing readers of “transgender celebs you need to know” (n.d.). CBS’s list, which contains 22 transgender “celebs,” illustrates the very invisibility surrounding trans masculinities highlighted previously –
with only two individuals on the list being trans masculine, or roughly 10%. Clicking through the photo gallery also indicates another trend: the trans feminine narratives portrayed are illustrative of a hyperfemininity, discussed by Espineira (2016) as “over-gendering” toward “archetypical femininity” (pp. 326-327). This archetypal, pronounced gendered imagery is heavily reliant upon class privilege and submission to a long-standing male gaze that “controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6) by presenting women as objects to be consumed as opposed to subjects with agentic capacity. The transwomen portrayed in CBS’s list, compiled four decades after Mulvey’s calling out of the male gaze, follow the rubric outlined therein. They are largely coiffed, heeled, and made up to conform to a very decorated ideal of femininity. Even transwomen in sport, a domain largely associated with masculinity (Krane, 2001) and perhaps a place that would allow for more genderqueer expression, are presented to the audience with an exclusionary feminine ideal in mind.

The photos of Renee Richards (known for a tennis career in the 1970’s) and Fallon Fox (contemporary MMA fighter) illustrate the image-conscious presentation attributable to femininity throughout the ages. Richards (p. 17), whose image was taken on the court, has her hair pulled back – no doubt for practical reasons regarding mobility, sight, and bodily temperature – but perhaps also to highlight her delicate golden hoop earrings, perfectly tamed and trimmed eyebrows, and shadowed eyes. Fox (p. 19), whose image has clearly undergone digital retouching, is shot from above, an angle that strips of power by making forms look smaller and looked down upon. Her face, a bronze tan, is illuminated by light. One arm is up to either flex a muscle or illustrate the importance of her fist for sport, but her face beams with a smile. Her back is curved, shoulders arching backwards – illustrating Goffman’s “ritualization of subordination” through her bodily cant, which Goffman characterizes as an “acceptance of
subordination, submissiveness, and appeasement” (1979, p. 170) typically associated with binary ideal femininity. Fallon’s photo does, however, refuse “licensed withdrawal” that would avert her gaze from the camera (p. 57) – bringing her eyes directly to the viewers. Yet her playful stance, large smile, bronzed tan, perfect eyebrows, and subtle black, smoked eye penciling remind viewers that femininity demands a certain looking upon-ness. Yet these women face two oppressive intersections within their identity – both of which urge us to reconsider sex and gender: (1) their position within sport whereby they present as hyperfeminine to “protect themselves from prejudice and discrimination” in a world hostile to their gender identity (Krane, 2001, p. 120); (2) their position as trans feminine whereby recognition in a binary sex and gender system depends upon conformity to particular gender acts while simultaneously complicating understandings of binary sexed bodies. This tension appears to exist for all trans feminine celebrities.

Trans women and trans feminine persons under media spotlight, and indeed in the everyday, face additional pressures to perform an exaggerated feminine ideal in order to be seen/recognized. Laverne Cox, when interviewed by bell hooks in 2014, came under fire for hyperfemininity, with hooks alluding to Cox’s implication in the patriarchal gaze. Cox replied to hooks: “I’ve found something that feels empowering. And I think the really honest answer is that I’ve constructed myself in a way so that I don’t want to disappear. I’ve never been interested in being invisible and being erased” (qtd. in Mirk, 2014, para. 9). Cox’s statement speaks to the importance of understanding trans feminine people as individuals under strict, sexist dictates whereby their recognition depends upon a heightened gender performativity that can further harm already vulnerable subjects. As Brownmiller writes, “the extremes of femininity are harmful only – only! – to women themselves in the form of a self-imposed masochism (restraint,
inhibition, self-denial, a wasteful use of thought and time) that is deliberately mistaken for ‘true nature’” (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 236). Such a trend should act as a kind of stimulant for feminist scholars and activists - urging the centering of the double-bind many trans feminine individuals face given the intersection of heightened gender expectation that, as Brownmiller stated, inflicts a “masochism” already upon cisgender women whose sex is not circumspect.

This dangerous double-bind should also be considered as part of the paradox of visibility inherent in mainstream media artifacts – meaning hyperfeminine trans bodies are the center of trans media narratives, often resulting in praise that resituates feminine gender performances as dependent wholly upon looks. This is evidenced by a publication in The Mirror whereby Caitlyn Jenner’s resemblance to supermodel Cindy Crawford is fawned over, Evans and Strang (2015) writing, “ever since she made her debut as Caitlyn we have always thought she was a stunning woman” (para. 1). Similarly, hosts and guests of The View remarked upon Jenner’s transition following her 2015 Vanity Fair magazine release, with Whoopi Goldberg stating that Bruce looked better than her as a man and “Caitlyn is still cuter” than her now. Guest host Raven Symone added that Jenner is “a hot woman” (Maglio, 2015, paras. 7 and 5). While I mention only two sources, this commentary surrounding Jenner is far from isolated. Mainstream media lit up regarding Jenner, with a majority of the commentary centering how “hot” or “cute” Jenner looked following her transition.

The discourse surrounding trans femininities therefore seems dependent upon the transgender individual being able to perform an exaggerated ideal of femininity that – as alluded to by hooks when chatting with Laverne Cox (Mirk, 2014) – can actually be regressive for various communities of women, especially trans women. Transgender women and trans feminine people face staggering gender policing that is exacerbated by their failure or refusal to perform
culturally legible femininity. Indeed, their failure or refusal to perform hyperfemininity increases the likelihood of discrimination and physical violence (Bazargan & Galvan, 2012; Testa, Sciacca, Wang, Hendricks, & Goldblum, 2012). It has also taken their lives, as evidenced by the rising rate of homicides against trans women (Steinmetz, 2015) with 2016 being the deadliest year for transgender people in the United States.

The majority of victims are transgender women of color (Schmider, 2016), but the discussion of their gender identity can obfuscate the importance that race plays when discussing violence. Violence against transgender women of color draws to the center the importance of a truly intersectional approach when understanding the material realities of transgender people. Feminist thought from the 1980’s onward has “increasingly employed” an intersectional framework (Shields, 2008, p. 303) to understand how identity privileges or marginalizes those in society based on intersecting axes of race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation (Shields, 2008). Yet, the tragic rates of homicide of transgender women of color illustrate that – despite decades-long, extensive theorizing of and alongside intersectionality – little has changed for those with intersecting identities. The “global genocide” (Kidd & Witten, 2008) of transgender people should urge scholars and activists to strive to understand trans experience through an intersectional lens and then utilize intersectionality as a framework for dialogue and, hopefully, change. Yet, merely naming a project intersectional has produced little change. Perhaps, then, it is important to revive particulars within the theory of intersectionality in an effort to move theory to action and accountability. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), who coined intersectionality, wrote that women of color face “intersectional subordination” that “is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (p. 1249). Intersectional subordination is experienced by
transgender women of color in regards to violence, systemic racism that creates and propels poverty, disownments and discrimination on the basis of gender expression, failure of the justice system to protect transgender people, and stereotypes emerging from the employment necessities of some transgender women.

Lakyra Dawson, a transgender woman of color living in Detroit, has seen multiple instances of violence happen against the transgender community. Remarking on the violence Dawson said “people say we’re not normal, we’re freaks or something. They just kind of feel like they can dispose of us, because we don’t really matter to them” (qtd. in Holden, 2015, para. 10). Dawson’s commentary alerts people to the vulnerabilities of transgender people – particularly as she discusses normality and deviance. However, even this staggering quotation has the potential to center Dawson and her sisters’ transgender identities as the sole signifier of their subordination, particularly when less than half of the states in the United States offer protection for transgender and gender nonconforming people. However, Dawson’s race and class augment the dangers she faces as a transgender woman. Here systemic racism and classism – in conversation with violent masculinity -- intersect with gender identity to place vulnerable bodies in dangerous spaces. In Dawson’s case the space is Detroit’s Palmer Park, an area known to locals as one where transgender women gather, largely as sex workers. The gathering is often necessary for survival as:

families ridicule or beat transgender girls when they try to come out. Kids tease them at school, and teachers punish them for wearing clothes that clash with gender expectations. They leave home young, often without diplomas, and move to cities and neighborhoods where they can find transgender families that offer emotional support. And then, turned
away from employers who make empty promises to “call you back.” (Holden, 2015, para. 22).

While the above excerpt centers gender expression, it implicitly illustrates that marginalization based on gender identity creates or augments poverty in such a way that, as trans woman of color Beyonce Carter said, prostitution is necessary for her survival. “I don’t want to be out here – hell no. But some days I just say ‘fuck it, I need some money” (Holden, 2015, para. 4). Unfortunately, the stereotype of transgender people as sex workers has arisen because of the dire need for some modicum of economic return that has place some transgender people on the streets as sex workers. This stereotype then presents another intersectional subordination as popular culture creates and propels “externally defined controlling images” (Collins, 1986, p. s18) that deny the complexity of subjecthood for Black women and now transgender women of color. Furthermore, those who turn to sex work, for whatever reason, are impacted by the stigmas surrounding their profession, gender expression, and race. This presents yet another subordination – the illegality and woeful protection of sex workers in the survival economy, an issue exacerbated by systemic racism that keeps people of color impoverished (Hartman, 2014). The violent policing of transgender women of color, which at its most extreme leads to homicide but also results in various other discriminations, is also indicative of the intersection between race and sexuality as “the well-developed fear of Black sexuality served primarily to increase white tolerance for racial terrorism as a prophylactic measure to keep Blacks under control” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1272). Crenshaw positioned rape as a policing mechanism, and that has been a consequence for transgender women of all races. Yet homicide has become a plague that largely impacts transgender women of color, with little coverage by media and woeful protection by the criminal justice system.
These murders, when covered by the press, do little good for transgender folks, as they often inadvertently place blame onto the transgender victim as they are framed as “deceiving” an (often) romantic partner as their gender identity conflicts with the reading of their sexed body (read: a glance at genitalia) (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Sadly, the homicide of transgender folks and the narrative of deceit and trans abnormality that allegedly pushes the charged to murder is so pervasive that it has been labeled the “trans panic defense strategy” in court. This strategy, if argued convincingly, leaves a human being dead while the murderer is acquitted and a lesser charge assigned (Lee & Kwan, 2014). This leads to yet another subordination that illustrates the various ways the intersections between gender, race, and class come to form stereotypes that demean the lives of vulnerable transgender people as institutions designed to protect and serve offer little protection. This may account for the hesitancy transgender people of color may have when involving authorities – a hesitancy also discussed by Crenshaw in regards to violence endured by cisgender women of color (1991). What appears clear is that intersectionality is ever important in contemporary times. However, a danger does lie during “the transgender tipping point,” as other portions of identity may be subsumed by the buzz of gender alone. It is vital, then, that scholars and activists continually return to the nuanced and complex nature of identity. This dissertation is informed by an intersectional praxis and highlights this through discussing the ways in which the race of two vloggers (Jason and Xavier) impact what they have seen in the media in regards to various facets of their identity, and the help they received before beginning their own channels. This is a point of departure for an intersectional analysis of transgender experience regarding media visibility, but taken on its own it is not enough. As discussed in the conclusion, much work lies ahead when battling the intersections of transphobia, racism, classism, and sexism if we are to see progress toward recognition and
acceptance. It is vital, then, that intersectionality is foregrounded in all knowledge and activist projects.

In sum, the illusion of recognition and acceptance in mainstream media trans narratives obscures dire and intersectional situations many trans folks without celebrity status navigate. These issues are far more pressing than the color of a dress or the length of a heel. Yet it cannot be ignored that we must have trans narratives in the mainstream media, as such a positioning has opened the floor for wider cultural conversations regarding trans experiences. However, the bodies that have been centered are trans feminine and indeed, by and large, hyperfeminine. What of trans masculine people? What of an intersectional analysis that highlights various portions of identity as in conversation with gender expression? The paradox of visibility presents a great number tensions to consider, many of which depend upon the questions of which bodies are allowed to be visible and in which ways? The trans narratives present in mainstream media present very particular trans bodies – bodies that pass – because mainstream media is drenched with heteroideological narrative insistent upon easy categorization into a sex binary that insists gender performances match body parts, specifically genitalia.

**Heteroideological Narrative Inspired by Narrative’s Heteroideology**

The paradox of trans visibility is largely due to mainstream media’s reliance upon “narrative’s heteroideology,” (Roof, 1996) a component of heteronormativity that impacts the stories told and consumed within any culture. Narrative’s heteroideology does one of two things with narrative: (1) it casts queer relations as deviant and dangerous or (2) it creates queer relationships that mirror normative, heteroideological ideals such as monogamous marriage and raising children (Roof, 1996). When discussing media production, independent or commercial, narrative’s heteroideology is one of the most important and timely sites to critique and
complicate. However, because this project focuses more on content and message (ideology), as opposed to narrative’s structure and form, I instead use the term “heteroideological narrative,” inspired by Roof’s theory of narrative’s heteroideology.

Ideology is grounded here through Stuart Hall’s (2000) framework. According to Hall, ideology operates as such: it is multi-faceted, with one concept connected to various others (for example freedom and democracy in America). Ideology, specifically in the service of power, depends on intricate webs. Second, ideology is not a process of a conscious intention. Instead, people work within ideology – ideology “produces” “social consciousness” (p. 272). Finally, ideology “works” by constructing positions for subjects (as discussed more in Chapter Three). Heteroideology acts as a component of hegemony, particularly heteronormativity, and works to keep complex fields of power intact through a consistently shifting narrative that is more of the same but appears as progressive and, importantly, seeks always to obscure complex realities (Gramsci, 2000, pp. 196-199). This discursive, ideological move in fact relies upon a “theft,” fragmentation, or “limitation” of the entirety (Barthes, 1976, pp. 6-9). That is, the appearance of forward movement (any visibility as progress) allows for consensual return to hegemonic ideology (there are two true sexes even when transgender bodies are present). In this specific case, hegemonic ideology keeps divisive binaries of sex, gender, and sexual orientation in place through obscuring either the cost of visibility (safety, heightened gender expectations) or bodies that are refused visibility (trans masculine forms or bodies that do not pass). The “bathroom problem,” discussed at length above, is a culturally relevant example of how heteroideological narrative works through people, even those committed to radical social projects. Indeed, heteroideology that functions through narrative is so entrenched in heteronormative cultures that
it is often replicated without realization, thus making it even more complex for “gender outlaws” (Bornstein, 1994) to survive in society, much less thrive.

A great deal of hegemonic heteroideology is maintained even during times labeled “the transgender tipping point” because it consistently shifts and changes form while also relying on binary sex and gender to maintain it. If this sounds strikingly similar to the paradox of visibility it is because heteroideology fuels the paradoxes. There is at once progression and regression under heteroideological narratives. This perpetual movement makes heteroideology not only historic but also very much present, and very hard to break through. Heteroideological narrative maintains the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality in place through stories, whereby one category (the majority aka heterosexuality) maintains a privileged position in society not through measures of overt force (such as illegality of gay and lesbian marriage) but instead through progressive narratives that appear to level systemic inequalities (legalizing gay and lesbian marriage). Stories are especially significant during this “transgender tipping point,” because narrative is the way that transgender individuals make sense of who they are, how they are seen, and who they wish to be – it is a “bridge” between the person they were assigned to be at birth and the person they are sacrificing to become (Prosser, 1998, p. 9).

Yet in order to grasp the significance of heteroideological narrative as it pertains to transgender experiences, and the paradoxes of visibility surrounding those experiences, one must first understand sexual orientation as possible only through gender, as gender “precedes and produces heterologic” (Roof, 1996, p. 63). Indeed, sexual orientation and gender are so closely linked – so dependent on one another – that they are often conflated (Valentine, 2007). Or, they are so “complexly intertwined” (Roof, 1996, p. 63) that radical work surrounding gender and sexual orientation cannot be undertaken without the tedious task of unraveling the cord that ties
these two components together. To further complicate matters one must then consider the conflation between sex and gender. I argue that this conflation between sex and gender has misdirected a great deal of thinking about sexual orientation as, in contrast to Roof, it is sex and gender that precedes heterologic. The conflation of sex and gender is that which continually produces and propels it.

The cords of sex, gender, and sexual orientation are looked at here and in order to investigate how their conflation keeps heteroideological narrative firmly in place. Heteroideological narrative works towards the maintenance of “invisible heteronormativity,” (Warner, 1991, p. 3) in that it seeks to keep “compulsory heterosexuality” in its place of power (derived from normality) because compulsory heterosexuality ensures the continuation of male dominance throughout society (Rich, 2003, pp. 19-21). Ahmed (2006) provides similar, contemporary detailing of compulsory heterosexuality that enforces heteronormativity through discussion of language within interpersonal relationships and everyday bodily experience. Ahmed points to the ways in which normalization of heterosexuality (Ahmed’s “the straight line” or orientation that effectively Otherizes queer subjects) creates a desire for “the other sex” (p. 71) – sex therefore being a prerequisite to having a sexual orientation, with our language acts normalizing a straight orientation possible only through a binary of sex (as other is indicative of us vs. them – what you are I am not). In a patriarchal society, this desire – or orientation towards – positions women as less than and therefore subservient to not only “the other sex,” but also to the institutions of marriage, labor, and/or reproduction (Rich, 2003). Women, fulfilling such positions as hetero-wife and caretaker, are then culturally privileged over queer women (and queer men). Here it is helpful to draw a continuity between Ahmed’s “straight line” and Rubin’s earlier metaphor of the “erotic pyramid” (1999, p. 151) that directs partnered, reproductive
heterosexuals up the *straight* line to the top – the prized position. Such normalization therefore works as a tool that maintains binary sexual orientation through the establishment of binary sex and gender.

**Heteroideological Sexual Orientation**

Heterosexuality is prized in our cultural climate, with homosexuality existing as deviant (Rich, 2003). However, homosexuality does not exist as the Other anymore. Survey construction illustrates that the identifiers gay and lesbian are now firmly lodged in discursive fields – people have a conceptual understanding of these categories (though they are still met with great aggression). What has arisen is a new Other. The binary of sexual orientation is troubled when one begins to add multiple ways of experiencing sex and gender into this equation. If heterosexuality is an orientation to the “other sex” and homosexuality an orientation to the “same sex” then what orientation exists for individuals attracted to a partner who claims neither sex, or performs gender on a spectrum that is both masculine and feminine? These sexualities are unseen and difficult to imagine as a result of such invisibility. As Beemyn and Rankin (2011) discuss, participants who checked the Other box for sexual orientation (with gay, asexual, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual being other options of selection) “were most likely to experience harassment” (p. 95). Tellingly, when these individuals provided their chosen sexual orientation identities, these included “homo-flexible, bicurious, bisexual when dressed as a woman, heterosexual when dressed as a man, don’t know, heterosexual lesbian, lesbian with bisexual leaning, omnisexual, pansexual, and queer” (p. 95). These self-identifications illustrate how sex and gender identities disrupt sexual orientation as widely understood throughout culture (“when dressed as a woman”). Therefore, unraveling sex and gender means unraveling sexual orientation
that enforces opposition or polarity between only two bodies – therefore, discussing all three in tandem is of great import for feminist and decolonial scholars.

Yet, this leads to another theoretical and discursive rabbit hole as, historically, much postulation about sex and gender has denied the ways in which biology and culture work through both categories. Progressive and queer theories of sex that have emerged since the 1970’s have impacted various avenues of culture and have troubled many cultural and scientific practices towards a more radical envisioning of identity. Yet, many are still slipping down either end of a “greased pole” - positioning discussion of sex and gender as either biologically determined or culturally constructed (Haraway, 1988). While it would seem redundant to mention sex and gender, given the incredible body of work that has centered these aspects of existence, it is actually of great importance given the rise of transgender narratives that often erase particular bodies while rendering others hypervisible. That is, the work of destabilizing heteroideological narrative as it pertains to transgender narratives begins first and foremost with the body, an element often overlooked and/or misplaced in scholarship (Halberstam, 2005; Grosz, 1995; Tuana, 1997; Valentine, 2007), as evidenced by Roof’s earlier definition of heterologic that removed sex from its consideration. Focusing attention on the various ways the sexed body binary is reinforced in culture allows for scholars to do the critical work of unraveling the mechanisms of exclusion through working towards a reconceptualization of sex and gender. This could in turn lead to a deeper understanding of how heteroideological narrative persists to police not only sexual orientation but the body and the performance of the body. In short, naming – calling out – drawing attention to – centering the discourse, policies, and places that exclude based on the binary of sex and gender -- is work we must do before we can work towards radical
re/envisionings of sex and gender. Much of the queer and feminist theory scholarship that has engaged sex provides us with useful points of departure for re-situating sex in our scholarship.

**Heteroideological conflations: Bodies and acts**

The imaginary of a sex binary (male/female) is held in place by various fields of cultural production. Scholarly projects across disciplines (Namaste, 2000), media representations (Halberstam 2005), various community centers and resources that enforce exclusion of transgender individuals based on their deviance from the binary (Jolly, 2000; Valentine, 2007), and our ways of speaking (Tuana, 1997) are all implicated in the maintenance of this binary. Even science, lauded as the field of objectivity, has offered a “materialist recourse to ‘the body’” through a consistent emphasis “on chromosomes, reproductive function, genomic makeup, and genital appearance” that remains superficial and lacking the nuances stemming from networks of life beneath the skin that actually defy or, at the very least, complicate notions of binary sexual difference and reproduction (Hird, 2000, p. 353). That is, when discussing chromosomes, there is no true XX or XY, instead all bodies contain various mappings that make such a staunch categorization impossible. Therefore, we can argue that there is no true “other sex” beyond genitalia – as chromosomes defy this polarization.

Yet a binary gender system is wholly dependent on the acceptance of a binary sex that in turn leads to a social conflation of the two as “natural” (your sex determines your interests and likes and therefore your gender appearance and performance) or a rejection of one and over-emphasis on the other. To either wholly conflate the sex and gender, or to reject one as a construct of the other, is to support the binary, because the critical focus needed to interrogate both systems of sex and gender is injured by the in/ability to recognize how they work in tandem and are impacted by one another – or how they are consistently intra-acting:
Culture intra-acts with biology. Biology is a well-spring for performativity, but it is neither fixed nor static. Nor is it a completely plastic background that the social forms into particular structures. It is active, productive, acted upon, and produced. There is a materiality that must always be taken into account but not separated from the discursive (Tuana, 2007, p. 63).

This chapter proposes that sex is at once biological and cultural. Sex and gender are intra-related also through the ways in which our everyday impacts our biologies (food availability, climate, etc.…). Yet the intra-action is often confused as sameness, leading to a conflation between sex and gender in the everyday. Some state-issued identification card applications, for example, ask for one to mark their gender. However, the application is really asking for one’s designated birth sex. Therefore, sex and gender must be looked upon and analyzed, with attentiveness to the fact that completely separating them from one another is not possible. Furthermore, separation of sex and gender (or saying one is wholly dependent on the other) can lead to obscuring either the ways in which an individual comes to know and shape their body (sex), or the ways in which individual express themselves despite the reading of the body (gender). This means that scholars must resituate sex and gender as working together and against one another. Refusal of this intra-action maintains categorizations of difference and sameness within us and amongst us; it enforces the dichotomy between sex and gender that leads to omnipresent, heteroideological narratives that do violence upon those who defy dictates of binary sex, gender, and/or sexual orientation. Both the sex and gender binaries – as well as the dichotomy between them – were created by power systems to maintain an us vs. them system of social relations that allows for the “epistemology of ignorance” (Tuana, 2004) to endure through separation from one another. As Julia Serano (2007) writes:
Oppositional sexism delegitimizes exceptional gender and sexual traits, and can also create hostility and fear toward those who display them. For example, the fact that I am a lesbian or transsexual shouldn’t really have any bearing on anyone else’s gender or sexuality (after all, gender inclinations are not contagious). However, people who have not given critical thought to their own sexual orientation, subconscious sex, and/or gender expression – and who therefore derive their own identities from oppositions assumptions about gender – may feel their sexuality and gender are threatened by my existence. After all, if you believe a woman is defined as someone who is not male, masculine or attracted to women, and that a man is defined as someone who is not female, feminine, or attracted to men, then the fact that I have changed my sex, or that I’m a woman attracted to other women, will inevitably bring everyone else’s gender and sexuality into question (p. 105).

Serano elucidates the very intra-actions between sex, gender, and sexual orientation. For Serano womanhood is conceptually imagined through genitalia, performance, and attraction. Even cisgender women attracted to women are not quite women under this rubric. Sexual orientation becomes part of gender, and gender is enforced following a sex designation at birth. Yet many see sexual orientation as dependent on gender, but gender is often conflated with sex. Cultural expectations of gender are then dependent on the myth that there are only “two true” sexes (Tuana, 1997). This discursive loop intentionally confuses, as confusion maintains a split between people and propels an inability to imagine a world outside of the binaries. Furthermore, Serano’s radical re-assignment of her body, complicating the idea of a “natural sex” that is immutable and unchangeable (fixed/static), calls into question all understandings of binary sex. This then stirs up discourse and action that presumes a sexed body should act in a particular way via gender performance. Serano’s existence, as she mentions, poses a significant danger to
systems of power and control that “fosters the entrenchment of traditional sexism” (Serano, 2007, p. 105). Her existence and declarations of her everyday disrupts traditional sexism while being – like the transfeminine celebrities mentioned above – incredibly vulnerable to it.

**Heteroideological Narrative at Work: Media Examples**

Dislodging hegemonic binaries would be a radical blow to inequitable power systems, but it would first require apt attention to intra-relations among sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Such attention is not granted via mainstream media narratives, however. Either heteroideological narrative is blatantly present in the entertainment or the entertainment returns to heteroideological models following reception. A comprehensive study of hundreds of critic reviews of the 2005 hit film *Brokeback Mountain* found that, while the film did indeed challenge heteroideology, the reviews returned the otherwise radical narrative back to a space whereby queerness was marginalized in favor of a universal love story frame that obscured the dangerous rural, homophobia the film centered. Indeed, critics wrote that the homosexuality of the main characters was unimportant, given the theme of love that connects narrative (Cooper & Pease, 2008). If reviewers did not relegate the inherent queerness of the film to the margins through focusing on the universality of romantic love they did so through centering rural hypermasculinity within the film by comparison to such icons as John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. Or, the return to heteroideology occurred through a kind of temporal displacement whereby homophobia was treated as a thing of the past, a relic of bygone eras – thus mitigating the films subversive potential through depoliticizing and decentering queerness inherent in the film (Cooper & Pease, 2008).

Similarly, the 1999 docudrama *Boys Don’t Cry* – which detailed the life, rape, and murder of Brandon Teena in Lincoln, Nebraska – displayed narrative power to deconstruct
heteroideology through focus on sex, gender, and sexual orientation. A return to heteroideology on the part of film reviewers is not indicated here – instead the return comes from feminist media studies scholar and author Brenda Cooper. Cooper (2002) vividly and convincingly analyses the film, providing ripe and thought-provoking moments that describe for the reader the subversive potential of this award-winning film. Yet, Cooper chooses to center Teena’s “female masculinity,” a choice no doubt guided by Halberstam’s canonical text. Doing so, however, does the ideological work of erasing Brandon and instead breathing life back into Teena (Brandon’s birth name, or “dead name” as it is referred to in trans communities). Continually referring to Brandon’s female masculinity as indicative of the troubling of hegemonic masculinity to “destabilize the heteronormative gaze” (p. 48) Cooper erases the fact that, so far as we are able to deduce from the testimony of lovers and friends, Brandon did not identify as a woman or as feminine. To Brandon, then, there was no female masculinity. There was simply their masculinity. Granted, Brandon’s masculinity was flavored by their socialization as female. The documentary The Brandon Teena Story (Dekrone, 1998), which partially inspired Boys Don’t Cry, goes to great lengths to express the ways in which Brandon did indeed defy hegemonic masculinity, treating his lovers with a care and tenderness hitherto unknown to them. However, Cooper’s erasure of Brandon’s identification via returning them to a gender role they neglected (female masculinity) illustrates a return to the conflation of sex and gender binaries that is essential to maintaining heteroideological narrative. Cooper is not alone in this ideological error – the sensational news coverage following Brandon’s tragic rape and murder consistently misgendered and misnamed Brandon, as did his own mother despite the various lengths Brandon went to assert his identity, such as altering the form of his body with a sock and changing his name. Indeed, 20/20’s The Brandon Teena Story on 20/20: The Truth Behind “Boys Don’t Cry”
(Floyd, 2000) consistently refers to Brandon as Teena, as her, and “the little girl” among other instances of erasure via misidentification. Here, and also in Cooper’s article through her label of female masculinity despite her masculine pronouns and naming practices, Brandon’s extraordinary and radical life, denying heteroideological categorization and heteronormativity, is repositioned back into a place of cultural understanding (mitigation of subversion) through the narrative of a confused girl who thought she was a boy.

What is evident is that heteroideological narrative has not diminished during “the transgender tipping point.” While scholars have found that trans representation in television has evolved from one-dimensional narratives that focus only on inhabiting the wrong body, there remains an absence of truly queer representations that refuse heteroideology (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016). Yet, the conflation of sex, gender, and sexual orientation makes progress in one area appear as progress in another. Nor is the slippery terrain between progress and heteroideology isolated within productions discussed above or, indeed, in the following chapters. It is everywhere. Hegemonic ideologies operate on “slippery,” vast terrain to avoid being caught; to avoid the naming of normalizing practices, and to maintain the binaries that refuse a spectrum of identifications (Carter, 2007, p. 27). In order for heteroideology to be deconstructed it must first be caught, centered, unraveled, and then scattered. Similarly, voices that refuse heteroideology must be highlighted. This is, obviously, a very large task that this dissertation cannot fully undertake. However, scholars turning their attention to the intra-relations between sex and gender and the resulting sexual orientation-based categorization schema can work together to unravel heteroideological narrative within the stories produced and consumed. This requires detailed readings of narratives. It requires immersion into every aspect of the story that is told. Yet, attention must be granted to the destabilization of many binaries in this
contemporary cultural moment, especially as this destabilization is occurring simultaneously with a stabilization of a trinary. This is not progress as ‘thirdness’ merely balances the binary system and, furthermore, tends to homogenize many different gender variations under the banner of ‘other’,” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 28).

To reject this Otherization scholars must be diligent about pointing out the processes of normalization – including paradoxes of visibility that erase entire experiences to establish a kind of transnormativity that positions a particular form as the signifier of trans. In the case of transnormativity the body that is centered “reifies respectability and upholds heteronormativity” (Glover, 2016, p. 352) through heightened feminine performances that insist upon reliance on a “sexual script” that obscures the material realities many transgender people face while touting an image of trans folk as successful, affluent, and in adherence to binary gendered norms (Glover, 2016). Furthermore, scholars must pay attention to sites where trans experiences flourish and take heed of the ways in which content is created with three-dimensional, nuanced, and complex representation in mind. In an increasingly digital, connected world it has been illustrated that independent media productions are necessary to “everyday survival” of gender nonconforming persons given their ability to create a transgender community that “furnishes feelings of belonging” and thus “help[s] them manage the trials and complexities of everyday life” in a “world created without them in mind” (Cavalcante, 2016, p. 110).

There are a great many independent media makers stepping up to answer to heteroideological narrative and the paradox of trans visibility. They are found on YouTube (Raun, 2015), Tumblr (Fink & Miller, 2013), and “transgender themed websites” (Cavalcante, 2016, p. 110), among others. Emmett Jack Lundberg, creator of the award-winning webseries...
Brothers, mentions lack of complex representation as a main inspiration for creating the show, stating about his writing:

It had to do with my own personal journey and realizing that there weren’t these stories. You know the stories were not out there and I was a film maker. I was a writer. So I was like, why not create it myself? Um…I really feel like there's something different when someone is writing from their own experience you know (Lundberg, interview, September 26, 2015).

Jamie Casbon, the actor who plays character Devon on Brothers, adds to Lundberg’s concern regarding the lack of visibility, stating that you cannot trust mainstream representations of transness on television and in film for a variety of reasons, including: a lack of trans talent playing the characters, normalized depictions of transness, and utilizing a trans character as spectacle to be rid of when the shock of the character begins to falter. Casbon cites DeGrassi High as a prime example of the failure of mainstream media when it comes to representing queer identities. “The actress playing her got tired of having to wear a binder and have short hair and so they put her in a car crash. Done. That's all. That's all you need to do to get rid of a trans character.” Casbon went on to add that:

Like when you're looking at mainstream media to be telling your story like you can't really trust it if you're a trans person and um so yeah like having this representation out there and, uh like… even … even though I'm a part of it [Brothers] it's really it feels important seeing that this is slice of life. That it feels real and showing like you can be a trans person and you can just be living your life the way that a normal sis gender heterosexual whatever person is living their life. Like there is a life for you out there (interview, September 25, 2015).
Brothers is careful to include aspects of queer life that are often erased from mainstream narratives given the lack of representation of the trans experience and the whitewashed representation that often occurs in mainstream accounts (Peters, 2011). That is, Brothers works against heteroideological narrative’s tendency to create paradoxes of visibility. In just one season of the show – comprised of eight episodes that are roughly eight to ten minutes each – Brothers represented the suicide epidemic that plagues trans communities, lack of healthcare access, difficulty funding surgical procedures, shifting sexual orientations, dependencies on psychological professionals to obtain medical treatment, and polyamory.

![Figure 2: Four White, trans masculine people pose for the camera while making silly faces or laughing](image)

Brothers stands as a testament to the ability to create queer, complex representations that highlight difficult (sometimes deadly) material realities within transgender communities. However, it does so in an entertaining way that seeks to illustrate – as Casbon said above – that there “is life for you out there,” by refusing sensationalism while illustrating the complexity of
everyday life. Main character Jack, for example, is seen trying to write a book and attending a focus group for extra cash, but he is also struggling with his own sexual desires as he finds himself attracted to men for the first time in his life. Throughout the show each of the four main trans masculine characters are portrayed in a nuanced way: they do everyday things like work and visit and have beers. Yet the reality of the everyday for trans folk also includes shifting sexual desires as a result of hormonal treatment, visits to psychologists who can hinder medical transitions, despair because of body dysmorphia that could (and has) led to suicide, and maintaining a relationship with someone who dated you before you began your transition among others. It is dizzying to consider the various complexities that trans folk navigate and this could be part of the reason why mainstream trans narratives fall flat, Lundberg says:

   I mean I think for the first season in particular there were a lot of issues that I wanted to address that I wanted to make sure were talked about in the season. Um. And for me it feels like those type of things are just kind of these daily things that you think about or you deal with . . .

   I really feel like there's something different when someone is writing from their own experience you know. Uh…I don't want to like bash, um that movie [omitted]⁶ that's coming out because I haven’t even seen it, but it just seems like it's a little problematic and like the director didn’t really know… wasn't using proper pronouns and kind of… wasn't like… didn't educate themselves enough on what they were doing. You know, so who better than us to tell the stories? (interview, September 25, 2015).

   The distribution of *Brothers* illustrates that stories such as those told in the webseries are in demand. *Brothers* premiered on YouTube and was housed there for well over a year before

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⁶ I deleted film details because of Emmett’s concern about “bashing”
being picked up by four different distribution sites: the omnipresent Amazon Instant Video, Vimeo On Demand, Canada’s OUTtv, and India-based Half Ticket. This also meant that Brothers has since removed episodes from the free website YouTube. This decision did not come easy to Lundberg and producer Sheyam Ghieth given that streaming their show now requires a subscription to one of the aforementioned platforms, which may not be accessible to many within the trans community given the intersections between gender identity and poverty. Yet, the cost of the show acted as a major impetus to move forward with other distribution options – as kickstarters to raise money to create the show have failed in the past and left Lundberg and Ghieth in the red. However, there are still a plethora of three-dimensional trans masculine narratives available on YouTube for free, though instead of taking the form of a scripted webseries they are virtual diaries available to the public as personal narrative video blogs. They, too, do the incredible work of making visible that which is obscured in mainstream media while also pointing to exciting methodological exploration for scholars studying online communities.
CHAPTER THREE: RE-IMAGINING VIRTUALITY AND CORPOREALITY THROUGH HYBRID METHODOLOGY

The paradox of visibility creates a double-bind as it encourages a system of selective erasure. This double-bind creates a need to explore avenues of independent production that may undo or, at the very least, work against strategies of erasure. Independent media productions have risen in popularity for members and allies of transgender communities in search of three-dimensional, nuanced, and complex representations, ingroup discussion, and advice. YouTube has grown to be a kind of social media home for alternative subcultures, in particular transgender folks and their allies. This video sharing site hosts the most vibrant and widespread of trans masculine narratives – both scripted fiction and personal narrative non-fiction channels are followed by hundreds of thousands of viewers and viewed millions of times. Such independent works “expand(s) the tradition of the feminist consciousness-raising documentary to establish trans youth as experts and create a sense of intimacy between vloggers and viewers” (Horak, 2014, p. 573).

The consciousness-raising mentioned by Horak is expanded not only through giving viewers a language to understand trans experiences, but also through working against heteroideological narratives that highlight particular aspects of trans existence at the expense of obscuring others through the paradox of visibility. Vloggers I worked with during the course of this research raise many issues through their channels that the mainstream media obscures, such as transgender suicide, complications surrounding the pursuit of intimate relationships, homicide against transgender people, incompetent medical professionals, familial disownment, and necessary procedures to change gender markers on the driver’s license and Social Security card – to name a few.
Nor is the paradox of visibility only present in mainstream media accounts of trans experience; there also exists a paradox in academic work (discussed also in Chapter Four). Often, when trans experience (transgender and/or transsexual) is discussed in scholarship it is utilized as an artifact to discuss subversion or reification of hegemonic gender order (Rubin, 2003). Conversely, the lives of transgender folks may be summoned as theoretical linchpins to answer the “woman question” without regard to the everyday experiences of trans folks (Namaste, 2009). Or, most prevalent in previous feminist scholarship from the culture wars, trans women were framed as imposters who cannot know the experience of being a woman given their socialization as male (Stryker, 2008). Intellectual productions have also presented trans folk as pathologized bodies compartmentalized (disembodied) to fit as tidily as possible into binary systems of sexual orientation (Serano, 2007). On YouTube the voices and experiences left unexplored or wholly silenced by the mainstream cultural industries and academia can and have flourished. They have also done the important work of illustrating the intra-relations between sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

YouTube is a promising platform for destabilizing sexual orientation boundaries through the personal narratives of trans vloggers because their stories bring the body back into focus as forms that are malleable and fluid. The shifting body troubles the conflation between sex and gender when it is centered. Vloggers repeatedly stress their masculinity while discussing issues such as vocal changes, binding the chest, menstruation, and more. In short, astute attention to the body effectively illustrates that the body and gender are not the same and that the body is a site of asserting subjecthood (discussed in Chapter Four). Through this undoing – or rather this drawing attention to the body as fluid and always forming -categories that make for a binary sexual orientation are also problematized and, at times, undone (discussed in Chapter Five). This
unraveling of sexual orientation, the struggle to identify what one’s orientation is, does the
critical work of dismantling heteroideological narrative through a refusal of return. That is,
instead of creating a space in existing poles (returning to a binary or trinary system of
identification), trans masculine YouTube producers and their partners (two of the three channels
featured partners) actually begin to discuss a departure from sexual orientation as a whole – or a
radical challenging of this identity marker. This presents a subtle blow to heteroideological
narrative that becomes liberatory as heterosexual partnering has been utilized as a policing
mechanism against gender nonconformity (Halberstam, 2005, p. 66).

These vlogs refuse a return to heteroideological narrative through their chronology,
which illustrates points of “chaos” of identity -- a “continual flux” across boundaries and, indeed,
back to them and beyond them again (Stone qtd. in Stryker, 2008, pp. 125-128). This continual
movement of identity formation, dissemination, deconstruction, and reformation, while being
situated in discursive frameworks that seek a continual return to binary identifications that are
also enacted on these YouTube channels (hypermuscularine performances, discussions of ‘straight
coupling,’), illustrates the “tensions” of being trans in a binary world that strives for postmodern
progress narratives of “flexibility” (Halberstam, 2005). In the interest of developing a three-
dimensional, nuanced representation of trans experience that spoke back to the paradox of
visibility in both entertainment and scholarship, an intensive methodology was needed. The data
collection had to consider the theoretical import of independent productions while also being
attentive to how the everyday lives of producers makes such theory possible. Furthermore, given
the complex nature of life in an increasingly mediated and virtual environment, the methodology
should also consider the ways in which subjecthood and embodiment are both corporeal and
virtual, seeking to weave the digital with the physical.
**Hybrid Methodology**

A variety of qualitative methods inform my label of hybrid methodology as this project blends an extensive, detailed virtual ethnography with textual analyses and corporeal interviews. This discursive move seeks to overcome reliance on *either* virtual *or* corporeal methods of data collection, and instead works to fuse them together as a means to explore the ways in which the virtual and corporeal inform one another. This connection between the virtual and the corporeal is an impetus for categorizing the methodology as hybrid, as to label this work “multiple methods” can linguistically deny the threads of connection and reciprocity between various methods. Just as the virtual impacts the corporeal and vice versa – my virtual ethnography impacted my interviews and my interviews impacted my textual analyses of popular entertainment. None of the methods I utilized are separate from one another, yet nor are they collapsible. Rather, together the methods that inform this work are a species of their own.

Hybrid methodology is also chosen over the more well-known descriptor “mixed-methods” because all primary data collection came from qualitative methods as opposed to a fusion between the qualitative and quantitative traditions. Johnson et al. (2007) completed an analysis of 19 definitions of “mixed-methods” found in scholarship; one consistency was found among many tensions: every one of the 19 definitions relied on the utilization of *both* quantitative and qualitative method with quantitative methods often taking dominance over qualitative methods (Johnson et al., 2007). If the study of transgender and transsexual experiences in academia have been charged as existing to fit gender warriors into the reproductive mechanism of the sex and gender dichotomy, and the binaries within both of them, then perhaps the reliance on only one research tradition, or method within each tradition, is partially to blame. The label of hybrid methodology comes as a response to the dichotomous
thinking between methods and within each methodology. If scholars study categorical formations within culture (such as sexual identity) and the consequences of such trappings, then it is imperative they are attentive to the ways in which dualities linguistically form and influence their own knowledge projects. This reflection upon tradition, methods within each tradition, and the privileging at work in knowledge production works epistemologically and phenomenologically against the “crisis of reason” in multiple ways. As noted by Grosz (1995),

the current crisis faced by the humanities and social sciences is dependent on their aspiration towards a natural science model of knowledge, which is impossible for them to achieve and which has dire consequences for the types of knowledge they produce. This produces a positivist version of the ‘Sciences of Man’ which reduces its object – humanity – to the status of measurable object (p. 29).

The reduction from subject to object is possible through diminishing explorations of nuance, tension and relativity that are vital to greater understanding – and indeed respect for – the everyday. As noted by Kwan when discussing methods for feminist geographers (2002), quantitative research has failed “to reflect the complexities” of lived experiences, thus “lumping” various ways of being together under one “rigid” category or variable (p. 3). This becomes especially problematic when considering that categories and variables utilized in quantitative study were developed and defined by white men of class status based on their experiences. Consequently, situating intersectional identities into these constructs can erase the complexity and experience (Kwan, 2002). The privileging of quantitative methods over qualitative “demonstrates the role that power, rather than reason, has played in developing knowledges” (Grosz, 1995, p. 42). Exploring the vast array of methods within both traditions creates comprehensive knowledge projects that speak back and to one another. It can mitigate the ways
in which subcultural identities have been utilized by scholars to answer questions that once again speak to power through fitting experiences into current paradigms of power.

While Grosz details the privileging of quantitative methods, there is also a privileging of particular modes of data collection within traditions. Fieldwork in qualitative methods has been privileged over interviews as a more objective form of knowledge because the participant-observation within ethnography records what people do in their environment, whereas interviews are said to illustrate only what people say they do (Kleinman, Stenross, & McMahon, 1994). This arguably creates a non-existent opposition given that interviews are often a part of fieldwork. This false opposition presents a critical site of reflection for qualitative methodologists in that it presupposes that a trained researcher is better able to deduce the traditions, stories, and customs of entire groups of people through their scholarly observations, illustrating that the “colonial power relations” resulting from the “Western biases” held by researchers is still very much alive despite the cultural turn within academia (Smith, 2007, pp. 221-222). In short, it asserts that what a researcher sees or says they see is more valuable than what an actor within the culture of study says to be true of their everyday. This trend of privileging a particular method within the qualitative tradition continues today with the growing use of virtual ethnography, though in subtle ways.

When virtual ethnography was first explored as a viable method of data collection it was met with a kind of disdain, as physical travel was stated as a “pre-requisite” for ethnography (Van Maanen qtd. in Hine, 2000, p. 45; see also Howard, 2002; Wittel, 2000). This is arguably a result of the preoccupation with tradition, a romantic nostalgia for standard ethnographic practices developed during the modern age (McRobbie, 1985). While scholarship openly disparaging the use of the virtual for ethnographic purposes is scant, the ways in which virtual
methods are discussed allows for the deduction that scholars are, as stated by Williams (2007), hesitant of virtual methods. Crichton and Kinash (2003) write it as a “virtual form of ethnography,” discursively placing it in an elsewhere – not quite ethnography but a kind of little cousin to the powerful patriarch. Wilson (2006) does much the same through discussing the “integration” of “traditional” and “virtual” methods. Similarly, renowned methodologist Hammersley (2006) consistently differentiates between ethnographic practices through various rhetorical moves, such as referring to the “traditional kinds of ethnography” versus “forms of ethnography” (p. 8) when referring to virtual worlds. This subtle demarcation places corporeal ethnography as ethnography through the indication of “kind” as a particular genus within the method – a species onto itself. Yet “form” indicates that there is a shape of ethnography that isn’t quite ethnography but could appear to be. More recently Gray and Huang (2015) state that they employ “narrative interviews and virtual observations” when studying online gaming patterns (p. 133). Yet as culture moved deeper into the digital economy it has become harder than ever to escape the affordances and, indeed, necessity of this method – as illustrated by the growing “explosion” of academic work that utilizes virtual ethnography (Williams, 2013).

Indeed, the trepidation about naming virtual ethnography without demarcating it as a “form” has appeared to wane in recent years. Additionally, such demarcations are also offset by texts that do a fine job explaining the affordances of virtual ethnography. Hine (2000) states that one of the greatest benefits of this method is its ability to close the boundaries of space and time. A researcher can complete their study of a culture with participants located in various locations while the researcher is not situated in any of these locations. Additionally, researchers are able to travel back in time while being attentive to production happening in the near-present. When doing research with YouTube producers, a researcher has access to videos created years ago
alongside the most recent uploads – allowing a near immediate reflection on the ways in which the producer, production, technology, and audience reactions have shifted over time. Kozinets (2010) neatly summarizes this potentiality when discussing virtual ethnography as netnography, stating that this method allows scholars to critically reflect on two key components of study: community and culture. Netnography, especially on interactive platforms such as social networks and game hosting – gives researchers a detailed picture of producers and audiences. On YouTube, for example, comments and likes are listed below each video as well as on a separate discussion page. Here the researcher can observe the ways in which a producer approaches their channel and video creation, while also gauging the audience reaction and the producer’s reaction to their audience members. This is especially important when utilizing virtual ethnography to explore narrative, as the presence of a corporeal audience often guides storytelling as much as the storyteller themselves (Butler, 1992; Hoffman, 2010; Langellier, 1989; Robinson, 1998). Virtual methods remove the audience from the same time and space as the teller and inspire the questions of how the narrative and the style of telling would change were an audience physically present. Also, the lack of a physical audience does mitigate the ethnographer’s ability to observe an immediate vision of community, as the audience is argued as the most telling aspect of how narrative informs culture via community (Butler, 1992). Virtual ethnography also presents the challenge of how to engage audience analyses and interactions over multiple times and spaces while also offering a generous archive of virtual audience interaction via comment threads and the like.

Indeed, digital materials provide generous archives to draw from (Boellstorff, 2012; Hine, 2000), and utilizing virtual tools such as email assists the researcher in establishing their own archive (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998). A less fortunate side effect of the archive is that the
mass information at one’s disposal can disappear at any time. For example, in a study of identity quizzes on BuzzFeed the authors reported a Facebook comment thread between two users disappeared when they had revisited the page at a later date (Berberick and McAllister, 2016). Similarly, in the spring of 2015, when I began my research, I transcribed what I thought was a powerful, poetic vlog performed by Xavier. Xavier’s entire channel had disappeared within months of the transcription. I did not take screen shots from portions of the video blog, nor did I record it. I was a naïve researcher who failed to document the items I was looking at (no doubt partially because I took for granted the sheer mass of material). Conversely, I also became a kind of historian/archivist of digital cultures by documenting something that would later be inaccessible to the public as Xavier’s computer crashed following their deletion of the channel (interview, 2016), meaning only one record exists of this powerful performance – and it exists because of virtual ethnography. The video may have been lost in the recycling bin of the information superhighway, but the transcript is safe in my inbox. The researcher’s fieldnotes can act as an archival document, capturing and preserving stories that may otherwise disappear entirely. Virtual ethnography, alongside being accessible and rich with materials, is also a potent method for contributing to cultural memory via fieldnotes, transcriptions, screen shots and the like.

The emergence and widespread adaption of digital technologies turned an already shaken method of ethnography on its head, offering researchers a new tool complete with its own potentialities and limitations. As discussed by Hine, ethnography has been in a state of “crisis” since the postmodern turn that insisted upon more nuanced representations of participants and greater self-reflexivity by the researcher regarding their praxis (pp. 42-43). Ethnographic practices were complicated and the static guides to ethnographic methods (once a staple within
research) disintegrated. The internet further complicated this crisis as culture shifted to not only question the researcher but also the nature of time, space, and locality. Because of the internet ethnography no longer necessitates physical travel or arrival at a corporeal field. Although virtual ethnography was critiqued at the outset, it nevertheless has gained great traction because it is accessible, there is a wealth of material, and it offers instant communication and interaction that can become part of a larger archive. I argue that virtual ethnography is also of great benefit to researchers because it enables a manifestation of feminist philosophies that lead to greater self-reflexivity within the praxis of the researcher through complicating the practices of participant-observation and travel while also nuancing conceptualizations of the virtual.

Virtual Potentialities: Trans/figuring Participant-Observation, Traveling, and Virtuality

Virtual ethnography is grounded here through Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1983) framework for traditional ethnographic practices – ethnography as a method whereby a researcher becomes a participant-observer either “overtly or covertly” for an extended period of time (p. 2). Participant-observation is argued here as the space whereby virtual ethnographies are challenged, as participation seems intangible when we move our research projects to virtual sites – leading us to reconsider conceptualizations of travel and the virtual. To discuss the benefits of virtual ethnography and dislodge the method from skepticism, then, scholars must interrogate the determinism surrounding participant-observation, as it is widely cited as the key to ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Fine, 2003; Hine, 2000; Kawulich, 2005; Wittel, 2000).

Participant-observation

Participant-observation was developed and coined by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski at the turn of the twentieth century. Malinowski “challenged” interview methods,
arguing that “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” a researcher must become part of the “native’s” culture (Malinowski qtd. in “observation, participant,” 2008, p. 14). This historical beginning also illustrates the ground from which more contemporary debates (the privileging of methods within a tradition) stem. Participant-observation was conceptualized as something wholly tangible or rooted in the physical realm of corporeal action from the onset. It was seen as a means for the researcher to learn about another culture not only through observation but also by becoming an actor alongside their participants (such as through learning their language or their social mores and taboos following the establishment of trust based upon corporeal presence and routine) (Kawulich, 2005). The inability to be in a corporeal space with participants and to act alongside them has thus complicated conceptualizations and acceptance of virtual ethnography, as computer mediation carries the faulty connotation of a passive passing of the time (immersed in observation with no participation). Revisiting Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1983) definition of ethnography allows scholars to draw attention to their discussion of “overt or covert” participant-observation. These two words create a space whereby traditional conceptualizations of participation and romantic nostalgia for ethnographic practice (referred to as “ethnographic holism” by Hine) can and should be challenged. Some methods situated within normative structure fail to consider how techniques “constitute” the participants they describe (Grosz, 1995, p. 27), leading to a lack of self-reflexivity and nuance that upholds colonial power premised on spaces of exclusion (Grosz, 1995; Kwan, 2002). Researchers must ask “what are we missing when we fail to recognize the various ways we participate with culture?”

Participation is not solely corporeal. Participation is, in many ways, a virtual experience. Participation occurs when folks immerse themselves into the story of another. Personal
narratives, for example, open space for audience members to go through an evaluative process of their own whereby they learn from the narrative they consume (Labov and Waletzky, 1997). A researcher such as myself, immersed into the YouTube channels of three vloggers whereby personal narrative is centered, learned new language through what I heard during data collection; such as the difference between trans man and trans masculine (new language being one of the items Malinowski privileged when coining participant-observation). I learned proper ways of identifying individuals based on pronoun use. I learned how individuals can seek trans friendly insurance coverage. I learned of personal traditions and rituals. I learned of communal struggles. Yet I did not do this when my participants were in the same geographic location as me or one another – none of us were in the same “field” if you will.

I was now participating in trans culture in my everyday through utilizing trans inclusive language learned from the vlogs, assigning complex trans representations in my media studies classrooms, and through awareness-raising practices in my everyday. Participation was taken from the geographic locality of my participants to my own geographic locality, and my utilization of social media created the potential for global and virtual means of participation. In short, ethnography has the “potential” to “permeate ethnographers’ own lives” – even when the data collection is primarily through computer mediation. As poetically stated by Singh (2016) following her own ethnographic work in India, digital technologies can:

help us understand better how social locations in fieldwork allow particular ways of existing in the world to seep into the researchers’ bodies and beings and bleed into their writing while developing fuller appreciation for the diverse worlds that exist within these unstable spaces defined as ‘the field’ and ‘home’ (p. 24).
The computer does not alleviate the fact that the lives we see unfold on our screen deeply impact us; virtual ethnography should be understood as an experience that collapses borders (the field, the home, the home of the participant) through various modes of participation inspired by the content we consume. Complicating participant-observation also creates a space for the reconsideration of what it means to travel. The complication illustrates that movement is not always physical but is, nonetheless, happening throughout every stage of data collection and writing.

**Travel**

Turning to Maria Lugones’ (1987) work on world traveling provides scholars with a feminist vision as to what a new imaginary of movement could look like were scholars to actively work towards dismantling traditional ethnographic understandings of what constitutes a world – or a space – and, following that, what constitutes travel. Lugones wrote that a “world” must have human residency, but it need not be complete nor a construction of a “whole society.” To elaborate:

A “world” in my sense may be an actual society given its dominant culture’s description and construction of life, including a construction of the relationships of production, of gender, race, etc. But a “world” can also be such a society given a non-dominant construction, or it can be such a society or a society given an idiosyncratic construction. As we will see it is problematic that these are all constructions of the same society. But they are different “worlds.” A “world” need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few people. Some “worlds” are bigger than others (p. 10).
Lugones calls for an understanding that we sometimes travel to “worlds” that are hostile to us, worlds that reject us. Yet there are “worlds” that we can travel to lovingly and in these worlds we have the potential to see ourselves as those in that world see us – a potential to work across our differences is present in this loving travel. Lovingly traveling to a world that is not hostile to the traveler has the potential to become a space of recognition that can affirm subjecthood and create community. To offer an example: *Brothers* (discussed in the Chapter Two) is an independently produced webseries that follows the lives of four trans masculine friends living in Brooklyn, NY. Each episode within *Brothers* is a world – the episode in its entirety constituting the “actual society.” The four friends, Jack, Davyn, Max, and Aiden, each have their own narrative that arches across the show – these narratives constitute a “tiny portion of a particular society.” When the narrative turns to feature Davyn, for example, there is a kind of world traveling happening within the show as the story moves from one “tiny portion” to another. One can also consider the traveling various audience members do prior to, during, and after viewing episodes as a means to further illustrate the various worlds that virtual travel presents. The mind is moving even while the body is stationary and as such travel is happening, travel that could alter the worldview of the viewer and thus their approach to the everyday—illustrating how something that begins virtually becomes bodily. Emmett Lundberg (writer/director) and Sheyam Ghieth (producer) illustrated in an interview how trans narratives can alleviate suicidal thoughts in a culture that faces grave risks of suicide through this kind of world traveling:

*Lundberg*: And people have contacted us. You know not said… not said maybe like “I tried to kill myself” or maybe they have I don’t know or maybe they were thinking about it or you know. Even at our last event the father of, uh this young trans kid who was
there, who wrote us this letter and gave us a donation. It was beautiful and he said I had
to come home from work early today the day of our [inaudible] because his son said he
like he didn't want to do it anymore…

Ghieth: … anymore and he was suffering too much and he was really sorry.

Lundberg: And he was like you guys, like, I hear your voice. Keep doing it. You know.

Ghieth: What you're doing is important.

The story recollected by Lundberg and Ghieth illustrates Lugones’s concept of “lovingly”
travelling to another world and therefore creating a kind of bridge across differences to facilitate
understanding. The youth who found *Brothers* travelled to the larger world of the narrative and
back and forth between the other worlds, or “tiny portions,” contained within the series.
Somewhere in that traveling the young trans man found a world that spoke to him and gave him
hope. The ability to travel to another world, even if virtually, inspired that hope. Nor does such
traveling only occur with members of that cultural in-group. The youth’s father, too, traveled
into these worlds and across them, despite his relative misunderstanding of them. It is through
this travel that the father was able to grasp various challenges his son faces. His gratitude to
*Brothers* for making such understanding and relationality possible was signified by both written
and monetary support of the labor the cast and crew of *Brothers* complete for three-dimensional
representation of living everyday as a transgender person. Ghieth and Lundberg also recalled
various allies contacting them with questions, illustrating that their work is both pedagogical and
a means to travel into a world you are unfamiliar with, much the way ethnographic writing can
create a new world for one to travel to.

To extend Lugones’s “world” model to ethnographic pursuits means accepting that
multiple worlds exist in one location and there is virtual travel involved in crossing those
boundaries. A YouTube channel constitutes a world, with each vlog existing as another world within a world. The comment threads present yet another world (these sometimes exist as the aggressive worlds that Lugones mentions). The researcher’s home is a world, their other academic projects exist as separate worlds. The spaces of leisure that they enter – more worlds. To do a virtual ethnography means to walk between these worlds frequently, moving from immersive observation of the YouTube channel to perhaps the classroom then the family room and back again. And, as earlier referenced by Singh, ethnography gets into the researcher. It affects them. However, unlike traditional ethnography, virtual ethnography – while being far more accessible at various times and in various locations – requires a consistent alteration of the mind. The researcher cannot be the same person in the world of the YouTube channel as they are in the classroom. When the world of research affects them, if it is time to pick up and move on to the next task, they must find a cognitive processing technique that allows them to switch between these spaces – to travel, even if that travel exists as a virtual practice that later alters the corporeal realm.

**Observer’s Paradox**

Virtual travel through online ethnography also mitigates a rather problematic aspect often found in corporeal ethnographic practices – that of “the observer’s paradox” whereby the presence of the researcher “influences the narrator’s behavior and discourse” (Butler, 1992, p. 37). Even if the online producer is aware of the research that is occurring (as mine were), there still remains a wealth of artifacts that existed before the researcher began their work. The “before-the-researcher-is-known” materials are unaltered by the presence of the ethnographer (though altered due to the nature of a public access forum that arguably impacts the ways in which things are said). This poses a great strength for ethnographic research, as it removes the
complication of wondering what would have been said had the participant not known a scholar was listening. It is not, however, an absolute. Once the participant is made aware of the researcher’s presence behind the screen their content may be altered, especially if face-to-face communication occurs during research – as was the case with one of my participants.

Jason met me for an in-depth interview in downtown Los Angeles in the summer of 2016. On the way to the interview Jason began recording a new vlog but he did not post it. He then recorded again following our interview and laced these two together as a kind of “before and after the interview” piece entitled “Hiking to the Hollywood Sign” that was tied together with an introduction whereby Jason, sitting in the car at night says:

Today we didn’t really do a lot. We went to a have brunch, we had a little interview with Stevie – by the way she’s a great person, she’s watching this. Hi Stevie, thank you for taking your time. It was a pleasure meeting you. So we did that and we, uh, went on a hike. So I hope you guys enjoy this little blog and come back for more.

This introduction then cuts to Jason sitting in the car during the day, alerting the viewer that they are now traveling back in time given the dark backdrop of the introduction. He says he has not posted a new vlog for a while because he doesn’t want his vlogs to feel “forced” and he hasn’t had anything new to say and nothing new has been happening in his life, but today is different. Today he has something to vlog about. He continues: “today I have a little meeting slash little interview about my videos with someone in L.A. I don’t know how to feel about this. I’m a little nervous because I don’t know what to expect.” The video cuts to Jason waiting for his partner Bianca; he tells viewers she likely won’t be ready. She isn’t. The next cut takes the viewer to Jason’s dashboard. “We have a full tank of gas,” he declares with great enthusiasm (a characteristic of his channel). The next cut is of Jason and Bianca waiting in traffic (a
characteristic of L.A.). In the next cut Jason and Bianca are walking down the street, and Jason asks Bianca how she felt about the interview – once again utilizing a subtle method of discourse (questioning Bianca) and place (the streets of Los Angeles) to alert to the viewer to time travel. She tells him “good.” Jason then states that he found the interview to be “weird” because “I never ever asked myself those questions . . . but it wasn’t awkward huh,” he asks Bianca, who replies with “no.” Then Jason reveals that he was startled not by the interview itself but by me, as he thought – given my name – that “it was gonna be a guy and it was a girl so I was like ‘wait, what the heck?!’” To which Bianca replies, “I got excited when I saw her. I was like ‘uh, she’s gonna be cool!’”

I have indisputably altered the content of Jay’s channel, even though I have not appeared on Jay’s channel since, and my name has not been mentioned on YouTube by other producers I worked with. This illustrates that the observer’s paradox is very much present within virtual ethnography, but it still leaves a valuable trove of before-the-researcher data. Also, Jay acknowledged me through first thinking of what was to come (nervous about the interview) and recollecting about what was (a delightful take on gender based on name). This is quite different than Jay altering what he would say because I was sitting in front of him during the narration of the video (Jay did not record during our interview). The nature of the observer’s paradox therefore shifts when discussing virtual ethnography as the researcher very much does exist at various times (but rarely in the same space). Yet the researcher exists as another virtuality to the producer – a specter that will be watching and therefore may be theorized about, or has been theorized about and perhaps even spoken to virtually or corporeally and thus recollected. Considering the researcher as a virtuality to participants then leads to a necessary discussion and re-conceptualization of common imaginings of the virtual.
Virtuality

The virtual carries very particular connotations in our culture, being largely situated as a word now indicative of what happens through a computer screen when one is “connected” via the internet. While this is certainly an applicable understanding, it is also an incomplete one that carries the danger of maintaining yet another dichotomy between the “real world” and the virtual world. This dichotomy presupposes the corporeal and the virtual as separate spheres despite their inherent connections, thus assuming space and time as constructs of a solely corporeal world. Positioning time and space as solely corporeal leads to assumptions of the physical everyday as an unmoving “backdrop” that one can leave and come back to at will (Leander and McKim, 2003)—as if one would leave the physical world and immerse themselves into the digital and then return to “reality” or vice versa. Yet we carry space and time with us during every moment, and every moment is comprised of both tangible and virtual elements. In sum, the dichotomy between the real and virtual minimizes the complexity of our everyday existence—potentially favoring what happens in particular contexts as somehow more valuable.

The impact of the dichotomy between the “real” and the virtual is illustrated in activism movements, whereby online actions such as petition signings, Facebook check-ins, and profile picture updates are seen as “slacktivism” as opposed to small actions that can, indeed, create significant change or spread global awareness about particular issues. Scholarship centering online actions has produced varied results. Some state that online activism is for show, or a means to present a popular “token” public image that rarely does more than get lost in the binary feedback loop of 0’s and 1’s (Bower, 2014). Others state that these actions are examples of liberatory media use (Lindgren, 2013) and can lead to sustained support for a cause following reflection of one’s privately held values that may alter or become more salient given the virality
of online activist movements (Christensen, 2012; Kristofferson, White, and Pilozza, 2014; Lee and Hsieh, 2013; Vie, 2014). Despite the disagreement between scholars regarding online activism as inherently self-absorbed, or as a tool to strengthen community and ingroup action, there is one consensus – what we do in virtual worlds impacts corporeal worlds – either through individual identity construction, group action, or philanthropic giving. That is to say that these worlds are not separate from one other. As written by Fay (2007) when discussing the delineation between the real and virtual in digital research, “in order to understand multiple expressions and experiences of mobility, it is more useful to think of offline and online spaces and interactions in relation to each other” (para. 8). Yet it is not enough to merely recognize that online worlds impact corporeal worlds and are, indeed, immersed within them, or “in relation” to them. Instead we must draw attention to worlds that are not wholly separate worlds – they are a series of worlds within our larger social world. Nor have virtual worlds emerged following the adoption of the internet, as the virtual is not solely computer-mediated realities; the virtual has always existed and we have always traveled through virtual worlds.

Shaka McGlotten (2013), writing of the disdain many gay men feel towards online dating apps such as Grindr given their understanding of the virtual as solely computer mediated, resituates the virtual from the postmodern conflation with the technologically mediated to that which has always undergirded our everyday environments through affect and psychic activities. He writes “the virtual is something waiting or pressing, something sensed, something dreamed or remembered. It is that which is so in essence, but not actually so. It is real but not concrete, ideal but not abstract. It is a vitality not fully captured by form” (p. 8). That is to say that a great deal of the everyday is undergirded by the virtual and always has been, well before our immersion into the transnational information age. The emotional response following a story is virtual. The
chemistry between new lovers is virtual. The knowledge sparked from various media is virtual. We have always traveled through and resided in virtual worlds. Yet virtual ethnography also creates spaces whereby the researcher themselves becomes a virtuality in the mind of the producers and through virtual travel and immersion into digital worlds that results in less cognitive function granted to the selves of the researcher.

**Virtual Selves**

Goffman (1959) postulated that individuals have many roles within society, and for each role there comes different performative requirements. These requirements are enforced through cultural expectations of the particular role in question. Goffman utilizes the example of a baseball umpire who, though always moving through different social roles, must act in a certain way to appease the audience who places trust in the status of umpire (p. 30). As demanded by the setting and the spectators, all facets of the umpire disappear during their time on the field, except those that assist in the performance of umpire. The umpire adjusts their behavior accordingly. I, were this a corporeal ethnography, would be enacting the role of researcher. Great cognitive function would be dedicated to how I present myself to the participants who worked with me. I would carefully consider my posture, my words, my tone … even my clothing. However, because the majority of my virtual travel was completed when I was in isolated spaces (often my own home) and while I was wearing headphones, I did not consider these things. The parts of my mind that are distracted by how I phrased a sentence, if my scarf is tucked neatly away, if I sounded as if I had done my research, etc…. were instead directed toward the narratives I was observing. This immersion creates a powerful moment for the researcher, whereby they exist to observe, learn from, and be affected by without fully existing as one or more of their carefully crafted selves.
To offer an example: I began my virtual ethnography with Dade’s channel in March of 2015. I took extensive field notes, as one would do when physically travelling. I noted where Dade was located in his home, what he looked like, what seemed scripted and what seemed improvised, and what the vlog I was watching centered. I transcribed portions of the vlogs. I even noted what advertisements played for the vlogs and what style of advertisement they were (banner, spot, etc…). After each vlog I took a moment to reflect on my own processes, asking myself what I thought of the narrative I had observed. The vlogs, each containing a different central narrative (coming out to friends for example) with various worlds within each narrative (work, vacation travel, coming out to family), are anywhere from 3-10 minutes (roughly). I watched many of Dade’s vlogs. I watched them again. The time and space around me disappeared. I was subsumed into Dade’s worlds (headphones help with this immersion). I became aware of my corporeal self and my environment only when the dog barked to alert me to the presence of the mail carrier. The bark jarred me out of my travel. It took me a few seconds to come back to self, as if exiting a vivid dream whereby I had to fully open my eyes and re-orient myself to an environment assuredly familiar yet made strange by my virtual dislocation. I looked around and realized that I had lost myself through traveling between the “multiple spatial orderings” (Hine, 2005, p. 114) of the internet. I was observing and simultaneously traveling through multiple worlds while arguably becoming virtual myself, allowing me to really slip into the narratives that Dade and Tiffany (his partner who also produces vlogs on his channel) presented to me. My affective responses that followed my virtual travel became my participation. I would show vlog examples to my class when discussing three-dimensional representation, and from those vlogs students would learn more about transgender experiences. That is to say that I became virtual and traveled through multiple worlds by becoming virtual. I took what I had
learned from Dade’s channel with me when I left YouTube, and as such the physical worlds around me were impacted. Reconsidering virtuality, travel, and participant-observation led to great reflexivity of not only the data that I collected but also the ways in which I perceived and reflected the worlds around me.

Nor is it only necessary to reconsider participation, travel, and virtuality so that scholars may enhance their understanding of data and self-situation. Reconsidering our own knowledge production is also a matter of progressive praxis to change the exclusionary nature of the neoliberal institution that pushes scholars toward individualistic research and teaching, much to the detriment of communal ties (hooks, 1994). A lack of flexibility within methods – or assuming a procedure to be static (i.e. there is one way to participate) – creates a “lacuna” within knowledge production that injuriously assumes comprehensive knowledge can be gained from one study. Fricker (2006) discusses hermeneutical lacunas as sites of lack – a location whereby a “distinctive social experience should be,” but the inability to name, understand, or explore that experience leaves it without representation or understanding (p. 97). This leads to hermeneutical injustices where experiences are rendered invisible (quite similar to the paradox of visibility mentioned earlier).

It is only through opening practices to various methods that knowledge projects may truly be able to capture and ethically represent experiences outside of current cultural understandings. I therefore propose understanding the privileging of participation as a practice grounded in crossing geographic borders as implicated in the creation of lacunas. Inabilities to stretch knowledge projects to include methodological play and experimentation traps the researcher into ways of doing that are embedded in masculinist modes of knowledge production, and no one study can cover all ground. A singular method cannot fully capture the nuance and complexity
that is culture and communities. Embracing various methods and means of completing a method offers opportunities to create webs of knowledge production that speak to and through each other for a more complete, communal vision of culture. To view our projects as connected and communal, even when in tension with one another, resists individualistic tendencies of the neoliberal institution that effectively “otherizes” entire populations to the detriment of alliance and nuanced knowledge projects (Jones and Calafell, 2012).

In sum, potentialities of digital methods following our re-conceptualizations of participant-observation, travel, and virtuality present both a challenge and an opportunity to scholars. It challenges us to push back against what is privileged in the worlds we work in and opens the floor for critical discussion of generalizability, as expanded conceptualizations of key words and procedures we work within leads to acknowledgement that no two studies are the same or likely to produce the same results (Hair and Clark, 2003). This becomes inherently personal as such challenging can also illustrate the ways in which we are situated in and impacted by exclusionary traditions. Furthermore, it allows for the direction of cognitive attention to the people and places we are observing – offering great potentiality for the study of culture and people. Certainly, the full nuance and complexity of life in the everyday is impossible to cover in one text or through one method. However, engaging multiple methods for one study – especially extensive studies such as dissertations and monographs – can bring scholars closer to this goal. These considerations inspired my methodological grounding; I completed a virtual ethnography coupled with in-depth interviews and extensive electronic communication to offer an intensive look into the lives of producers, in this case trans masculine producers.
Data Collection

For the purpose of this dissertation I watched the channels of three trans masculine YouTube vloggers – Dade, Jason, and Xavier. I took detailed fieldnotes that discussed what was said in each vlog, what I saw in each vlog, who vlogged with the primary vlogger (Jason and Dade sometimes have their partners in frame with them), what ads appeared before or during the vlog, and my general impression of each vlog. In total I watched roughly 180 vlogs for the project, resulting in over 300 pages of 1.5-spaced, typed fieldnotes (this includes screen shots that were embedded into the notes). I cannot definitively state how many vlogs I watched as variables such as deletion and release date make this an unreliable number (Xavier deleting the channel and later reinstalling only some or vlogs that were released after I finished all interviews). Often times vlogs had to be watched at least twice, though notes were taken only on the initial viewing. Transcriptions of what the vloggers said required multiple viewings.

Selecting participants to follow was perhaps the most challenging task, as there is a great wealth of trans masculine vloggers on YouTube. To choose participants I considered (1) the number subscribers and views each channel had; (2) how long the vlogger had been producing content for YouTube; (3) different modes of narrating experience; (4) diverse representation of trans masculinity and; (5) the vlogger had no previous celebrity associated with their channel (there are a few trans masculine video bloggers who came to celebrity status through music or acting, for example). I wanted to speak to individuals who had curated a vlog for at least two years, giving them time to obtain subscribers and find their personal style of telling. Subscribers and views were an important selection for criteria because I was looking at YouTube as a platform that can draw a mass audience. Yet, as any communications scholar can attest – mass is rather hard to define. I was torn between looking at the number of followers versus the number
of views and chose, ultimately, to look at how many views each vlogger had. I settled on choosing vloggers who had over 100,000 video views, but there is a great spectrum of views and subscribers across the vloggers whom I worked with during this research (likely a result of a myriad of factors such as narration style, frequency of uploads, audience contact, and the body of the vlogger). I reached out to six producers; of these six it was Dade, Jason, and Xavier who granted me permission to observe their channels (I would not begin the fieldnotes until I had this permission, though I did watch the vlogs recreationally).

This primary data was supplemented by in-depth interviews with each of the producers whose channels were viewed and, in the case of two of the producers, their partners. As noted by Hine (2000), these interviews add a level of nuance to the virtual ethnography through giving the researcher an opportunity to ask clarification questions, situate themselves within the local environment of the producer, and potentially triangulate findings (pp. 48-50). Adding to this, meeting participants face-to-face assists in leveling the playing field of power. Virtual ethnography presents a taut line between being a voyeur (Mulvey, 1992; Sontag, 1977) and being a participant-observer. It is quite easy to watch, to record, and judge when dealing with virtual realms. The researcher, when immersed in the virtual field, can watch without being watched. They can judge without being judged. They can postulate about what they see without someone else postulating about what the researcher is seeing or why they care to see it. Meeting corporeally illustrates that the researcher is willing to be judged, to have their work evaluated, and to have critical questions asked of them.

Each interview took anywhere from one to two hours and followed months of email communication. In total five YouTube personal narrative producers were interviewed. A generic question list was compiled, which included questions such as: Why did you begin vlogging?
you compensated by YouTube? How often do you interact with audience members? Have you met audience members? Yet unscripted questions also arose during the interview and there was some slight variety in the questions asked based upon the differences in content on the channel. The first vlog on Jason’s channel has an unknown person taking the video, so I asked Jason who was behind the camera. Similarly, Dade produced many vlogs that discussed his processing of familial disownment so I asked if creating the videos was also therapeutic in the sense that hundreds of audience members have been vocal about their support of Dade in the comments thread. The transcription following these interviews created over 150 pages of notes to complement the field notes for a total of 450 pages of fieldnotes and interview transcriptions. All of this work was completed following exemption from Pennsylvania State University’s Institutional Review Board.7

Additionally, textual analyses of one episode of Orange is the New Black and Transparent were completed as contextual data that puts YouTube vlogs in conversation with popular entertainment media. Completing the textual analysis for each episode required a total of six viewings (three for each episode) for a total of roughly five and a half hours. However, the second viewing of each episode took far longer than the length of the episode (roughly 45 minutes) to complete as there were frequent pauses. As illustrated in the first chapter, there are many other media analyses that occurred during the course of research and writing. These range from analyses of independent trans activism on social media to closely analyzing the lists that proprort greater trans visibility. Thus this work combines virtual ethnography, interviews, and textual analysis to form a hybrid methodology that seeks to explore how heteroideological

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7 This work was possible through grants awarded from the Don Davis Program in Ethical Leadership and the Arthur W. Page Center for integrity in public communications.
narrative informs the stories we tell and consume while also being complicated by independent media producers.

**Introducing Trans Masculine Vloggers: Xavier, Jason, and Dade**

**Xavier**

Xavier⁸, a Black trans masculine video producer and YouTube vlogger living in the Northeast, has the fewest subscribers and views, with over 5,550 subscribers and over 109,000 video views. They have also been vlogging on YouTube the longest, beginning the documentation process in 2011⁹. Xavier took a break from YouTube and interrupted their video flow. Xavier is the most poetic and cyclical of the vloggers, with their channel covering various topics that detail their own life, their thoughts on the political environment, performance art, and beat poetry. Xavier is the only one of the three folks I worked with who has not vlogged alongside a partner. Additionally, Xavier moves away from a traditional transition narrative whereby they discuss top surgery and hormones to, as we will see in the following chapters, centering gender fluidity through focus on the body and their gender performances. Xavier thus deviates the most from the transgender narrative that is commonly seen in both mainstream and independent channels (Horak, 2014; O’Neill, 2014; Raun, 2015; Vivienne and Burgess, 2013). Xavier says that expressing their fluidity on YouTube is vital to their authentic embodiment:

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⁸ You’ll notice that in the transcription Xavier refers to themself as a trans man. These vlogs, uploaded by Xavier in 2012, illustrate for the audience the fluid nature of identity. Xavier’s identification changes as the viewer progresses through Xavier’s channel. Xavier talks about top surgery and expresses excitement at scheduling it in early vlogs. As the years go by Xavier’s view of their identity changes. They go off of testosterone, vlog openly about embracing menstruation, and state they identify as gender fluid and prefer pronouns they/their. In a follow up email Xavier said they are also comfortable with male pronouns, but this dissertation honors their consistent discussion of fluidity both on their channel and in their interview. Thus genderfluid pronouns are used.

⁹ Xavier left the YouTube community for a time and also deleted a number of his video blogs. In an interview Xavier said he began recording his vlog nine years ago at 18. In 2015 Xavier deleted his channel and, following a computer crash, lost a great deal of his earlier vlogs. He reinstated the channel in late 2015, but with far fewer vlogs.
But being fluid for me is just. I was having experiences where some days I would wake up and I would say hmmm I feel more female centered. And what that means to me is just I'm in a certain vibrational field of being receptive as opposed to you know outward. Like Grr masculine is strong. It was just about how I embodied myself and it didn't necessarily mean that I was feminine. It just meant that I was okay with what I was physically because I haven't done. I haven't had any surgeries. I haven't done any of that stuff. I say you know what I'm okay with that today. And there were days I would wake up and I say huh I feel feminine today or like it was funny. Before I started to kind of merge the different sides. I when I was more feminine that also sometimes meant that I regarded myself as a gay man. So it was funny where this internal dialogue would be happening when I'm out in public and a woman looks at me like she's attracted to me and I think oh no girl I’m gay. You know like my whole mannerism had changed. My speech would change. And I was just like this is interesting. But then I would wake up another day and I'd be like yo I don't feel like you know being feminine in mannerism. I don’t feel feminine in speech. I don't feel feminine at all today. I feel like this type of person. And I just made a decision to be okay with that instead of try to police myself and dictate how it was that I was subscribing to my own version of reality (interview, June 6, 2016).

Xavier has stepped away from their YouTube channel in recent months, citing a desire to do more community-based, pedagogical projects with the time they used to dedicate to YouTube. They have currently been invited to panels for social justice, for example. Xavier’s channel hit popularity following blackgaychat.com’s sharing of their vlog “Invisible” (discussed in the next chapter), and credits YouTube for giving them a platform to speak, which has helped viewers make sense of their own experiences and, in turn, curb suicidal thoughts: “People are
literally saying I saved their life, like, or I saved somebody’s life. Like, that’s a huge thing … so to hear that somebody is thinking differently about their life now. I’m like, that’s amazing. It’s just because of YouTube” (interview, November 7, 2016).

Figure 3: Xavier, a Black trans masculine YouTube vlogger, sits in their car while recording

Jason

Jason, a Latino trans masculine food service worker and YouTube vlogger living on the West Coast, is the second most popular of the vloggers. He has just over 5,700 subscribers – slightly more than Xavier, but he has accumulated almost 500,000 views. He joined YouTube in 2009 but his first FTM video wasn’t uploaded until 2014. It is likely that Jason’s views are exponentially higher because he started vlogging later, updates frequently and, as will be discussed in the following chapter, created a vlog that was quite radical in its vulnerable discussion of genitalia. Jason began his channel in a trans traditional way, documenting his first hormone shot (Raun, 2015). Jason says he began a YouTube channel because there were few resources available to him when he was questioning transition, noting that he reached out to a few trans media producers and heard back from only one Instagram producer. Given his frustration with the lack of knowledge he could glean from others on a similar path he decided to begin a channel that could become a resource for others. He wanted to fill a void and illustrate
the process of transition that is obscured in many trans media narratives. Additionally, Jason says he wanted to create a personal archive that he could revisit to see his own progress through the transition.

Yet Jason has altered the central content of his channel, stating in an interview that he wanted to do something different with his channel through taking the focus away from hormone-related changes (though he still does vlog about big ones) and instead centering events like vacations, hikes to the Hollywood sign, and the like:

I just want to be able to record. I feel like there's not or at least I haven't really researched cause right now. The only person is like I only watch one blogger really and it's like a cis male, ya know. So now I just make videos of my life just to show people I’m a regular person. I do regular things. Ya know the only thing different… yeah I take a shot once a week and maybe there's some changes but I feel like there hasn’t been any changes so I don’t really post about my transition.

Jason’s sentiments about establishing himself as a YouTube producer focused on his everyday life were echoed by his partner Bianca, who occasionally vlogs with Jason. Bianca stated that many trans narratives focus so much on transition that they may make transgender life appear to be a consistent space of change and maybe even excitement, thus obscuring a great deal of the everyday – all elements being of equal importance with the transition taking up far less space than one would construe given the consistent return to the transition narrative:

I think it's cool that you know that we make videos that way. They get to see, oh you know, they're just a normal couple going and doing this. They're going to go eat. They're going to… oh see he has to go to his doctor. Sometimes we'll forget that, you know, we need to do that kind of stuff. Like the doctors or his shot…that…stuff like that.
So, while Jason says he began vlogging on YouTube as a way to speak to other trans folks like himself through documenting his transition, he shifted focus to illustrate that he and Bianca live a relatively ordinary life. That is, he wants to educate folks on trans-specific issues, but he also wants to educate folks by showing them that his identity as a transgender man does not consume every aspect of his life. This aligns with Mayer’s work on the role of narrative within social movements, which states that through telling stories we are able to come to know the self (or selves) (2014). Through hearing stories we are transported into self-reflection and thus narratives can act as persuasive tools that alter attitudes, beliefs, and interests (Mayer, 2014, Chapter 5), something Jason acknowledges and has adapted to his personal production praxis.

Figure 4: Jason, a Latino transgender man, lies on a bed looking up into a camera

Dade

Dade, a White transgender man, YouTube producer, and business owner living on the West Coast, is the most popular of the vloggers I worked with during the course of this research (see the conclusion for additional thoughts on this). In October of 2016 his channel had over
28,000 subscribers and his vlogs have been viewed over six million times. Dade joined YouTube in March 2010 and uploaded his first vlog in December of 2011. Initially Dade and his wife Tiffany vlogged together, but soon it became apparent to Dade and Tiffany that Tiffany should produce her own video blogs and host them on Dade’s channel. Dade says:

I couldn't find any resources for Tiffany early on after I told her I wanted to transition. Um there was zero help for partners including on YouTube. And so that's why when I said I think I should document this, and I can't remember if it was my idea or her idea but either way she came into it and was willing to document her process throughout it also. So that, you know, wives or partners um yeah would have something.

Dade attributes his popularity to a number of factors, Tiffany’s participation on the channel being one. Yet the most important, he says, is that his “FTM transition: one year on testosterone” photographic comparison vlog went viral when shared by Reddit. These

Figure 5: Dade, a White transgender man, stands in a bedroom looking straight into a camera
photographic curations, widely understood as “before and after” vlogs with musical accompaniment that are “central to the mainstream media ecology” of trans experiences (Vivienne and Burgess, 2013, p. 281), allow the audience member to travel through time to see the years of transition compressed into mere moments.

The popularity of Dade’s photo comparison vlog is not surprising as it allows others to imagine their own lengthy process as one that will, in time, illustrate great change to their form and ways of being. The photograph used in the personal narrative vlogs acts as both an “online-curated exhibitions of self” (p. 283) and a referent that draws community together to create a “networked public,” as illustrated by the virality of Dade’s vlog and the resulting popularity of his channel. Dade also attributes his following to many hours spent connecting with audience members who contact him with questions; his consistent posting; and his strict analytic measurement that taught him how long to make his vlogs in order to keep audience attention. That is, of the three participants Dade has spent the most time with his channel, which in the beginning took roughly 20-30 hours of maintenance per week and since has tapered to roughly 6-7 hours per week – situating Dade as the vlogger I worked with who spent the most time on his channel. Dade, like Xavier and Jason, says he began his channel because there were so few resources out there for transgender people. Conversely, both Xavier and Jason state that YouTube did not provide them a great resource when they began their transition thus they had to become the representation they were left wanting. Dade, however, did find refuge in the trans YouTube channels he viewed before transition:

When I was looking at a transitioning uh there were very few resources available. Um hardly any uh online literature telling you what to do and how to go about it. And a few in a few instances where you find something but it seemed like they always had an angle
of “you shouldn't do this though.” Like there's something wrong with you if you're transitioning. So really the only resource I could find where there was real life examples of people transitioning was on YouTube. And it you know you could watch a person transition. Hear their thought process. See what was happening to them. And it kind of put your mind at ease. Whereas there was no other place for that to happen. You know and there's also, you know, in my situation…I didn't have anyone to talk to about it at that particular time. So, you know, it felt like I was…I didn’t have an outlet even… I never..I kind of always lurked on people's videos. I never said anything. I never messaged anyone. You know I… I don't follow any YouTube channels. Um. But I was there. I was always there gathering information and so when I started to transition I talked to Tiff about it and you know told her how helpful it was for me.

The lack of representation available to Xavier and Jason, in contrast to the content available to Dade, returns theorists to the applicability of intersectionality when discussing transgender experiences. Given the historical and contemporary omnipresence of white bodies in media productions, it is not surprising that white transgender vloggers appeared on YouTube while transgender vloggers of color remained scarce. As stated by Dyer (1997) when writing of whiteness in film, “white people create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that construct the world in their own image” (p. 9). This trend has not abated in recent years as “women and racial/ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in Hollywood, far below proportion of the U.S. population” (Erigha, 2015, p. 78). According to Jason and Xavier, this trend in Hollywood – a form of entertainment quite similar to YouTube in regards to reliance on narrative and audio/visual modes of telling – is also present on YouTube. While independent media production can help to level this unequal field of race representation, as evidenced by the
presence of Xavier and Jason, one must also consider the intersection of class and race. In order to produce and disseminate content on the internet one must have access to the internet, which is possible only when one has the means to afford accessible devices and connectivity bills. However, Black and Latinos are less likely to report having internet access than White people despite overall increases in connectivity in recent years (Campos-Castillo, 2014). This presents another consequence of systemic racism that sees higher percentages of poverty among people of color. According to the 2015 U.S. census, 24.1% of Black people and 21.4% of Hispanic people in the U.S. live in poverty, in contrast to 11.6% of White people (Proctor, Semega, and Kollar, 2016). The intersection between race and class is further augmented by gender identity, as transgender individuals are more likely to live in poverty than cisgender people (Grant et al., 2011). In sum, while digital technologies certainly do grant affordances for greater diversity and complexity in representation, attention must still be granted to the fact that privilege does enable content – even independent content.

However, Dade, Jason, and Xavier have one very telling thing in common despite differences in views, content, ways of telling, race, personal identifications with gender expression, and the number of vlogs uploaded on each channel. They all report that members of the audience have come to them with gratitude. They have all met with members of their audience, and they have all become mentors to other transgender people searching for media that helps them process what is happening in their own lives. Their work has, in many ways, become a labor of love – a means to contribute to the world something they felt they didn’t have during the beginning of their own transitions: representation that brought education and self-actualization.
CHAPTER FOUR: A RETURN TO SEX

The internet and the social networking sites that now flourish provide vast locations for transgender individuals to both discover and develop discursive frameworks that affirm their own sense of self. They also give others (both transgender people and allies) necessary semiotic tools that are lacking in popular entertainment media. As transgender media producers illustrate, achieving the authentic – finding the true self that one must come to know after years of social programming – is vital to happiness and to health. Independent producers have undertaken this journey for a public audience through photography transition videos (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013), confronting microaggressions and bullying (Green, Bobrowicz, & Ang, 2015), relocating their status and identity via tagging on TUMBLR (Dame, 2016), and radically re-writing mainstream media narratives via fan communities (Maris, 2016). I argue that the content creators on YouTube are doing much of the aforementioned. They are also creating radical content that disrupts heteroideological narrative on a web platform that is largely dependent on narrative and, in most cases, heteroideological narratives. The trans masculine YouTube vloggers I worked with during this dissertation do the radical work of dislodging heteroideological narrative by (1) illustrating the intra-relatedness of sex and gender through attention to the body, and therefore refusing either as wholly natural or wholly culturally constructed (2) drawing attention to the dystopic nature of sex and gender binaries and thus destabilizing performative roles meant to police and, (3) undoing binary sexual orientation (more about this in the following chapter).

Additionally, because the paradox of visibility is largely attributed to heteroideological narrative that insists on subtle reinforcement of binaries and static sexual orientations, trans YouTube producers also make visible elements that are largely obscured in mainstream media productions. The channels viewed during the course of this research highlight issues such as
income disparities, transgender suicides, hate crimes against genderqueer communities, lack of knowledge on the part of medical practitioners, and familial disownment to name but a few. This attention is largely attributed to the fact that the producers of this content are transgender therefore their lived experiences as members of a marginalized and often erased community infuses their work with a self and social reflexivity. This knowledge stemming from lived experience is often lacking in mainstream media designed to make a profit via creating advertising-friendly content that, despite bold measures to cut through the clutter (McAllister, 1996), ultimately works to maintain the status quo (Berger, 2007, p. 31). Importantly, while all the participants I interviewed for this research are compensated by YouTube or partner sites via the placement of advertisements on select videos, the videos themselves were not created with monetization in mind. Instead—and following trends noted in other independent media creations such as fashion blogging (Duffy, 2015), women’s self-branding on social media sites (Banet-Weiser, 2012), and travel blogging (van Nuenen, 2015)—these productions are largely created during pursuit of the authentic self. However, trans media creators’ pursuit of realness manifests in far different ways, and from different motivations, than those discussed under the “authentic” cultural turn in contemporary media studies because transgender producers often operate outside of culturally understood ways of being. This location outside is precisely what enables their productions to push back against heteroideology and the paradox of trans visibility.

**Independents Illustrating Authenticity Through Shifting Bodies**

Current critical media scholarship positions realness as a commodity to obtain and then reflect to others as a self-brand for digital media technologies and social networks (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2014; Duffy, 2015; Hearn, 2008). The idea of the authentic in this case, existing within a postmodern cultural climate that increasingly pushes for a
branded public image, is born from “visual codes of the mainstream culture industries” (Hearn, 2008, p. 198). Thus, ideological conceptualizations of “real” or “authentic” are bound in ideological webs dependent on the very binaries that police various identities.

Duffy (2015) writes that women producing media in the digital age (both independently and as consumers of the popular magazine *Cosmopolitan*) are certainly given more opportunities to “contribute to the production processes” than ever before (p. 225). However, their position within production is often reliant upon the emphasis of the “real” or the “everyday woman” as she who affirms specific cultural constructions of femininity that have long been used against women – either in the traditional sense of the domestic goddess or the appropriated independent of postmodernity (p. 226). The women Duffy worked with branded their digital selves and their cultural productions as authentic, yet the authenticity they relied upon is an image of femininity that is a tool of advertisers incorporating feminism and, of course, Western notions of beauty and style. A paradox exists where more women are visible within production (transforming ideology of the domestic goddess) while simultaneously relying on adherence to tropes of femininity that are exclusionary by nature (producing and reproducing ideology). Similarly, Cavanaugh and Shankar (2104) noted producers use identity, specifically identity that is legible and thus non-disruptive to norms, as a means of self-branding in an attempt to sell not only their image but also their product. A pig farmer in Italy and a rock musician from Taiwan utilized “group-specific notions of heritage to profit in capitalist arenas” (p. 52) to craft the image of their selves and their labor. Yet, in doing so they have potentially “objectified and commodified” “particular aspects of heritage and culture,” (p. 61) particularly elements that are widely consumable and therefore comfortable – ultimately posing threats of homogenization and standardization. However, identities are formed and reworked according to stories individuals tell themselves
and, when possible, the stories they have access to that are told about them. Thus, media — particularly entertainment and social media that are widely consumed and shared — are vital to the production of selves. Yet, because “media’s main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies” (Hall, 2000, p. 271) there are a great deal of identities left unrepresented or underrepresented because their deviance from the status quo makes them less than ideal for monetization or sharing.

Identities are made sense of through ideology and, as was mentioned in Chapter Two, ideology produces subjects (Hall, 2000). Ideology often positions people in places that “make sense” according to ideological circulation (i.e. women in the home, people of color in the kitchens, etc…). Thus, if the cultural industries are indeed controlled by capital interest and if capital interest seeks to standardize content, then the authentic turn covered in critical studies of late is largely dependent on an image of realness born of hegemonic ideological constructions. These constructions return subjects to particular positions that uphold power structures of dominance, regardless of their shifting and nuanced nature.

These ideological constructs of selfhood — while omnipresent in mainstream media narratives — are certainly present in independent spheres (Duffy’s fashion bloggers), and producers promote them. How could they not if ideological formulations of identity precede social consciousness as postulated by Hall? Ideological production and action upon ideologies is at once agentic while also being regressive so that progress towards the alleviation of privilege in favor of equitability is always slightly out of reach. That is, ideology is at once and always both progressive and regressive. Material realities often dictate that people work upon this trapeze act of progress and regress. One could even argue that working within ideology towards the
formation of identities is a privilege while also being a cell that locks the selves into status-quo categorization.

For example, the authentic that trans producers are in pursuit of is often in conflict with the ideological forces of identity construction, or born outside of it. That is not to say that they are outside of the ideological apparatus that informs identity, because such a position is not possible. Instead they are outside cultural understandings of identity – their being stands in opposition to the production of ideology that informs identity. In the case of these narratives, binary sex and gender was not authentic for the producers despite its prevalence in culture. Realness could not be obtained through being an “everyday” person because the discursive framework of the everyday has long excluded or diminished trans identities (Halberstam, 2005; Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2007; Stryker, 2008). Authenticity -- or the search for and publication of the “real” self (even when in the service of branding one’s selves) is positioned here as a privilege not readily available to all. Heteroideological narrative obscures many narratives that enable the quest toward the authentic. As vlogger Electric Dade said in his popular and requested “How I Knew I was Transgender” vlog (2012):

I still didn’t know I was transgender, but I thought I was a lesbian which is somewhere that most – well, I don’t wanna say most – but a lot of trans guys go to because, ugh, I don’t know why. So I figured ya know I identify more masculine but I like women sexually – I must be a lesbian. So I started hanging out with a lesbian crew and (clears throat) I felt better but I started noticing well (pause) I’m… not…like… these women either. They … most of them are comfortable with a little feminine flair here and there or they don’t mind having their breasts or the shape of their body or they - still they don’t think like me – there is still no one like me in this group, I was still alone and I still didn’t
have a name for what was going on because I was newly out of my religion and I wasn’t out in the world [emphasis his]. Then one day I heard about the terminology transgender and I started doing research. And I dove into the research and I decided that was what was going on for me, that I must be transgender and everything made sense to me (2012). Dade illustrates here that he could not begin to understand himself, let alone a projection of his “real” self because he was bereft of the language to give voice to his experience. The current language, working within and indeed born of heteroideological narrative, denied him that. He turns to a lesbian community as many FTMs do (Halberstam, 1998; Rubin, 2003), but this community also existed on a trinary sexual orientation scale that demanded a binary of gender identity and sexed bodies. Dade didn’t fit. His sexed body betrayed his feelings of gender. Or, as written by Henry Rubin in his extensive study of FTM transsexuals,¹⁰ Dade was existing in a “disembodied self” (2003, p. 101), given the lack of sensory representations of other transgender individuals that gave him an understanding of where his identity fit in wider worlds. “For identity is not something that simply arises from the self and its experience but is a product of an ongoing process of meaning-making which draws on, and is drawn into, institutionalized categories of selfhood” (Valentine, 2007, p. 223). Transgender as a category was unavailable to Dade for much of his young adulthood, so he was inhabiting a body without a place and a self without a name. When Dade began the search for authenticity he was, therefore, working outside of “institutionalized categories of selfhood,” and as a result his vlogging represents radical re-conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Dade had to challenge various portions of hegemonic ideologies in order to find a place to fit and space in which to flourish. Yet the authenticity discussed in critical media studies of

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¹⁰ I am not labeling Dade as a transsexual here. Dade does not identify as a transsexual. I am, instead, noting the consistency between Dade’s narrative during transition and Rubin’s study.
late positions realness as something that has been largely appropriated by capital to create a new body of immaterial labors for economic exploits in the digital economy. This is a worthy and captivating line of study, but it can also diminish the power of authenticity for those whose identities have always been outside of gender and sex binaries (among others, of course). If authenticity is consistently seen as a branding tool in an era of global capitalism, or as that which aspires to stand out on the premise of the “ordinary” or individual, then what of those who exist in the margins of culturally understood ways of being (man or woman, gay or straight) yet are searching for their true “authentic” selves? What of those whose self-realization and, indeed, the discursive tools necessary to vocalize the self, are dependent on community as opposed to individuality? Inclusion of these voices, and indeed understanding of the pain a lack of “authentic” or “everyday” archetypes causes these individuals, is only possible when scholars recuperate authenticity or realness from its position within capital. That is, scholars should pay heed to the ways in which “ideal” performances are celebrated and propelled by capital, but they should also work toward an understanding of the importance of identity in regards to finding one’s place in the world. Recuperating authenticity, and nuancing it to include where it serves hegemony and can subvert it, offers scholars a means with which understand the spiritual trauma someone without a prevalent model of the real would go through.

Therefore, I argue that the potentiality these content creators offer the world is born from their displacement – a location outside. Transgender producers offer powerful texts to re-conceptualize understandings of various categories that are utilized in the service of hegemonic ideology through creating media inspired by their lived experiences. It is authenticity – the search for a true self that is denied through existing discursive fields – that allows for this. Close readings of these texts challenges cultural frameworks for understanding existence and life in the
everyday while offering to the world vulnerable media artifacts that center narratives oft-silenced or ignored. Furthermore, those who lack the “authentic” or “everyday” representation have the potential to radicalize understandings of the everyday when they begin a public search of the self.

There are various ways in which these independent media products do the radical work of re-conceptualizing life in the everyday through blurring the borders of binary-based categories, but this chapter grants primacy to moments where these productions draw attention back to the body as “an expression of the core self” (Rubin, 2003, p. 145). These productions remind us that bodies matter, that they are powerful tools of communication and self-actualization, that they influence our culture as much as they are influenced by our culture, and that hegemony works through the physical ordering of bodies as much as it does through the roles prescribed to these bodies. In short, it alerts us to the intra-related nature of sex and gender – a necessary discursive movement given the “primacy of embodiment” for individuals in recent times (Rubin, 2003, p. 144) that academic and media production has long obscured.

**Shifting Bodies**

It is important also to note that the body is not centered only to defy heteroideological narrative. Indeed, such a focus or demand of trans bodies is both ignorant and careless. As discussed by Henry Rubin in regards to transsexuality (revisit introduction for a return to the difference between this and transgenderism) “judging transsexuals as a group by their commitment to the gender revolution obscures the heterogeneity among transsexual men” (2008, p. 164). Thus, commitment to discussing their cultural production solely through the most subversive moments is an affront to the community, as it denies their lived realities and everyday experiences. It denies the complexity of the spectrum of transgender and seeks to position
transgender individuals as yet another cog in the wheel of gender liberation as opposed to living, breathing subjects. This dissertation utilizes heteroideological narrative as a focus for media analysis, but it does not do so with the intention of erasing experiences. Instead, the theory is a means to fully explore the ways in which ideological constructs have shut out important stories, even if those stories can be argued as supportive of heteroideology (through passing bodies, for example). Discussing these productions as radical (and I see even the more conservative ones this way given their placement on a public platform that can be revisited and thus act as a repetitive outing apparatus) is done here in recognition of the incredible cost these producers bear in an effort to be recognized in a world that has largely refused their recognition. As such, all of these vloggers have assisted in the creation of new discursive fields that reject the sex and gender binaries and the dichotomies between them. Indeed, these productions re-write the idea of body through centering the body and as such they are already – regardless of the appearance of the body – radical or “subversive,” as Rubin says.11 The delight in these productions is that such “subversiveness” occurs in a variety of ways and through a variety of lived experiences that are explored over time and through time on YouTube.

Heteronormativity (of which heteroideological narrative is a component) cannot be dislodged until the body (sex) and culture (gender) are each given close readings and understood as equally important and equally communicative to and through one another. As mentioned in Chapter Two, much theorizing about sex and gender results in the sliding down of “poles” whereby consideration is given to one while the other is disregarded (Haraway, 1988). This

11 Importantly, not all transgender experiences fit here, nor do they need to. The individuals who remain stealth are not discussed here because they are stealth and thus a part of the fabric of society that is not mediated through sites such as YouTube. This does not mean that they should become a “gender outlaw” (Bornstein) or a “warrior” (Feinberg), nor should they pushed towards that identification. Their experiences are not excluded because they are less important, but because it is – quite simply – a different project.
“sliding” assists in the perpetuation of heteroideology and therefore heteronormativity despite small gains made at calling out both. Apparatuses that support heteroideology are dismantled through rigorous discussion of both body and gender expressions. Marginalizing powers work best through obfuscation. If the body continues to be debated as another cultural construct, or as gender determined by sex, then one is dismissed while the other is privileged. This privileging leads to an erasure or silencing of a site necessary to the destabilization of normalizing and policing practices and discourses – such as heteroideological narrative. As previous scholarship asserts, it is not enough to merely mention bodies, as many have done so before and have actually “vanished,” (Halberstam, 2005), “devalued” (Grosz, 1995, p. 42), or “fixed” (Tuana, 1997, p. 57) forms into place. Instead, it is vital that attention is drawn to the body as a real communicative, moving, shifting form of self that alters the everyday and is altered by it. It is helpful to re-envision identity as not that which comes from a static form, but that which is born and reborn in the shifting of the form. Banishing the body leaves behind entire groups of people for whom their bodies betray their experiences and identities. If the body is necessary for self-actualization and for action then its import cannot be ignored, particularly because “bodies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs” (Grosz, 1995, p. 35). Bodies are media – reflexive, alive, full, and sometimes terribly unseen and unrecognized media.

Vanishing the body also leaves behind the malleability of bodies. This malleability is key to the disruption of a binary sex system and the dichotomy between sex and gender as avoiding it assumes that bodies are static as male/female and thus aids in biological determinism’s emphasis on the natural as the inevitable (Tuana, 1997, p. 57). These YouTube productions call forth the body, and they do so on a virtual platform that paradoxically denies viewers access to the
sensory experience of being physically near the body from which the sounds they hear are produced. These productions draw attention to forms and to beings and as such begin to complicate ideas of maleness and femaleness as the only endpoints, even when the body transitions to what is culturally recognized as a passing male body. Jason, for example, identifies as a transman who – in time – wishes to have all potential surgeries and pass. His progress is drastically slower than vlogger Dade’s (who had the same aim and has since undergone all surgeries) because their material realities are quite different. Dade was able to fund his transition procedures out of pocket; the costs of his medical care totaled roughly $120,000. Jason, in contrast, is seeking a means to have his procedures covered. Absence of surgery has not stopped Jason from reclaiming his form in the image of one that fits his gender expression. Indeed, he has re-written the male body in his 2015 video “ftm bottom growth (graphic).” Such a re-writing is possible through a focus on the material-semiotic. Donna Haraway (1992) utilizes the term “material-semiotic actor” to “highlight the object of knowledge as an active part of the apparatus of bodily production, without ever implying immediate presence of such objects or, what is the same thing, their final or unique determination of what can count as objective knowledge of a biological body at a particular historical juncture” (p. 308). Jason demonstrates embodiment – his bodily production and even offers his body to viewers and then uses verbal description to explain his body as he has come to inhabit it. Viewers can see how Jason creates a new story for his form, but they can also see how the form is constricted within cultural understandings of the body. Yet through his vulnerability those understandings of gendered form are questioned and, in many ways, complicated.
Sex the Flesh: Jason, Xavier, and Dade Ascending While Sophia Returns

Jason’s Realness through Reclamation

Reclamation

The mid-shot opens on Jason (also referred to as Jay), a Hispanic transman who looks to be in his mid-twenties. He has short, buzzed, black hair that disappears into a tight fade on the side. His eyes are striking – a light blue that takes on a silver hue in certain lights. His ears are gauged, with large, white acrylic plugs complementing the absence of color in his t-shirt and the gray tint of his eyes. Jason begins his vlog in the usual manner – with an enthusiastic “what’s pop…pop…poppin?” Jason is decidedly more animated than Dade, who takes a laid-back, smooth, level-toned approach to vlogging, or Xavier, whose rhythmic style of telling often reminds one of beat poetry or soft hip-hop. Jason is in a room that appears white, but the lighting throws off shades of pink. He steps back from the camera, his arms – which were crossed – spread across his body, and he opens his hands. “Today’s the day I don’t care,” he exclaims.

“So, this is the disclaimer,” he begins – placing his head in his hands, wondering how to say what he wishes to say, nervous to be so vulnerable in front of a public and potentially global audience, “…so if you’re very dysphoric when it comes down to bottom please click off. Please click off, because I’m gonna be talkin’ about bottom.” Jay looks to the side; it appears as if he catches the gaze of someone watching from the other room. “Bottom?” he asks. “I’m gonna be talking about bottom?” he repeats – still looking to the side. “Ok I sound stupid as shit.”

Jason looks back to the camera, re-centering himself and his narrative. “Ok, I’m gonna be talkin’ about downstairs growth tonight. And…” Jay’s voice drops down, nearly inaudible, “I’m gonna see whatchoo guys think about that.” Jay winks at the camera then winks with the other eye, turning his gesture into comedy.
“So, yeah, I know I always update you guys on this and that I talk about bottom and sex and all that shit, but I never really get deep in. I mean, I get deep in it but I never get DEEP IN IT when it comes to telling you guys how deep it can go. Ok.” Jason takes a step back from the camera. His tone changes (only momentarily) to a defensive pitch. “So if you guys have a problem with that,” he says, his voice changing once again following a pause. “If you guys have a problem with my stuff being all over your screen,” Jay moves his hand in frantic circles across the lens, “please click. Off. Right. Now.” Jay pauses. He clears his throat, taking a step back.

“Okay, for you guys – nasty ass motherfuckers that wanna watch this shit – what’s going on?” Jay clasps his hands together. “So yes, we are gonna talk about downstairs growth.” Jay then talks to the viewer about bottom dysphoria, telling them that he doesn’t experience dysphoria with his genitals the way he does with his chest. Jay has more discomfort with his upper body than his lower, a statement that likely reflects breasts as an indication of femaleness. Soon Jay launches into telling us that he gets “hard” and stays hard for a couple hours, and it can be “uncomfortable.” He says this video is “for educational purposes only…so please don’t report it. Please don’t report it.” Jay then says that he is going to get a pump to “make it grow,” but says he does not know the validity of this statement as he has never used one before. Jay says he is about to show us “the thing,” and tells us that we should pause our screens off if we hear our “mother” or “grandmother” climbing the stairs “because I’m about. To. Show. You. Right. Now,” Jay says, exhaling. His behavior, even more animated than usual, along with his frequent exhalations and pause in sentences illustrates to us the apprehension that built up while Jay contemplated sharing this with the world. He looks to the side of the camera. He is gearing up, revving himself up. He begins to cross his smart phone over the lens and quickly pushes it back
to the side. He asks the audience not to screen shot it and once again states that this is “for educational purposes only.” He exhales again.

Slowly Jason pans his phone in front of the camera lens. We see a penis, or what appears to be a penis according to cultural understandings of male genitalia. Jason takes the image across the camera a couple more times. He tells us that is “all him” with no prosthetics or pumping. He perches his arm over the camera, looking to the side. “Ok, this is like that awkward moment when you just finished having sex and you don’t know what the fuck to do. So I’m just gonna do this,” he says. He cuts the feed. The video is over.

Jason takes embodiment to a different material-semiotic field altogether during this vlog. He utilizes the body, indeed a very vulnerable part of his body, to illustrate a discursive move to re-write the body. That is, he goes outside the boundaries of penis and vagina to illustrate how he has renamed and, in turn, come to a new relationship with his form. He describes his lower growth in terms associated with the phallus – stating that it gets “hard” during sexual pleasures and sometimes stays “hard” for a couple of hours. He refers to the “thing” not by naming it penis (indeed he avoids this name), but describing it as such. This description of his bottom growth, alongside his discussion of being more “dysphoric” about his chest illustrates to us that as Jay is “repairing the link” between “his body and gender identity” (Rubin, 2003, p. 144). Importantly, as discussed by Rubin, Jay is not transforming his genitalia – it had betrayed him throughout his life. He is partaking in the death of the genitalia people expect given his birth designation and he is taking authorship of the re-birth. He is utilizing embodiment to illustrate to viewers, much like discussion of the authentic noted earlier, that he was at once and always a subject but now he is working to make that subjecthood legible to others via shaping and transitioning his body.
Jason’s subjecthood is indeed recognized, with this video being the most popular on his channel. Jay attributes this popularity to curiosity, stating that “they want to see what it looks like … I searched for it myself on YouTube to see how many people actually put themselves out there. And I only seen one video.” Jason indicates that he, too, was curious about the effects testosterone would have on his body, particularly the portions of the body that are gendered in Western society. The lack of information about bottom growth, Jay stating he only “seen” one other video aside from his own, illustrates the courage one must have to publicly show such a vulnerable part of the self – a part of the self that denies maleness or femaleness. It also illustrates this part of the self, this very real, very fleshed part of the body as being of incredible import. It is no doubt, then, that Jay does incredible discursive work during this video – both with his description of his bottom growth and the overall anxiety and apprehension that colors the video.

That is, to Jason his “thing” is a real part of himself, a portion of the form that gives him more pride and pleasure than his chest. It is not widely legible as a penis, but nor is it a clitoris.
Jay’s willingness to display his bottom growth makes visible to viewers a certain pride. In contrast, his hesitancy during the filming also illustrates that such pride is hampered by the in-between space Jay’s bottom occupies. His “thing” is, according to Butler, a “phantasmatic constitution of a subject, a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms which itself has been degraded” (1993, p. 131). One could argue that Jay’s experience with his bottom growth is indeed “mimicking” the form that has policed him – that of maleness, and thus his subjecthood is denied through his discussion of a “morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance” (Butler, 1993, p. 129). Here the ideal is maleness and masculinity, one could say – and one could also say, given Jay’s speech (cussing, talk of sexual pleasure, etc…) that this ideal male form is working through to guide his performance, likely a result of the consumption of heteroideological narrative. Here the viewer simultaneously sees how heteroideological gender expression is tied to the body and how that expression works through actors while they also subvert such expression. Jason is very much performing a vision of masculinity tied to binarism, but he is also re-writing his narrative and his form in such a way that denies binarism. Does Jason’s realness depend upon his performance of the ideal? In part, perhaps to him, it does. Yet attentiveness must also be granted to the reading of the real as that which carries the “ability to compel belief, to produce a naturalized effect” (Butler, 2003, p. 129) again denies the authentic as it works through subcultural communities. Butler’s reading denies that these producers have always been outside of this brand of “real” and it is indeed that outside that has inspired their production as they seek to legitimize real through their own lens … their lenses being highly dependent not only on their gender performance but also on their sexed forms.
Realness

If power demands a certain type of authenticity, and such a demand is widely spread, then new ways of knowing authenticity will also spread. These new ways of knowing the authentic selves may not be crafted with subversion in mind, but their existence in and of itself is subversive. Their existence also indicates their realness. These stories of the body are not phantoms or specters, they are real moments of incredible vulnerability offered to a vast public as not only a testament to the self but also as a way to understand and come to know experiences beyond our purview. Jason’s “thing” is quite real; its growth has eased his dysphoria. Granted, the desire for a longer “thing” is laced within the web of understanding binary maleness – indeed is a “normalized” desire in and of itself, yet we cannot expect these norms to disappear altogether.

It is also irresponsible to expect a community vulnerable to extensive violence to do all the work of destabilizing these norms. Denying the realness of these productions and these bodies is a violence of erasure. If these individuals say their bodies matter, and indeed they all do, then their bodies matter as real, living, teaching, learning forms. They are not replicas. Denial of their realness – a realness on their own terms (and of course these are influenced by normalizing tendencies but also by exclusion from the normalization project) – is counterproductive to greater moves against normative sex and gender structures because it forecloses the possibility of slow change and demands a romantically hopeful immediacy. It, once again, removes the body from purview. Also, removal of the body acts as a dismissal of transgender individuals’ various life experiences. It renders their experiences as two-dimensional, focusing on theoretical application of their abstract, disembodied journey. Furthermore, this erasure of the form assists heteroideology with its chokehold on a binary sexed
body that demands particular gender performativities. Removal of the body – the vanishing point where it is folded into the culturally discursive like a tender, origami swan that media and academia alone can craft and place – leaves the body lodged as something pre-determined and static; it makes an illusion of the tangibility of the paper that is shaped.

Heteroideological narrative depends upon a constant “return” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 94) to the body as pre-determined and decidedly obvious male or female, a location denied by Jason with his video blog about bottom growth. Yet within mainstream media this return, resisted sometimes blatantly and other times subtly on YouTube, is certainly clouded by the ways in which heteroideology opens itself to emerging narrative and, as such, appears almost progressive at times. Indeed, as noted in scripted television shows studied over the course of six years, the portrayal of transgender characters has grown more diverse, focusing less on storylines that emphasize the “wrong body” and more on narratives that include new ways of experiencing the body and identity (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016). However, the following analysis of Orange is the New Black’s (OITNB) “Lesbian Access Denied” offers a contextual analysis that illustrates that even when progressive narratives appear they are flavored by various elements that, after critical and close reading, undo much of their radical narratives. OITNB is chosen as a show to analyze in this work because it, like the vlogs, relies on audio/visual ways of telling, follows a linear narrative, and is – overall – quite progressive. Simply, audio/visual narrative is the most similar form to personal narrative vlogs and thus offers a compelling point of departure for comparative analysis. In the case of Sophia from OITNB, the script focused on her struggles with embodiment just as it returned to a hetero savior. Returned, or the return, is key, as heteroideological narrative acts paradoxically as it must appear to shift so as to avoid being caught and therefore does, indeed, flavor narrative with new and seemingly radical storylines. Yet, it must continually
return to the body as a *determined* sex (singular), and – if that fails – it must illustrate the body who cannot return as deviant or in need of saving, thus propelling heteroideology through the body.

**Sophia’s Return through Heteroideological narrative**

One of the most popular new programs featuring a transgender character is Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black*, with Laverne Cox playing inmate Sophia Burset – imprisoned following the theft of credit cards to pay for her transition. Sophia’s storyline is captivating, and allows audience members a glimpse into the financial reality of transition – particularly the high cost associated with it. Sophia’s story is quite radical in a few regards: (1) a black transgender actress plays the character (many times trans characters are played by cisgender actors and women of color are far less present in media than white women); (2) it highlights the very real dangers of the prison-industrial complex for trans inmates (Sophia is put in solitary confinement for an extraordinarily long time, and in season one is fighting to maintain her routine hormone treatment); (3) it consistently highlights transphobia through various systemic aggressions and (4) it details the sacrifices partners of trans individuals make. However, heteroideological narrative works subtly underneath these critical moments through sex, gender, and sexual orientation. In the case of OITNB we see a return to heteroideology almost immediately – as a matter of fact, the return happens when we are first introduced to Sophia’s backstory in season one, episode three “Lesbian Request Denied” (Kohan, Heder, Kerman, and Foster, 2013).

The scene opens with a fireman inside of burnt wreckage. He is taking a photo of a piece of paper near a filing cabinet. Another fireman enters the frame. “Burset, we’re clearing out man,” he says. Burset quickly stuffs the paper in the filing cabinet. It seems apparent that the audience was traveling back in time through Sophia’s life, but the dialogue clears any confusion
one might have had. The scene cuts to Burset walking through the locker room. The same fireman we saw before asks where Burset is going. “Gotta drain the hose,” Burset answers – their bag swung over their shoulders. We travel with Burset into the tiny stall of the bathroom, they take off their clothes and underneath we see a neon-pink lace bra covering a flat chest with matching pink panties. Now all potential confusion is mitigated, we are in Sophia’s life. The episode travels back and forth through time – illustrating for us many of the pains of transgender existence. In this episode, Sophia fights for her hormones, she is referred to with wrong pronouns by the warden, DeMarco (another inmate) calls her a he-she, a guard refers to Sophia as a “freak” while another fetishizes her “cyborg pussy,” and Red (another inmate) tells Sophia she would cut off her son’s hands if they tried to “do what you did.” The transphobia is centered and deconstructed, it is palpable and ever-present, and the use of close-ups on Sophia’s face throughout the episode (she had the most in the near hour-long slot) encourages viewers to empathize with her. These moments are powerful, and they are recognized as progressive visibility.

Yet the compassion we are led to for Sophia subtly shifts when we are introduced to her wife, Crystal. Crystal married Sophia when she still answered to her dead name, Marcus. They have a son (a moment of confusion for viewers who are grappling with the gender identity as it contradicts with sexual orientation and reproduction). In one striking moment, the camera cuts from the prison and back into the past of Sophia where she stands before Crystal in a black, sequin-studded tank top, a cut-off denim skirt, and brown cowboy boots. Crystal tells Sophia that the outfit is wrong, that she won’t have her “husband” looking like “a $2 hooker.” Crystal walks to her closet, picks a flattering plum dress from the hanging bar, and tenderly begins to undress and redress Sophia. There is a moment of discomfort as Sophia - who now has breasts, is
wearing makeup, and appears quite feminine – is referred to as husband. Here the body conflicts with the gender role assigned to Sophia by Crystal. The naming of husband to a markedly womanized form then confuses sexual orientation. How could a woman be husband?

“Please keep it,” Crystal says, as she stands behind Sophia while Sophia analyzes the reflection of her own form in the plum dress. The camera cuts to a close-up of Sophia’s face. She looks down to the side.

“Crystal,” she begins to say – she is interrupted.

“I’m fine with the rest of it … the hair, the makeup – Ill teach you all of it, you’ll be a pro,” Crystal says as the camera cuts from the reflection in the mirror to focus on Crystal. “Just please keep your penis,” she continues.

The camera cuts to a close-up of Sophia’s face – she is looking to the side. She makes eye contact with Crystal through the mirror.

“You know I can’t,” Sophia says.

“For me,” Crystal says, her eyes wide. She is pleading.

Sophia turns around to face Crystal. “You don’t have to stay.”

Crystal looks down momentarily, then back up at Sophia. “No,” she smiles softly.

“Where would I go, huh? This is my family.” Crystal is looking down and begins to walk away but Sophia grabs a neon bag from the bed, a gift she purchased for Crystal. Crystal tells Sophia that she’s twenty pounds up so she probably wouldn’t fit in the gift, adding “besides, your tits are better than mine.”

This is a critical moment for the episode, both in that it presents audiences with the complex nature of transition for the partners of transgender people and because Crystal’s tenderness sets the stage for a later interaction that constructs heteroideological narrative through
sexual orientation, even though there is a radical play on sex and gender identity. First, the introduction of a wife and a son bring us back to heterosexuality as privileged – one must ask if Sophia’s narrative would have been written into *OITNB* had she once identified as gay? The presence of a heterosexual marriage and a child arguably makes the story more sensational, but it also gives audiences a sense of the familiar, the privileged position (the top of the sexual orientation pyramid) that is omnipresent. Here we see that Crystal’s sexual orientation is the most telling portion of her identity – her being is intimately tied to Sophia’s phallus. With the phallus Sophia remains husband, remains father. Sophia’s sexed body holds power, but her gender, intra-related as it is to the sexed body (Tuana, 1997), is never wholly compromised to Crystal so long as there is a penis. This is a radical moment given the discussion of the sexed body as intra-related to the gender performance (they do not exist independently of one another). Yet it also serves to potentially conflate the two, thus prescribing gender as “natural,” and thus a ripe tool for policing of bodies. Read: Sophia can never really be feminine and therefore be a woman so long as she has a penis. Alternatively, another reading that illustrates heteroideology is available.

Crystal’s statement here borders on the suggestion that Sophia’s emergence is a kind of drag show or “imitation” of femininity (though never true femininity so long as a penis is involved) that actually upholds gender binarism and therefore “heterosexualized gender” through “an effort” of “hegemonic heterosexuality” to “imitate its own idealizations” (Butler, 1993, p. 125). Sophia is becoming the ideal feminine form, as illustrated by Crystal’s comments about her perky breasts. Yet, so long as she has a penis she can appear as a man in drag – an actor on stage playing a role though not indicative of reality - as opposed to a transgender woman who, despite medical interventions, lives and experiences life as a woman. Her sexed body is not fully
compromised and therefore her gender or the heterosexual family unit is also left intact though perhaps a bit bruised. In this way, the subversive potential of the scene is flavored with heteroideology because there is a return to straight sexual orientation as the defining characteristic of Crystal’s identity, and so long as Sophia has a penis she, too, remains heterosexual despite “the hair” or “the clothes” that Crystal mentions.

Another reason this scene is crucial to the heteroideological undergirding of Sophia’s story is that Crystal’s care exists in juxtaposition with various moments of transphobia that exist throughout the episode. Crystal appears almost saint-like because of this contrast. Importantly, and as will be discussed later in Chapter Five, the identity of pre-transition partners is challenged when they walk this journey. However, in this particular Crystal’s role in the narrative is such that it supports heteroideology, placing Sophia’s transition as the impetus for the devastation wrought upon their family. This becomes especially striking during the last moments of the episode, where Sophia and Crystal meet at the prison. Sophia, having been denied her hormones and fighting to obtain them, asks Crystal to smuggle in the hormones for her. This request is a last effort for Sophia, having been through all bureaucratic and black market channels save for (a) smuggling via Crystal and (b) smuggling via the guard Pornstache in return for sexual favors. The dialogue between Sophia and Crystal following this request is the single most important signifier of heteroideological narrative, and works along lines of sex, gender, and sexual orientation while also working in conjunction with the earlier scene whereby Crystal asked Sophia to keep her penis.

Crystal denies Sophia’s request to smuggle in hormones, stating, “have you lost your fuckin mind?” Her shock is palpable, she is visibly disgusted. The camera cuts in between close-ups of Crystal and Sophia, showing us their pain.
Crystal says, “but you, you’ll have smooth skin and lady curves so it’ll all be worth it.” Then Crystal bites – telling Sophia that she is working two jobs and “they” are trying to take the house. It is implied that “they” are the government, trying to seize Sophia and Crystal’s home following Sophia’s expensive credit card fraud, which we find out earlier in the episode paid for Sophia’s $80,000 transition. Crystal also tells Sophia she can no longer show her face in church. In seconds Crystal illustrates that Sophia’s identity – her departure from heteroideological binaries – has wreaked havoc upon their family. Sophia is in prison, Crystal is working her life away, and her connection to her spiritual community has been severed. She is alone, and their son is also alone save for his mother.

“Crystal, if they take this away from me this’ll all have been for nothing,” Sophia replies, pleading. The camera is focused on her anxious face.

The camera cuts back to Crystal, who shakes her head, looks Sophia up and down and says, “I married a man named Marcus. I cry for him all the time. And I stayed and I supported you because I could see how much pain you were in.”

This moment brings us back in time to an earlier segment of the episode where we are first introduced to Crystal, her kindness standing in stark contrast to the transphobia Sophia endures in her everyday. Crystal was already saint-like with her tenderness and acceptance, and now – following her injured confession – that status is elevated by Sophia’s repeated request. Crystal finishes by telling Sophia that their son, Mikey, “has two moms and a dead dad,” but at least Sophia would be around and be in Mikey’s life. Yet Sophia is not in his life, instead she is in prison. “I put up with you becoming a woman, but I never signed up for life with a criminal,” Crystal tells Sophia.

Sophia promises to get her shit together and make it up to Crystal.
Crystal tells Sophia to do her time, “get the fuck outta here so you can be a father to your son. Man up.”

Sophia looks to the left, crying. The scene ends. Here we see that Sophia’s heterosexual partnering and parenting pre-transition places her into a position where her sex and resulting gender expectations cannot truly shift. Crystal expected a father for her son, and she refuses to let that father die. Indeed, the father role is evoked to police Sophia, to remind Sophia that the life she lived pre-transition must be attended to and now, in the face of this great, illegal favor, will be resituated – the various microaggressions of this moment are alleviated by the framing of Crystal as saint and Sophia as deviant.

Yet, the most telling aspect of heteroideological narrative comes at the very end of the episode when Pornstache, the repugnant prison guard who called Sophia “cyborg pussy” and sexually harassed her, approaches Sophia. Sophia knows he would get her hormones in exchange for sexual favors, as he does similar things for other inmates. We know Sophia is out of options, as the linear progression of the episode tells us that this approach occurs after Sophia has made her request to Crystal. Pornstache asks Sophia if she needs something from him – maybe she’s reconsidering a “sausage mc muffin” (a tie-back to Pornstache offering Sophia a bite of a McDonald’s hamburger in exchange for a blowjob, which she refuses by stating she doesn’t like sausage). Sophia pauses, the audience waits – wondering, will Sophia preserve her integrity? Will she “MAN up” as Crystal demanded?

“You got the wrong girl,” Sophia says. She walks away from Pornstache.

The audience is left in an ambiguous space. Sophia at once reasserts her sex, gender, and sexual orientation. She is a transgender woman who doesn’t like sausage and who is married to a cisgender woman. She is a trans woman with a sense of bodily integrity and pride. She will not
allow these precious things to be sacrificed, as already there have been so many sacrifices. Yet, is she “manning up”? Arguably, Crystal’s speech acted as a mediation – a kind of divine inspiration that saves Sophia from doing anything necessary to obtain her hormones and therefore saves Sophia her self-respect. In this sense, Crystal acts as a hetero-savior, akin to the white savior depicted as “divine” (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 82). While Crystal is not Sophia’s white savior (they are both women of color) she is indeed her hetero-savior. Importantly, race and sexual orientation (along with other identity categories) work together – intra-related as sex and gender are – to maintain hegemonic ideologies. Because a white savior is not available to Sophia (all the white characters we come across in this episode, save for Piper and Nicky, impart various discursive and medicinal violences upon Sophia) – a heterosavior is introduced because heterosexuality and whiteness are bedmates in this culture (Carter, 2007, pp. 26-29), linked in their normalization agendas – the lack of one demands the presence of another. Yet here the heteroideological narratives of race and sexual identity are largely muted, because this episode critiques whiteness in useful ways. It points out racial tension. It centers and demonizes transphobia. Queer sexualities are omnipresent. Yet underneath all of this comes a heteroideological motivation that rescues Sophia and returns her to her dignity. Thus the “naturalness” (Carter, 2007) prescribed to heterosexuality (and therefore the sex and gender binaries) is upheld, even disguised by more progressive and captivating moments within the scene.

This episode of OITNB, when closely analyzed, gives viewers a text to understand how the paradox of visibility works through heteroideology. This episode obscured, for example, that many trans inmates are actually assigned to prisons that do not match their gender identity – a situation that poses far more danger for these individuals as 60% of transwomen housed in men’s
prisons report sexual assault, compared to 3-4% of cisgender inmates (Patterson, 2016, para. 2). Yet “Lesbian Access Denied” touched upon transphobia, medicinal denials, material realities that make various steps within the transition process unobtainable, and the treacherous power relations within prisons. Heteroideologically, the episode established for the audience a hetero-savior that returns Sophia to her dignity, or at the very least, establishes a saint/deviant dichotomy between Crystal and Sophia. Arguably, this episode also positions transition as a kind of poison to the heterofamilial unit – Sophia’s desire for her “authentic” self, which relied on strict attention to embodiment, was a force of great destruction for her wife Crystal and their son, Michael. The audience empathizes with Sophia – they see her fear throughout the episode, present through pleading and through tears. However, Crystal’s narrative and her positionality as a hetero-savior who reminds Sophia of her duty to the hetero-familial unit softens that pain and that fear and, indeed, positions Sophia within a space of selfishness. Her authentic identity, and the long road she traveled to come closer to embodying that identity, is cast as selfish and (given the nature of a show set in prison) criminal. Heteroideological narrative in mainstream media underscores the importance of the journey toward the authentic for trans individuals and the ways in which invisibility complicates their ways of knowing and expressing the self. However, this does not lead to a lack of subjectivity or authenticity but rather a nuanced vision of subjectivity that must acknowledge the past alongside the present and unimaginable future. Authenticity, then, involves the conversation between socialization and subversion. Xavier, for example, illustrates that their subjecthood lies not in a return to their designated birth sex and intra-related gender expression, but in a fully formed picture of their entire journey. That is, their history in its entirety is key to expression of authentic subjectivity. Their past, their socialization as female, their present, and even hope for their future is all vital to
realness. Sophia, in contrast, was “saved” by the reminder of her birth-sex and pre-transition gender expression. Thus, heteroideological narrative compartmentalized Sophia and thus her character lacks three-dimensional, authentic subjectivity that Xavier exemplifies.

**Xavier’s Subjectivity through Subversion**

**Subjectivity**

The camera opens its eye as the sound of a heartbeat comes across the speakers. We see a room, it is blurry and grayscale. Letters come across the screen, perfectly timed to the beating of the heart. The word INVISIBLE is formed as a body takes the center of the frame. The form is blurred, a Black masculine person in a dark t-shirt. The screen goes dark.

“You want me to be uncomfortable with myself as a trans person. You want me to no longer acknowledge my history as a transitional male. You want me to assimilate and buy into your idea of the norm,” Xavier says over the white noise, static-like ambient sounds. They strip their shirt off, standing front and center. Their clavicle is adorned with tattoos. Xavier holds their chest.

“You want me to date women,” they say as the camera closes in on their face. Xavier makes direct eye contact with the lens. Xavier is inviting us in, they are inviting the gaze upon their form. In just 37 seconds they have shown us their face in intimate proximity, stripped off their shirt, and lifted weights. Viewers continue to look at Xavier’s body. It is both a gaze and an invitation, while Xavier’s voice-over creates dissonance in the mind of the viewer. As Xavier turns from side to side, as they lift weights, as they stare deep into the camera the viewer hears:

You want me to deny my feminine nature both physically and metaphorically, and behave as though my truth is the same as any other guy’s. Let’s make it clear. It isn’t…and I’m ok with that. They have their realities and I have my own. Mine includes
having a vagina, growing breasts, and having ever even experienced menstruating. Mine includes having been with another man and fearing possibly becoming pregnant. Mine includes squatting in a stall rather than standing at the urinal. My reality includes injecting testosterone in to sustain my masculine physical characteristics and having surgery in order to achieve a flat chest.

Yet Xavier’s arms are large and toned. Their face is firm and masculine. Their facial hair indicates maleness. Their nails are short; they are not painted. Even though they hold their chest it appears as if there are no breasts. In contrast, a voice tells the viewer that Xavier has a vagina, that they menstruated before testosterone, that they have feared pregnancy. The delicate dance between their words and the choreography of Xavier’s form seem in opposition to one another. This is intentional – a powerful discursive move complemented with performance art. Xavier wants the audience to look upon them. They want viewers to identify maleness, but they are sure to remind of their womanhood. This is made especially clear as the video progresses.

Figure 7: Xavier stands in front of a desk looking into a camera. The words “being a sister, a niece or a daughter. We share a title to an identity. Man, male, masculine” appear on the screen.
Soon Xavier switches the camera angle from his face to their legs. They are wearing boxer shorts, there is a lump that appears as a penis.

Xavier reaches in and pulls a sock out. They toss it to the floor. They indicate here “the construal of ‘sex’ no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). That is, according to Butler, that bodies became sexed matter based upon their coherence to gender norms. Here Xavier can be socially situated into maleness given the lump that is in their pants – gendered performativities of masculinity inherently tied to the symbolic power of the phallus (Halberstam, 1998, p. 105).

The body matters here because Xavier illustrates the reading of their body as male – while discursively illustrating that their maleness is dependent upon lack, particularly the lack of history. Thus, their maleness is also dependent upon specter – the illusion of a penis via a bundled, dark sock. Xavier critiques the ordering of bodies, the subjugation of sex based upon genitalia. They instead showcase the body as shapeable and fluid. They draw viewers back to the importance of the material body for self-identification as well as the importance of the material body in socio-cultural policing. Xavier’s mention of erasure in the media, violence on the streets, and exclusionary legalese illustrates the ways in which unidentifiable, fluid, malleable bodies - bodies occupying the inbetween - may be self-empowered while also being vulnerable to violence that result from the refusal to be either/or. This is a harrowing reality for transgender individuals who are “in jeopardy in both ‘ordinary’ public space and in those designated as lesbian/gay” (Namaste, 2000, p. 147). In many ways Xavier illustrates yet another paradox of visibility – whereby increased attention to/knowledge of transgender lives may also bring about
increased violence and bodily policing, especially as race intersects with gender expression as discussed in Chapter Two.

Xavier also does something in his vlog that defies a great deal of scholarship currently surrounding the body. Xavier positions the body as that which is not determined, but neither is it wholly discursive. They illustrate, in contestation with Butler, that they were a subject before "assuming a sex" as their sex is, quite frankly, one that refuses static assumption (Butler, 1993, p. 3). To expand – Butler describes a subject as they who lie within regulatory statuses of identification … discursive fields allow us to understand who is recognized. In the case of transgender individuals, the movement from maleness to femaleness or vice versa makes them a subject only when they’ve achieved the other end, as our framework is one that operates on binary planes of identification. The in-between body (between Tuana’s [1997] two “true sexes”) is referred to by Butler as the “abject” or the “unlivable” zone. It is a place where subjects cannot be formed because the subject must be born from categories of identification that are products of hegemony and thus exclusionary by nature. Yet this view actually assists hegemonic heterosexuality and – as such – heteroideological narrative because it subtly supports the erasure of the material body and instead creates the specter of the wholly discursive – sex as created by gendered expectations. Erasure of the material effectively supports (though subtly and, paradoxically, often with a critical lens) heteroideology through denial of one of the components that keeps binarism in place – the body. Furthermore, and an egregious error discussed in detail by Namaste (2009), Butler’s primacy of gender (eschewing the body) “forgets entirely to account for the specificity of women’s bodies and women’s lives” (p. 18). That is, through denying the body and through denying the very real and material ways that folks work within their body and the ways in which the body is received – to insist on the abject instead of the subject – is to erase
the lived experiences of individuals who have consistently been erased, beaten, raped, forced into hiding, etc."

The body matters to transgender individuals. The body matters a great deal. As vlogger Dade said in an interview: the trans YouTube community grew largely because transgender producers posted transition videos that wholly focused on bodies, because the changing body requires a shifting from discursive and biological dichotomies in society. The initial discomfort of transition (or “second puberty” as Dade’s wife Tiffany refers to it) requires great mental Olympics as FTM subjects administering hormones work through changing emotions, the disappearance of menses, growth of the clitoris, and other alterations that defy their lived experiences to date. Yet their experiences are still at odds with expectations of maleness because of their breasts, hips, higher voice tone, lack of facial hair, etc. Such a liminal space can be both exhilarating and uncomfortable – certainly it can be scary, but the position that it is “unlivable” or “abject” denies the ways in which some individuals not only live in this space but choose to stay there. It denies, in fact, that transgender folks do not always transition in such a way as to be read as the “opposite” sex of their birth designation – some may never assume an ideologically understood sex, but instead assume amorphous sexes. Indeed, the radical potential of envisioning transgender lies in its positionality as a term that should, ideally, defy the creation of a transnormativity that is born of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity insists on two sexes. Thus, transnormativity guides the body to the opposite or opposing pole to position a legible sexed form as the archetypal way of being and looking for transgender people, as seen through the passability of contemporary culture’s two most iconic trans celebrities: Caitlyn Jenner or Laverne Cox.
Yet transgender individuals may choose hormones or they may not, they may elect for a top surgery but forego the bottom surgery, they may choose to gender bend through a consistent altering of clothing (including binding, tucking, stuffing, and other maneuvers to temporarily alter the physical landscape of form) and gender performance but make no permanent adjustment to their sexed body. In these spaces a subjectionhood is very much assumed, even if a static sex is not assumed. That is, the body is part of the assumption of being and, as illustrated by the prevalence of YouTube transition vlogs, a very important one. Yet by designating the liminal spaces as “unlivable” spaces, subjectionhood is denied and the power of heteroideology and heteronormativity confirmed. It denies, in fact, entire communities that have come together because of this very liminal space (Raun, 2015; Raun, 2015b). It denies the activism that subcultural communities undertake to be recognized in these liminal spaces (Dame, 2016; Marris, 2016; West, 2014). It denies the ways in which individuals come to know themselves as “gender outlaws” (Bornstein, 1994) and use that identification against a binary sex system – even if that positionality came following a shifting over time. Xavier, for example, begins their channel discussing his desire for top surgery within “the next year.” Yet as viewers progress through the vlogs they see a marked change in Xavier. Xavier stops administering testosterone and as a result they are reunited with menstruation. Xavier illustrates that subversion is key to the expression of authentic subjectivity.

**Subversion**

Xavier takes the audience into their bedroom, their head resting on navy blue pillows. Xavier is in the center of the screen. Viewers watch from the clavicle up, Xavier’s white tank top contrasted against their dark skin. They wear a dangling earring in one ear – a change from the diamond stud viewers saw for so many years. Xavier begins talking about yoga as a means to
ease the pain of menstruation, which they have welcomed back as a testament to fluidity. Yoga, they say, eases gender dysphoria. Yoga allows Xavier to be themselves, embracing masculinity and femininity equally. It allows them to be comfortable with facial hair, a somewhat deeper voice, and sculpted arms. Yet it also allows them comfort with their menses and breasts. Xavier says they have come to a place in life where they want to “create and vibrate on a more natural rhythm” and to “flow again” with their “natural impulses and not need control.” As Xavier talks there is light, instrumental music in the background – they are creating a space of comfort, of flow … a liminal space that quiets the dissonance created by a two-sex system. Xavier looks at the camera and tells viewers that they now come from a “position of gender fluidity.” “Here I am,” they say. Xavier moves the camera to the center – obscuring their face – showing viewers the rest of their body. They are lying on the bed in an S formation, panning over the distressed blue jeans, white top, and unbound chest.

Xavier returns the camera to their face, making eye contact with the viewer. “I am comfortable with that,” they say. “And I am comfortable ripping off my clothes,” Xavier adds as they move the camera to their chest and snaps the tank top sleeve with their free hand. “The only thing I require is a safe space to be natural,” they add. Xavier’s natural is a discussion between the body and gender expectations of the body – the intra-relatedness of the two that makes them tied but not synonymous. Xavier does the tricky work of parsing between their body and roles placed upon their body. Their natural is menstruation that dances with masculinity but does not diminish it. It is a conversation between Xavier’s body and their various identities – a conversation Xavier wishes to have with others. They tell viewers they want to meet and “have conversations and revelations and reveal ourselves.” Here Xavier is stepping into the role of organizer and activist. They are utilizing their liminal space (their refusal of the binary) to call
others to the cause. Xavier is offering personal healing techniques to the audience and envisioning a future where gender fluidity allows forms read as male to bleed and forms read as female to speak in a deep voice.

Xavier does mention the need for a safe space and, indeed, the liminal space they have come to occupy does invite the potentiality for more violence, especially given the intersection of their queer gender expression and their race. Xavier’s occupation of this “liminal space” may indicate a non-recognition of citizen or subject if one thinks of subjectivity “as a discursive practice of relationality and recognition” that is outside of our control “when they traffic in symbols and signs that we only partially command” (West, 2014, p. 45). West’s reading offers us the power of Butler’s designation of the “unlivable,” “abject” space. Indeed, West champion’s Butler’s work throughout the text, and in many ways such support is reasonable. Butler and West take state powers that exclude to task, and rightfully so. Power punishes, power is very much violence for fluid bodies because they are outside of heteroideological narrative – their forms do not fit in the stories that are widely told and consumed. Malleable bodies damage, even if slightly, the binary bend of heteronormativity. The bodies are policed. The policing is exacerbated by one’s race and class position – as discussed in Chapter Two. This cannot be ignored, but the answer lies not in denying subjecthood but instead in rallying around subjecthood – or as Namaste writes, the “lived realities.” Lived realities, such as those seen through trans produced YouTube channels, illustrate that subjecthood is defined through producer’s relationship to their bodies and narrative. The placement of these narratives offers a conduit through which subjecthood can be asserted, seen, and recognized. YouTube has offered many folks a communal space of recognition. Is this denied because the body and the narrative operates from the border, or the unseen space of fluidity that betrays binary categorization? In
sum, while the formulation of the abject does indeed work when someone discusses citizenship as humans recognized by the state, we must reconsider its potential when discussing subjecthood or subcultural subjectivities who, by their very existence, present a “noise” and “blockage” in the “system of representation” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 92).

It is subcultural communities that have slowly worked against ideological formations, even if eventually being assumed or ideologically “incorporated” (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 92-99). One could argue that transgender identity is in the process of being incorporated by power as the difference of transgender is often denied in narrative. Such was the case in Chapter Two’s analyses of the social media that arose around the “bathroom problem,” whereby pleas were made regarding the passability of the body, or its ability to visibly fit within binary identification systems. Likewise, one could also argue that transgender is the “spectacle” or the “villainous clowns” that marked 1970’s punk rock cultures (Hebdige, 2010, pp. 92-99) – similar to what Serano calls the “deceptive transsexual or the pathetic transsexual” (2007, p. 36). Yet, the YouTube productions discussed in this dissertation have largely avoided these ideological forms of incorporation. Likely because, as posited by Namaste, “within Western societies, it is easier for females to pass as men than for males to pass as women” (2000, p. 145). Thus, trans masculinities seem to present a body that is less spectacular than transfeminine forms, largely because “ideal” femininities were created and perpetuated with a looked-at-uponness in mind.

Furthermore, I posit the sacred code of hegemonic masculinity – the top position in a hierarchy of masculinities that oppresses or incorporates other forms of masculinity in an effort to maintain domination of other genders (Connell & Messerchmidt, 2005) - systematically erases trans masculine experiences from widely consumed, mainstream media narratives because of the threat such individuals pose to masculinities in power. Here trans masculinities are not
incorporated, they are rejected and suppressed. Of course, one could argue that postmodern masculinities, which “locate[s] itself through breaks in patriarchies absolutism” (Barratt & Straus, 1994) complicates this argument, as the postmodern offers greater flexibility to our cultural understandings of masculine qualities. Postmodern masculinities may indeed allow for more subversive masculinities. However, even such flexibility works to camouflage or distort the present reality of an aggressive, consuming masculinity that informs North American society. While the postmodern may have created greater potentialities for alliances between genders, and encouraged the development of self-reflexive men, it has done little to alleviate the cismale dominance we see in social and economic spheres given its reliance on individualistic, personal growth (Pease, 2000, Ch. 7).

Trans masculinities are systematically ignored or erased because they operate as destabilizing units. Erasure is key to the healthy, prosperous survival of the binary sex and gender ecosystem and the dichotomy between sex and gender. Heteroideological narrative ensures their exclusion, indeed depends upon it, as Xavier discusses in their 2011 vlog (cited earlier) when they state that others demand their removal from their own past, or the refusal of Xavier’s lived experience. Lastly, Xavier compellingly illustrates how embodiment is central to trans experience, and their embodiment is impacted by gender expectations just as their fluid gender performance is complicated or, at times, complemented by how their body is read and how they present the body to be read. Xavier provides apt examples of the intra-relatedness of sex and gender yet does not regress to a conflation of the two so as to determine or fix their body. Importantly, Xavier represents the most fluid and overtly radical of content creators worked with during this dissertation. However, even producers who do not embrace their natural

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12Connell and Messerschmidt also do work to also nuance the understanding of hegemonic masculinity in their 2005 article (see references), which could certainly be symptomatic of the postmodern turn in cultural studies.
as menses and masculinity also dislodge the discursive and material weight of heteroideology from their shoulders.

**Dade’s Vocal Trouble through Transition**

**Transition**

Dade’s channel, the most active of all discussed in this dissertation, began on December 8, 2011 when Dade took his first shot of testosterone for himself and in front of the audience, a performative strategy utilized by many of the early YouTube trans masculine vloggers who illustrated “a significant emphasis on, even preoccupation with, testosterone” (Raun, 2015, p. 704).

In the early stages of the channel Dade followed the testosterone formula described by Raun (2015a) as a “structuring principle” (p. 704) – he updated the audience weekly, sometimes monthly, about changes happening to him as a result of hormone administration. His formula illustrates the birth of YouTube as a community for transgender resources and answers. His channel also illustrates an example of what scholar Laura Horak calls “transition videos” (2014), a phenomenon that became so widespread on YouTube that it is arguable as a genre on the site (Ruan, 2015b). The mere presence of these vlogs certainly illustrates the importance of the body and healing the disembodied self that Rubin speaks of, once again drawing our attention to the centrality of the form in and for trans lives. Dade discusses muscular growth, voice changes, body hair appearance, lower growth (taking a drastically different approach from Jason and remaining elusive and leaving this often as “changes down there”), mental and emotional changes, and facial shape changes, to name a few.

Importantly, many of Dade’s vlogs may appear to return us to binary sex systems, as the audience often follows the vlogger through discussions of bodily changes via testosterone and
surgeries that lead the body to a passable cis maleness. Indeed, the Dade of 2016 looks far different from the Dade of 2012, and watchers of his channel know that he has undergone top and bottom surgery and administered self-determined dosages of testosterone. Watchers of Dade’s channel know that he identifies as a trans man, father, and husband. This appears to complement heteroideological narrative through taking us from one readably sexed form to the “opposite.” However, Dade’s consistent discussion of his shifting body actually troubles (though far more subtly than Xavier or Jason) heteroideological narrative because it refuses a determined sexed body and therefore complicates gender as conflated with, or equivalent to, sex.

Figure 8: Dade stands outside on an overcast day. There are mountains behind him

**Vocal Trouble**

Dade calls into question what happens to gender when the reading of the body is betrayed. In a vlog, and as complemented by an interview, Dade explains his insecurity over his voice – described by his wife Tiffany as “mousy” and by Dade as childish. According to Dade, he was always able to “pass” until he spoke and even now, years after he began his transition, his past voice still haunts him, reminding him of a time when an aspect of his body betrayed him.
“It's painful for me to listen to the video and my voice. I can look at myself. Cause Oh look at a little twelve-year-old boy but I can't listen. I can't listen to those videos but I completely honor the fact that I was there and other people are there and they are doing something from that hopefully,” Dade says, adding that it took eight months for his voice to crack, whereas folks who begin transition in younger years may experience a drop within weeks. This disjuncture, discussed in the video blogs and in our interview, calls forth the changing of the body. It illustrates for us the body as media that is read and interpreted as purely visual, and that reading of the body creates expectations whereby gender should align with the body. However, auditory information quickly complicates understandings of gender as a result of reading the body.

For example, Dade’s wife Tiffany, who vlogged alongside him during his tenure on YouTube, created vlogs that chronicled her own journey throughout Dade’s transition. One of the videos “Week 7 – message to transguys,” published on January 22, 2012, featured Tiffany’s hope for a change to come in regards to Dade’s voice. Tiffany, a fit White woman with sandy blonde curls, high cheek bones, and light eyes, is centered on the screen while sitting in a red armchair in front of a window. She turns the computer on and begins her video, largely documenting for the audience what partners of trans individuals go through as they release the person they knew pre-transition. The vlog is packed with information, but towards the end Tiffany centers Dade’s voice, stating that she is really looking forward to his voice lowering because that will help with pronouns and will also help with passing. Tiffany, too, slips with pronouns because (a) she knew Dade pre-transition and (b) his tenor betrays the reading of his body, so any ambiguity of sex is relegated to the auditory as the element that destabilizes the ambiguous body. Therefore, Tiffany expresses her desire for the most ambiguous element of
Dade’s body to be lower, so that Dade can present as male and they won’t “look like jackasses” because Dade is not presenting as female anymore.

This discussion of the voice reminds the audience that the body cannot be wholly objectified when discussing sex, gender, and sexual orientation. The body cannot be seen as a piece or fraction of, especially when amorphous forms are present. Heteroideological narrative seeks to wind all of these elements up in a conflation that consistently returns us to the “natural” in an effort at “ideological incorporation” that “resituates” the subculture into the very forms it resists (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 97-98). Dade, in an interview, said he largely passed as masculine/man before he began his transition – until he spoke. The body was read on the surface – the hair short, the chest flat, the posture firm. Dade’s voice, however, carried high pitch. Dade could not pass based on the visual alone. This seems a return to sex, a return to birth designation. Yet it is not. It instead indicates an in-between space that troubles the idea of a static body.

Tiffany’s concern over looking like “jackasses” best illustrates this fluid and forever morphing zone that weakens the establishment of a two-body system, because this fear stems from the culturally understood reading of the static body. They look like jackasses because they trouble the notion that the body is the static deciding factor that gender arises from. As Dade discusses through multiple videos on his channel – he has always presented himself as masculine. As he moved through his transition – gaining greater muscle mass, more facial hair, and a more defined, sharper jawbone – it became harder for onlookers to associate femaleness with Dade. He was no longer an embodiment of female masculinity as he was before, but his voice still carried a higher pitch. The fear of looking like “jackasses” stems from this illegibility of the body and therefore of gender. That moment of uncertainty, which Dade and Tiffany both allow to exist as evidenced by a public YouTube channel that boasts tens of thousands of followers, is where
heteroideological narrative is complicated. Heteroideological narrative insists upon a static, sexed form that dictates an “opposite,” yet Dade’s voice indicated that Tiffany was not Dade’s opposite. Yet nor was she the same. He was not culturally legible in regards to the ways in which heteroideological narrative shapes our understanding of sexed bodies. Tiffany would not return Dade to a birth-designated sexed body in the way that Sophia was returned when Crystal told her to “man up.” Tiffany allowed the malleability of the body to exist in vocal ranges. In that moment of uncertainty, the idea of static body and a resulting gender role is questioned, even if momentarily. Because these elements are questioned, so too are understandings of sexual orientation. Furthermore, this auditory betrayal of static sex – of a culturally legible one-or-the-other body – does important labor towards untangling the conflation between sex, gender, and sexual orientation, a necessary movement towards the destabilization of heteroideological narrative.

Ascension and Return: Concluding Thoughts

Destabilization of heteroideological narrative begins with the body, as illustrated by the various vlogs discussed in this chapter. This is not a move toward objectification. This is a powerful moment that illustrates the importance of form in regards to navigating the everyday and discovering the “authentic” as it relates to skin, hair, adipose, voice, and a myriad of other largely taken-for-granted characteristics that make up what people are made of. The diverse nature with which these video bloggers present the body and discuss their forms – ranging from visual hybridity, a renaming of the body, and tensions with an aspect of the body (voice) – make visible something that the paradox of visibility obscures: there is no one way to be transgender. While mainstream media returns to hyper trans femininities located within celebrity or slowly achieving celebrity, these vlogs instead illustrate the various ways to be and live as transgender.
Xavier shows that their body is amorphous, that their history is dependent upon their socialization as female alongside their reclamation of fluid gender expression, and that they embrace a menstrual cycle just as they embrace facial hair. Jason discusses dysmorphia with his chest while renaming and illustrating pride in the growth of his “thing” that is not clitoris, nor is it penis. Dade illustrates that even bodies read as passing carry ghosts that defy or deter the reading of the body as male. In sum, it is in the malleability and the shifting of the body that identity is born, reworked, and recast – again and again. This project of searching for authentic identity for those who exist in fields that bisexism and bigenderism cannot quite reach, takes apart heteroideological narrative through refusing its return to the static, muted, and unchangeable. It redefines subjecthood as that which is not dependent on recognition via oppressive apparatuses and seeks instead to dislodge such regulations one story at a time – giving us cause to consider how we define subject in an increasingly connected political-economy. These video blogs urge us to nuance the authentic after traveling through complex lives with story-tellers who are defying the specificity of binary sex and of gender.

Xavier, Jason, and Dade’s narratives assist us in understanding what the everyday is like for someone who is located within an in-between space that betrays deeply embedded understandings of sex and the poisonous conflation (not to be confused with intra-relation [Tuana, 1997]) between sex and gender. This is possible through attention to the body, particularly to the body as that which is shapeable and that which is always shaped. Through drawing our eyes to the various ways one comes to know and accept their body as real or authentic, and thus questioning hegemonic ideologies of acceptable authenticity, these personal narrative vloggers bring viewers to a space where bodies matter. They undo, even if subtly, the
insistence on a static form and thus they work against determinism that locks the body into place or erases it.
CHAPTER FIVE: UNCATEGORIZABLE ORIENTATIONS

This chapter argues that the conflation of gender and sexual orientation (Valentine, 2007) is a powerful and dangerous tool to maintain binarism, as it results in the privileging of one – sexual orientation – at the expense of another (Stryker, 2008). However, the conflation of gender and sexual orientation is not possible without first collapsing sex into gender and effectively vanishing the physical, shifting form. Therefore, the vlogs trans masculine YouTube producers create are powerful though often subtle acts of resistance to the conflation between gender and orientation. As stated in the previous chapter, the body is vital to undoing conflations that propel binary ways of thinking. When the body is drawn back to attention and signified as vital to subjecthood, but not essential to gender expression, the conflation between sex and gender is troubled. Such troubling may cause more visibility for transgender people while also assisting them in their identity work, thus re-establishing the differences between gender and sexual orientation. Furthermore, I argue that, although the rise in representation of gay and lesbian characters in media has fostered greater acceptance of homosexuality, the representation has also dispossessed genderqueer individuals through making certain tropes of gay and lesbian characters hypervisible while erasing more subversive ways of being queer. That is, media representation fosters a homonormativity that excludes queer bodies and queer coupling that do not mirror heterosexual rituals as dictated by heteroideological narrative. The “whitewashing” (Peters, 2011) of queer bodies and queer love then creates a hole in the field of knowing whereby queer folks struggle with their identities.

The T in LGBTQ remains largely invisible – causing genderqueer individuals to struggle to understand their identities given the conflation between sex and gender (that banishes the body) and the subsequent conflation between gender and sexual orientation. The mental,
physical, and spiritual labor involved in trying to find an identity that fits in a world where transgender is becoming a buzzword but was largely unknown before the “tipping point” is cited as the impetus behind launching YouTube channels by Dade, Jason, and Xavier. Xavier says they struggled with identity as a child and, through that struggle, was inspired to start a YouTube channel:

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Well it started off because, well this actually goes back to like growing up period as a kid…just not really having a lot of imagery or narratives around my experience where I didn't associate with gender in a binary sense. I didn't associate it with being conformed to any type of identity or type of behavior . . .

I would go to YouTube trying to find resources and experiences. Just kind of get to know. And there was nothing there. I said “you know if there's no young Black trans man on YouTube. All of them are White. Fit able bodied attractive” and you know they have like 20,000 subscribers [then] 50,000 next week. And it was just like we need resources too, coming from a different perspective. So just speaking to intersections, you know, I have to speak up and that's why I started my YouTube channel. I was actually eighteen when I started it.

Media invisibility obscured from Xavier a way to understand what they were going through as a youth designated female but feeling out of place with their body and gender identity. This was exacerbated by Xavier’s race, as blackness was either erased or marked by derogatory and omnipresent stereotypes regardless of gender expression. Toni Morrison (1992), when discussing Africanism in popular literary canons, says that “distancing Africanism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony” (p. 8) in the “construction” of American identity (p. 9) that not only privileged whiteness but did so through constructing whiteness and
maleness as the “quintessential American identity” (p. 44). The construction of such whiteness was possible only through creating an imaginary that conflated blackness – across all gender identities -- with lack, a trend that continued over time in different form throughout various media. The erasure seen in early literary canons morphed into misrepresentation in audio/visual productions. hooks offers a compelling discussion of what happens when black women’s bodies are positioned outside of the white icon, stating through her film critique of Girl 6 that “we live in a culture where black female bodies are stereotypically ‘seen’ in a sexual light so that it becomes difficult for audiences of any race to see our image standing for universal themes of identity formation, sexual agency, feminist resistance, unrequited longing, etc…” (hooks, 1996, p. 19). Black women’s bodies exist as the hyper-sexual, thus adding to a discussion of gender the intersections between race and sexuality. The hyper-sexual black body becomes a “spice” “marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening” (hooks, 2006, p. 370) consumed by whiteness. That is, whiteness is “eating the other” through sexual intimacy, cultural appropriation or misrepresentation. The body of color becomes an object of flavor (spice) that further enhances the aforementioned power of idealized white, heterosexual femininity through both its divergence from it and the commodification of bodies that resist gendered, racial, and sexual subjugation on the principle of genitalia and associated social roles. Such “externally defined controlling images” (Collins, 1986, p. s18) deny the complexity of subjection for black women (because they are not positioned as women) and can act as tools of domination that defer black women’s self-valuation as they strive to achieve distance from stereotypes of black womanhood (Collins, 1986).

Xavier, living as a genderqueer youth socialized under the rubric of femininity was no doubt influenced by the prevalence of stereotypes of black femininities. Yet, given their
displacement from feminine gender expression they were also being informed by the equally toxic misrepresentation of black masculinities. Williams (2015) writes that cinema released between 1903 and 2003 these stereotypes relegated black men as either a “contented slave,” (p. xvi) also referred to as the sidekick or magical negro, (Hughey, 2012) or “wretched freeman,” (Williams, 2015, p. xvi) which morphed into the criminal or the violent savage (Rome, 20014). The imaginary of black masculinity as tied to “black bondage” (Williams, 2015, p. xvii) did not wane with time, but only shifted. Nor do these stereotypes only permeate cinema, as countless studies have critiqued their appearance (particularly that of the criminal) in news (Bissler and Conners, 2012), reality television (Tyree, 2011), television advertisements (Shabbir, Hyman, Reast, and Paliwadana, 2014), and literature (Morrison, 1992). This list is not exhaustive, as stereotypes of the black athlete and overly sexual “mandingo” inform media content (Weaver Jr., 2016). Thus, Xavier sat at the intersection of misrepresentation of their race as it met with binary gender expectations and erasure of their queer gender expression. Their discursive unknowing of self was ultimately intensified by the convergence of their identities in a culture that offered little to no positive representation.

Furthermore, because invisibility of queer gender expression is pervasive, this also means that the folks around Xavier had no discursive framework to understand what Xavier was going through. Because gay and lesbian orientations have become largely commonplace in cultural discourse, and because they are housed under the sexual identity umbrella, gender identity is often confused with or replaced by sexual orientation. Yet orientation is dependent upon a binary sex model of the fictitious “two true” sexes (Tuana, 1997). To further complicate matters, sex often vanishes because gender and sex are conflated and the body is often obscured under this conflation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Dade discussed that his gender identity was
confused with his sexual orientation while his bodily dysphoria went unrealized because sex is collapsed into gender. Jason illustrates the same frustration on his channel, as well – making note of his personal unhappiness because he was only able to understand his identity through sexual orientation.

Important to note here is that sex and gender are not the same. Gender and sexual orientation are not the same. Yet, they are woven together to create the tapestry of sexual identity. As Dade mentioned in an interview and on his channel: he often passed as male before beginning his transition. However, his voice kept him from passing. His gender expression was not dependent upon his genitalia, but other aspects of his body did betray his gender expression. The conflation was troubled because of Dade’s voice – patrons of a bar would assume Dade’s sex based on his gender expression and then question that assumption following his speech. Because the conflation between sex and gender is troubled, and instead the intra-relations highlighted (Tuana, 1997), the binary of man or woman is also troubled. This leads to the questioning of orientation that strikes fear into the categorical imperatives of heteroideological narrative. Simply, the vanishing of the body is vital to the survival of heteroideological narrative, as it is through the body that one is drawn to another. When the body disappears, or is taken as “natural” or “fixed” then so, too, is orientation. The fixed categorical schema of gay or straight, and the visibility of this branch of sexual identity, dispossesses subjects from understanding the self as it erases portions of subjectivity through collapsing different ways of being in the world.

**Media Erasure as Being and Becoming Dispossessed**

Dispossession, as discussed by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013) is a multi-layered occurrence in a rapidly globalizing world and must be understood as both “being dispossessed” and “becoming dispossessed.” First, to understand dispossession one must consent
to universal human status as “interdependent.” everyone is dependent on social worlds for survival in both interpersonal and political senses. Because survival is dependent on others, every human is at once and always dispossessed of any true sovereignty. Thus, people are all born dispossessed from themselves, as the ways in which selves change is not solely dependent on the individual’s own actions, words, etc…. but also on the actions and words of others. If, for example, a transgender person is disowned by their family (as Dade discusses on his channel) then they are dispossessed from who they were before disownment. The familial dispossession is an illustration of “being dispossessed.” While the dispossession came later in Dade’s life, he was vulnerable to the possibility since birth. Dade “became” dispossessed by medical and state staff who could not or would not assist Dade with his transition. Dade did not have a doctor but a physician’s assistant, and through Dade’s own research he adjusted his own testosterone dosage, drew up his own state-mandated paperwork, etc…. because no one in the medical or state department knew what to do (interview, June, 2016). Yet this leads to an important component of dispossession – one finds their place through being without a place. As Dade says, the dispossession made him who he is and inspired his actions as father. He would not do to others what was done to him. In the simplest of terms, dispossession can lead to political action in an attempt to eradicate “becoming” dispossessed (pp. 1-9).

To “become” dispossessed is to weave in various forms of state violence, such as “deprivation” and “subjection” (pp. 1-9). Fully exploring the nuanced nature of becoming dispossessed is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but one can look at media erasure of queer coupling and queer bodies as a form of “becoming” dispossessed, made possible in this particular case by heteroideological narrative. Dorothy Allison, when writing of growing up as a young, poor lesbian in South Carolina in the sixties and seventies, spoke of the erasure of her
class and sexual orientation, stating that myths the media depended on regarding class were largely congratulatory and romanticized. The tropes were a means of illustrating a pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstrap mentality ascribed to the “good poor” in an effort to shame, compartmentalize, and trivialize the experience of poor folks who do not escape poverty -- a means, so to speak, of keeping them in line through keeping them silent about poverty as a production of the capitalist state (Allison, n.d.). Likewise, her identity as lesbian also was erased from understanding because of media silence about lesbian orientations. Pornographic paperbacks offered her hope in isolation, contributing to her experience a word to understand her sexual orientation and therefore identity:

I knew her immediately. She wasn’t true, either. She wasn’t me . . . But she was true enough, and the lust echoed. When she pulled the frightened girl close after thirty pages, I got damp all down my legs. That’s what it was, and I wasn’t the only one even if none had turned up in the neighborhood yet. Details aside, the desire matched up. She wanted women; I wanted my girlfriends. The word was Lesbian. After that, I started looking for it (1994, p. 187).

On a personal level, Allison’s intersectional erasure, based on her class and sexual orientation, dislocated her from herself and from a feeling of belonging to a community, her “being dispossessed” heightened by “becoming disposed” as people like her were erased from culturally accepted narratives. She grappled for a way to understand who she was and what she was going through. What has changed since Allison grew up is a heightened media visibility surrounding certain LGB narratives alongside an invisibility of queer gender identity narratives. Yet the lineage of LGB representation in media, regardless of critique, is important to note as the
representation of trans people in the media is following a strikingly similar path whereby only certain forms and couplings are made visible.

**Erasing the T: LGB Coupling on the Television Screen**

Kielwasser and Wolf (1992) detailed the erasure of homosexual love between adolescents in popular teen television from the 1990’s, concluding that even when gay relationships were present in these shows the narrative focused on the queer youth as lost or a “phantasm” utilized only to reinforce the struggles of heterosexual children and teens (p. 360) – a spiral of silence leading to “symbolic annihilation” of homosexual desires in adolescents (pp. 355-57). Nor is it surprising that such erasure was and is prevalent in programming directed toward children and teens. Children’s programming has long been deemed important to regulate in the interest of protecting children from violence, language, and other mature content. There are restrictions on the amount of advertising allotted per slot as well as the type of advertising placed within the programming (Kunkel, 2001, pp. 384-386). Restrictions include regulations on food advertising (Berning, Huang, Rabinowitz, 2014) and “program-length commercials” whereby advertisements featuring the characters within a program were not permissible during the airing of the program (a Batman toy cannot be advertised while a child is watching a program about Batman) (Roman and McAllister, 2012). There are also precautions taken to voluntarily block children from viewing particular content, such as the V-chip that gives parents the option to censor programming based on adult language and violence, among others (Kunkel, Farinola, Farrar, Donnerstein, Biely, and Zwarun, 2002). One can deduce that the invisibility of explicit homosexual narratives, despite consistent jokes, hints, and elucidations to queer lifestyles (Dennis, 2009) illustrates that queer narratives are considered a threat to children and teens. For example, in 2005 a “rumor that a video starring undersea denizen Spongebob Squarepants would
include a plea for tolerance of gay people prompted hysterical protests from watchdog groups and aghast denials from producers” (Dennis, 2009, pp. 738-739). However, protection takes limited forms despite complex regulations. Programming geared toward adolescents refuses queer narratives while simultaneously propelling heightened capitalism, as children’s programming has been found as having consistent “commodity flow” and brand saturation techniques that encourage hyper-consumption at the earliest of ages (McAllister and Giglio, 2006).

It is not solely children’s television programming that has misrepresented, stereotyped, or completely erased queer coupling (Dyer, 2006; Gros, 2001). Television programs that catered to adults were often devoid of any queer narratives until the 1990’s, when “between 1994 and 1997, well over 40 percent of prime-time networks series produced at least one gay-themed episode, [and] nineteen network shows debuted with recurring gay characters” (Becker, 2005, p. 185). The most notable explosion of LGB visibility on broadcast television came when Ellen DeGeneres’s coming out narrative was broadcast on her sitcom Ellen. This was a crucial moment for media representations of LGB individuals as DeGeneres’s narrative, both on the sitcom and in media that followed (Time, Oprah, etc…), opened up new discourses about gay and lesbian communities. It also illustrated that there was an audience willing to watch media with LGB characters. The canonical coming out episode was the most popular of the sitcom, with the audience nearly doubling (Dow, 2001). Television was quicker to introduce more LGB characters following the formation of an audience for this content, though few of these characters were leads (Becker, 2006). Ellen was an exception to this rule, and soon led to the hit show Will & Grace, which featured one straight main character (Grace) and one gay main character (Will).
However, the question has to be raised of exactly how these narratives became palatable and why?

As explained by Dow (2001), Ellen’s coming out was strategically written to make her sexual orientation more palatable to heterosexual audiences through appealing to their notions of progress and forward thinking. That is to say that *Ellen* – the show and the media narrative that followed her coming out – worked to keep the “secret” of “homophobia” and “heterosexism” (Dow, 2001) through making visible a lesbian narrative that appeared progressive and thus nurtured liberal self-constructions hinged upon multiculturalism and acceptance (Becker, 2006). In short, visibility was dependent upon de-politicizing the act of coming out and the impacts of being a lesbian in a straight world (Dow, 2001). What the show *Ellen* did not tackle were the ways in which material realities of LGB folks are impacted by their sexual orientations. Absent from the script of *Ellen* was, for example, content that made visible the backlash that Ellen faced as a result of making her coming out a mediated event. Backlashes included consumer threats to advertisers that remained with the show, cancellation of advertisements as a result of show content, and harassment Ellen herself faced (Hubert, 1999).

*Will & Grace* did much of the same de-politicizing work through following particular scripts under heteroideological narrative, mainly through presenting Will and Grace in a contradictory way that allows for Will’s gayness but also presents them as “an ideal heterosexual couple” (Quimby, 2005, p. 714). The show kept the viewers hooked via the hope that someday Will’s orientation could be “straightened,” or that his love for Grace would blossom into desire. The show illustrated that prime-time television “can represent the Other while appealing to a broad audience” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 1053). Yet the appeal to the broad audience is made possible through sacrificing truly nuanced, politicized narratives that deviate from hegemonic identity
constructions. While gayness is represented by the character of Will, the comedic undertones and queues of “ideal” coupling between Will and Grace produce a gayness “least likely to offend audiences” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 1064). Furthermore (and much like Ellen) Will is good-looking, White, semi-affluent, easy to like, and able-bodied. Will’s sexual relations are locked in audio, comedic representations as opposed to visual demonstrations (the audience did not see same-sex coupling). Homosexuality came to the prime-time screen, but was, in many ways, incorporated by the norms that govern narrative as opposed to pushing back against those norms (Mitchell, 2005).

Television content that centers LGB orientations has not changed much since the nineties. Programming of queer couplehood is largely “whitewashed” (Peters, 2011) in modern televiusal, mainstream representations across broadcast, cable, and premium channels, establishing a homonormativity that mirrors the tropes of heteronormativity. An analysis of Showtime’s Queer as Folk found that affluent, privileged lesbian and gay subjecthood was frequently represented on the screen – even as the content broached edgier intimate scenes than would be allowed on broadcast or cable. The characters were affluent, able-bodied, and largely gender normative, presenting little of the material reality that many LGB folks face (Peters, 2011). The show also erased from its purview queer orientations and bodies that are not legible as male or female or attracted towards legibly male or female bodies. FX’s show Rescue Me comes closer to doing the political work that the aforementioned shows mitigated through comedy or eroticism. Rescue Me consistently highlighted homophobic dialogue that illustrated ways in which individuals work through their own prejudice in a culture of heightened masculinity (post 9/11 firefighters). However, this ran the danger of supporting “derogatory intent” through heightened inflammatory discourse about gay identity (Draper & Lotz, 2012).
Yet, like all of the aforementioned programs— the show relied upon binary bodies and gay orientations without consideration to the fluid nature of sexual desire.

Bravo’s *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* appears to get closer than any of the aforementioned television programming in regards to genderqueer representations. Often the content of the program works against traditional masculinities by encouraging straight men to adopt a metrosexual appearance through feminized grooming rituals (such as plucking the eyebrows). Yet the encouragement of fluid and more tender masculinity is encouraged so that the men are more appealing to women, illustrating heteroideological, sexist motive while positioning women as a “prize” to be won through manipulation. Additionally, *Queer Eye* falls short in that it panders to normalization of “urbane refinement, class, and taste” that are indisputably situated within systems of privilege (Clarkson, 2005, p. 243). It also returns viewers to the importance of heterosexual coupling while, as indicated by Clarkson but not fully expanded or analyzed, supporting tropes of gayness that make it possible for LGB folks to support hetero agendas while simultaneously being marginalized by them. Simply, mainstream media representations of fluid sexual orientations remain lodged in categorical, binary systems dependent on stable bodies and associated gender roles, despite the rise in the “sexual borderland” whereby non-exclusive identities “have sprung up from the cracks within in, creating an in-between space” (Callis, 2014, p. 64).

Importantly, small gains have been made toward the representation of LGB communities, including an increase in representation (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015), more nuanced representations that sometimes diverge from tropes associated with LGB individuals (Montalbano, 2013), and positive audience reception of queer orientation narratives (Dow, 2006). That is to say that there remains benefit to these shows despite their compartmentalizing
of queerness into comfortable archetypes supported by heteroideological narrative. Exposure to LGB characters on television is correlated to greater acceptance of LGB equality (Bond & Compton, 2015) and can – in time – move beyond regulation and thus lead to greater respect for LGB folks (Raley & Lucas, 2008). To repeat: representation matters, though the journey to nuanced, three-dimensional representation is painfully long and problematic.

Avila-Saavedrea (2009) charges media studies scholarship with the same affront of erasing queer orientations. For example, the authors cited above have done important work in forging a window to analyze the relations between the narratives people consume and the attitudes people have. They have taken pains to point out webs of privilege that erase or misrepresent. Yet there is little discussion of queerness as that which defies categorization and certainly normalization (Jagose, 1996). The audience is often returned to normative constructions of LGB identities without consideration to the spectrum of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. There are scant (at best) representations of queerness in our contemporary mediascape as the representations of LGB communities have approached a pervasive homonormativity or “gaystreaming” that diverges from heteroideological images only through same-sex bodies (Ng, 2013). Furthermore, the highlighting of LGB orientation at the expense of gender expression has had implications for many transgender people.

As theorized by Foucault, one’s experiences can only be understood through the dialectical environment in which they are situated (1977). Dade, as recounted in the previous chapter where he says he at first considered himself a lesbian and still “didn’t fit,” struggled to find a name that would center not his sexual orientation but his body and gender. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, Xavier details a similar lack of knowing that was exacerbated by misrepresentation of race (something that Jason likely experienced as well despite the lack of
explicit discussion of race on his channel). The erasure of gender queer and non-conforming representation temporarily but effectively mitigated all three vloggers’ realization of their sexual identity subjectivities. That is to say that they were dispossessed. Dade is candid in explaining that dispossession impacted him so deeply that, as he says, he became suicidal – a problem that plagues transgender communities yet is obscured through the paradox of visibility (attributed not only to feelings of non-belonging but also to discrimination, familial disownment, poverty, etc…). However, when Dade found the word – transgender – a new discursive field opened up for him, giving him a means to understand his own experience through embodiment, gender expression, and sexual orientation as related but not conflated components of the self.

Xavier and Dade are not alone in the quandary of making sense of their trans identity in a culture that erases such identities from widespread knowing, as many transmen live as lesbians before their transition (Schilt, 2010, p. 58) – as Dade, Xavier, and Jason did. Jason supports this during his vlog “Q&A with the girlfriend” (Oct. 11, 2015). The vlog takes place in the car while Jason is driving with his fiancé Bianca reading audience questions to Jason. Jason is asked “when did you know you were transgender?” When Jason hears this question he heatedly replies, “I don’t know because I thought I was fucking gay!” Jason works through his confusion for the audience while he drives, detailing his attraction toward men as something not sexual in nature but still a longing, stating that in elementary and middle school he always liked to be around the boys, which further confused his own identity. He then discusses seeing a YouTube video about transition around the age of 16 or 17 and, like Dade, finally found the framework he needed to make sense of his selves and begin the labor to embody the portions of his personality that were left untended to.
In sum, Western culture - imbued with widespread understanding of the words gay, lesbian, and homosexual – gave Dade, Jason, and Xavier the dialectical tools to work through their identities through sexual orientation. Yet, given the lack of cultural understandings of gender identity and bodily dysphoria, this was a mythical subjectivity for them. It did not bring them much closer to understanding their own positionalities. That is, an individual’s subjectivity is impacted if they do not have the vocabulary to give voice to their experiences. Dade and Jason are much more explicit than Xavier in discussing their personal confusion surrounding their dispossession, but even Xavier mentions that “dating as a lesbian was easier.” All of their identities were wrapped up in their inability to give name to that which they were experiencing in regards to their perceived sex (by those around them) and social expectations of gender expressions. This returned them to questions of their orientations given their inability to name body and gender dysphoria. Yet media invisibility surrounding malleable bodies and spectrums of gender identities, in combination with the conflation between gender and orientation, also leads to questions of love.

If the media continually propels binary and “whitewashed” cultural narratives of orientation it leaves precious little room for folks to understand shifting, queer orientations. Those in the “sexual borderlands” (Callis, 2014) – trans individuals and their partners – struggle to understand their desires and their selves when the T is erased or normalized only when it appears as a form that passes into a binary body imaginary. The binary body allows for a sexual orientation to be neatly compartmentalized into attraction toward the same or the opposite. That is, a mitigation of the spectrum of bodies is a mitigation of queer coupling. Or, if a queer or transgender body is presented then heteroideological narrative may keep binaries in place through returning the body to the binary, as seen in Amazon’s hit streaming show *Transparent.*
Transparent isn’t transparent: Returning to heteroideology through love-making

In an episode of Transparent, lead character Maura Pfefferman is finally able to explore her sexuality following her decision to transition. Maura, played by cisgender actor Jeffrey Tambor, is a middle-aged transgender woman who decides to transition following years of “closeted” cross-dressing. Maura’s transition also affects her ex-wife and three children as they navigate their own lives. Until the ninth episode of the second season, Maura has been uncomfortable with sexuality as it pertains to her body, something best illustrated by her interactions with her ex-wife earlier in the show. During the episode entitled “Man on the Land” (Soloway & Liebegott, 2015), Maura, having gone to a music festival with her two daughters without the knowledge that the space is largely hostile to trans women, leaves in a panic following her discovery of the exclusionary policy. Her daughters remained at the festival. Maura has a panic attack and screams “MAN ON THE LAND” as she half-runs, half-walks out of the festival. It is on her panicked departure that Maura unites with Vicki, an American Indian woman with a mastectomy whose form also denies the image of womanhood that is lodged in the cultural imagination (whom Maura met earlier in the episode). Vicki offers Maura a ride, and soon they are in a motel room together. Maura makes idle chit chat with Vicki, moving from her own bed to Vicki’s. Vicki tenderly runs her hand across Maura’s face and Maura caresses Vicki’s legs. The women kiss; Vicki gets on top of Maura. Maura moans, but there is hesitancy to her pleasure. Maura tells Vicki, “I can’t, I don’t know what to do” while Vicki straddles her. Maura reaches to Vicki’s long braided hair to maintain contact, but refrains from the feel of more intimate places.

Vicki asks “What would you like?” Maura looks terrified, her eyes wide. She shakes her head. “I’m not sure,” Maura replies. Vicki, realizing that Maura has yet to discover her body as
Maura, asks if Maura would like to see her flat chest, a result of her mastectomy. Maura nods and Vicki shows her. Maura is soothed, her dysphoria over her own flat chest mitigated through the knowledge that Vicki does not define a woman by the curves below a clavicle. Maura takes off her own shirt. We see her flat chest encased in a white bra, Vicki touches the bra asking “on or off?” Maura says off and changes her mind quickly. “On,” she says. Her eyes are closed, her mouth parted slightly, she is breathless – the camera captures her face with a mid-shot, allowing us to see Vicki’s ring-adorned hands cusped in the center of the bra. Vicki’s hands slide down to position Maura inside of her. Maura screams “God, my God!” Yet her voice has not raised pitch, and as such has timbre associated with maleness. Both Maura and Vicki moan as Vicki moves back and forth on top of Maura, riding her.

Here the scene appears progressive. It is tender and soft; the carnal cravings of heterointimacy often portrayed in television and film are eschewed for gentle, embodied loving of one’s own form and the form of another. This is augmented following penetration as Vicki lies flat down upon Maura while Maura strokes her hair. For the first time in two seasons the audience sees Maura as a sexual being, one who is discovering the pleasures of her own body and doing so with another woman. Indeed, this is all quite a turn from the objectification of women’s sexuality we see often see that depends upon young, firm “idealized” bodies for audience consumption (Berberick, 2012; Brownmiller, 1984; Kilbourne, 1999; Mulvey, 1975). Here the bodies are older and narrated with lines, yet still sexual. Here the bodies that come together are shunned or somehow “less than” women, yet their feminine tenderness shines through. Yet here also the audience is returned to Maura’s body as pre-determined in regards to sexual pleasure.
Vicki did not pleasure Maura in a way that deviated from our cultural understanding of sexual relations between two “opposite” sexes, despite the many ways such pleasure could be found. Vicki did not treat Maura’s body as womanly. This is, of course, a nuanced reading as many trans women may opt out of lower surgery and, as such, still take and give pleasure with their birth genitalia. There is no wrong way to experience the body as your own. Yet, heteroideological narrative ensures we are returned to Maura’s body as pre-determined and static, focusing on her ability to give pleasure and receive it as dependent upon a penis – all while providing an unconventional narrative. The return to the sexed body through the penis locks the body into place. Maura can take hormones, wear dresses, request female pronouns – but in intimate spaces she is still, as indicated by this vital moment that relies on a deep voice and penile penetration, returned to “him.” Maura’s body is made static in this episode by returning her pleasure to a body part that led to a sex designation at birth. The audience is given a great deal of radical content while being returned to the “natural” imaginary of binary sex and coupling (penile penetration) that undergirds heteroideological narrative. Maura’s pleasure, despite the emphasis on her return to erotic embodiment (evidenced by Vicki’s inquiry as to what Maura would like), is still dependent upon the kind of love-making she partook in pre-transition. The paradox of visibility happens in this place of tension as the audience is explicitly exposed to queer coupling, but what is obscured are the ways in which trans people come to re-discover their body and adjust their intimate acts.

Maura’s pleasure is hypervisible, and her pleasure as an aging trans woman is not something audiences are accustomed to seeing. Likewise, Vicki’s aged, round, and breastless body questions mediated “ideals” of womanhood and pleasure. What is visible is Maura’s identity as a trans woman. Also visible is her pleasure. These two progressive visibilities work to
cloak the fact that such a radical and in many ways beautiful scene was dependent upon Maura’s penis – the indicator of maleness. Such a return indicates that while Maura is transitioning she is still embodying pleasure through her penis, stripping her of her malleability and of the various ways one can and does embody sensuality and eroticism. This return is key to heteroideological narrative as it returns viewers to what heterosexual coupling looks and sounds like despite the ways in which intimate coupling changes for a body in transition. To undo or refuse the return to heteroideological narratives requires attention to the body and embodiment, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Transparent is used here as context material to be placed in conversation with the content of YouTube vlogs given that both rely on audio/visual forms of narrative and are quite similar in presentation (audio/visual) and narrative style (linear progression). The analysis of this episode illustrates the ways in which the content on YouTube channels is more disruptive to heteroideological narrative than hit streaming shows, as Transparent obscures at least one component of sexual identity.

Obfuscation results in a vanishing point, and what is not seen cannot be critiqued. It is the body that vanishes, as covered in the previous chapter, and when the body vanishes the critique of orientation is left muted. Heteroideological narrative is a complex web that is dependent upon connecting gears in a large machinery of heteronormativity. For narrative to be heteroideological it cannot solely depend on sexual orientation. That is because sexual orientation is heavily dependent on the understanding of a stable, fixed body because orientation “can be felt as inherent, bodily, or even essential . . . orientations can feel ‘as if’ they come from inside and move us out toward objects and others” leading to a sense of a “fixed” sexuality (Ahmed, 2006, p. 80) that obscures the fluid nature of sexuality.
Much of the previous research (existing largely before the culture and sex wars of the 1970’s and 80’s) located sexual orientation identities as biological predispositions that were immutable and exclusive. That is, one is born as either homosexual or heterosexual exclusively (Drescher, 2015), with no interest to orient toward the other sex – those with nonexclusive desires were regarded as bisexual (Savin-Williams, 2014). More recent scholarship has by and large positioned sexual orientation along a spectrum model that allocates space for sexual orientation to shift, move, and change (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2014) with more individuals – cis and transgender alike - self-identifying through nonexclusive and fluid means such as “queer” and “pansexual” (Callis, 2014; Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz & Mitchell, 2014; Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2012). Independently produced vlogs thus illustrate for audiences a more accurate representation of societal shifts centering the nuances of sexual identity. This is done through depicting fluid bodies that defy the binaries of sex and gender and through offering critical reflections on the construction of a categorical system of sexual orientation identification (homo/hetero/bi). Scholars should begin the exploration of such absences and investigate where queer representations do appear, how they unfold, and how they impact those who create media that fills such an incredible void, particularly in regards to audio/visual representations in popular media.

Once the body is centered as a vessel that is morphing and changing, along with altered gender performances and pronouns, so too do the foundations of sexual orientation begin to shift. No longer are heteroideological narratives of orientation based on a stable point of attraction valid. The normalization of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and to a lesser degree bisexuality is complicated in favor of a vision of sexual orientation that has no categorization, nor does it have a norm with which one can identify themselves against or with. Yet, because media
representations of queer sexual orientations are rare, this leaves many people – both transgender folks and their partners or potential partners – in places of great discomfort as they try to navigate life in the margins of an omnipresent ideology they were previously accustomed to and even formed self-identifications alongside. These vlogs give audiences a clear view into what such shifting is like for transgender people and their partners or potential partners. The audience is then placed in uncomfortable and often unresolved locations as they witness the pain of shedding identifications tied to heteroideological narrative and the resulting systems of exclusion and dispossession. Examples of the troubling of sexual orientation identity are offered through the narratives of Tiffany (Dade’s wife) and Bianca (Jason’s fiancé). Tiffany and Bianca illustrate their struggles with sexual orientation that happen alongside the transitions of Dade and Jason. Tiffany and Bianca discuss how their own identities transitioned beside their partners, but they do not do so romantically. Instead, Tiffany and Bianca illustrate that there were painful deaths involved in the transition of their partners, which led to great emotional labor and struggle as an identity category that once made sense to them and thus helped them make sense of themselves deteriorated.

**Partners and Participatory Transition: Tiffany and Bianca**

**Tiffany: Moving On through Mourning**

Viewers of Dade’s channel follow Tiffany (who Dade was married to before his transition) as she travels through the territory of, as she says, saying goodbye to her wife and embracing her husband with open arms. In perhaps one of Tiffany’s most emotional vlogs “30 days of T – Wife’s perspective – grieving” uploaded in December of 2011 (and the first video Tiffany recorded without the presence of Dade), Tiffany describes going to a tree where she mourns the loss of her wife, giving metaphorical power to the various deaths involved for not
only transgender people but also those who love them. Tiffany explains these deaths necessary to accepting a human being as partner while working to sever the attachments to body, gender, and sexual orientation:

Once I understood what was going on, umm, it was really grieving the loss of my wife and allowing that process to happen. For me – I have a, we live on acreage – and ugh I have a big, huge old cedar tree that’s always been what I refer to as my tree of life. So we built a little bench and a little walkway and it’s where we do – ya know, like, I do little ceremonies or just ritual. I think that’s a really important aspect for me in my life and in helping to mark the different cycles of living and of dying. So, umm, I took several hours one day in the fall and just … grieved. And so … went out to my tree of life and um, ya know, cried and yelled and sobbed and laughed and umm, let go and … filled that space then with the love that I have with this person in my life. With this man in my life. And umm, tried to leave there with the tree all of my fears of like ‘what does this mean for me’ ‘am I still, ya know, how do I identify am I lesbian do I -- like all of that I just tried to leave it there and be able to see Dade as the person that I love and whatever he needs to do to be a healthy, happy person then – that doesn’t hurt other people – then I fully support that. But I had to let go and I think that was a really important process to be able to give myself that space (2011).

Tiffany was in a unique position as a partner who married someone who had not yet had the vocabulary to understand himself as transgender. Tiffany, who was in a heterosexual marriage and left her husband when she realized she was attracted to women, went through various pains and spaces of discomfort to support Dade, something she discusses openly on the channel. One of the most significant moments within Tiffany’s account is the notion of “leaving”
her wife behind, allowing her wife to die. The metaphor elucidates the pain involved in the process of transition that is often obscured within mainstream media accounts. Heteroideological narrative, as illustrated through previous analyses of *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent*, continually returns viewers to the pre-transition person via language or heteronormative sexual acts.

![Figure 9: Tiffany, a White woman with long, curly hair sits in a room with tiled background looking into the camera](image)

In this vlog, Tiffany refuses to return to her self-identification as lesbian by leaving Dade, and she creates a literal and symbolic grave for her wife (the base of the tree) so that her love for Dade as a transgender man could grow in the place she was holding for her wife. Markedly, this video is shot in black and white and takes place in the bathroom – a space of intimacy and privacy. This is contrasted to the previous vlogs on the channel that were all in color and shot in common, social rooms – most frequently the living room. This video is a turning point on Dade’s channel, where the audience moves from hearing about his body and the changes he is going through as a kind of birth, to a space of death and of mourning. Tiffany illustrates that
acceptance is only possible through sacrifice and through pain. Binary systems of identification leave no recognition of borderlands and erase from their purview shifting bodies that trouble orientation. Tiffany shows the audience her moments of discomfort and through that the audience is also discomforted, illustrating how heteroideological narrative gave Tiffany a means to make sense of her own identity and how painful it was to leave the web of omnipresent binarism.

Later vlogs discourage viewers from concluding that Tiffany’s service at the tree ended her personal struggle. One year later, in January of 2013, Tiffany recorded a vlog entitled “What the hell am I anyway?!” where the audience listens to Tiffany grapple with her own identity in response to an audience member questioning her sexual orientation. The vlog is off-the-cuff, a stream-of-conscious speaking where Tiffany states that she hasn’t posted about her own self-identification because it is not resolved within her. Tiffany says she and Dade were discussing this question over coffee when Dade asked her if she would be with another man if they were no longer together. Tiffany’s “automatic response” to Dade’s question was that she is not attracted to men. Tiffany painstakingly explains that her response created a space of discomfort in the home. Because Dade is a man and she is attracted to him, Tiffany’s statement (though she doesn’t say it in these terms) did the linguistic work of erasing her attraction to Dade or, at the very worst, erasing Dade as a man, husband, and father. The audience hears her confusion, stated almost like penance, as she says, “It all sounds so complicated and ummm, I don’t know just outside of my life to be talking about … I don’t know … just the identity piece to me is just really difficult and I get really stuck because it gets complicated really quickly.”

Tiffany’s long pauses speak volumes – she stumbles over words as she attempts to express the painful nature of redefining the self through her love of another. She loves Dade, but
she doesn’t know where that love leaves her personally. In a way that part of herself is
minimized because of the psychic labor attached to identifying one’s self following such a
drastic shift in one’s partner. She left a marriage to honor her sexual orientation and thereby
herself. Thus, the recognition of her sexual orientation became vital to her rebirth, illustrating the
importance of identity as something that “gives us a sense of depth, out there, and in here” (Hall,
2005, p. 43). To make sense of herself and her place, Tiffany explains that she subscribed to
Curve magazine, wore the rainbow stickers, and quickly corrected anyone who assumed she was
straight. She was in the process of not only finding herself but also asserting that selfhood. Her
relationship with Dade altered that understanding of self, as Tiffany says, “It started changing me
a little a bit.” Yet Tiffany cannot be sure that it changed her so much that she would find herself
attracted to men other than Dade. In an interview that took place over three years after this vlog
was uploaded Tiffany said that the only thing she would go back on – the only thing she would
change – is that particular vlog because she “could[n’t] give a shit now. Like I don’t care about
my identity but I can honor that I was in that place of trying to fit in a peg somewhere or not or,
you know, just going through that process” (interview, June 6, 2016). That is, before one can be
comfortable without the confinements of identity categorizations that are largely based on
hegemonic ideologies such as heteroideology, one must first be placed in a position that
challenges the very person they thought they were. As illustrated by Tiffany, this is a difficult
and painful place to be as one must move on from the person they spent years cultivating and
coming to know, often times with few linguistic tools and support networks to do so. That is, to
break with the hold of heteroideology one must first break with their own self-identifications.

Moving on
The audience travels with Tiffany as she consistently works through her sexual orientation identity while Dade works through his medical transition. Tiffany discusses the importance of pronouns and of coming to know new terms of identification. She discusses the changes that testosterone brings. She elaborates on the necessity of community, for both her and Dade. When Dade has his top surgery, Tiffany mentions that she always liked his breasts and she must say goodbye to a physical piece of her partner that she always enjoyed, but later recounts that she did not miss her breasts the way she thought she would. Tiffany’s concern over the loss of breasts illustrates how heteroideology informs even liberal imaginations regarding bodies, conflating womanhood with the curve of a chest. Dade’s top surgery thus illustrates that tentative fears surrounding “saying goodbye” were dependent upon heteroideological conditioning. However, her declaration that she did not miss this body part as much as she thought she would provide an example of working through the compartmentalization that heteroideology demands. This is augmented by the 2014 vlog “My husband has a penis?!” where Tiffany discusses the “shocking” nature of the changing body. Tiffany elaborates on what was “shocking” to her, stating that the penis and the testicles aren’t shocking, but “the hole, it’s just gone!” “There’s no lips, there’s no hole. It’s sewed up. It’s gone. It’s like it was never there.” The shock, she explains, comes not from Dade’s changed form, but instead from medical advances that makes such a change possible. Yet we are again reminded of sexual orientation when Tiffany recounts the story of a friend who, shortly before Dade’s bottom surgery, asked Tiffany if she was “sad” because this was the last female part of Dade – drawing us to the binary body as the site of orientation and therefore self-identification. The friend’s question exemplifies the mental loops people work through when trying to understand or at least come to terms with the borderlands
that arise from challenging heteroideology. Tiffany replies to her friend by stating that there is no female left to Dade. “The female left a long time ago,” she says.

However, Tiffany explains that her acceptance of Dade would not have been possible in the past. Time, and incredible psychic and spiritual labor, were necessary for her to work through the hold that sexual orientation identity had on her and how it impacted her relationship with Dade. She stated that before she could accept this she had to let go of her wife, she needed to find the “mind space” to come to know Dade and to recognize him. Over time such a knowing came, following an intense grieving process, counseling, and continual reflection via journaling and the posting of vlogs. This video is rich in the illustration of the hold that heteroideological narrative has on the mind – both from hearing Tiffany explain that she need time and space to grieve – and through the question posed to Tiffany by a friend. This vlog, especially when taken as part of a longer conversation unfolding over years on Dade’s channel, makes evident that years of living under a system of orientation that directs folks to one body or the other is not easily undone. The cords must be unraveled through seeing and discussing the body, accommodating authentic gender expressions, learning new pronouns, creating new rituals, and making space for multiple transitions and instances of mourning. When a transgender individual transitions, so too must their partner – albeit in different ways.

Figure 10: Tiffany stands in a room with green walls looking into the camera
The transition of the partner of a transgender person is a nuanced and three-dimensional change, Tiffany explains through the herstory of her vlogs. While Tiffany works through the various spiritual and psychic changes she undergoes (leaving her wife at the base of the tree), she also discusses how her body, too, must work in different ways – her body must also move on. This is best illustrated when Tiffany discusses the sexual intimacy between her and Dade. Their counselor requested that Dade express his discomfort with their sexual practices because, after beginning his transition, they were still having sex “as two women, which was really uncomfortable for Dade . . . he hated it.” Tiffany’s statement further illustrates the ways in which *Transparent* froze Maura into heteroideological sex roles, dependent on her coupling as a heterosexual man. This exposes another paradox of visibility surrounding transgender communities: their lack of three-dimensional, nuanced narratives of queer coupling that take into account the dynamic processing that both the transgender individual and their partner go through.

For Tiffany to mourn her wife, move on from that grief, and embrace Dade there had to be uncomfortable discussions about new movements of bodies wrapped together. Tiffany and Dade had to relearn what pleasure felt like for them. In order for Tiffany to be able to make the “head space” necessary to accept Dade as man, husband, and father she first had to work through her attraction to female forms and the ways in which she engages bodies during intimacy. This discussion presents a moment whereby the assumptions of you, reader, can be challenged, as it can appear as if Dade’s discomfort was alleviated by heteroideological sex acts commonly associated with male and female coupling (missionary sex, for example). However, the ways in which Dade and Tiffany couple were not explored or asked after, nor should they be. Therefore, any presumption the reader may have had should be interrogated as a possible side-effect of heteroideology.
Tiffany worked through heteroideology’s impact on her identities, and while a YouTube audience member can see Tiffany’s process of moving on from her sexual orientation identity in mere days, on the channel it took place over three years. The Tiffany of 2014 is quicker to state that “parts don’t matter.” Her priority is supporting the person she loves so that he feels peace when looking at his own form. Over time Tiffany moves from a space of discomfort and mourning to a space of peace. Tiffany even makes the rather profound statement that her sexual orientation identity is no longer something she wishes to struggle with. For her it is enough to love a person. Tiffany undoes sexual orientation as that which draws one body to either the “opposite” or “same,” largely because the body Tiffany is drawn to has been through the crossing of same to opposite. In turn, Tiffany silences binary sexual orientation from her identity and chooses to situate herself within a borderland that has no normalizing poles with which to identify one’s selves with. Worth repeating is that this undoing of sexual orientation identity is not easy, Tiffany’s metaphor of grieving and death symbolizes the emotional, reflexive labor involved in such a task. Bianca augments Tiffany’s illustration of the emotional labor involved in working through one’s own identity alongside a partner in transition – highlighting how her partnership with Jason is one that cannot be easily categorized, and implicitly making the argument that perhaps it shouldn’t be categorized at all.

**Bianca: Emotional Labor and Troublesome Explanations**

Bianca does not post her own vlogs on Jason’s channel. Instead she appears with him in certain vlogs, providing a conversational piece between the two for audience members of the channel. Therefore, there is less explicit material to work with regarding how transition impacted Bianca and her own sexual orientation identity. Most of Bianca’s work on Jason’s channel involves her answering questions asked of her by Jason, and she takes care to privilege Jason’s
voice over her own – often following her answers up with statements such as “Huh, Babe?” or, “Do you think that’s right?” In one telling vlog, “a little something with gf she got upset” (2015) Jason centers Bianca’s narrative, despite what appears to be an off-screen argument about the narrative. The vlog is shot at night, with what appears to be a carnival in the background. It switches from color to black and white. Jason explains that he and Bianca “don’t look too good” because they had an argument before leaving the house and in a heated reaction he took off his pants and refused to leave. They worked through the argument, though with what appears to be some great tension, and Jason hurriedly put on sweatpants. He tells the audience that Bianca is upset – and she confirms this. Still, she answers his questions. The camera, positioned above Jason and Bianca for a sharp downward angle effect, catches Bianca from the chest up. Jason asks her how his transition impacted her. She answers:

Well…it affected me in a lot of different ways. Like emotionally especially. Ummm, it was hard for me at first because your past relationship that you were trying to get out of – I was there with you and it was so hard for me. And then plus with your transition, ummm, because I was shocked when you first told me. And then you wanted to stop talking to me because you were scared (2015).
Bianca stops there. It is clear she feels uncomfortable in front of the camera. Jason proceeds with his questioning, asking Bianca how it was emotionally challenging. She states that she was shocked to hear of his transition but did “kind of” expect it. Bianca’s answers are short – she gives little detail, not surprising given Jason’s insistence on recording a vlog that Bianca was hesitant about. It is an uncomfortable piece for the audience to watch. Jason’s style of interrogation points to yet another way heteroideology works through those who frequently subvert it, as Jason’s questioning mirrors hegemonic masculinity’s tendency to perform a “toughness” that affirms the dominance of masculinity as rightful (Donaldson, 1993, pp. 644-645). Yet Jason’s commitment to the inclusion of Bianca’s voice simultaneously resists hegemonic masculinity’s insistence upon the relegation of women to sexual object – presenting yet another nuanced example of how hegemonic ideology can be at once challenged and affirmed. Bianca’s uncertainty in answering Jay’s questions is paramount; her answers indicative of her unwillingness to divulge. Yet they are also indicative of her desire to support Jason. This is made especially apparent when she discusses that testosterone has made Jason more
expressive, but it also fueled anger in the introductory months. It appears, without Bianca saying it, that she is trying to understand what he is going through as someone radically changing their identity while the world watches. Yet when Bianca tells Jason that during the initial stages of the transition she felt as if he didn’t care how things were affecting her it is also made clear that there is a period of adjustment for partners as they work through the shifts in their identity as well. Bianca reminds the audience that, while there is a discursive field now readily available to understand lesbian/gay orientation identification (and in some regards, bisexual orientations), there still remains a great abyss of unknowing surrounding queer identities and shifting orientations that follow bodily transition.

The accounts provided by Tiffany and Bianca, while illustrating how engrained heteroideology is within our cultural frameworks, offer an interesting point of nuance. Tiffany and Bianca were with their partners before transitions began, and they are with partners who identify as trans men and largely pass as cisgender men. It is arguable that their complication of heteroideology that occurs while they work through their own orientations returns us to heteroideology in a not so static way. I refute the tendency of return, however. It cannot or should not be denied that, even though the body is read by others as cisgender (and in Dade’s case has fully medically transitioned to have – as Tiffany says – “male parts”) both Tiffany and Bianca crossed the “borderlands,” and, given their hesitancy and perhaps inability to concretely name their sexual orientation now, remain there. They are, in the simplest of terms, located in the process of continual crossing. Tiffany never calls herself heterosexual, showing that she never “arrived” at the other end. Bianca, who does refer to her and Jay as a straight couple, troubles over the categorization. She takes issue with questions of orientation brought to her from
audience members, often feeling she should not have to explain her orientation despite repeat questions:

And I feel like I shouldn't...I shouldn't, especially for people I don't know that I should explain to them, but I feel like me and him are just a normal couple that but he just does blogs you know. So I feel like me and him are a straight couple. Like I don't feel like oh this is something different, you know, so yeah (interview, June 9, 2016).

Bianca’s discomfort in discussing orientation is noted immediately. She repeats that she “shouldn’t” but cannot find the words to express what it is she shouldn’t say. In the interview, Bianca pauses after she finishes her thought. I ask if people are curious about her orientation. She continues to say that she doesn’t like to talk about her sexuality or her sexual orientation to those outside of her close family (mother and sister). Yet she continues to attempt to express the reason behind her discomfort, explaining without further questioning on my part that any answer she gives is one that originates from intimate spaces and may do the discursive work of trapping viewers in a box crafted from her answer. She says that her interpretation of their love as a straight love “doesn’t go for everybody” and “another couple can feel like a different kind of way.” Bianca continues, “I don’t know how to explain it, you know what I mean?” Bianca shows through her words that even the categorization of straight is one she is not comfortable projecting to mass audiences, largely because she “don’t know how” to explain her orientation or her reasons for curbing explicit discussion of her orientation. Like Tiffany, Bianca cannot quite find the words to express the changes happening to her identity, largely because our discursive framework has not made space for such understanding and subsequent explanations.
As illustrated by the narratives of Dade, Jason, Xavier, Bianca, and Tiffany, our mediated environment has largely been bereft of stories that give voice to the complications of working through orientation when one’s body is in motion or when one is drawn toward a body in motion. It is new territory, territory many do not have visual or verbal metaphors to explain. Yet this territory is brought to the audience through these vlogs in a way that is obscured under heteroideological narrative, thus presenting another paradox of trans visibility. The public visibility of the vloggers while they attempt to find the words and explanations illustrates powerful moments of working against and sometimes within the systems that dispossessed them. Importantly, erasure is exacerbated when bodies do not pass. That is, sexqueer and genderqueer folks take on a great deal of labor in their quest for love, in large part because their bodies and/or gender expressions confound binary ways of thinking and organizing the world. While heteroideological narrative is the impetus behind the necessity for Tiffany and Bianca to working toward a new understanding of their personal sexual orientation identities, queer individuals may be working to have potential lovers accept their sexualities as valid.
Queer Bodies Finding Queer Love

The navigation of sexual orientation identity as situated into gay or straight becomes more complex when queer bodies are introduced – bodies that do not easily fit into the categorical schema of male or female. Trans writer and activist Dr. Joelle Ruby Ryan candidly writes of their struggles with queer identity and acceptance of their identities given frameworks provided under systems such as heteroideological narrative. Dr. Ryan explains that people consistently inquire about their sexual orientation because of the conflation between the body and gender and, consequently, gender and orientation:

I don’t demonize those who ask. Undoubtedly, they are motivated by curiosity and lack of knowledge about trans people’s sexualities . . . Having the body I do, not to mention the complex identities, makes finding and accepting partners very challenging. I often feel like my body and identity are unintelligible in our society. My gender, size, and sexuality place me in uncharted territory. ‘Are you gay or straight?’ has become like a broken record. ‘None of the above!’ I want to scream (2011, p. 34).

As previously mentioned, both Dade and Jason are trans men who are often read as cisgender men. Xavier refuses this. Xavier embraces a body that bleeds as well as beards, prefers pronouns they/their, and refers to themselves as trans masculine as opposed to trans man. Also unlike Dade and Jason, Xavier does not have a partner they were with pre-transition, and thus their channel offers the audience a glimpse into the frustrations involved when dating as a trans person who does not identify as straight, gay, or bisexual, as they explain in an interview:

Some of those days I’m like you know what I feel like being a gentleman today. And I feel really heterosexual. Like I feel really attracted to women and I'm not even going to think about looking at a man that way. Where it's just literally I don't have an attraction to
this person based on you know how I’m reading [inaudible] sexuality and that was confusing to me. I didn’t get it. I was like “what is this?” “How is it happening?” And that’s when I started finding stuff like trans sexual\textsuperscript{13} and queer and just realizing that like for myself sexuality is not just stable thing that's constant all the time where I'm always sexually attracted to this person. I'm always romantically attracted to this person. Just like so many different types of attractions and understanding it changes from time to time just like sometimes you have an appetite or palate for you know spicy food. You might not always want to eat spicy food. You know so that’s how it started. Okay I'm a person. I have different things at different times (interview, November 7, 2016).

The interview, which took place more than four years after Xavier uploaded a series of vlogs discussing dating while trans (discussed below), illuminates that the shifting of orientation is made possible when one shifts their gender performances and their bodily appearances. Unfortunately, the personal shifting of the selves necessitates reconsideration of sexual orientation identity (as illustrated by both Tiffany and Bianca’s discussions) that is not met by individuals outside of transition. This can often lead to complications in coupling as a result of the conflation between the body and gender and gender and sexual orientation. That is to say that queering orientation – creating a space whereby sexual desire is not met with questions of homo or heterosexuality – is largely unknown territory for many people and thus places the burden of education onto the trans person.

Jakob Hero, who only began dating men after they began their transition, writes that they have had to “hold, comfort, and reassure them [men] while they go through crisis about my body” (2011, p. 27). Xavier also discusses education on their YouTube channel, voicing

\textsuperscript{13} Here trans sexual is used to indicate across sexual desires, often referred to as pansexual. This is not to be confused with transsexual as used by scholars such as Prosser and Rubin.
frustration about the labor that is involved in making visible a body and corresponding sexual acts to partners who remain largely ignorant to and of queerness. Xavier introduces us to their frustrations surrounding romantic love and partnerships early on, with their second vlog “FTM: Dating” (2012). The vlog opens with a close-up of Xavier talking into the camera. There is a window behind them with sunlight coming through to saturate the background and the viewer-left side of Xavier. Their hair is pulled back, they are wearing a black do-rag and black V-neck T-shirt. We see only from the chest up. Xavier maintains eye contact with the camera, turning the vlog into a more conversational than artistic piece. Xavier tells the audience that the last person they dated identified as a gay man who had never been with a pre-operative trans masculine person. The partner kept reminding Xavier of what he “did” for them. Xavier was taken aback by this, explaining that “this is what you would do for any partner, why the fuck are you supposed to get extra credit?!” Xavier explains the relationship as harmful, feeling as if they were made to “teach them everything about interacting with me.” The vlog cuts, and the audience is taken to the most poignant portion of the vlog. Xavier offers the audience a vulnerable frequent fear:

For a while I did think there was no hope for me as a trans man…the thought was very daunting for me, it made me even more afraid and hesitant to transition thinking that there would be no one out there for me…. sitting here thinking no one is going to love me because I am trans.

Xavier explains that those who did create intimate spaces with them had to be educated on sexual identity as they often confused Xavier’s body with Xavier’s orientation. Xavier labored to work these threads apart with partners. They explain in this vlog that body parts are not indicative of gender and gender is not indicative of orientation, stating that the gay man they
dated “viewed a vagina as a woman’s part. I don’t. He views a penis as a man’s part. I do not.” The statement is telling. The gay man Xavier dated appears to have been in a state of identification distress given Xavier’s form and gender, something Tiffany discusses in-depth in her vlogs. Xavier embodied masculinity, but had genitalia associated with femininity. So, the partner’s identity was not challenged by Xavier’s gender expression or by Xavier’s body—until the body was bare. That is to say that the partner’s sexual orientation identity remained intact until clothes came off. When clothing came off so too did the neat compartmentalization and conflation of sex, gender, and sexual orientation that is enforced and reified by pervasive returns to heteroideological narrative. The partner was disrupted and their cognitive dissonance led to a space of great frustration for Xavier as they felt as if the partner wanted “extra credit” for the self-reflexivity the partner had to undertake as their ideological understandings of self were shaken. As Xavier discusses this in their vlog the screen cuts to a solid teal background. The words “CONFESSION: DATING AS A LESBIAN WAS A LOT EASIER” appear, indicating the incredible labor queer persons undertake as they navigate life in a binary world. Importantly, this subject influenced three consecutive vlogs on Xavier’s channel, indicating the centrality of the topic for both Xavier and the audience. Their following three vlogs “How to date a transman” (April 4, 2012), “Are Trans people gay?” (May 16, 2012), and “I don’t date transsexuals” (May 24, 2012) each discuss various aspects of dating in a binary culture that has not yet differentiated between the three strands of sexual identity.

“How to date a transman” and “Are Trans people gay” act as conversational PSA’s for the audience. “How to” opens with a cream background, the text “Dating a Trans Man” comes onto screen and Xavier enters the frame. The camera is angled slightly up, with Xavier looking down into the lens. They are standing in a bedroom, with bunks to the side of them and wooden
cabinet with clothing draped over it behind them. The shot cuts to a plain background with the word ASK appearing in bold letters. Xavier reappears to instruct the audience that there is no one way to treat a transgender man and, as such, it is up to the intimate partners of transgender people to do the hard work of asking questions. The questions should include inquiry of bodily pleasure, sexual preferences, pronouns, and public address. Xavier then makes a kind of a relationality argument to the audience, telling viewers that “to a lot people this may sound like a lot, but these are probably things you’ve already done with other partners but in different ways.” Here Xavier is both normalizing the discussion of sexual intimacy with trans individuals (“something you have already done”) while also ensuring it remains outside of de-politicization (“in different ways”). It sounds like a contradiction, but is a powerful rhetorical move in that Xavier recognizes the importance of familiarity when presented with the unfamiliar (Douglas, 2008, pp. 45-48). Xavier acknowledges that past experiences inform identity, and relationality to the past, even if not a direct similarity, may ease the dissonance involved with sexual identity work in the face of large “hermeneutical lacunas” (Fricker, 2006). Yet Xavier also subtly asserts that, similarities aside, there are indeed differences between queer and straight love that not only deserve attention but need it given the widespread invisibility of queerness that has created such an uncomfortable and burdensome location for queer folks whereby they become educators to their lovers.

The labor of intimate education exists in addition to the various other pedagogical roles queer-identified persons must perform in a society because of their erasure. The pull to a binary direction that Xavier mentions in “How to” is mirrored in “Are trans people gay,” where Xavier takes care to educate the audience, again in PSA style, about sexual identity and the conflation of gender and orientation. Xavier repeats that never does gender identity indicate someone’s sexual
orientation, a theme that also ran through “How to.” The repetition of this theme, stretching over not one but four consecutive vlogs is indicative of the mental space that this teasing apart took up in Xavier’s life at the time. It also appears to indicate that Xavier was working through their own frustrations with coupling while trying to make sense of their positionality in a world that often erases, compartmentalizes or objectifies their existence. Xavier mentions in “how to,” for example, that many people assume that trans folk transition for attention, or to date the opposite sex of one’s birth sex and escape coupling in the straight world. The ulterior motives that people assign to trans communities stem from deep normalization of binary ways of being (you transition to be gay instead of straight), thus effectively compartmentalizing trans experience into the narrative of binary orientation that they are familiar with. That is to say that heteroideological narratives and hetero/homo normative categorization schemas -- a “pattern making tendency” (Douglas, 2008, p. Chapter 2) -- are so embroidered in larger cultural tapestries that individuals may find trans people suspect because they are unable to situate queerness into categories. This inability to accept queerness without assigning motive narratives is a result of the “active production” of unknowing that stems from the epistemology of ignorance (Tuana, 2004, p. 195) produced by heteronormativity and reified by tools such as heteroideological narrative.

**Uncategorizable Orientations: Concluding Thoughts**

Transgender people are often returned to a binary in an effort to situate queerness through compartmentalization – via the body, gender, and/or sexual orientation as “public beliefs are more likely to be produced in the course of reducing dissonance between the individual and general interpretations” (Douglas, 2008, p. 49). A “distortion” is created to reduce dissonance, and re-establish the binary in any way possible (Douglas, 2008, p. 46). The lives of transgender individuals are compartmentalized during distortion. Or, as Xavier also mentions, their transness
is heightened and becomes the sole defining factor of the human, thus objectifying the person by turning their trans identity into a consumable spectacle of fascination that erases the complex subject. However, it is also arguable that compartmentalization and objectification are powerful in this instance as they may act as initial stages of “confronting” the “anomaly” to “try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has its place. It is not impossible for an individual to revise his own personal scheme of classifications” (Douglas, 2008, p. 48). Yet the current socio-political climate is such that the burden of this falls on already vulnerable people who are endangered by visibility just as they are by invisibility. Simply, the “confrontation” should occur through mainstream mediated representations of transness that are three-dimensional, nuanced, and queer. It is unclear if such a day will ever come, but independent media producers have stepped up to fill this void.

The narratives of Dade, Jason, and Xavier offer audiences an intimate and complex look at what it is to exist in a world that, through heteroideologically charged schema, erases them. These independent producers refuse such erasure via their productions, and as a result their productions also stand as a digital archive that may continue to be vital for audience members seeking answers, recognition, and hope. Importantly, their productions also offer the vloggers an archival tool through which they can track their bodily and spiritual progress – a visual diary that allows them to travel through time. In short, while these vlogs empower and educate audience members seeking recognition and understanding, they also empower the vloggers themselves. This seems little consolation in a world that presents a very terrifying material reality for trans people, as discrimination against trans people is a global crisis, or as stated by

\[\text{14 This dissertation did not engage audience reactions given space constraints (though it does touch upon it in the Methodology chapter). However, each producer I worked with discussed the various ways in which their audience members turn to them with gratitude because their channels offered hope. A cursory glance at the commentary following the vlogs illustrates this.}\]
Kidd and Witten (2008) – “a global genocide.” The world has work to do. Narratives matter in this work. They matter a great deal, as they provide necessary public pedagogy that can assist individuals in “confronting” their phobias. Right now, the burden of this falls on the shoulders of many trans social media producers. Xavier, Jason, and Dade have accepted this great task, and with great vulnerability, they have created content that has given hope, eased the burn of familial disownment, offered valuable resources for those seeking medical care and insurance coverage, repaired fissures in interpersonal relationships, and saved lives—all while also bringing the body back from its vanishing point and illustrating for scholars how short, personal narrative vlogs hosted on YouTube offer more resistance to heteroideological narrative than the most progressive of popular entertainment.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUDING THE CHANNEL

Personal narrative vlogs created by trans masculine producers and hosted on YouTube make visible a great deal of information about everyday life for transgender people that is obscured in mainstream media. It is argued here that the paradoxes of visibility in mainstream accounts are created out of heteroideological narrative, which functions as a component of heteronormativity. Independent, transgender media productions, such as those hosted on YouTube, are created by individuals who are working through transitions that impact their body, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. As such, their mere existence is often at odds with the narratives that are widely consumed. Therefore, transgender producers’ cultural productions stem from a place that is often outside of heteroideological narrative, and thus they are creating stories that are also often outside of this discursive, policing mechanism and can trouble heteroideological narrative.

It is argued that fracturing the hold that heteroideology has on narrative can begin with the body, as it is both omnipresent in media yet largely stagnant. Mediated bodies are often idealized as they are continually presented as fit, cissexual, cisgender, able, heterosexual and – by and large – white. Bodies existing outside of this rubric are often cast as spectacle or existing in relation to the ideal, illustrating the “human impulse to textualize, to contain, to explain our most unexpected corporeal manifestations” (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p. 2). That is to say that amorphous transgender bodies, bodies in motion and consistently shifting, are largely absent from mainstream media productions precisely because they cannot be contained and contextualized as either within or outside of normality. Independent video blogs on YouTube center the amorphous body. The audience follows producers as their voices change, as their facial hair grows, as they step away from testosterone to embrace their menses once again. This
documentation has the radical potential to disrupt heteroideological narrative through the body. A body in motion cannot be oriented toward binary ways of thinking and loving and refuses normalization while also illustrating how normalization has worked through people. Identities that stem from the body “locates sexual subjectivities within and between embodiment, place, and practice” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 5) and this bodily fluidity extends to the sex, gender, and sexuality so that “containing” any is not easily possible. Once an audience member begins to contain the shifting body of a trans masculine producer through a label – man, for example – the producer reminds viewers once again that they are shifting and that their histories (including insecurities) cannot be dislodged. The return to the past, alongside visions of future hope, trouble containment. For example, a trans masculine producer “passes” as male but continually discusses their facial hair dysphoria to the camera, is reminding the audience that they are in motion and that their present and indeed future is inherently connected to their past. They are male if they identify as such, but their maleness and masculinity is still influenced by the ways in which they were socialized as female and feminine. The conversation between these identities is where binaries designed to categorize, police, and maintain difference are destabilized.

Furthermore, the importance trans producers place on the body illustrates various ways that the body matters, not as object but as a sacred and shaped vessel for communication of a formed subjectivity. This is a powerful moment for theorists involved in the subject/abject debate as it illustrates subjectivity as existing through embodiment. Therefore, this work contributes to the fields of feminist theory and media studies the importance of the body and a nuanced reflection of how the body is connected to gender and sexual orientation. Subjectivity, like norms of sexual identity, exists along a spectrum. It cannot be denied that state recognition or disregard has dire consequences that must be paid astute attention. Yet, it must also be considered that the
ways in which a human comes to know, live, and project themselves is often part of a larger political project of assertion and acknowledgement.

Redirecting attention to the body also calls into question sexual orientation for trans producers and their lovers – bringing to light what happens to sexual orientation identity when a body exists in the borderland and thus impacts the way people have come to know their own sexual orientation. If a body is neither male or female then how does one label themselves in regards to their sexual desires and, more importantly, how does one come to know one’s self? Because a great deal of mainstream media productions render sexual orientation as being either homosexual or heterosexual, those existing in the sexual orientation borderlands are left with barren discursive fields for understanding their selves and their experiences and as such must create a new vision. Queerness in mainstream media is rendered invisible because queerness exists outside of binaries and, like stable bodies, cannot be contained by labels that offer either/or ways of being. Partners of transgender vloggers illustrate the ways in which sexual orientation as it is widely understood – homo/hetero/bi – offer only a partial vision of the nature of coupling as one moves beyond orientation to a particular kind of sexed body and the effects of such a shift.

Importantly, while these YouTube channels illustrate queerness in a binary landscape, there also many moments where normativity politics do come into play. As such, a deeper, intersectional exploration of normality politics and political economy would be beneficial to future research. For example, a dimension to Dade’s popularity comes from his identity and body politic. Dade’s race (White) may lead audience members to consider his new media production as synonymous with technological progress and “civilization,” whereas both Jason and Xavier, men of color, could be coded by ideological constraints that conflate their ethnicity with
primitivism in the minds of audience members, despite their utilization of YouTube to illustrate faulty logics of associating brown bodies with “pre-modernity” (Hobson, 2008).

Dade’s class (ability to fund his transition and spend significant time with YouTube) illustrates that economic placement in our cultural fields of production matters a great deal when creating media. Dade has had an economic status that first equipped him with new media literacy and then created a space whereby he had the technological tools necessary to not only blog about his transition but also consistently update his channel. Dade’s financial ability mirrors the trend seen when the expansion of the internet took place along current socioeconomic lines and reinforced class hierarchies so that a digital divide ensued (Cleary, Pierce, and Trauth, 2006; Wattal, Hong, Madviwalla, and Abhhijit, 2011). Dade’s story serves to illustrate how – even as the digital divide shrinks – the residuals of inequitable distribution of the information superhighway will continue to create a hierarchy within the field of independent cultural production.

Dade’s bodily presentation and familial status (Dade passes and, as his wife said, even passed pre-transition with the exception of his voice) surely contributes to his popularity as upon first glance Dade appears to support the very omnipresent yet invisible whiteness that media has long normalized (Dyer, 1997). Additionally, as written by Carter (2007), sexual orientation exists as a “component part” to whiteness (p. 26). It could certainly appear as if Dade’s productions support heteroideological narrative. However, I propose that Dade presents a challenge to viewers because he discusses the shifting body, the complication of sexual orientation, and various subjects obscured by heteroideological narrative and the double-bind of visibility (transgender suicide being a prominent theme on his channel). Yet one must immerse themselves into Dade’s channel, following his videos diligently, order to fully absorb these moments of
tension with heteroideological narrative. At first glance the audience could see a White trans man with a cisgender wife, a beautiful home, and a young daughter, especially when watching newer vlogs. Dade’s content may make the uncomfortable comfortable for viewers if not taken as a whole.

The intersection of race and class as it pertains to content most likely to go viral is illustrated through contrasting stories of virality between Xavier and Dade. Dade’s before and after photo collage was picked up by Reddit, a platform utilized by over 230 million users in 2016 (60 amazing, 2016) that features links, gifs, memes, pictures, videos, questions, and much more that users quickly post and others on Reddit reply to. Reddit’s wide range of content draws from other sites – such as YouTube and Facebook, creating a wide potentiality for personal virality across cultures. That is to say that Reddit, while containing a great deal of niche material, is not created to appeal to a particular market or subculture but instead hosts content that speaks to various interests, identities, political beliefs and so on. Dade attributes his incredible YouTube celebrity status to Reddit. Similar to Dade, Xavier attributes the increase in their viewership through a share from Black Gay Chat (bgclive.com), which featured Xavier’s vlog “Invisible: Trans Assimilation.” BGClive.com describes itself as:

The largest gay/bi/trans social network where members communicate with Black and Latino Brothas/Sistas. BGC welcomes all members of the LGB&T community, including the Black Brothas/Sistas, Our Latino Brothas/Sistas. Our White Cousins and our Far East Cousins from China and India, we are all One Big Family. Anyone who thinks otherwise does not belong here.

BGClive.com is a niche dating website where users can construct a profile and chat with other members of the site. It also hosts pages dedicated to music videos, cartoons, vlogs, health,
images and more for its 520,000 members (with roughly 700 new members activating profiles each day). The majority of users on the site are Black, gay or bisexual males. Hispanic, Black/White, and White users who are bicurious or straight also host profiles on the site, but make up far less of the user base (bgclive.com/advertise, 2016).

Dade’s vlog went viral on Reddit. Xavier’s went viral on bgclive.com, leading to important questions of identity and the potential normalization of trans experiences via the passable bodies and gender performances. Dade’s photo transition vlog features images of his chest pre-surgery and post-surgery, pictures of him in dresses during childhood, photographs of him and his wife Tiffany before and after his transition, and pictures of his daughter. The vlog allows the viewer to see the birth body turned identifiably male – conforming to cultural expectations of binary sex. It illustrates what could be read as heterosexual partnership (until you listen to Tiffany’s vlogs). It appears to feature the omnipresent White, middle-class family (until you later listen to Tiffany and Dade explain raising their daughter to understand Dade’s transition). On the surface, it very much appears as media content we are comfortable with even during moments where discomfort may arise.

Xavier’s vlog does quite the opposite through continually making uncomfortable the assumptions about sex, gender performance, and sexuality. This vlog discusses Xavier’s socialization as feminine and how it impacts their masculinity, it features their body unaltered by surgery, it seeks to discuss trans identity as that which is neither masculine or feminine but both and more. It explicitly pushes back against binaries and assumptions based on binaries. Dade’s channel does this as well, but over many vlogs instead of in one vlog. Dade’s photo collage vlog wows the audience via his incredible bodily transformation that centers the passing male body that was once designated female. Nor is there dialogue in the video, instead a song plays while
the images pass before our eyes. The audience is granted great authority of interpretation – something the rest of Dade’s videos do not offer as he continually stresses the complexity of trans identity via personal narrative. Xavier denies the audience this power in their vlog. Indeed, this vlog is ultimately an assertion of the complexity and nuance of identity. Xavier repeatedly reminds the audience that they cannot strip them of their roles as daughter and sister while they look upon Xavier’s sculpted arms and bearded face. Is Xavier’s vlog too avant-garde for mainstream social networks such as Reddit? I argue that it is. Their Black body, poetic delivery, and continual return to fluidity and spectrums does not allow the viewer to situate Xavier into boxes of masculinity or femininity or male/femaleness and thus questions of sexual orientation are also confused as sexual orientation is dependent on the reading and categorization of a body presumed stable. Dade’s video does not do this either, but could were the viewer to forego watching the other vlogs on his channel.

Dade’s channel therefore illustrates that what we are drawn to watch and what goes viral may very well be dependent upon the ability of trans narratives to not quite conform but complement media content we frequently see (White, heteronormative, middle class). Conversely, Dade’s channel also offers pivotal moments of discomfort and realignment because of the initial appearance of heteroideological narrative that is complicated and confused over various vlogs on his channel. Dade’s continual return to his experiences with masculine and feminine gender performances, his vulnerable discussions of bodily dysphoria, and issues that plague transgender communities (medical industrial complex, access to healthcare, violence, suicide) create cognitive dissonance within the viewer whereby what they hear complicates what they think they are seeing. Simply, it is not a question as to whether or not these productions always disrupt heteroideological narrative – they both do and do not.
Resistance is not nor has it ever been linear. Disruption is not always explicit. Furthermore, consistent disruption could impact the financial rewards of independent media makers. All three personal narrative participants are compensated (poorly) for their productions. Compensation is dependent upon viewership, and viewership appears to increase exponentially when the audience is given the power to script the narrative and when the narrative fits somewhat comfortably with the status quo or gives viewers a bridge to situate the vlog within cultural categorizations regarding maleness/masculinity and femaleness/femininity. Jason and Xavier, having fewer financial resources than Dade, stand to lose the most money through radical productions, mirroring the same wage hierarchy in the U.S job market whereby people of color earn less than their White counterparts (Patten, 2016). YouTube is a product of the world it was created in. Content that goes viral can offer the most material gain to the creator, but virality appears to be at least partially dependent upon normativity politics. An intersectional analysis of material most likely to go viral could be investigated alongside a detailed analysis of compensation and labor that is missing from this dissertation.

Dade, Jason, and Xavier have become experts to their audience members. The audience participation and following that began in comment feeds eventually moved to private messages through social media and – occasionally – the cell phone (via texting). Dade states that at the height of his vlogging he would receive 50-200 private messages per day, in addition to the public comments. Dade answers each person, spending roughly 20-30 hours per week maintaining his channel when it is active. Dade took a break from his channel and during that time his maintenance decreased to 6-7 hours per week, but Dade says this doesn’t account for the time responding to Facebook or text messages. Jason and Xavier both spend significantly less time working on their channels, something attributed in part to the differing material realities of
the three vloggers whereby Dade’s financial situation affords him more time to work with his channel. Jason spends roughly one hour per week working with his channel and Xavier, who rarely posts anymore, says most of the time they don’t work with their channel because they have been working on different projects as of late. In sum, trans masculine producers invest a great deal of time and labor into their channels when able to do so. Their labor has undoubtedly helped many people, but has it benefitted them financially?

This dissertation, while sometimes subtly nodding toward compensation, does not explore the ways in which these producers labor to make their transition visible and consequently give representation to others. All three of the trans masculine vloggers stated that when they began their transition they had no one to turn to with their questions. They found guidance through social media and in turn wanted to create something that was both a personal archive (Dade and Jason) as well as an answer to invisibility (Xavier). Yet it has, at differing points, taken a great deal of time and mental prowess to maintain their channels and the resulting mentorship that came from their public celebrity. All three are compensated by YouTube or affiliates, but poorly. They certainly have not earned a living wage for their labor. Is the labor thus exploited by YouTube? Or, does compensation come from acknowledgement and community building? These questions are not properly explored here but worthy of attention.

Finally, perhaps one of the greatest areas of future exploration lies not within the vlogs but within the reception of the vlogs. An audience analysis could further unlock the potentialities and limitations of the independent productions of trans producers, but such an analysis is not explored here. The comments section of YouTube provides a great deal of information, most of which can be read as either support of the content or hostility towards it. This brings up yet another paradox that should be explored in the future: independent media production can act as a
tool toward community building while also existing as a hostile space via trolling and hate speech. Many folks who turn to these channels express gratitude in the comments, such as Nic Link who writes on Dade’s public discussion page, “Dade, I work nights and just spent the last few hours watching your journey and plan to share your experiences, both yours and your family's experiences with my wife. As I am coming to terms with who I really am! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you.” On Xavier’s discussion page Marcus writes, “you are so inspiring. (if thats how you spell it) ive been watching your videos since before you started T and you really helped me out bc some of the stuff you went through i was too. so thank you :).” Jason does not have a public discussion page on his YouTube channel, but Jaylene writes on the comments section following a new vlog upload: “I just started watching your videos and they've inspired me to do what I need to be whole and happy. But they'd help me!!! Thank u for your openness!!!!!!” A cursory glance at comments across channels illustrates that the majority appear to contain messages of support or encouragement. A good number also ask questions of the producers. Yet there also exists a decent amount of negative commentary and trolling. Trolling is endemic to digital culture. Yet the trolling exists in one of the only spaces where nuanced trans visibility happens. That is, some audience members may come to these channels because it is the only space, or one of the only spaces, where they have felt their own story is worthy of recognition. A predatory troll in this space can heighten the already painful stigma for these audience members, begging perhaps two of the most important questions in regards to social justice and obliterating the epidemic of violence against transgender people: can a safe space exist in a heteronormative world where heteroideological narrative operates pedagogically; and what work must cisgender allies do to assist the manifestation of such a vision and alleviate the burden from already vulnerable bodies.
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EDUCATION

Ph.D.  
Mass Communications (Conferral in May 2017)  
Pennsylvania State University  
Advisors: Michelle Rodino-Colocino

M.A.  
American Studies (Transnational Division)  
University at Buffalo, 2013.

PUBLICATIONS: JOURNAL ARTICLES


PUBLICATIONS: BOOK REVIEWS


TEACHING EXPERIENCE: IN RESIDENCE

COMM 411: Cultural Aspects of Mass Media, Instructor of Record, Pennsylvania State University, Fall 2015.

COMM 150: The Art of the Cinema, Instructor of Record, Pennsylvania State University, Summer 2015, session 2.


GGS 213: Women in Contemporary Society, Co-instructor, University at Buffalo, Spring 2013.