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# Contradictory Realities, Infinite Possibilities: Language Mobilization and Self-Articulation Amongst Black Trans Women

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“When do you stop being enough?” Lena kept asking, more to herself than to me, as we patiently waited in the lobby of the LGBT<sup>1</sup> Center. It was 10:45 a.m., and I was there to join Lena and a group of homeless women who were living in a shelter for a morning trip to the movies. We were supposed to have met at 10 a.m. to take the Broad Street Line to the Pearl Theater on Temple’s campus to watch *2012*. However, when I came to the office a few minutes after ten, there was only one woman waiting to go on the trip. I, thinking I had gotten the time wrong, asked Lena if I had come too early.

“You’re on time. We’re just waiting for some of the women to come.” In the meantime, between answering and directing the calls of the agency, Lena shared more of her story with me. We had met only once before, but even during that first encounter, she quickly opened up to me.

Thirty minutes had passed, and there was still no sign of any more women. By this time, the frustration on Lena’s face was clearly visible.

“This is all my fault. I forgot this is when the women got their checks.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, naively thinking that with money, the women should be more excited to come and treat themselves to a movie.

“The women got their checks, so they’re out getting high.” Lena shook her head with pity. Lena facilitated a weekly workshop with trans women in homeless shelters, giving them information about safe transitioning and living practices while homeless, as well as skills to avoid the common pitfalls that prolonged their homelessness—such as drug use.

“But I was the same way,” Lena professed:

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the agency and the subjects have been changed.

I was the exact same way. I was at a point where all I wanted was a hit. But then one day, I realized that I wanted something more, so I had to leave that world alone. I had hepatitis C, I was on drugs, I was homeless, but I knew I was something more. Even if no one told me I was. Hell, you look on TV, and you'd think we were monsters. You got all those shows—*Maury* [Povich] and *Jerry Springer*—and even in movies like, like, *The Crying Game*. The only thing they [the media] make us seem good for is being prostitutes and crazy people.

After a pause, she said, “RuPaul’s the best thing that happened to us [trans community] and hell, she a drag queen!”

I started this project with the aim to closely analyze television and filmic representations of black trans women and learn how those representations affect the actual community.<sup>2</sup> I had wanted to juxtapose media depictions with what I originally thought of as the “real” source, to see where the depictions overlapped and where the depictions proved to be disastrously off. But after spending more time with a few black trans women, along with reading the literature to grasp what theorists understood and what was still missing, I realized that the lack of positive pop cultural representations of trans women was deeper than media depictions. When I asked Lena why so many trans women were homeless and on drugs, she immediately pointed to the depictions of their bodies and identities in the media, but I could not believe that television held that much sway in these women’s lives. I do not disagree with Lena’s assertion that the media plays a powerful role in dictating attitudes, but the homelessness, the drug addictions, and the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases brought larger issues to the fore that I felt were being overlooked. Put simply, the black trans women I interviewed have survived—while being continually victimized—systemic violence that collides with their being black, working class, urban subjects, and trans. Negative depictions in the media are only icing on the cake. My subjects survive at the intersections of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia (which occurs in both the heterosexual and LGBT communities). Consequently, queer theory that focuses on being trans without reading the implications of race, class, and environment silences particular communities, a silencing that results in clumping people together without regard for their complex identities and/or excludes them from the benefits of the collective.

With that said, my project investigates the *relationships* my subjects have with language and some of the ways those relationships have manifested on screen. I argue that while these manifestations have real effects on my subjects, the politicization of language, formulated by the medical and academic communities, has coded a trans identity that my subjects do not fit into. This linguistic politicization has also affected the media’s handling of trans identity, propelling trans characters who are devious, broken

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<sup>2</sup> Later, I will explain why I refer to my subjects and their communities as trans instead of transsexual or transgender. Nevertheless, when I use trans, I am talking about subjects who are transitioning, in this case, from male to female.

(whether physically or mentally), and humanistically marginal.

For a bit of insight into the community on which I focused, I used the theory of performativity. As articulated by Judith Butler, performativity is based on Jacques Derrida's reading of Franz Kafka's "Before the Law" where Kafka maintains the existence of the law in the subject's anticipation of the law. "The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure," Butler suggests, "is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object."<sup>3</sup> With the subject's imagination creating the "law" in the act of anticipating, Butler transfers this line of thinking onto gender, asking if gender creates the very "expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon it [gender] anticipates."<sup>4</sup> The theory of performativity is useful in my project because the act of anticipation signals a language and performance that is already bound in the subject's imagining of that entity. When the expectation and what actually occurs coordinate on some level, the object's authenticity is solidified. However, the act of anticipation illustrates that some idea of the object already existed, or else there would be nothing to anticipate. It is these pre-existing "bound acts of performance," as articulated by Butler, that I examine in the creation and subversion of identity in the black trans community I studied.

Nevertheless, E. Patrick Johnson points out the limitations and oversight Butler's theory of performativity suffers from when examining queer communities of color. In his push to "quare" queer theory, Johnson wants to "maintain the inclusivity and playful spirit of 'queer'" while ridding queer theory of "its homogenizing tendencies" that have overlooked queer people of color.<sup>5</sup> In traditional queer theory's call for the "elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity," theorists have failed to realize how the links to "some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one's survival."<sup>6</sup> He proposes articulating quare theory as theory in the flesh that will destabilize notions of identity by "locat[ing] racialized and class knowledges" of each person's body. In short, each body generates theory rather than theory being generated and imposed upon bodies. I find Johnson's quare theory incredibly useful for my project of interrogating the ways black trans women mobilize, articulate, and negotiate their identities, because theories in the flesh "conjoin theory and practice through an embodied politics of resistance. This politics of resistance is manifest in *vernacular* traditions such as performance, folklore, literature, and verbal art."<sup>7</sup> Not only is quare theory explicitly

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," *Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

concerned with the ways race, class, location, and the temporal moment inform sexuality and the expression of it, but queer theory is equally invested in the ways language is mobilized by the subjects to situate themselves in multiple communities that may superficially seem at odds with one another.

### On Language and Naming

One of the manifestations of symbolic violence I closely examine is language—from the ways it has been manufactured in academic and medical institutions, to how it has been imposed on trans on communities that inhabit different lived experiences than those bound by the original theory. This imposition has caused me to use the word “trans” when referring to the general populations of either transsexual or transgender subjects for this very reason. In interviewing and observing my subjects, I saw that they all used and had very different relationships to the words transgender and transsexual. In personal interviews, I learned that one of the women did not identify as transgender while her office mate did not identify as transsexual. Naturally, I became confused because in my training, both transsexual and transgender carry distinct meanings. In *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007), Julia Serrano outlines the lexical issues that are associated with the umbrella group of transgender—which includes cross-dressers, drag queens/kings, gender-queer, intersex, transvestites, bi-gendered, gender-fluid, and transsexuals<sup>8</sup>—by succinctly articulating the confusion surrounding who or what types of gender expression constitute being transgender. She notes that people have

to recognize that it [trans] is primarily a political term, one that brings together disparate classes of people to fight for the common goal of ending all discrimination based on sex/gender variance. While useful politically, *transgender* is too vague of a word to imply much commonality between individual people’s identities, life experiences, or understanding of gender.<sup>9</sup>

Because identity politics presupposes a collective identity, often through shared experience(s) and/or memory, the umbrella group of transgender naturally leads to the belief that all who are blanketed under the term have common trajectories and/or interests. However, this is not the case. Serrano points out that “many individuals who fall under the transgender umbrella choose not to identify with the term... Many transsexuals disavow the term because of its anti-transsexual roots or because they feel that the transgender movement tends to privilege those identities, actions, and appearances that most visibly

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<sup>8</sup> Gender-queer: identifies outside of the gender binary; bi-gendered: identifies as being an admixture of femininity and masculinity; and gender-fluid: identifies as moving freely between femininity and masculinity.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Serrano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), p. 26.

‘transgress’ gender norms.’”<sup>10</sup> For Serrano, the biggest contention between the transsexual community and the term transgender is that transgenderism is predicated on the manifestations of gender, and not the somatic dissonance transsexuals are most prominently conflicted with.

Yet Serrano commits the very crime she is decrying by lumping together all people who identify as transsexual without regard for their different histories and identities that are outside of being transsexual. Often, white middle-class trans professors who have access to the publication companies that can widely distribute their work generate and write trans scholarship. Unfortunately, much of the scholarship renders race and class invisible. Of course, theorists must limit the scope of their research projects, or else their work will be unfocused and cursory. Nevertheless, this does not excuse theorists’ failure to address the implications of class and race in trans people’s experiences. It is understood that transsexuality/transgenderism (TS/TG) is a loaded subject that immediately invokes the intersections of gender, sexuality, and violence; therefore, it may be seen as simpler to focus solely on the effects of TS/TG. But in the effort to isolate issues surrounding TS/TG, an erasure of race and class issues occurs and unfortunately, that erasure is denoted in being white and middle class—a denotation that signifies the normalization of whiteness and middle class-ness in the American context.

Focusing on the boundaries created and contested in trans communities in New York City, David Valentine poses an important question: “How does race, class, or geographical location figure into the naming of people as transgender and/or homosexual?”<sup>11</sup> Language is a highly political weapon used to strategically create communities of inclusion or exclusion, and can be mediated by either side of the insider/outsider dichotomy. Everyone is a citizen of various communities that can complicate or facilitate their relationship with others and with themselves, the effect of which leads people to identify with contradictory realities. Part of the symbolic violence that I am contending with is how people are forced into either/or situations where they have to choose which group they identify with most—this, of course, leading to feelings of schizophrenia or the “double consciousness” that W.E.B. Dubois spoke of so eloquently. For that reason, appellations are in constant flux, as they are manufactured and undone as one moves in, out, and through communities.

Consequently, out of respect for the communities of women whose voices have generated and shaped this project, I will not gather them under terms in which they do not personally identify. Unlike Valentine, who attempts to sift through the myriad ways his trans women subjects defined themselves by concluding that the women who used the terms “correctly” had more exposure to a formalized education

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 31.

on transgenderism and transsexualism, I wish to make the point that my subjects' relationships to what it means to be a woman, man, hetero/homosexual, transgender, and transsexual is a consequence of creating a language that represents their lived realities, even if those realities seem contradictory. Being black, working class, and trans in urban spaces has positioned them as both hypervisible—because of the fetishization of their bodies, and the fact that many of my subjects were homeless, conflating the public with the private—and invisible by the scholarship that incessantly overlooks the intersections of race and class, and the mainstream public who is bombarded with images of trans women as either prostitutes or medical specimens. The absence of multiple representations of trans women in the media and the overall lack of attention paid to black trans women in the creation of theory have led me to look specifically at black trans women, and allow their experiences and language to fill in the gaps created by fear, misunderstanding, and overall ignorance of the communit(ies).

## **Methodology**

I spent over six months at the LGBT Center, observing the interactions between trans women who are recipients of the services from the center and the trans women who were employed by the center. I also conducted personal interviews with three of the employees, who are trans activists throughout the community, to learn about their backgrounds and the different ways they have mobilized language to construct their identities. The three women I interviewed were chosen for their availability and willingness to share their stories.

To ensure that my subjects' voices were paramount to my research, I chose performative ethnography as my method of inquiry. Discussing the ways to rethink and resituate ethnography, Dwight Conquergood articulates the positionality of the ethnographer in regards to the subject, and how that positionality is especially crucial when the fieldwork is rendered through a performative lens. Analyzing Michael Jackson's position against traditional ethnography,<sup>12</sup> Conquergood views "[t]he radical empiricist's response to the vulnerabilities and vicissitudes of fieldwork [as] honesty, humility, self-reflexivity, and an acknowledgement of the interdependence and reciprocal role-playing between knower and known."<sup>13</sup> Speaking of Victor Turner's work on translating ethnography onto the stage of performance, Conquergood observes that the shift in language shifts the ethnographer "from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of 'coactivity' or co-

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<sup>12</sup> According to Jackson, traditional ethnography privileges "detached observation and scientific method." More of his reasoning is included in Dwight Conquergood's essay "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006), p. 354..



performance with historically situated, named, ‘unique individuals.’”<sup>14</sup> With ethnography now placed in a paradigm of performance, it reified the relationship between my subjects and me, and more importantly, we were engaged in a dialogue where our words, disposition, and histories informed the other on what was said/unsaid, remembered/forgotten.

In this abridged version of my thesis, I focus on the vocabulary used by my subjects in relation to being trans (from the medical world to the actual communities) and the ways they have mobilized language to assert their existence and multifarious identities. More importantly, I utilize E. Patrick Johnson’s quare theory to analyze my subjects’ understanding of and relationship to trans identity and how that subjectivity has been a result of their personal histories and life trajectories. I closely interrogate the distinct ways they identify, and how those distinctions strategically place them within particular paradigms and communities that they feel are important to their well being and personal survival. I am especially interested in the politics of authenticity, and how my subjects have infused the medicalization of transsexualism/genderism through the importance of narrative, and how they have rejected portions of medical language that do not include and speak to their lived experiences.

### **When Self-Definition and Dominant Discourse Collide**

Me: How would you define yourself?

Rhonda: I’m me.

In my interrogating of my subjects’ definition of self, Audre Lorde is an ineluctable figure. Not only was she aware of the inherent imperialism in language—mainly that of American English—that created and maintained subaltern subjects, Lorde fought to dismantle this dynamic in her writing and speeches. During quite a few of my interviews and conversations with the women, the phrase “I am who I am” was a familiar response, and one that instantly evoked Lorde, who declaimed: “If I don’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies of me and eaten alive.” This proclamation is especially fitting for my subjects, who must contend with quotidian fetishization because they are black and trans. Moreover, many of my subjects’ participation in sex work further layers their positionality as exoticized subjects in many people’s imaginings.

What is intriguing, however, are the ways my subjects affirmed their existence and identity by defining themselves through refusing typical categorizations. In all of my interviews and in moments during my field observations, all of the women referred to themselves as “I am who I am.” Spoken in a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 359.

tone of finality, “I am who I am” is a definitive statement that fails to make anything clear to the listener. Yet, its use does reveal much about the speakers and their awareness of their complicated and multiple identities. Replying “I am who I am” carries a tinge of defiance, in that it explicitly rejects already formed categories. In fact, this statement makes the speaker a unique category unto herself because not only is she acknowledging her belonging across multiple planes, but she is pushing her listener(s) to do the same.

Lena responded as such when she discussed the complications she met with being placed in a drug rehabilitation center. Her social worker, not feeling comfortable with placing her in either a female or male facility because of the violence Lena could meet, finally opted to place her in a male facility where her quarters were separated from the other men and where she could use the unisex bathroom for residents with disabilities. She shared,

I understand the trouble she [her social worker] had in placing me because I’m not a woman and I’m not a man... She couldn’t easily place me in a woman’s center because I’m not a woman. And she couldn’t easily place me in a men’s center because of these babies [motions to her breasts]... I haven’t had bottom surgery, and I don’t even want it anymore. I am who I am.

In a way, Lena’s statement demonstrates a kind of resignation to the marginalized life she must endure because she is “undefinable.” She recognizes that possessing both a penis and breasts will negate the “full” existence of the other. Since both body parts are visual markers that denote *opposite* sexes, her being a whole person becomes incongruous within a system that is strictly bifurcated along lines of sex. Signified in her and other trans people having to use disabled bathrooms in order to avoid conflict, the only way society can make sense of people like Lena is to frame them as disabled—both physically and mentally—and therefore, marginal.<sup>15</sup> Because trans people fail to fit neatly in society’s imaginings of gender and sex (this is not including their other aspects of personhood that may marginalize them), society attempts to break them in pieces so that they fit. Through a forced fragmentation—often imposed by the state as in the case of placement in prisons, rehabilitation facilities, shelters, and gender assignment on state identification—their penis or vagina overrides every part of their identity, highlighting the definitive power of genitalia.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jack (Judith) Halberstram has a wonderful chapter dedicated to the policing of bathroom spaces according to gender codes in his book *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> My rumination on brokenness took on more meaning after I read Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987). Her chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” was of particular interest because it is where she expressed surprise at hearing two women feminize the *nosotros* (Spanish for “we”) by replacing the last “o” with an “a.” In her recognition that Chicana women used the masculine version of *nosotros* in reference to women or men, Anzaldúa writes: “We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (54).

But despite the declaration “I am who I am” being a rejection of prescriptivist notions of categorization, Rhonda and Lisa, moments later, made sure to break down the different parts/identities they do or do not embody. Looking at it from this perspective, “I am who I am” can be read as an encapsulation of their various identities, some of which they deem as constant—such as their racial identity—and others they recognize as being in constant flux—such as their feelings toward gender embodiment.

When I talked to Rhonda about the ways she personally identifies, she replied: “I’m me, just me. I’m a regular girl. That’s all I ever *wanted*” (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> Her phrasing was of particular interest because she began by defining herself through refusing to define herself as anything other than “me.” However, she then classified herself as a “regular girl,” word choices that are especially loaded when the meaning of regular is broken down, and how that meaning becomes imbued with notions of acceptance and blending in. To be regular denotes a continuous action or event that makes it expected. In short, it becomes part of the ordinary. So by describing herself as being a regular girl, she is aligning herself within society’s understanding of who and what actions constitute an ordinary “girl.” However, in saying “That’s all I ever wanted,” Rhonda seems to have negated her position as a “regular girl.” The phrasing frames it as either it *was* a goal she desired in the past that she has now realized or it *is* a goal she currently desires but has yet to make true. In either case, her desire to be a regular girl distorts her describing herself as being such because she is indicating that she was or is something other. Like Lena, Rhonda recognizes that in the broader narrative, she does not have a dwelling in any current configuration of identity politics. While Rhonda recounts feelings of gender dysphoria around the age of three,<sup>18</sup> she is fully aware that feeling like a woman and being feminine does not make one a woman in the public’s imagination. Nevertheless, this does not stop her from asserting her existence in a paradigm from which she is socially and legally excluded.

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<sup>17</sup> Rhonda’s referring to herself as a girl is common among the trans women I observed and with whom I spoke. Often calling themselves T-girls, they intrigued me by what the appellation “girl” signifies in their relationship to womanhood. Girlhood is a stepping stone to womanhood. It denotes a period of transition, where the body and mind are transforming to become that of a woman—in both the biological and social senses. With that said, I want to interrogate what it means for trans women to refer to themselves as girls. Is it a way of illumining camaraderie, as natal women do when they talk about their *girl*-friend? Or does it intimate trans women’s idea of themselves as never being “full” women, who, for anatomical and/or social reasons, will always view themselves in transition, and never in a state of being? These are but a couple of the questions I want to examine further but, due to the scope of this project, must hold off on analyzing.

<sup>18</sup> But this is when she recognized it. Rhonda, however, shared the story of her grandmother’s partner looking at her when she was three months old, and telling her mother, “he’s going to grow up to be a woman.”

## The Formation of the “Official” Language

When thinking about the politics of language—from the creators, to the arbiters, to the adopters—slippages and redefinitions are inevitable, as the interstitial spaces created in transmission and translation allow for new meanings and applications to take place. These borders that Homi Bhabha constructs as “the ‘in-between’ spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” not only bind individuals to a larger social framework that evokes notions of belonging, but also allow the moments of rupture to precipitate and negotiate fluidity.<sup>19</sup> It asserts the position Gloria Anzaldúa posits as “Language is my homeland...I am my language.”<sup>20</sup> Language locates the speaker—and listeners—spatially, temporally, and culturally—and its ability to centralize and contextualize the speaker is key. Yet in the situation where the speaker belongs to identities that are marginalized in dominant discourse, Anzaldúa then notes that their conflicting subjectivities render them without language, which ironically empowers the speaker with the fluidity and freedom to travel in and out of worlds, living on the borders of life, a space, Mikhail Bakhtin attests, where the “most intense and productive life of culture takes place.”<sup>21</sup>

It is crucial, however, to recognize the various entities that are the gatekeepers in who can be considered authentically trans, and from there, who is allowed access—whether that access signifies medical care or group belonging. I will focus on the medical community’s role in creating the vocabulary surrounding the trans community. In particular, I will examine the ways in which the medical discourse informs and is informed by the actual community, and how the gaps of understanding and recognition have gone into the formation of my subjects’ identity politic.

In 1966 Harry Benjamin, renowned surgeon and specialist in transsexualism, wrote *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, which delineated a scale of male to female transsexuals. Similar to the Kinsey scale that placed people on a spectrum from unequivocally homosexual to unequivocally heterosexual, Benjamin’s scale ranged from “pseudo transvestites to pseudo transsexuals.” The scale illustrated the variation in the transsexual community but most importantly, it was used to designate trans people who were deserving of hormones and/or surgery.<sup>22</sup> As the 1970s approached, however, general disapproval for sex reassignment surgeries abounded, bringing some clinicians to find ways of regulating and limiting “availability of hormones and sex reassignment procedures only to those trans people who would be able to *successfully* blend into society as ‘normal’ women and men” (emphasis

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<sup>19</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Trowbridge: Crowell Press Ltd., 2006), p. 162.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” p. 358.

<sup>22</sup> Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl*, p. 118.

added).<sup>23</sup> The barometer to measure a trans person's success at passing depended on the clinician, but the common thread was that the trans person had to exhibit gender (as well as hetero) normative behaviors in order to be diagnosed as a true transsexual.

Identifying as bisexual, Rhonda told me of the problems she has encountered with other trans women, mostly older, who have questioned her transsexual authenticity because of her sexual orientation. While Rhonda is engaged to a man, she is open about her attraction to other women. In their retorts, Rhonda shared that other trans women have asked her, "Doesn't that go against the whole reason of becoming trans?" This question is problematic on a few levels. First, the question implies that Rhonda chose to be bisexual, an inference that people have made of people who transition. By suggesting choice, a further question is being raised on conscious deviance from the norm. When people transgress the confines of sexuality and/or gender expression, framing the transgression as a matter of rebellion can abet arguments against gay/lesbian marriage, as well as hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgeries being covered by insurance policies. Second, this question suggests that trans women are truly gay men who want to evade persecution from homophobia; therefore, they transition to be read by the public as heterosexual. When I asked Rhonda when she first realized she was a woman, she responded that she first noticed while she was in preschool. But despite her family picking on her because she "was so scrawny and really, really feminine," her family "was kinda safe with the gay thing. But I knew it was something deeper than that." She then tried to verbalize the "something deeper," explaining: "It wasn't, you know, that I was attracted to men. I knew that my partner would be a man because I knew essentially that I would be living my life in the near future as a woman...I just did not know how to go about doing that [live her life as a woman]." Rhonda's assessment of what she felt reflects her knowledge that trans women are sometimes posited as living their life as women to escape rejection from the outside public, but at the same time, all of my subjects made sure to comment on the hardships they have endured simply because they are trans. While Rhonda did not point to any separations in the black trans community along generational lines, her emphasis that it is older trans women who have positioned her bisexuality as being counter to transitioning illumines a revisioning of what constitutes an authentic transsexual in the black trans community.

Benjamin's scale for diagnosing "true" transsexuals also required patients to undergo several months of psychotherapy to ensure that their desire to transition was not steeped in a mental illness or for superficial reasons.<sup>24</sup> When Isis King, the first transgender finalist on Tyra Banks' show *America's*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.120.

*Next Top Model*, was invited to speak at the University of Pennsylvania for Penn's LGBT Awareness Month, she shared that she supported trans women going to therapy for an allotted time, not only to prove to the medical intermediary that they are truly trans, but to prove to themselves that they want to transition for the right reasons. King recounted how she knew of gay men who were told they would make pretty women, and from there began the arduous process of transitioning. Lisa shared the same sentiment, explicitly referring to trans women who have regretted their decision and desired to live as men again.

Problems arose with this step, however, because a psychiatrist's stamp of being a "true transsexual" is required for the legal administration of hormones. Aware that there was a script to a successful trans story, many patients began sculpting their stories to conform to the narrative that ensured a diagnosis of transsexual and, therefore, legal access to hormonal therapies and/or surgery. Physicians soon discovered the fabrications, and began calling trans people liars and deceivers without taking into account the ways their strict protocol precipitated the deception.<sup>25</sup> The establishment of an official narrative worked only to suppress open variation in trans communities by constricting the parameters of who and what types of performativity could be deemed authentic.

### **Contradictory Realities, Infinite Possibilities**

Being self-reflexive was of extreme importance during this project. Because my aim was to disrupt categorizations that support the notion of static identities, I had to be cognizant of my reactions to the moments of multiplicity that left me befuddled and sometimes frustrated. As I analyzed my subjects' interviews, I became aware that self-reflexivity was not limited to the ways I interact with my subjects in the moments of dialogue and/or observation, but also included the ways I interacted with their voices and narratives in the privacy of my analysis. I realized that my body and embodiment was also involved in the tapestry of theory making, and that my flesh and subjectivity was critical. These moments of recognition developed as I listened to Lisa speak about her identity in such a complex way that made me question my participation in a heteronormative linguistic hegemony that fashions a person like Lisa as confused and completely marginal in dominant discourse.

In my personal interview with Lisa, she told me that she feels safest in the heterosexual community and personally identifies as a heterosexual woman. Following up on that question, I queried into the types of men she is attracted to, and she answered that she prefers gay men because "they don't trick her in the bedroom," referring to the stringent rules straight men outline during conversation, such

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.124.

as not “being a bottom,” but desiring to perform those very acts once they are engaged in sexual intercourse. Learning that she is married, I inquired into how her husband reconciles being a gay man but married to someone who identifies as a straight woman. She then corrected my assumption, replying: “He [Lisa’s husband] don’t consider himself gay. I just say he’s gay because I mean, he’s like me, we consider ourselves heterosexuals, but...okay, I’ll break it to you like this. We consider ourselves heterosexual but in the bedroom we have gay sex.”

Her statement confused me on multiple levels. First, her dismissal of her husband’s self-identification was the very thing she fights against from those who do not perceive her as a woman because she is not biologically female. Second, Lisa directly counters how she personally identifies in maintaining that her husband’s self-definition does not match his actual lifestyle, a contradiction she herself shares.

Predicating her husband’s “true” or “closeted” identity through his sexual practices also invokes the configurations of male homosexuality where it brings into question being a bottom, a top, or versatile and how that extends into that partner being read as the masculine or feminine partner.<sup>26</sup> Being a top or a bottom also codified men who were read “absolutely gay,” and who could, therefore, be called “fags,” apart from men who had sex with men, and were perceived as being sexually fluid between hetero/homosexuality. While I was at the LGBT Center, a man sat with Lena and me in the reception area as he waited for a computer to become available. To pass the time, I suppose, he shared his background with me, saying that he had just moved to Philadelphia from Chicago, and was having a hard time getting used to the Philadelphia gay community. “I’m really masculine, so people don’t perceive me as gay, but I have sex with men,” he explained. “But these Philadelphia fags, I swear they’re on something else here. They’re so hateful. The fags will come to my job, and tell my boss I’m gay, like he care. I swear I want to hit some of them stupid ass fags.” After realizing that he was in a LGBT Center speaking around two trans women, he apologetically added, “I don’t mean to offend anybody here by saying fag. But that’s what y’all are: fags.” Lena and the other woman simply looked at him, and he continued speaking as though no awkward moment ever transpired.

His delineation between gay men or men who have sex with men and “fags” had been formed on two aspects that I gleaned from our brief interaction: 1) the performance of gender—either masculine or feminine—where the men who have sex with men are undeniably read as “men” in public, and 2) the

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<sup>26</sup> The positions of bottom, top, and versatile refer to being the partner who is penetrated, doing the penetration, or performs in either position, respectively. From speaking with and observing my subjects, as well as spending time in different gay male communities, I learned that the way a gay man performed his sexuality led others to intuit his position of choice. Therefore, when observing a gay couple with a gay friend, he told me which man was “obviously a top.” When I asked how he knew, he responded, “Because he’s the more dominant one. Just look at how they interact.”

performance of the closet where those who have sex with men can pass more easily as straight and, therefore, are more invested in the politics of the closet, unlike those who are out and willing to out others (such as the gay men who came to the young man's job to disclose his sexual orientation to his manager).<sup>27</sup> In the case of the young man, the second factor also goes into ideas of maturity that he felt the men who went to his job did not have, and could be derogatorily written off as "stupid ass fags."

Applying this reading to Lisa's troubling over her husband's verbally defined heterosexuality, she could have been making the statement about her husband being a bottom or versatile (where he both penetrates and is penetrated). I did not ask for these details, for his sexuality was not my concern. What I was concerned with was the role Lisa felt her body played in her husband "really being gay" by specifically asking her, "Well, what about him makes him gay?" In a rather matter-of-fact response, she said, "Because he has sex with me." Biological men and women have anal sex, and it is perceived as undoubtedly heterosexual.<sup>28</sup> So the act of anal sex is not what makes Lisa's husband gay. What makes their sex gay, according to Lisa, is that he has sex with her; therefore, despite identifying as a straight woman, she is still indexing her maleness through her penis.

Lisa's identification with the heterosexual community where she reports to feel safest, and her naming herself as a straight woman, does not override her recognition that she was a gay man before her transition, and that even though she lives as a woman, she still possesses a penis that indicates her anatomical origins. In learning about the community she feels most comfortable with, I asked if most of her friends were like her, letting her know that she was free to interpret the "like her" part any way she saw fit. She responded that her closest and true friends were a male and a transgender woman. She further explained how her transgender friend was like her—something she did not feel the need to justify with her cissexual male friend—saying,

She's [transgender friend] like me to an extent because she is really gay friendly, and I'm not too gay friendly because of the experiences that I've been through as a child in the gay community, and how people have done me. It's not that I'm against gays, I'm just kinda stand-offish with gays, *but I know that they're still a part of me*, so I'm in this field to help them, but that's the furthest it's going. It's like helping them with services, being tested, linking them to care and housing, and the different things they need to better themselves. *But as far as having personal relationship with someone that's gay or transgender, I can't do it.* Because I've been through, like, a lot. That's why I said that I only have one friend that I can trust who's transgender (emphases added).

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<sup>27</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> Unless the woman performs anal sex on the man with an object, which can raise questions about the man having gay homosexual desire because he is allowing himself to be penetrated.



Maintaining that being gay is part of her roots illumines how her current identity as a transgender/heterosexual woman is an outgrowth of being a “child in the gay community.” Being a gay man will always be a part of her, whether it is because she is pre-op, the sexual practices she engages in with men, or from being born as a man who was always attracted to men. Stuart Hall’s argument of the complexity of blackness in popular media deftly elucidates Lisa’s articulation of simultaneously being a product of the gay community while at odds with it, as well as being a straight woman whose body still orients her partner’s sexuality as being gay. Hall writes:

These antagonisms [gender, sexuality, class, and race] refuse to be neatly aligned; they are simply not reducible to one another; they refuse to coalesce around a single axis of differentiation. We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities. Each has for us its point of profound subjective identification...they are often dislocating in relation to one another.<sup>29</sup>

Lisa is more than aware of the different planes of identity her history and bod(ies) have placed her in. Nevertheless, she refuses to compromise any part of her identity because it would result in significant silencing. She recognizes that to the four children she has fathered, she is also their mother. She recognizes that while she is a wife to her husband, their relationship counteracts his assertion of being heterosexual. She recognizes that while she owes a great deal to the gay and trans communities in Philadelphia for making her into the woman she is today, it is also those communities that caused her great pain and anguish.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, she is highly invested in their well being, using her skills and access to provide healthcare, housing, and educational options to the gay and trans communities. Nevertheless, she is adamant on protecting herself from the problems she experienced with them previously by limiting her interaction with those communities.

In his attempt to understand transgender identity, David Valentine ventures “that they [transgender identity and community] are *products of an imaginary*” that “puts transgender identity and community into a historical and ethnographic framework that requires us to ask a range of questions” about who fits into the category and why, and who is written out of the identity and why. He also furthers the point that his project is not to provide an “exhaustive description of the possible categories of selfhood that could be incorporated into ‘transgender.’” Rather, he focuses on his specific group of trans women (black and Latino trans women who utilize an LGBT center in New York City) because

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<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Lisa is also sexually attracted to gay men, so this adds another layer to her tenuous relationship with the gay community.

“they demonstrate the instability of ‘transgender’ even as they are central to an imaginary of what a transgender community is.”<sup>31</sup>

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Like Valentine’s work, my query into the ways Lisa, Lena, and Rhonda articulated, negotiated, and mobilized their identities is not meant to make an umbrella statement about black trans women in any context. Trans communities are no different from other communities in that the umbrella is a fiction. While we rely on generalizations to simplify statements and get a better understanding of something in which we may or may not be a part, we also understand that generalizations can prove their shortcomings very quickly. To avoid that, I framed each woman as her own category within the trans community, a community in which they contested the parameters, the performances, and definitions.

The importance of narrative structure in validating experience, the desire to transition, and finally the diagnosis on the medical and social levels are in constant conversation that renegotiates what it means to be a trans woman. A revisioning of what it means to be a trans woman is happening on every level where questions of self-(re)presentation, self-definition, and proving authenticity against mainstream standards as well as those within the trans communities result in the creation and dissolution of community. My subjects, especially Lisa and Rhonda, demonstrated that the either/or dichotomy is no longer relevant in their identity formation. Rhonda, who identifies as bisexual, and Lena, who recognized the problem her body created when she needed to be assigned to a rehabilitation center, are both well-aware of the divisions their identities create within the cissexual and TS/TG populations, yet it is an issue they are more than willing to deal with to maintain their sense of self, which, most importantly, they recognize as varied, complicated, and in quotidian shift.

My subjects’ distinct relationships to being trans illustrate the problem with trying to create a universalizing vocabulary that will situate women who identify as being transsexual and/or transgender. Language is political, and so is its mobilization. My subjects’ relationships to their pasts, presents, and desired futures shape the relationships they have with the media, the medicalization of transsexualism/transgenderism, and their experiences. Despite spending much of their day in the same space as each other—and in the case of Lisa and Rhonda, coming of age in the same environment—each woman has her own subjectivity that personalizes the theorization of her body. As the project progressed, my aim transitioned into recognizing and respecting the separate theorizations each of my

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<sup>31</sup> David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*, pp. 68-9.

subjects produced that placed their bodies within paradigms that have sought, and still seek, to keep them marginalized.

Again, the goal of this project is not to create an overarching vocabulary in which my subjects and women like them can create community(s) that will encapsulate their identities and make them easily understandable to the people outside of that community. While I believe that a new language should be formed that will upset the gender binary system that marginalizes my subjects, I do believe that the ways they have mobilized the existing language is brilliant, and that is what I want my future work to explore in more detail. More importantly, I want to interrogate the strategic elisions, inclusions, and exaggerations in multiple contexts to get a more personal insight into the lives of black trans women as they experience and survive this world.