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Zoë Rose Linder Crabtree

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The Thesis Committee for Zoë Rose Linder Crabtree
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

Doing (Trans)Gender with Words

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Laura Gutiérrez

Curran Nault

Rebecca Rossen Pavkovic

Doing (Trans)Gender with Words

by

Zoë Rose Linder Crabtree, AB

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Abstract

Doing (Trans)Gender with Words

Zoë Rose Linder Crabtree, MA

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Supervisor: Laura Gutiérrez

The strategic employment of language in small, sexually intimate communities of practice -what transgender studies scholar C. Jacob Hale terms "cultures of two" -can serve as a practice of resistance against dominant biologically deterministic ideologies and a source of support within hegemonic constructions of public and private that silence and invisiblize non-normative identities. Following this assertion and exploring the ways that transgender people speak and write about trans bodies on their own terms, this thesis draws upon J.L. Austin's theory of performative language, Charles Taylor's idea that language is constitutive, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to argue that the language that transgender people use for their bodies and sexual practices is both performative and constitutive of gender. In order to emphasize multiple transgender people's voices across media, this thesis uses performance analysis to examine discursive and embodied representations of gender both in in-depth interviews that the author conducted and selections from Tristan Taormino's anthology of trans and genderqueer erotica titled *Take Me There*.

In Chapter Two, I draw upon José Esteban Muñoz's concept of a "queer utopia" and Avery Gordon's idea of "haunting," to consider how both the interviewees and the anthology represent language as something that can affirm, but which also puts people in a place of vulnerability or exposes them to potential trauma. Then, using Stuart Hall's writing on representation and audience and Michael Warner's theories of publics and counterpublics, I analyze how the intended audiences for both the interviews and *Take Me There* affect their portrayals of intimate conversations about sex. Finally, I employ Don Kulick's idea that gendered language is a resource available to everyone as a frame for my interviewee's thoughts on language's potential for affirmation.

Chapter Three considers how language can facilitate the recognition of transgender identities as real. First, I articulate how my understanding of recognition has been shaped by Althusser, Butler, and Hale. Then, I consider how the audience of a transgender person's "gender performance" affects their feeling that they have been recognized: How does "seeing" and "being seen" work in what Hale terms "cultures of two"? How does it work in more public interactions? Finally, I argue that language is doing more than performing and constituting gender identity for those who engage with it: it is also creating and pointing to people who care about how the language that they use affects those they use it with.

Following Taylor and Austin's theories of constitutive and performative language, and emerging into the theoretical gap that Kulick illuminates, my thesis considers the ways in which language can be employed to either restrict or expand transgender people's abilities to author their own gender identities within, alongside, and in opposition to the binary sex/gender system. In the United States, a country that insistently and brutally enforces discrimination and violence against transgender people, based in an ideology that presumes them to be either ill, deranged, or mistaken, it is vital that transgender people's

own conceptions of self, especially as they manifest relationally in intimate (read vulnerable) sexual situations, be considered with respect.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Forget the images you've learned to attach
To words like cock and clit,
Chest and breasts.
Break those words open
Like a paramedic cracking ribs
To pump blood through a failing heart.
Push your hands inside.
Get them messy.
Scratch new definitions on the bones

-Excerpt from Gabe Moses's "How to Make Love to a Trans Person"[1]

I have read these words so many times that I cannot quite remember how long ago I first saw them, though the tears of recognition that slipped down my cheeks upon reading them linger. It must have been my senior year at Mount Holyoke College, the first year of my relationship with my trans male partner. I clicked a link on Facebook to Genderqueer Chicago's text post of Gabe Moses's poem and read in silence before turning the computer to show him. Here were the words of our relationship. Here was someone who understood. Finally, a representation of the imaginative work in which we had been engaging.

Unlike recent popular culture representations of transgender identity like *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent* that sensationalize transgender bodies as different, strange, or exotic, Moses's poetry engages deeply and compassionately with transgender experiences of embodiment. In "How to Make Love to a Trans Person," Moses urges readers to reimagine bodily terrains outside of the frameworks of normative gender. "Cocks and clits," he reminds us, do not always look like "the images you've learned to attach" to them, and we must "scratch new definitions" onto these words. That is to say, the language for people's bodies, and in particular their genitals, needs to be divorced from biologically

[1] See Appendix 1 for the full poem.

deterministic gender ideologies that dictate not only the bodily configurations that socially recognized "men" and "women" are allowed to have (men have "cocks" and women have "clits"), but also what those "cocks" and "clits" look like.

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler makes an argument similar to Moses's. She asserts, "sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (14). That is, biological sex, which has been framed as natural, will be revealed to be as socially constructed as gender. For transgender people, sex is often considered to be socially constructed through hormonal and surgical interventions and changes in gender presentation, including clothing and hair choices. My argument over the next three chapters is founded on the notion that the language transgender people use for their bodies and sexual practices also has a hand in shaping the material realities of their bodies.

Nonetheless, discrimination against transgender people continues to be enforced by a binary "sex/gender system" that considers transgender bodies to be "unnatural." Anthropologist Gayle Rubin coined the term "sex/gender system" to describe "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (34). In the United States, our sex/gender system considers bodies to be bound by biological determinism, an essentialist concept that holds that gender is determined by biological sex characteristics. Therefore, someone born with genitals that fall within the socially constructed parameters for a penis is assigned male and is expected to be a man. Conversely, someone born with genitals that fall within the socially constructed parameters for a vagina is assigned female at birth and is expected to become a woman. This system of assigning sex (and along with it gender) does not imagine the possibility of someone's genitals not fitting within either category or someone not identifying with either gender. Furthermore, it maintains a strict

definition of what constitutes a "male" or "female" body and correspondingly what constitutes a man's or woman's body.

This binary sex/gender system pathologizes transgender people by conceiving of them through what disability studies terms "the medical model" (McRuer; Kafer). Transgender studies scholar Alexandre Baril argues for the use of disability studies frameworks for thinking through transgender identity in his article "Transness as Debility: Rethinking Intersections Between Trans and Disabled Embodiment." The medical model posits that there is an irreconcilable conflict between a transgender person's gender identity and their body -referred to as gender identity disorder -that manifests in symptoms like body dysphoria and depression. The medical model addresses gender identity disorder as either a mental sickness or a physical ailment. If it is the first, transgender people must abandon the "delusion" that they are transgender in favor of a respectable cisgender identity if they hope to be "cured." If it is the second, they must undergo surgeries that would construct for them the "appropriate" (binarily "male" or "female") bodily configuration -it does not seem to matter that the "sex change operation" that is imagined to create a perfectly binary body does not in fact exist.[2] It is not even considered in this model that a transgender person might be comfortable (or even happy) in their body or in any body that does not fit within the binary/sex gender system.

The social model constructs itself in opposition to the medical model. It holds that the struggles that transgender people face are not the results of inherent sickness, but instead the results of living in a transphobic world. Baril explains that the social model,

[2] There are many different gender affirming surgeries with various goals and purposes available to transgender people. For more information see medical anthropologist Eric Plemons' scholarship on sexual reassignment surgery, including his essay "It is as it does: Genital Form and Function in Sex Reassignment Surgery" and his forthcoming book *The Look of a Woman,* which examines facial feminization surgery.

when applied to people with disabilities, "distinguishes between impairment, that is a physical/mental condition, and disability, seen as situated at the junction of impairment and the environment" and clarifies that "in this model, disability is the result of an environment that does not offer disabled people the tools required for participation" (65). That is, if for instance there were no expectations for what a person's body would look like based on their gender, the social model suggests that transgender people would not experience gender dysphoria.[3]

Thinking alongside this social model in conjunction with the methods of performance studies, my thesis considers how discursive and embodied representations of transgender identities and sexualities in the United States reimagine connections between language, gender, and embodiment in order to argue for the performativity of language. The representations I examine include the 2011 anthology of trans and genderqueer erotica titled *Take Me There* compiled by Tristan Taormino and interviews I conducted with transgender people about the language they use for their bodies and sexual practices over the Spring, Summer, and Fall of 2016. For my purposes, I have defined "transgender" as referring to anyone in the U.S. who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth -regardless of whether or not they have undergone or planned to undergo any form of medical transition. In this research, I am not interested in determining the ways in which transgender people might reify biological determinism by using, for example, the word "cock" to evoke maleness, nor am I interested in lauding the subversiveness of naming bodies in defiance of the binary. To do so would place either blame for the perpetuation of the sex/gender system or responsibility for its destruction upon the shoulders of transgender people, stances which only maintain cisgender privilege by assuming that we are not also

[3] Baril goes on to propose a third model that he terms the "composite model" that takes into account both social discrimination and body dysphoria.

responsible for making change. Instead, my goal is to examine language's role in gender performativity. What is the purpose of the language that transgender people use for their bodies and sexual practices? What work does it perform?

In 1999, anthropologist and queer theorist Don Kulick proclaimed: "The study of the relationship between transgender and language is one of the most fascinating-and necessary -projects that we can engage in today" (616). In the few decades preceding Kulick's proclamation, studies of language had focused primarily on the language practices of a given group of people, for example Robin Lakoff's research on "women's language" in the seventies (Lakoff). In his call for more research on "the relationship between transgender and language," however, Kulick emphasizes the importance of research not on some imagined common language shared by transgender people but rather on "the ways in which transgendered individuals wield their languages' grammatical system to help constitute their own subjectivities and desires" (611). However, since 1999, transgender studies scholars have largely not risen to the task. Linguist Heiko Motschenbacher highlights this issue a decade later in 2009, remarking:

> Most studies in language and gender research have concentrated on individual gender performances, while very few have tried to tackle performativity as it relates to language practices. The field of language and sexuality has recently witnessed academic attempts to overcome this deficit. The central question, then, is no longer "Who says something?" but "What does saying something produce?" (6)

Socio-linguist Lal Zimman has attempted to tackle Motschenbacher's question with his research on the ways that transgender men deploy genital terminology traditionally linked to both "male" and "female" anatomy in an online forum to both construct their embodiment as male and to navigate feelings of body dysphoria. In *Doing (Trans)gender with Words*, I draw inspiration from Zimman's research questions and insights, however I depart from his methodology. Where he employs an internet-based observational method

to gather data on the practical language use patterns of transgender men, I engage in a mixed-methods process in which I use a performance studies lens to conduct a close-reading of both the interviews I conducted and the erotic short stories in *Take Me There*. I depart from Zimman's methodology in order to utilize the rich tools for analyzing embodiment and the politics of representation that performance studies has to offer. The multimodal methodology I employ allows me to dialogue with those I interviewed, inquire about the reasons behind their language choices, and allow their self-analysis to guide my own.

By theorizing alongside my interviewees with a performance studies lens about the ways that language operates to shape the gendered material realities of bodies, my thesis makes an intervention into the scholarship that has not until now approached these questions from a performance studies angle. Exploring how language can be a technology of gender for transgender people, my thesis responds to Kulick's and Motschenbacher's call for more research linking transgender identities and language and builds upon Zimman's suggestions that there might be something more to learn "about the possibilities that are created when we reclaim authority over our own bodies… something about empowerment" (31).

I situate my research in transgender studies because I believe that, in words famously credited to aboriginal activist Lilla Watson, my liberation "is bound up with" the liberation of transgender people (Heckert 161). In other words, this is my fight too. My right to define my own gender identity and sexuality along, outside, or otherwise in relation to binary understandings of gender is contingent on the rights of transgender people to do the same. Furthermore, the myth of a stable "cisgender-ness" as the "natural" gender identity relies on the marginalization of, pathologization of, and de-legitimization of transgender people. When transgender people's gender identities are questioned, so is my

gender identity; when transgender people's gender expressions are policed, so is my gender expression; when transgender people's sexualities are invalidated, so is my sexuality. Binary constructions of female/male, transgender/cisgender, gay/straight and sex/gender harm everyone because people's bodies and identities are more complex than what these categories allow. In a world in which gender identity is relentlessly policed by institutions like the state, the family, and educational and medical establishments, it is important to understand sexual activity as a site at which people can reimagine and take authorship over their own gender(ed and sexed) identities.

SPEAKING ACROSS MEDIA

Taking the above into consideration, where language becomes a tool by which one can author their own gender, my thesis seeks to examine its potential uses. Because, as I will discuss later, language is both performative and constitutive, it has the power to bring about new possibilities for embodiment. My thesis engages in a performance analysis of the discursive and embodied representations of gender that emerge in the ways that transgender people speak and write about their bodies and sexual practices. To do this, I draw upon in-depth interviews I conducted with transgender people and selections from *Take Me There*, an anthology of trans and genderqueer erotica.

In the summer of 2016 I conducted a series of interviews with transgender people -primarily transgender men, non-binary, and genderqueer folks about the language that they use for their bodies and sexual practices. Following a discussion about how each interviewee conceived of their gender, I asked them to share the words they use to describe their bodies during sex. *If you had to create a dictionary of terms for your body, what would it contain?* Further, I asked them to share why they used those words in particular. *How*

does that language make you feel about yourself and your gender? The people I interviewed were all adamant that language was important to their sexual lives and said that talking to their potential partners about language before engaging in sex was paramount. If people used the correct language for their bodies, my interviewees said, they were much more likely to feel like their partner saw *them* and not just an idea of them.

If Moses's poem "How to Make Love to a Trans Person" provides an introduction to respectful and sexy ways for transgender people and their partners to engage in sexual activity, *Take Me There* is the rest of the manual. The stories in *Take Me There*, like the interviews I conducted, grapple with language, embodiment, and sexuality. In the introduction to the anthology, Taormino writes,

> Bodies can be tricky territory: minefields or playgrounds or both, and the power of giving and taking is a gift. I want to acknowledge that moment of surrendering a part of your body, a piece of your sexuality that may feel scary, but through the fear owning it, asking for it, even commanding it. (xvi)

This moment of surrender to which Taormino refers is a vulnerable moment for anyone, and the risk is intensified for transgender people, whose bodies often are expected to need more explaining than cisgender people's bodies. Taormino recognizes this risk and re-conceptualizes the moment of surrender as a site of empowerment. My interviewees also considered the language they chose for their bodies to be empowering. When their partners listened to them and were willing to adopt the language that they wanted, they said, it was gender affirming.

Taormino adds, "throughout the book, people harness their desire and imagination to go places that transcend bodies and language" (xvi). Taormino is getting at the performativity of language. In these stories, language is not used for its own sake, but to achieve something, as she puts it, to "craft new worlds, rituals, and experience beyond borders" (xvi).

By analyzing the stories in *Take Me There* in conversation with the interviews I conducted, I attend to a larger picture of how transgender identity is constituted through language in the United States. What is the performative efficacy of the language that transgender people use for their bodies during sex? What does it help them achieve? Further, I hope my research will suggest how partners of transgender people can employ language as a practice of love and respect.

LANGUAGE AS PERFORMATIVE AND CONSTITUTIVE

The theoretical foundation of my thesis rests on the idea that language is performative. I trace this idea back to J.L. Austin theory of language "performatives" (6). He develops this idea in his series of essays collectively titled *How to Do Things with Words*[4], arguing, "to say something *is to do something*, or *in* saying something we do something, and even *by* saying something we do something" (96). That is, contrary to Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac's enframing theories of language in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries (Taylor 103), language for Austin does not merely describe a pre-existing material world. Rather, language acts upon and in the world. Ultimately, language *creates* the world, and every thing and every person in it.

Austin's theory of performative language flew in the face of previously dominant rationalist and empiricist theories of language that considered language as a universal. Universal theories of language propose that "human perception and reason are everywhere and always the same; languages are merely different ways of externalizing already-formed ideas or variations on deep structures that are universal" (Leavitt 6). Universalist logics were central to both rationalism and empiricism. Rationalist thinkers in France in the 17th

[4] My title, *Doing (Trans)gender with Words*, is a nod to Austin's.

century, building off of the methods and goals of philosopher Rene Descartes, believed that the French language was best suited to get at the truth about the world and human existence because of its superior word order. Because they considered French word order to be the most logical, it allowed them to directly access truth through reason. Though he did not actively participate in debates about the superiority of the French language, Descartes did consider language to be inherently human, because no machine "could have the variety and appropriateness of response that is found in human language" (Leavitt 33).

In England, empiricist thought ruled. Thinkers like Francis Bacon and John Locke believed that language obscured the truth of the material world. They yearned to create a universal language that would render moot problems of translation. Most settled on adapting English, which they considered the superior language because of its efficiency and pragmatism. Their position on language can be summarized as: "Ideally language must be made transparent so the world can show through" (Leavitt 40).

Charles Taylor argues against the empiricist theories of language he attributes to Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac (HLC) in his 2016 book *The Language Animal*. HLC's theories, he says, consider language to be "enframing." That is, for them, language describes an existing material world. Taylor contrasts their theories with what he terms "designative and constitutive" views of language held by romanticist thinkers Johann Georg Hamann, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (HHH).

Romanticist theories of language including those of HHH emerged primarily in Germany as a result of Leibniz's 17th century writings on monads. Leibniz described monads as "simple substance[s]… simple meaning without parts… every monad must be different from every other. Because in nature there are never two beings that are perfectly alike" (Leavitt 49). Each person, each language, and each nation had a unique essence that affected their perspective on the world. Leibniz considered the essence of the individual

to be paramount and his theory of monads arose out of that commitment to diversity. Influenced by Leibniz's monads, Hamman, Herder, and Humboldt believed that a person's language would influence their thought. They were invested in promoting a national German identity that meant protecting the unique essence of the German people and the German language.

Central to Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt's essential (meaning focusing on something's essence) understandings of language, Taylor argues, is the idea that language is constitutive. Constitutive theories of language suggest "a picture of language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behavior, [and] new meanings" (4). That is, instead of merely describing a world that already exists, language creates new possibilities for understanding the world and ourselves. Because language is constitutive, Taylor explains, "Humans as self-interpreting animals are partly constituted by their own self descriptions. And so a new topography of the self cannot but have existential import" (41). In other words, the language that people use to narrate their lives is constitutive of their identities.

Taylor considers Austin's theory of language performatives to be in agreement with HHH's constitutive theories. However, Taylor criticizes Austin for primarily considering language's performative effects in legal contexts. Austin's primary example is the performative enactments of wedding vows: the very act of saying "I now pronounce you man and wife" during a wedding brings the marriage into being (8). To Austin, however, the context is very important. Saying "I do" will not perform a wedding unless all the other conditions for a marriage are met: there must be an officiant, the two people must be legally allowed to marry, there must be witnesses, and a marriage document must be signed. From the wedding example, Austin concludes,

> it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering

> to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it…what are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative utterance, or, for short, 'a performative.' (6)

Though Austin also includes promises in his categorization of language-that-is-performative, he stops short of arguing that all language is performative. Taylor's theory of constitutive language, despite his criticism of Austin on this very point, has the same fault: rather than standing behind his claim that language is constitutive, Taylor separates language into two types: language that describes the material world (which he declines to say is enframing) and language that communicates human meaning (and is therefore constitutive). For example, he separates language that would describe what he thought to be uninteresting static things like objects and body parts from figurative and metaphorical language that he thought to be exciting and full of potential. In so doing, Taylor undermines his own argument against the enframing theories of language put forth by Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac. In *Doing (Trans)gender with Words*, I draw from Austin's and Taylor's arguments and push beyond them to argue that all language, *particularly the language that is often thought to merely describe or refer to physical objects*, is both constitutive and performative.

Perhaps because of Austin's use of the word "performative" and Butler's use of his theories in her work, he is credited as being a foundational thinker in performance studies whereas Taylor's theory that language is constitutive operates primarily in the fields of linguistics and linguistic anthropology. I find them both useful for my argument that language serves as a technology of gender, particularly for transgender individuals. For example, a transgender man calling their genitalia a "cock" conjures that limb into existence - that is, the naming constitutes it - and this enactment also serves as a performance of gender.

Because the language I consider in my thesis is constituting and performing *gender*, Butler's theory of gender performativity is crucial to my analysis. Writing around the same time as West and Zimmerman publish "Doing Gender" in 1987, Butler applies Austin's idea of performative language to the idea that gender is something people do. Butler's theory of gender performativity resists both the ontological theory of gender that claims gender is an identity and the social-role theory of gender that considers gender to be a cultural garment one can don or doff when appropriate and instead proposes that gender is the conscious and unconscious citation of historically located and culturally specific gendered performative acts. That is to say, for Butler, gender is something people are continually doing, speaking, embodying, and performing, and these doings are always in conversation with cultural and historical ideas about gender.

Following Butler's theory that gender is performative, my thesis examines the ways that language becomes a tool by which people perform their gender. Thinking about these tools in a broad social context, Teresa de Lauretis terms these tools "technologies of gender," and describes them as working through and upon "a sociological construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc) to individuals within the society" (7). For de Lauretis, filmic and literary representations are the most salient technologies of gender -that is, the tools for constructing, reifying, or dismantling ideologies of gender. I, too, examine discursive and embodied representations of gender for thinking about how people use language as a technology of gender for self-representation[5]. I find her term capacious enough to encompass individual representations as well as social apparatuses that operationalize gendered representations.

[5] Here, I'm interested in using individual self-representation to think about larger notions of social and cultural representation.

Language has also served as a method by which people are constituted as subjects of the state. Althusser theorized that people become subjects in the eyes of the state when they are hailed by an officer of the state. His interpellation scenario goes like this: A man and a police officer are walking on the street. The police officer calls out to the man, "Hey you!" Recognizing that he is being hailed, the man turns around to greet the police officer. This mutual recognition between the officer of the state and the man -the being hailed and responding to the hailing -interpellates the man as a subject of the state. In her book, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Butler frames Althusser's interpellation scene in terms of recognition, a theme that I address at length in Chapter Three. She writes, "The act of recognition becomes an act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence" (25). Recognition, for Butler, is complicated by the subject's ambivalence towards the circumstances in which the hailing occurs. For example, she remarks on how injurious language can interpellate a subject:

> Thus we sometimes cling to the terms that pain us because, at a minimum, they offer us some form of social and discursive existence. The address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy. In this sense, an "injury" is performed by the very act of interpellation, the one that rules out the possibility of the subject's autogenesis (and gives rise to that very fantasy). (*Excitable Speech* 26-27)

I employ Butler's logic to theorize how transgender people and their partners can co-opt the practice of citation to create a subjectivity that is affirming rather than injurious. In other words, how do transgender people during sexual activity cite the bodies that they want to have as a way of bringing them into being?

Here, C. Jacob Hale's concept of a "culture of two" becomes very useful. In his essay "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Women or Men," Hale examines the "genderings" of leatherdyke boys and their daddies to think about how gender is conceptualized and lived multiply in sexual subcultures in the United States. Hale

proposes that "leatherplay can create, so to speak, a 'culture of two' composed of those two people who are playing together" (229), and suggests that the intimacy and familiarity cultivated in a "culture of two" allows for the participants to cite gender in ways that would not be legible in broader culture. Hale explains, "in this culture of two, informed and structured by leatherdyke community gender codes, [his] communication of a masculine gender identification was legible to someone else, despite [his] female body" (229). Legibility is crucial for gender performativity because, Hale clarifies, "just as any other form of performativity, [it] must occur within social constraints to be intelligible; it must be intelligible to be efficacious; and if it is not efficacious, it cannot succeed as performative" (225). That is, gender is not recognizable unless it operates within a socially recognized framework. For transgender people, operating outside of normative gender frameworks results in misgendering, discrimination, and violence. Therefore, I argue that, because it is possible to recode the frameworks operative in "cultures of two"[6] to suit the needs of the participants, these sexual partnerships serve as sites at which transgender people can constitute their identities on their own terms.

Hale's "culture[s] of two" operate as private spheres of interaction in which broader cultural codes can be re-written. Michael Warner's articulation of "public" and "private" space as constructed, deeply entwined with ideas of gender and sexuality, and privileging normative identities in his book *Publics and Counterpublics* is helpful for contextualizing "cultures of two" within broader heteronormative publics. In his chapter on "Public and Private," Warner provides two examples that reveal how the concepts of "public" and "private" are constructed. He first recounts a story about Greek philosopher Diogenes, who "provoked disgust" by masturbating in Athens' central marketplace as part of his

[6] Scholars in linguistics might consider "cultures of two" to be a kind of a community of practice.

commitment to "do without the distinction" between public and private entirely (21). In his second example, Warner describes the negative criticism that Frances Wright received from Catharine Beecher in the 1820s for speaking publicly against slavery and about women's rights in the United States. Warner comments "the abusiveness in [Beecher's] passage is not so much about Wright's ideas or her acts as about her being: her person is masculine, her voice loud, her attire out of taste; she stands up and is seen" (22). By breaking normative rules about public decorum, Diogenes and Wright reveal that sexual desire and women's ideas are considered to be private matters not suitable for public. Moreover, breaking these normative rules ultimately means something about how their genders and sexualities are perceived: Diogenes must be sexually insatiable and Wright must be less of a woman. Warner explains that these examples demonstrate the hierarchy between public and private space and expose how "being in public [particularly for people of oppressed groups] is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private" (23). That is, unlike straight people, whose identities are considered "normal," transgender people and queer folks, whose identities have been relegated to "private" life are forced to hide those identities in order to participate in public life.[7]

In some public contexts today, transgender people talking about their bodies and sexual desires is received with as much horror and disgust as Diogenes' and Wright's behavior. The slew of so-called "bathroom bills" sweeping the United States in 2016 and 2017 is a current example of how anxieties about publicness and privacy in relation to gender and sexuality play out in politics. By stipulating that people use the restroom that

[7] This gives trans and queer folks a tough dilemma: they cannot share who they are if they want to participate in public life, but choosing to not disclose one's gender identity, sex assigned at birth or sexuality can lead to being accused of lying about one's identity and/or being a fraud for which they can face legal recourse. This line of thinking has also been used as the reasoning behind cisgender heterosexual men using "trans panic" as a (winning) legal defense after murdering transgender women.

corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth rather than that which matches their gender identity, these bills claim to protect "women" and "girls" from predatory "men in dresses" who seek to harm them in public restrooms. This narrative grossly shifts the real risk of violence and discrimination that transgender people face in public restrooms onto an apparently defenseless monolithic category of "women and girls."[8] In effect, these bills are actually about transgender people's rights to exist in public space: if they cannot use any public bathroom safely without risking violence then they will be forced to stay home. While transgender people definitely deserve to exist and speak and be out in public spaces, the privacy that "culture[s] of two" provide is nonetheless vital for their safety and well-being.

SEEKING AN INTERVIEW: REFLECTIONS ON BEING REJECTED

I had a plan for locating what James Spradley succinctly denotes as a "primary informant" for my thesis research, which I pitched to the IRB as exploring "how trans men's (sic) and their partners co-construct gendered subjectivities with language" (IRB proposal). It would be easy. I was going to rely on my network of queer and trans friends from my undergraduate years at Mount Holyoke College –a bastion of gender exploration –for initial interviews. My loving partner had already declined to be interviewed because of valid concerns about remaining anonymous. My ethnography professor had also advised that I start by interviewing someone with whom I was not particularly close –he echoed the concerns of our two main handbooks (see Spradley and Weiss) for conducting ethnographic interviews that a close friend would leave out information, thinking I already knew what they would say.

One former classmate a few years older than I had spoken openly about his experience of transitioning on campus at a panel on being transgender at Mount Holyoke the year before. I set my sights on him –certainly he would be willing to speak to me. I shot off a quick Facebook message, hopes high:

> Hi! I'm working on a research project that will ultimately become my thesis project, but right now I'm piloting the interview process in my ethnography and

[8] By which they mean cisgender women and girls even though they do not say that.

> qualitative interviewing class. The project aims to explore how language can be a technology of gender. In other words, how do the words that we use for our bodies and practices shape our gender identities and sense of self? I'm particularly interested in how the language that trans men and their sexual partners use for their bodies and sexual practices shapes gender identity. Would you be interested in doing an interview with me? (My study is IRB approved). (Personal correspondence)

Hopes soared as the message was marked as "read," and waned over the next hour and half as no response appeared. Finally, a short message popped up and my heart collapsed as I read the decline to participate. I felt ashamed. Had I unearthed some painful memories for this person? Was I, like many scholars before me, inadvertently harming those I wished to learn about and from –essentially *using* them for my own ends? What right did I have to ask about another person's sex life and relationship to their body? What right did I have to target a group of people who are always already harassed about their bodies in the news, by their families, by medical establishments –and now recently by police officers as they attempt to enter the bathroom of their choice?

I continue to wrestle with these questions. Indeed, I doubt that my research will ever sit easily within my body. Yet I sense that this constant churning –of ideas, of questions, of concerns –is vital to maintaining accountability to those involved in and touched by my work –my interlocutors. Without it, my research would be entirely suspect.

After much internal debate –and reassurance from my partner that my questions were worth asking –I forged ahead. If nothing else, I needed to find someone to interview to fulfill my ethnography assignment. I scrolled through my Facebook friends, trying to identify people to whom I might reach out. It felt wrong. How was I supposed to know if these people, who I hadn't spoken to in years, thought of themselves as "trans men" –the people my call for interviews identified as the imagined interview participant? What about those people who thought of themselves as genderqueer or nonbinary or demibois or any other gender that isn't one of the two marked on a birth certificate? Wary of these pitfalls in how I had imagined my study, I re-wrote my pitch and my consent form, replacing "trans men" with "non-cisgendered people" –this language was not much better, I knew, nor would be "gender non-conforming," but it was a closer approximation.

This change made, I posted a call for interview participants on my Facebook feed where any one of my couple hundred friends could see it –specifying that people who were interested should message me privately. I steeled myself to receive no messages. Within a few minutes, I was surprised to hear from two different people –my former roommate texted to remind me that she was still interested, and one of my exchange students from high school contacted me as well. Excited that my message wasn't lost in the void of social media, I also felt disappointed that these two responses, the only two responses to this call that I would receive, were both from people who (as far as I know) are cisgender women. Technically they fit my interview pool as people who could be or have been partners of people who weren't cisgender. However, I felt strongly that my

first interview should be with someone who could share their own experiences of taking authorship over their gender identity. I would add in the perspective of partners later. (Research notes, April 2016)

The above paragraphs are an excerpt from my first interview write-up as part of a class on ethnography and qualitative interviews that I took in the spring of 2016. In the time since I wrote those words, I have conducted nine interviews. All but two[9] of the interviews was conducted via various internet-based video communication services and all of them were recorded and transcribed. Rather than continuing to target individual people via social media messaging services, I stuck to the broad posting technique, putting a call for interviews on my own Facebook page and on the page of a queer Facebook group based in Austin, TX.

Of the nine people I interviewed, three identified as as men or transgender men, three consider themselves genderqueer (one of whom also aligned themself with the words "trans" and "agender"), one identifies as a woman and as nonbinary, one was the cisgender woman partner of one of the trans men I interviewed, and the last did not care about gender. All were between the ages of 20 and 40 years old. Eight of them were white or white-passing and one was mixed race asian american.

Not everyone I interviewed is quoted in my thesis. The mixed race asian american genderqueer person, who themself had doubts about the applicability of their experiences to my project due to their age and what they considered a "boring" approach to language, ultimately did not talk about anything that I felt shed light on my research questions. The white person who said he did not care about gender ultimately turned out to not identify with a gender different from the one assigned to him at birth and so did not fit the demographic for this research. This means that the following analysis is about primarily

[9] One was conducted in person. The other was over the phone.

white and white passing transgender people and so will not necessarily speak to the experiences that transgender people of color have around language.

The interviews lasted anywhere from a half hour to over three hours. Some interviews were longer because the interviewee was a friend and wanted to use the time as both an interview and a social activity. Others were long due to interviewees' reluctance to talk about sensitive items on my list of questions -like the words they use for their own bodies in a sexual context -a discomfort that some maneuvered by veering somewhat off topic to tell related but less personal stories that lengthened the interview times. The shorter interviews tended to be short because the interviewees were forthright with information and required little to no prompting to share specifics.

I used the last section in every interview to clarify how the interviewee wanted me to refer to them in my thesis. First, I asked which pronouns they would like me to use. Second, I asked them if they had a name in mind for a pseudonym, letting them know that, if they did not, I would choose one for them from a baby names list on the internet. Of the nine people I interviewed, half chose their pseudonyms and I chose the other half.

One trend that I noticed over the course of the interview process is that, as the people I was interviewing shifted from close friends to acquaintances to strangers, as happens when using the snowball method of seeking interviews, the conversations became less awkward and the interviewees became more forthright. It seemed somewhat paradoxical that the people I knew the least were the most willing to share intimate details of their sex lives with me. However, as I continued to contemplate this observation, the trend made more sense. Those people who I did not know at all had less reason to hold back information from me than did my close friends and acquaintances. They had no expectation of continuing to interact with me and they had no reason to believe that I knew the people they were telling me about in their interviews. The same could not be true for

my close friends and acquaintances. They were in the tough place of negotiating their desire to help me with my research alongside the knowledge that I would then know everything they told me about for the rest of our relationships with each other. A higher level of trust is required from them, then, than from the strangers.

I felt this awkwardness play out in all my interviews with those people with whom I had had a relationship prior to our interview.[10] It often manifested in laughter and questions about how the other people had responded during their interviews, trying to gauge how much information I was expecting them to divulge. Rosie, for example, laughed and then asked, "How specific do you want me to get?" in response to my request for the kinds of things she and her partner would say to each other during BDSM scenes. She laughed more nervously when I responded, "very specific" and continued to talk around the question for the next couple of minutes. Other friends/acquaintances I interviewed stated that they felt comfortable sharing information about themselves, but not about their partners -partly because they felt it was not up to them to share that information, but also partly because they knew that I had either already met their partners or might meet them in the future.

My own research focus shifted over the course of the interviews away from my original interest in re-thinking Althusser's concept of interpellation between two people instead of between a person and the state. Rather, what emerged as I continued to talk to my interviewees were the ideas that language can affirm someone and help them "feel seen" -themes that came to structure my second and third chapters. Noticing these themes arise in the interviews, I turned to scholarship to find out how people had been theorizing affirmation and what I came to call "recognition." I was surprised to find very little written

[10] Of the nine people I interviewed, I had some level of relationship ranging from acquaintance to close friend with six of them prior to our interviews.

on affirmation in gender studies and transgender studies. All of the writing on the subject seemed to be coming out of mental health fields. When I mentioned this to my advisor, she suggested that that might be because gender studies and transgender studies have moved towards reveling in and reclaiming the non-normative, the monstrous[11], and the failure[12] that has been ascribed to queerness. In such a context, looking for hope in the affirmative was out of vogue, she added. Nonetheless, I was set on pursuing a politics of affirmation in my own work. Because it was important to the people I interviewed, and to the transgender friends I did not interview as well, it was important to me.

Why am I using these interviews in conversation with the anthology of trans and genderqueer erotica *Take Me There*? Another tension that arose during my research process was between considering my work to be a performance analysis and the transcripts I had amassed of interviews I conducted with people. During my presentation at the Trans* Studies Conference in 2016, Lal Zimman asked me if I was going to use an additional data set to bolster the data I had gathered in my interviews. His own work on transgender men's language use in discussing their genitalia on an online forum was, after all, based on information from more than six people (at the time we spoke I had only conducted six interviews). I understood where he was coming from, but at the same time I felt as if my work was seeking to do something different. Where his work attempts to access and analyze some truth of how transgender men speak about their genitalia (a linguistic analysis), I am more interested in the ways that transgender folks represent their bodies through language (a performance analysis). At first, I was attempting to do this

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[11] See Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chaminoux: Performing Transgender Rage," and Haefele-Thomas's *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity* among others.

[12] See Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*

performance analysis using only my interviews with trans folks. After my conversation with Zimman, however, I remembered that one of my interviewees had recommended that I read *Take Me There*, adding that I might find it useful for my research. This might be my additional data source, I thought at the time, one that is appropriate to the genre of scholarship I am producing. Upon reading it, it became clear that the anthology would indeed enhance my analysis.

By considering the interviews alongside and in conversation with the anthology, my thesis moves away from the methods of a sociological study or linguistic analysis intent on finding "The Truth" of how trans people talk about their bodies and sexual practices. Instead, drawing upon strategies used in ethnographic writing, my experimental method pairs long excerpts of interview transcripts alongside quotations from erotic short stories, treating both as texts that are equally valid and have much to say about the power of language to affirm or deny identity.

WHY THIS? WHY ME?: RETURNING TO ETHICAL QUESTIONS OF AUTHORSHIP

Returning to the concerns I was confronted with in the process of putting my IRB research proposal into action, I asked myself again: Why am I so interested in transgender studies? Critical Pedagogy scholar Peter McLaren reminds us that knowledge is "never neutral or objective, but is ordered and structured in particular ways." He adds: "Knowledge is a *social construction* deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations and geopolitically situated" (McLaren 133). Our epistemological pursuits are also situated in these webs of power.

Ultimately, it is only with the help of one of my colleagues and a couple of drinks that I could articulate why I am so invested in contributing to transgender studies. I opened the reminder application on my phone and sloppily typed as my colleague dictated: "Transgender studies is important to me because my ability to construct my own gender identity and sexuality is contingent on everyone's ability to conceptualize their identity outside of binary understandings of gender and sexuality." She added, "I don't want to put words in your mouth," but I copied them down nonetheless, sensing recognition as they appeared in print. (Research Notes, April 2016)

Reflecting on that moment last Spring, I cannot help but feel that, for some reason, those words *felt right* to me when she spoke them. In *The Language Animal*, Taylor writes:

> When I hit on the right word to articulate my feelings, and acknowledge that I am motivated by envy, say, the term does its work because it is the right term. In other words, we can't explain the rightness of the word 'envy' here simply in terms of the condition that using it produces; rather we must account for its producing this condition -here, a successful articulation -in terms of its being the right word. (26)

That is, Taylor argues that the "rightness" of a word is not only about "the condition that using it produces" -calling envy "envy" doesn't just feel "right" because it conjures the feeling of envy. That feeling was there already. There's something else going on- a history of this feeling being named "envy,"or an iconicity, a resemblance -that makes the word feel "right" when it is used to name that feeling. Just as the sentence that my colleague gifted to me *felt right* because it named something that I already felt to be true, the language that my interviewees and the anthology characters discuss *feels right* to the people who use it because it names a body they already feel to be theirs, even as those very words conjure that body into legibility.

I want to return again to my research notes from last Spring about this conversation with my colleague to continue to reflect on my positionality in this project:

> Just before dictating me the statement that captured how I felt about why my research was important, my colleague asked: "You're not transgender, right?" I didn't expect that question; it slammed into me and I was shaken. Despite interrogating constructions of gender every day, I was reminded that I continue to take for granted that I will be read as a cisgender woman. This discomfort serves to remind me that it is important to specify my positionality in relation to my research. My compulsion to explain why I am interested in this topic stems from being uneasy researching trans people when I am not trans myself. I cannot help but think that being transgender would legitimize my scholarship, though I know that this thought is suspect. And as I continue to embrace this ambivalence, I firmly hold that the questions I am asking are important and my responsibility as a researcher is to acknowledge my relation to them and engage them with care. (Research notes, Spring 2016)

The conversation began with the aim of helping me articulate why this project is so important to me, outside of the close relationships I have built with transgender folks - including my partner. Just as pointing to one's black friend is not enough to account for one's positionality in anti-racist work, I knew that claiming closeness to transgender folks was not enough to account for my positionality as a white, cisgender, queer woman in transgender studies. The way the conversation continued, with my surprise at being asked if I was transgender myself, it is clear to me that I have not fully come to understand or account for my cisgender privilege. Though I know it is and will never be enough, the best I can do is continue to talk with my transgender interlocutors, continue to ask questions, and push their voices forward more than my own.

CENTERING AFFIRMATION

My research is rooted in a politics of affirmation like that which Hale describes occurs in his "cultures of two." I consider affirmation to be the act of validating someone in their wholeness. In my work on transgender identity and embodiment, validation takes many forms including using someone's correct name and pronouns, providing or supporting their access to gender-affirming medical care, and describing their body in the way they want it to be described. These acts of affirmation, at their core, recognize the multiplicity of self-images (who-someone-is, who-they-want-to-be, and how-they-want-to-be-seen) and affirm that they are both always already who they want to be and always in the process of becoming that person.

Though language can certainly be used injuriously, I consider how language can be deployed as an act of affirmation. Psychologist Drema Dial Albin writes, "Speech becomes a new, libidinally-cathected, communication of love. Verbal communication contributes to

the establishment of individuation, the formation of the body image and the sense of identity" (30). In other words, language -applied in an affirming manner -is constitutive of identity.

One goal of affirming someone is to remind them that their existence in the world –and in the affirmer's own life –is both recognized and valuable. Choosing to affirm someone in their wholeness is an act of love, something which feminist scholar Aimee Carrillo Rowe reminds us is always a political act:

> Belonging is political—who we love is constitutive of our becoming. I mean "love" not necessarily in the narrow sense of lovers, or even friends, although I mean those relations too. "Love" may be considered in an expansive sense. Whose lives matter to us? Whose well-being is essential to our own? And, alternatively, whose survival must we overlook in order to connect to power in the ways we do? If questions of who we love are inseparable from the politics of subject formation, then belonging is political. (Carrillo Rowe 3)

Carrillo Rowe, too, is thinking about the ways that we become. For her, who we love, who we think matters, informs how we are constituted as subjects. Keeping in view this politics of affirmation, my thesis examines both how language can be used to constitute a narrow idea of transgender men's embodiment and how it can be used to expand the possibilities for embodiment.

My approach to performance analysis involves "reading" embodied performances (of gender in daily life and in erotica) as texts to examine and interrogate the representational work they do. While considering performance as text was largely popular in '90s literature criticism[13] and has since been broadly criticized for privileging language over embodiment,[14] my choice to consider performance as text is useful because my thesis

[13] See Susan Leigh Foster's *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* and Goellner and Murphy's *Bodies of the Text* for this discussion in the context of dance studies.

[14] For a specific instance, see Dwight Conquergood's article "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics."

focuses on how language conjures meaning about bodies. Nonetheless, I do not believe that my theorization prioritizes texts over embodiments because bodies are in many ways the reason for this writing.

The second and third chapters analyze both in-depth interviews I conducted with transgender people and their partners about the language that they use for their bodies and sexual practices and an anthology of trans and genderqueer erotica called *Take Me There*.

Sociolinguists Sarah Mills and Louise Mullany would consider my interviews to be "active interviews" in which "interviewers... take a flexible approach to questioning and where they ask open-ended and less-structured questions" (100). My interviews are structured by a set of open-ended questions ensuring that each interview covers the same kinds of topics, but I adjust the questions and the order I ask them in to follow the flow of conversation.

I am invested in using in-depth interviewing as a research method precisely because it gives me the opportunity to validate the knowledge of the transgender people I interview -my intellectual and community interlocutors. This practice is particularly important whenever a researcher is engaging with people that are often discriminated against because their opinions and experiences are often called into question. By listening thoughtfully and including sections of quoted speech in my analysis as is common in ethnographic writing, I provide a platform for my interlocutors to share their experiences and explain their ideas in their own words. Another way that I am validating the knowledge of transgender people is by putting the interviews in conversation with the short stories in *Take Me There*, an anthology of trans and genderqueer erotica written entirely by transgender and genderqueer authors.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, after a recent presentation of my work at the Trans* Studies Conference, Lal Zimman pointed out that because self-reporting in

interviews is often very unreliable it would be interesting for me to consult some additional data on which language transgender people use for their bodies and sexual practices. He used his own research on transgender men's language work in an online forum as an example. Mills and Mullany are also concerned about feminist linguistics research conducted based only on interviews without also engaging in participant observation:

> From within the disciplinary perspective of linguistic anthropology, Duranit (1997: 103) argues that analysing data taken from interview data alone is no substitute for observing and recording real-world interactions: it is only by producing analyses of spontaneous interactions that 'a culturally informed linguistic analysis' can be produced. (101)

I agree that for many research projects participant observation and/or consulting additional data sources would be necessary to create "a culturally informed linguistic analysis." However, because I seek not to examine "real world...spontaneous interactions" as an ethnography would, but rather a performance analysis of discursive and embodied representations of transgender identity, Zimman, Mills and Mullany's suggestions that I seek additional hard data is not applicable. Instead of attempting to figure out "the truth" of exactly what people are saying during sex (a highly suspect and voyeuristic pursuit I might add), I have chosen to focus on my interviewees' own meta-linguistic analysis and characterizations of these interactions. Nonetheless, I have found it useful to incorporate an analysis of the short erotic stories alongside the analysis of the interviews. Each informs the other.

The questions I ask of both the stories and my interview recordings include: What language do transgender people and their partners report to use for each other's bodies and sexual practices? What do they say is their reasoning behind choosing those words? How do they say they communicate which words they want used? How do they report the words make them feel? What meaning do they ascribe to the sexual interactions about which they

talk? What does the language used in these interactions do? My aim is to explore how language can be a tool by which someone can affirm or deny a person their right to define their own gender identity.

PERFORMING THE CONSTITUTION OF MY ARGUMENT: A CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

In this introduction, I have laid the foundation for my argument that language is an important tool for transgender people in projects of self-authorship. To make this argument, I have employed theories from performance studies, linguistics, and gender studies. In particular, I have drawn upon Austin's theory of performative language, Taylor's idea that language is constitutive, and Butler's theory of gender performativity. In this section I have also clarified my definitions of several terms important to my project, including: the binary sex/gender system, biological determinism, transgender, and language. Furthermore, I have explained how transgender people's rights to self-definition in the United States have been severely curtailed in order to make the case that the strategic employment of language in small, sexually intimate communities of practice -what Hale terms "cultures of two" -can serve as a practice of resistance against dominant biologically deterministic ideologies and a source of support within hegemonic constructions of public and private that silence and invisiblize non-normative identities.

The subsequent chapters of my thesis explore the ways that transgender people speak and write about trans bodies on their own terms in the materials that I have analyzed. In order to emphasize multiple transgender people's voices across media, I use performance analysis to examine discursive and embodied representations of gender both in in-depth interviews that I conducted and selections from the anthology of erotic stories, *Take Me There*.

Putting the interviews and erotic stories in conversation, I aim not to reveal "the Truth" of transgender sex or sexuality. Rather, my purpose is to move towards a theory of language as a technology of gender affirmation and of "seeing" and "being seen" for who one truly is. In order to develop that theory, I analyze how my interview respondents and the erotica authors describe feeling about the language they use for their own or their characters' bodies and sexual practices, their characterizations of the importance of using the "correct" language, and their sense of what the language achieves.

In Chapter Two, titled "Representations of Affirmation and Invalidation," I draw upon José Esteban Muñoz's concept of a "queer utopia" and Avery Gordon's idea of "haunting," to consider how both the interviewees and the anthology represent language as something that can affirm, but which also puts people in a place of vulnerability or exposes them to potential trauma. Then, using Stuart Hall's writing on representation and audience and Michael Warner's theories of publics and counterpublics, I analyze how the intended audiences for both the interviews and *Take Me There* affect their portrayals of intimate conversations about sex. Finally, I employ Don Kulick's idea that gendered language is a resource available to everyone as a frame for my interviewee's thoughts on language's potential for affirmation.

Chapter Three, "'Seeing' and 'Being Seen': Language and Social Recognition," considers how language can facilitate the recognition of transgender identities as real. First, I articulate how my understanding of recognition has been shaped by Althusser, Butler, and Hale. Then, I consider how the audience of a transgender person's "gender performance" affects their feeling that they have been recognized: How does "seeing" and "being seen" work in Hale's "cultures of two"? How does it work in more public interactions? Finally, I argue that language is doing more than performing and constituting

gender identity for those who engage with it: it is also creating and pointing to people who care about how the language that they use affects those they use it with.

Following Taylor and Austin's theories of constitutive and performative language, and emerging into the theoretical gap that Kulick illuminates, my thesis considers the ways in which language can be employed to either restrict or expand transgender people's abilities to author their own gender identities within, alongside, and in opposition to the binary sex/gender system. In the United States, a country that insistently and brutally enforces discrimination and violence against transgender people, based in an ideology that presumes them to be either ill, deranged, or mistaken, it is vital that transgender people's own conceptions of self, especially as they manifest relationally in intimate (read vulnerable) sexual situations, be considered with respect.

Chapter Two: Representations of affirmation and invalidation

In our interview over the phone, Gil, a trans guy in his late thirties, shares: "being naked and sexual is a vulnerable place to be, and particularly for transgender people. I mean there you are with the undeniable truth of what is in your pants or on your chest, you know, and so to have other powerful terms, you know definitely for me that's affirming."

Morgan, a genderqueer, agender, and trans identifying person in their early twenties, specifies that having check-ins with their partner on a daily basis is very important, because their language needs might shift, and they know that the wrong words could send them into "sub drop" and it'll "just end badly for both of [them]." In another part of the interview, Morgan explains "if one word slips out that's gonna cause me to freak out that day, then it's just not gonna end well."

Skylar, a nonbinary woman in her mid-twenties, muses "I feel like each word has the power to either build someone's self-image and make it easier for them to feel like 'Oh Yes! This is me' or completely negate that and sort of like close someone off from me."

In these snippets from our interviews, Gil, Morgan, and Skylar all speak to the power that language has, especially in intimate situations, for affirming or invalidating their identities. The aphorism "sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me" came up during my conversation with Morgan, who was angry at how that message invalidates emotional and psychological pain and minimizes language's ability to hurt. Indeed, for many of the people that I spoke to, language was a powerful force. It should not be considered as "just words," but rather as a medium by which people can build identity and through which they can share their identities with people around them. In this chapter, I acknowledge the power that my interviewees place in language, building upon the foundation I laid in the introduction that language is both performative and constitutive

of identity, to explore how language can be used both to affirm and invalidate transgender people's gender identities.

In this effort, I employ interviews with transgender people I recorded in the summer of 2016 and selections from Tristan Taormino's anthology of trans and genderqueer erotica *Take Me There*. Treating both as representations of transgender folks' beliefs about language, I use them to think through language's part in affirming and invalidating gender identities. What is affirmation, and following that, what kinds of language might transgender people find affirming? What is invalidation, and what kinds of language might transgender people find invalidating?

First, I draw from Avery Gordon's concept of haunting and José Esteban Muñoz's concept of a queer utopia to explore the close relationship between affirmation and invalidation, how each is defined against the other. Then, I turn to Stuart Hall's ideas on representation and audience in conversation with Michael Warner's theorization of publics to analyze how the anthology's intentions to arouse and pleasure and my interviewees' intentions to share and inform affect how each represents transgender folks' feelings on having conversations about sex. Finally, Don Kulick's understanding of gendered language as a resource frames my interviewees' thoughts on how and why language can indeed be affirming.

Throughout this chapter and the next, my theorization is informed by my interviewees' and the characters' own analysis because, as they are aware of the ways that they are performing and constituting their identities using language and imagination, they are theorizing their identities through practice. My additions of other scholarly theory serves to demonstrate how my thoughts have developed alongside them rather than an attempt to think for or about them.

A Queer Utopia Haunted by Violence

In her essay "Intimate Grammars: Anthropological and Psychoanalytic Accounts of Gender, Sexuality, and Desire," Elizabeth Povinelli captures the simultaneous promise and danger of constituting one's identity through language that my interviewees expressed. Povinelli asserts that "language may denote and predicate gender but it also provides the ever-present means of its insecurity and indetermination" (205). She continues "doomed to be actual only through language, the subject will be forced to enunciate herself as a full and truly human subject in a communicative medium necessarily partial and particularizing" (205-206). That is, because language is central to gender identity formation and presentation, it is also that which can lead to its destabilization. While language can be deployed to empower someone by bolstering their self-image -what I am calling in this chapter "affirmation" -it can also be used to contradict or cast doubt on that self-image. This uncertainty between affirmation and invalidation often leaves transgender folks feeling vulnerable about the language that they use to constitute their identities.

While a transgender person can certainly affirm themselves using language, as in speaking or thinking affirmations to oneself in the mirror each morning for example, in this chapter I build upon George Herbert Mead's theory of the self as "constituted...by an organization of the particular attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another in the specific social acts in which he participates with them" (158) to consider affirmation as a co-constitutive process in which identity emerges and is affirmed in interaction with someone else.

My focus is primarily on the ways that this process of identity formation unfolds in what I have been terming "intimate" situations, by which I mean several things. First, I use "intimate" to refer to emotional and physical closeness with and/or proximity to another person, as in the way one is intimate with a dear friend or lover. Secondly, I use "intimate"

to mean "private," in that these interactions take place in "private" spaces and also concern topics, like gender and sexuality, that have been coded as "private" things. Indeed, in his book *Publics and Counterpublics* Warner writes that the very distinction between what is considered "public" and what is considered "private" has been constructed to privilege normative genders and sexualities and silence non-normative genders and sexualities. That is to say that the reason conversations about language for bodies and sexual practices for those whose bodies and sexual practices are not cisgender or heterosexual often happen in intimate contexts, private conversations, the pages of a book about "private" desires, is that they cannot safely happen in public. To take them out onto the street or display them in the public space of one's Twitter feed would break through the normative rules about "proper" behavior and discourse, and expose the speakers to violence in a way that would not be true for cisgender heterosexual people.

Even in these intimate and private contexts, however, because language operates at the juncture of affirmation and invalidation, some of the people I interviewed report that talking about sex and in particular talking about their bodies in sexual contexts could be very difficult. Parcival, a man in his mid-twenties, explains that conversations about sex can be

> shitty**,** but because of the situations. Because, you know, like –especially when you have like bodies that carry trauma and, like, experiences that are shitty for different reasons… um, you know, that comes up if you're like –either like exposed to a situation that can just like physically trigger something, or like I feel like another component is just like if you try to be emotionally close to each other during sex, that can just like open you up for –like you're more vulnerable so just stuff comes out, you know. Umm so –but then it's like negative. Negative stuff. That's why the talking about it is shitty because if you're like, "well this and that happened to me, and I feel gross and disgusting and like dirty" and you know blah blah blah blah blah. That's a shitty conversation.

For Parcival, navigating a sexual encounter with his partner seems to involve "physically trigger[ing]" traumatic memories or experiences that stemmed from body dysphoria. The physical and emotional vulnerability of being naked with another person would bring out negative emotions, especially if his partner would "accidentally touch [him] in a place [he] didn't want her to." Accidents like that, though in Parcival's case they often stem from a misplaced touch rather than an uncomfortable word, were haunted by language that undermined his sense of self. Touch him in a place he does not want to be touched and he will be forced to reconcile his maleness against a body that did not necessarily look like or would be described with the same language as normative cisgender male bodies.

When an "accidental touch" would happen, Parcival explains that the ensuing conversation might go something like this:

> [I would be like] "uhhh. That sucks and now I have all these feelings" and her probably being like "Oh sorry are you ok?" and me being like "Yeah sure" and then like ten seconds later me like crying. Ummm. You know.. roll over, hide under a blanket, umm, and be like "Go away, leave me alone, I feel like shit."

Over time, he claims he has learned how to better control his reactions to accidental triggers during sex:

> If something happens now, well, A. I think I've just like grown as a person and I can take it better. Um and B. is like, I dunno for some reason I don't break down as badly and so we can talk about it and we can continue having sex, right, if we want to.

Because he has a stronger foundation for his identity, built up over the years by having affirming interactions with partners, Parcival is better able to handle it when "something happens."

Parcival is the only interviewee to so explicitly describe the negative sexual experiences he had as a result of triggering language and misplaced touch. Other folks,

including Morgan who I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, are, however, clear that the incorrect language could negatively impact their mental health and sense of self. That language could have this negative effect is due not simply to the words themselves, but to the imaginative processes they imply. Speaking about a transgender man in a way that one would speak about a woman reveals that the speaker is failing to imagine him as he is.

There are not many examples in *Take Me There* of characters using invalidating language -mostly because, I surmise, the erotic stories are meant to be a utopian representation of trans and genderqueer sexualities. Here, I draw upon Muñoz's concept of queer utopia[15] as "an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (1), "a doing for and toward the future" (1), and about "other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (1). For Muñoz, queer utopia is always on the horizon, something towards which we are always working. Claiming *Take Me There* as a queer utopian project in this way is not to say that it depicts trans and genderqueer sexualities that do not yet exist or are outside the realm of people's experiences. Rather, my point is that the anthology aims to provide a space in which trans and genderqueer people are celebrated and validated, a series of stories that Taormino says "harness their desire and imagination to go [to] places that transcend bodies and language" (xvi). The stories in its pages are something to cherish and strive for, even if they reflect experiences that people have already had. Instances of language being deployed violently to invalidate people's identities, already so prevalent in people's lived experiences, would be counterproductive to this queer utopian project.

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[15] Even though his work primarily focuses on the experiences and work of queer people of color, I find Muñoz's concept of "queer utopia" nonetheless useful for theorizing about my interviewees and the characters I analyze from *Take Me There*, who are all white or white passing.

The specter of violent language, while not erupting explicitly in the stories, nonetheless haunts *Take Me There*. In her book, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Gordon[16] defines haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (xvi). In this case, the violence reveals itself subtly and insidiously as something the characters have internalized. Many characters in the anthology are preoccupied with their own language use, worrying that they might use harmful language, especially in situations where they do not know their sexual partner very well. In Andrea Zanin's "THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN," a young butch[17] meets Crystal, a tall, arrestingly beautiful trans woman, at a vegan cafe that they describe as having "'lesbian' written all over it" (Zanin 108). This is a characteristic that they remark seems out of place in small town Cobalt, Ontario. They have come alone to the cafe after attending their grandmother's funeral, and are marveling at the mix of *Bitch* magazine with *Canadian Living* behind the counter when Crystal startles them. They are immediately struck by her breasts, enticingly clad in a tight red sweater, a feature for which the butch is established earlier as having a "healthy appreciation" (107) at least on other people, but they force themself to "meet the gaze of the gal to whom the cleavage was attached" (108) -as their feminist theory classes at University remind them is important.

[16] Again, while Gordon writes about ghosts that arise in the aftermath of violence against people of color, I find her work useful for writing about white and white passing transgender people and characters because they too experience violence both in the present and in the form of ghosts from the past.

[17] The story is narrated from the butch's perspective (in first person) and does not name or give the narrator's pronouns, so I will refer to them as "the butch" and use they/them pronouns for them. To clarify between "they" the butch and "they" the butch and Crystal, I will refer to the butch and Crystal as "the pair."

The pair seem to experience immediate mutual attraction, seemingly born out of the lack of queer community in town. The butch, while thinking about Crystal's femme presentation as a trans woman in the context of writing by Kate Bornstein, Joan Nestle, and Leslie Feinberg, starts fantasizing about having sex with her. However, at the point in the fantasy where they would reach Crystal's genitals, they falter: "all the reading in the world doesn't help when you're struck with an intense desire to nuzzle your face into the fragrant cavern between someone's breasts and then, maybe, lick your way south from there and… and, well, when you don't know how to do all that without saying the wrong thing and messing it all up" (109). Here, language is imagined as that which has the potential to "mess it all up." In the beginning of the fantasy sentence, the butch is thinking about pleasurable actions, but when confronted with the thought of Crystal's genitals -an unknown -they switch to worrying about language. Genitals for trans folks are, then, assumed to be something that need explanation, that need to be talked about -and navigating that discussion correctly is necessary for continuing the sexual encounter.

This anxiety about "messing up" by speaking incorrectly comes up again once the pair are engaging in sex at a nearby motel. During their initial sexual activity, the butch expresses some concern that they will not know how to pleasure their partner, having never had sex with a trans woman before. After starting off somewhat flustered - "I'm not sure I know… I mean, I've never really been with…well…" (111) -the butch sees Crystal frown and tries a different approach: "Tell me what you like" (112). This is followed by the internal dialogue: "*See me,* I was thinking. *I so very much want to do this right. I know how women like you have been treated. Just let me be different. I want to be the one-night stand you don't regret. I want to be the perfect gentleman for you. That's what you deserve*" (112). For the butch, talking is a place to trip up, where they fear their intentions to "do this right" and "be different" from those other one-night stands that they imagine have left

Crystal full of regret will be lost in the transference from thought to words. Implicit in this worry is the recognition that language, backed by the imaginative relation it implies, has the power to turn an otherwise fulfilling sexual interaction into an unpleasant or even traumatizing one. The "perfect gentleman" evoked in the title of the story and in the butch's internal monologue, however, is constructed as perfect *precisely because* they do not "mess up" the sexual encounter with language or anything else. The "perfect gentleman" imagined and yearned for in this story is someone who validates and affirms their partner's gender.

A character in in Dean Scarborough's story "SHOES ARE MEANT TO GET YOU SOMEWHERE" has a concern similar to the butch's in "THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN." Oscar, a gay cisgender man, and Hayden, his transgender male dominant play partner, engage in an erotic power scene focused on the restrictions, discipline, and beauty of ballet. Oscar is blindfolded, wearing garters, stockings, lace underwear, and a corset. When Hayden asks him how he likes performing fellatio on the balletic patent leather heels he is about to put on, Oscar replies, "I wish it was your cock, Sir" (42), and nervously adds, "'Your… your *real* cock, Sir'"(42), a statement which Oscar immediately regrets: "The silence that greeted this just made Oscar's face even hotter. What if that had been the wrong thing to say? What if Hayden was turned off by the idea of letting anyone near him like that? What if the strap-on *was* what he considered his real cock?" (42). Here, Oscar expresses his desire to pleasure Hayden by sucking on his genitals instead of his strap-on, but is concerned that making the distinction between Hayden's strap-on and his "real" genitals has offended Hayden. Oscar's question("What if the strap-on *was* what he considered his real cock?" (42)) reveals a potential disconnect between the way that Oscar has been imagining Hayden and how Hayden imagines himself. The two clashing imaginations colliding produces the conflict in this story.

When Hayden responds by suggesting that Oscar does not know how to pleasure him, Oscar expresses his desire to have Hayden come in his mouth. This, again, causes Oscar to worry that Hayden "was offended, or worse, disgusted" (43), but ultimately the pair is able to negotiate a way to continue that fulfills both partner's imaginations. In this story, once again, language mediates sexual interaction. Because the story is meant to be erotic, the language is not revealed to have offended anyone in the scene and the pair continues to pleasure each other.

Perhaps in non-fictional encounters the language would be triggering and something more like the trauma Parcival described might occur. Gordon argues that haunting is distinctive from trauma because it produces a "something-to-be-done" (xvi). For Gordon, who writes about disappearance and state violence in Argentina, this "something-to-be-done" is what propels families who have lost relatives to question the state and demand to know whether or not their relatives are dead. For my research, the "something-to-be-done" provoked by this fear of "messing up" with language connects back to Muñoz's queer utopia. Because *Take Me There* is haunted by the fear of violent language, it requires action from its readers: *Even in this celebratory anthology*, it suggests, *there is risk. We must unite and work towards queer utopias together. The work is not yet done.*

Gordon's concept of "complex personhood" is an idea that I believe should be operationalized as part of the "something-to-be-done" of continuing to forge queer utopias. For Gordon, complex personhood means:

> that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others… that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves… that even those called "Other" are never never [sic] that… that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their

> society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward… that people get tired and some are just plain lazy… that groups of people will act together, that they will vehemently disagree with and sometimes harm each other, and that they will do both at the same time and expect the rest of us to figure it out for ourselves, intervening and withdrawing as the situation requires… that even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not. At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (4)

Imagining people complexly has long seemed to me to be a step towards some kind of utopia. Much ill in the world arises from our failure to imagine the needs, desires, and troubles of those whose lives exist on the periphery of our own. It is only by reconciling our imaginations with each other, and thereby acknowledging our collective humanity, that we can hope to begin to work towards ameliorating that ill. It is this process of reconciling to which I next turn.

HAVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SEX

Sexual partners come to each other with expectations. They imagine what their sexual interactions will be before they happen and judge their satisfaction based on how well it matched up with or exceeded what they imagined. This can pose problems when people come to each other imagining different ways of interacting, and reconciling such differing or contradictory imaginations is difficult. The characters in *Take Me There* represent this process of partners reconciling their imaginations through conversation very differently than my interviewees do. I argue that this difference of representation between the two sources is due to their different intended publics.

In his book, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall provides what he terms a "common sense" definition of representation. He explains

that representation is "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people" (183). He goes on to explain that representation is, of course, more complicated than that, but what I find salient in this definition is the recognition that representation involves an audience. When representing something, then, one keeps the audience in mind: *Who will see this? What am I trying to communicate to them? How will they interpret what I say?* As Hall argues in "Encoding, Decoding," the interpreter of a text has as much a hand in making its meaning as its author does.

The two sources of representation I analyze are made for two very different audiences, or, as Warner would term them, *publics*; that is, the group of people the authors imagine in their addresses and who ultimately organize around or simply pay attention to them. *Take Me There* is intended as a queer utopian representation of transgender and genderqueer sexual intimacy for an public that Taormino describes as "those of us who appreciate the written word's power to not just get us off but bring nuance and complexity to erotic storytelling" (x). Considering the interviews as performative representations of trans and genderqueer sexual intimacy as well, I as researcher am in the place of the audience and the interviewees are the performers. There is a notable difference between representations of sexual intimacy for the purpose of erotic entertainment that will circulate throughout a large public that includes strangers, and representations of sexual intimacy in a private setting with a limited audience (me) for research purposes. Unlike the stories in *Take Me There,* the people I interviewed were not sharing their stories with the express intention of arousing people, of titillating a public. Because of the different, more private and research-focused, context in which they were representing their experiences of sexual intimacy, they did not need to sexualize their accounts, and so shared stories of traumatic, frustrating, or unfulfilling sexual encounters as well.

In *Take Me There,* talking about sex is framed as an inconvenience that situates the trans characters as "other," a unique hurdle for transgender people that cisgender people are not expected to jump over. If we read *Take Me There* as a queer utopian project made for a queer and trans counterpublic -Warner's term for publics that exist in tension with or operate against normative publics (120) -then it stands to reason that its transgender authors would write stories in which their characters do not have to engage in conversations that they find othering, or at least have the opportunity to complain about the times that they have had to do so. The topic is not one that emerges across a majority of the stories, but two characters express outright displeasure at the prospect of talking about sex, and so this is worthy of analysis.

Most outraged is the narrator in Ivan Coyote's story "HOLD UP." After relating an unfulfilling sexual interaction with some women who rudely describe him as "hormone-free beef" (Coyote 20), thereby revealing their imagination of him[18] as less masculine than a transgender man on testosterone, he contrasts that experience with one he had with a purportedly "straight" older French Canadian woman he met at a conference. In part because they do not share a first language, their encounters are markedly free of discussion, which is exactly how he likes it. Flicking away his depression at the thought that he meshed better with this older French-speaking woman than with "two twentysomething Bay Area femmes" (21-22), he launches into a rant against talking during sex:

> I know it cannot be easy for a trick to figure out my body on the fly, and I understand that often the kind of tiresome questions and trepidation and fear that a femme feels when feeling me up for the first time is born from a desire to not trample where she shouldn't, and to step lightly through possibly painful territory, but that doesn't make it any hotter for me to discuss do's and don'ts in the dark, when I would rather be fucking or fisting or tangling tongues or pulling each

[18] Even though the narrator is never referred to in the third person, I have chosen to use he/him pronouns to refer to him because he refers to himself as a "guy."

> other's hair and deciding by willpower and whim just who is going to suck whose what, and when and exactly how. I have always been a pay-as-you-go kind of guy, a trait that has landed me in trouble at times in the past, but more often led me to just right where I wanted to be as well, so I have resisted the urge to try to tame myself in this matter. I have always been more of a doer than a talker, when it comes to fucking. What is that old saying? Better to ask for forgiveness than permission? Dangerous, maybe, but definitely hotter. Nothing kills my boner faster and for longer than a good old-fashioned lesbian sex process. If you have to ask me whether or not I can be touched like this, or here, or like that, usually the fox has flown the coop. The cat is no longer in the cradle, or whatever. Just read my wet-and-hard-o-meter and listen to my breath. My body will always tell you the right next move. Stone butch? Only if you talk my dick out of its hard-on. (Coyote 22)

Talking about sex, as he says, engaging in "a good old-fashioned lesbian sex process," for this narrator, takes all of the pleasure out of it. His view on the "lesbian sex process" evokes the long, drawn-out, tired and repeated discussions that have been stereotypically linked to "lesbian bed death." Though acknowledging the danger of his no-talking method, he insists that he would rather act first, decide "by willpower and whim just who is going to suck whose what, and when and exactly how," and deal with any consequences later. In this fantastical setting, the narrator can rant about his frustrations with being expected to do sex differently because of his trans identity to a readership that might share some of those frustrations, even if they believe that having conversations about sex in their lives is practical and important.

The protagonist, Jack, in Michael Hernandez's story "YOU DON'T KNOW JACK" expressed similar disdain to that of Coyote's narrator for needing to come out to potential sex partners in what he calls "The Conversation." When he has a promising interaction with a stranger at a bar, he complains to himself, "*And now we are going to have to have that fucking chat*" (175). The narrator then explains that,

> Jack had done this so many times that he knew every possible reaction to The Conversation. The outcomes were varied and had torpedoed his plans more than once. Anyone who has had The Conversation can attest to the fact that things that

> were going rather well before the talking began could suddenly go off the rails. Sometimes what should have been a short conversation led to a much longer discussion followed by either sex, a raincheck, or ranging forms of rejection. It was the price that Jack paid for having pursued his deepest, darkest desires. (Hernandez 175)

While Jack's "The Conversation" is more of a coming out/disclosure of trans identity conversation than a conversation about what he likes to do and talk about during sex, it serves as a precursor to the more in depth kinds of conversations that Ivan Coyote's narrator abhors. Nonetheless, Jack constructs "The Conversation" as negative, a hindrance, and as something that has the potential to "torpedo" his plans.

Unlike the characters in the stories, the transgender people I interviewed almost unanimously assert the importance of talking about sex. They do not fantasize as the narrator in Ivan Coyote's story does about working things out without language. Nor are they resigned to a sad fate of having to explain themselves as is Jack in Michael Hernandez's story. Instead, they describe having conversations about how each person wants to be talked about and touched during sex, even if just once at the beginning of a relationship, as very important and even sexy in and of themselves.

Bobby Noble terms this kind of sex conversation *entrustment*, which he describes as "an active, always negotiated relation" (19). He elaborates, "It is likened to something being given up or given over, something exchanged in the sexual scene. It functions like a shared sets (sic) of agreements and arrangements about how those bodies and desires are materializing in excess or beyond the limits of the conventionally sexed or sexualized body" (19). That is, entrustment is a process of setting boundaries in the context of a relationship and getting on the same page. The "shared sets of agreements and arrangements" serve not only to ensure the safety and pleasure of the folks involved in the sexual interaction, but also to reconcile two differing imaginations.

Rick, a trans man, is one of the two people who was a complete stranger to me before our interview. Though I do not know how old he is, he talks about his transition as something that had happened a number of years before. On the importance of having conversations with one's partner before engaging in sex, he says

> it's important -it's not just important to me as a person to feel good about what I'm doing, but I feel like it's really important in general for people who place their value in the words that they use. Mainly because, yes, it's gender affirming, it feels good, but it's also -you know there's a responsibility we have when we use our words to make sure they come across the right way and so it's a conversation that needs to be had kind of really early of "These are the words that I use and these are really important to me" and that's kind of like a hard boundary. And so you know after that it's like we're not going to continue this. It's not going to happen.
>
> When you have those conversations, even if you're not saying those things in bed -like you know "Touch me here." or "Do this." -um there's still that level of intimacy of "Oh, this person affirms my gender. They know what I like to call my bits. And they're okay with that. And everyone feels comfortable here. There's no surprises. We know what's there. We know what's going to be inside that box. And what we do with it I feel like is what we decide to do with it." Whereas I feel it could be a little bit different if you didn't have those conversations. That level of intimacy of "Are they okay? Do they know? Is this a surprise?" Those kinds of things.
>
> You don't want to offend someone that you're trying to be intimate with. And that can be really like "That's a big no-no" and that can feel kind of shaming during sex, um so it's important to set those boundaries so no one feels like they're not understood or not heard and you don't accidentally say something that could be potentially a big, you know, boner kill for me.

For Rick, having at least that one conversation at the beginning of a relationship to make sure that the person he is with understands, as he says, "what I like to call my bits" is paramount. He very forthrightly explains that the terms set up in these conversations are a "hard boundary" and that if they are not respected then, not only might the language be a "big boner killer" for him, but also he is "not going to continue" the relationship.

Skylar, the nonbinary woman mentioned earlier, explains that for her it is "incredibly important to talk about sex with whoever [she's] with" because she has "a very broad definition of what sex is" and her definition does not usually match up with what other people imagine to be sex. She laughs when explaining that her definition is, "if someone thinks it's sex, then it's probably sex," which she contrasts with a more conventional conception of sex as intercourse with vaginal penetration. As she has had more relationships with people, Skylar has realized "Oh and this is how I need to talk about things with people" so that her partners know what she means when she talks about sex. In order to understand each other, she says "it's important... to actually be able to have a very candid and forward and honest conversation about sex." She adds that she has what she calls "this very fucked up notion" that she "would like to hear someone else tell [her] that they also are interested in [her] body" and "you can't really do that if you're not gonna talk deeply with each other." Skylar acknowledges that she and her partners often come to each other with different ideas about what sex is, let alone what sex with each other might look like. Her method for reconciling these different ways of imagining sex is having "candid and forward and honest" conversations about each person's desires, like the desire she has for her partners to be interested in her body, even if the conversations will be difficult or embarrassing.

Morgan, the genderqueer, agender, and trans identified person whom I mentioned earlier in the chapter, stresses the importance of checking in with their partner often about their language preferences.

> Morgan: Often we have to talk about the dynamics of what language we should be using that day specifically, but also we've already talked about like what to identify each other as –especially in kink power dynamics, um, also like surrounding bodies and surrounding actions, if that's what I want to call them – but it's just mainly a lot of negotiation every day checking in with each other.

Zoë: What do those negotiations sound like?

Morgan: Usually it's like –usually just before we have sex it's like a little check-in of like "What do you want me to call this part of your body today?" or "What can I identify you as if we start getting into power dynamic roles?" or um kind of just like "Can I call this part of your body this thing today? Because that's what would turn me on today." And it's just, we kind of go through this little checklist of like: What do you want me to call you? What can I say? And can I change the wording a little bit, or will that throw you through a dysphoria loop?

In this exchange, Morgan explains that they and their partner have frequent conversations about how their sexual interactions will unfold. Even though they have already set up the kinds of boundaries and expectations that Rick talks about in his interview, Morgan says they and their partner also check in every time they have sex to ensure that they continue to be on the same page about the kind of sex that they desire. Their conversations are detailed, covering body part language preferences as well as more general terms they might use to refer to each other in role. Notably, the question "Can I call this part of your body this thing today? Because that's what would turn me on today," demonstrates that these check-ins are about catering to the desire of both people in the interaction, and reveals that speaking can feel as powerful as being spoken about during sex. Moreover, it also demonstrates that conversations about sex do not have to be as dry as Ivan Coyote's narrator imagines them to be. Uttering your own version of "Can I call this part of your body this thing today? Because *that's what would turn me on* today?" could be a come on, it could be flirtatious, sexy, a way of talking as foreplay. Morgan does also, like Rick, acknowledge that the language has consequences: diverting from what is agreed upon might throw one of them into a "dysphoria loop."

Gil, the transgender man mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, agrees that the conversations he and his partner have about sex are very important, and specifies that they

often use the conversations as a form of post-sex check-in to see how things went for each person and plan for how to improve the next time.

> Zoë: So do you and she [his partner] talk about sex with each other?
>
> Gil: Yes. Very much so. Um... which is awesome. She's very like – I don't, I don't, and I never feel like –I mean, if I'm embarrassed I'll just say "I'm embarrassed to say this," but then I'll go ahead and say it and it's pretty cool. Pretty awesome. She's very – well, really open and honest with her. It's been awesome.
>
> Zoë: That's really good. What kinds of conversations are those? Like what do you talk about in them?
>
> Gil: Well, we talk about what we like, what we don't like. Um talk about, you know… I would say all aspects of sex. We talk about it. We even kind of, we'll even talk about afterwards sort of a 'grading' if you will. Like: that worked, that didn't work. You know almost, almost an improvement plan if you will.

Here, the conversations serve as a way to check in after sex and to set up expectations for the next time. Like Skylar, Gil explains that the ability to have "open and honest" conversations is important for communicating about sexual desire.

For my interviewees, engaging in entrustment by talking about sex with their partners is important for setting boundaries, getting on the same page, checking in, and evaluating the sexual encounter. No one that I talked to expressed the same nonchalant, devil-may-care attitude that the character in Ivan Coyote's story "HOLD UP" does. This is, I argue, because of the different publics intended for the book of erotica and my interviews. While disdain for discussing desire might seem dashing in the pages of an erotic story, it becomes less desirable when people's bodies and all of their particularities and vulnerabilities are involved. It might be fun to fantasize that a partner can read your mind, but when bodies are tangling, flesh and desire immediate and yearning, the surest way to realize both people's imaginations is to talk about it, outline what you want. Ultimately, the reason that having conversations about the language they wanted to use during sex was

so important to my interviewees, they said, was that language, though uncomfortable at times to negotiate, has the potential to be very gender affirming if used correctly.

LANGUAGE AS GENDER AFFIRMING

Because of the ways that gender has been tied to anatomy in the United States, language for body parts is often gendered. In "Transgender and Language: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for the Future," Kulick asserts that gendered language "constitutes a resource that is available to be invoked and manipulated by anybody to convey and construct gendered positions and identities" (613). That is, the use of gendered language is not restricted to those of any particular gender, but can be used by anyone as a technology of gender construction. Accordingly, both my interviewees and characters in the anthology use this resource with their partners to share their self-conceptualizations and thereby construct and affirm gendered identities and embodiments in their sexual interactions.

Gil explains that the words he and his partner use to describe his body are different, depending on the way that they are having sex. The important thing, though, is that the words reinforce his masculinity:

> Zoë: So in uh in the conversations that you have, do you talk about each other's bodies, specifically?
>
> Gil: Yes, yeah. Definitely there's some hmmm changing and different like –it tends to pertain to the roleplay a lot. Like if we're doing the boy role play I don't mind her saying –calling my genitalia a pussy, but generally it has to be –like I prefer that she say like 'boypussy' rather than yeah, like I'm more secure with that. but of course with the daddy role play it's always like 'cock.' Cock is the preferred word. Penis is very clinical and dick is kind of I dunno too playful I guess. So that's definitely –and that's whether –I mean I don't know how much detail you want –but that's whether using a strap-on or not. I would refer to genitalia or whatever using the term cock. So...

> Zoë: Um and then, so these –the terms that you use are, you said that they're specific to the scenario that's playing out, and then so how do they make you feel in the scenario?
>
> Gil: I think it's probably somewhat –I guess you could say gender affirming. I definitely feel more masculine when those terms are used. If just the term "pussy" were used or any kind of clinical "vagina" or "clit" or any of that, I wouldn't like that. so it just makes me feel, I guess you could say, more like a man. Just more masculine.

Gil explains that, when he and his partner are referring to him during sex, he prefers language that connotes masculinity even if they are talking about body parts that could otherwise be considered "female," as demonstrated by his preference of the masculinized word "boypussy" over simply "pussy." The kind of masculinity connoted is also important. Gil finds the clinical and playful masculinities connoted by the words "penis" and "dick" to be less appropriate for sexual situations in which he is playing "daddy" than the word "cock," which is his preferred word. Using language that is gendered masculine, Gil says, affirms his gender because it "makes [him] feel… more like a man. Just more masculine."

Though she does not specifically talk about how it makes her feel in relation to her gender, Skylar explains that language helps her overcome her anxiety and feel confident with a partner. She says:

> I really like words. I like when other people say them and I feel validated. I like when, when I say them to get a rise out of other people and then that also feels validating for me. Or like um I don't know I think there's something about language and language and sex that um makes me feel really confident when it's used correctly and it makes me more willing to like take risks and like overcome some anxiety things that I have to like be able to um… be. And like really be in –involved and excited.

Language "when it's used correctly," Skylar explains, makes her feel confident enough to just "be," which I take to mean just *be herself*. It validates her identity and desire, creating a safe enough space for her to "take risks" and "overcome some anxiety things" so she can be "involved and excited" in the sexual interaction.

Because both they and their partner are trans, Morgan is able to share their experience as someone who both uses language to affirm their partner and also is the recipient of affirming language. Morgan explains that language makes them feel "very empowered," and links it to bodily autonomy, saying that language makes them feel "very much like [they have] autonomy over my own body, over my partner's body when they want me to. And like being able to make the decisions that I want instead of having to follow the mainstream narrative of how you should identify a body or identify a practice of doing something to the body." Language, then, for Morgan is really a tool that can be wrested away from "mainstream" processes of gender construction and used to instead "make the decisions [they] want" for their own body.

Furthermore, as an agender person, the language Morgan and their partner use together, they say, "makes me feel like my gender is real." They worry that people think their gender is not real because of the attitude that "agender shouldn't be under the trans umbrella because you're not a gender so that makes no fucking sense." Language helps them feel validated and like their gender is known when dysphoria and doubt about being "trans enough" hit them because "it's affirming to my gender, but it's also affirming to myself that I can look however I want and still be that gender." Morgan also believes that the language currently available for trans bodies and identities is inadequate for their imagination of themself, and they "would like to start trying to create more language around what I want my own body to be" outside of the gender binary so that they can better constitute that identity.

Andy, another person who was a stranger to me before our interview, is exploring their newfound realization that they are genderqueer. When speaking to me about the different dynamics at play in their relationships as a pansexual person, they explain how they present their gender a little differently depending on the gender of the other person.

With their girlfriend, they present as more masculine than they do with their boyfriend. When they are with their genderqueer partner, though, who until recently was a friend, they explain that the dynamic is different:

> It's just the little things. You know little things like recognizing like "Man, you're such a dude" or something like that. Uh or you know, uh you know, "I bet you're getting so hard thinking of this." You know, using those gendered terms because, uh you know, it's good. It's nice. It feels affirming. It feels like, I'm glad that you recognized that part of me that most people don't.

In this relationship with another genderqueer person, Andy does not feel like they have to play off of the other person in their gender presentation. When their partner refers to them as "a dude" or refers to their sexual desire in a way that men's sexual desire is, they feel like their masculine attributes, which are more often overlooked than their feminine attributes, are recognized[19] and affirmed.

In all of these examples, language serves as a resource for my interviewees and their partners to affirm and validate each person's identities. Though it is not expressed as explicitly in the stories in *Take Me There*, language serves this purpose for many of the characters as well.

In Gina de Vries' "COCKSURE," the two characters engage in a flirty roleplaying scene. The narrator, playing a slutty 90's seventeen-year-old punk, invites her partner, playing a shy fourteen-year-old boy, to come listen to music with her until her brother gets home. She toys with him, asking him to sit on her bed. When he nervously asks to sit at her desk instead, she explains, "I choose my next words carefully." She declines his request: "No, no, no, peach. Sit on my bed...Oh the bed's way more comfortable than that hard desk chair. Have a seat" (2). At her words, she notices that "he flushes a little at the word 'hard,' and I smirk. He's extrasensory when he's turned on, responsive to the tiniest

[19] For further discussion on recognition, see Chapter Three.

of stimuli -a single word, a light touch" (2). In this story, the narrator uses the word "hard," and all of the masculine eroticism it connotes, to tease her partner, to turn him on by referring to his growing hard on. He teases her back, pulling away to feign needing to go work on his Social Studies project with her brother. She appreciates his power using words as well: "he has a good mouth, this boy. He is good with his words, even when he's bratty, and he is good with his lips, and this is what I tell him as I slide in and out" (5).

Helen Boyd's "ALL-GIRL ACTION" follows Sharon, a lesbian trans woman, as she attends her first play party in the company of her friend. Her friend, who is also the narrator, explains that, Sharon "was convinced her body wasn't feminine enough, or sexy enough, to turn a woman on. Men weren't so picky, and chasers -well, chasers were after the cock she didn't like as a cock. We called it The Hugest Clitoris Ever" (24). Calling her genitals "The Hugest Clitoris Ever" is Sharon's way of feminizing her body, feeling soft and woman enough to feel like other women would be attracted to her. And attracted to her they are! During the play party, the friend ties her up in a doorway and hands out cards to the other participants with instructions like "kiss her mouth" and "lick her nipple through her nightgown" on them. By letting the other women come to her instead of having to initiate all of the interactions, Sharon gets to feel desired. Once they get her panties off, the narrator describes her genitals again as "her *ladystick* -it was the term she used," noting that "there was nothing phallic about it anymore" (27, emphasis in original). Renaming her genitals is Sharon's way of claiming her body and her femininity on her own terms. Having other people use those terms and accept her as a woman affirms what she already feels to be true about herself.

Toni Amato's "THAT'S WHAT LITTLE GIRLS ARE MADE OF" features a transgender man pleasuring his partner. When she unbuttons his pants to find a silicon cock in the same color as the dilator she has been using to keep her newly healed genitals ready

for penetration, she squeals "before she can stop herself, 'what a pretty cock you have!' And then she flushes. She knows better than to call her Daddy, or any part of him, pretty. She knows how to say *handsome*, and *good looking*, and even *manly*, but this time she just couldn't help it" (91). He does not fault her, because he knows that she will be excited by his surprise, but this exchange reveals how partners teach each other what kinds of gendered language they like used for them. Because "pretty" is usually used to describe women and feminine things, her partner has taught her that he would rather not have that word used to describe his genitals. Instead, he prefers to be called "*handsome*, and *good looking*, and even *manly*" because those words are gendered male and he wants to be thought of as male.

Kulick's idea of gendered language as a resource holds true for my interviewees as well as the characters in *Take Me There*. In both sources, gendered language is used to affirm gendered identities in sexual interactions.

CONCLUSIONS:

In this chapter, I have argued that language, and the imaginative work undergirding it, is an important tool for performing and constituting gender identity in sexual interaction. This power can make gender identity vulnerable: if language can create gender identity, it can also dismantle it. Using Hall's theory of representation and Warner's publics and counterpublics, I have also demonstrated that the different ways that transgender folks' attitudes about talking about sex is represented in *Take Me There* and in my interviews is due to their different intended audiences. Language is nonetheless an important means for affirming someone's gender identity, and is used as Kulick proposes as a resource for constituting gendered positions.

In the following chapter, I will turn to recognition, a concept which helps me think further about the different contexts in which transgender people express that language enables them to feel seen and validated. In particular, I will address how my interviewees and the characters in *Take Me There* express how it feels for them to feel "seen" by their partners in intimate scenarios as opposed to how it feels to feel "seen" in public.

Chapter Three: "Seeing" and "Being seen": Language and Social Recognition

Sometimes people tell me that like I have like a certain kind of energy or something that they see, or like, *read* as male. And if that's like actually true, then I think that would be something that's there even... even when I'm not dressed at all. Umm, but like, if you don't want to see it, it's not super present. And I think that's what I mean when I say that the other person has to do the work of like, of like imagining me. But like not just *imagining* as imagination, but like you know, put those together. You know, have an image of me, and the real me, and make it match. (Personal Interview with Parcival, April 15, 2016)

A stranger looking at us now would call us "MTFs" instead of women, would name us by our genitalia - "pre-op," "non-op" -would call us trans before they called us anything else, if they did call us anything else. A stranger would call our bodies gender ambiguous: her cock about to enter me, my clit poking out of her fist, her tiny breasts on her large rib cage and the shadow across my cheeks and chin. A stranger would say that, and that stranger would be wrong: our bodies aren't ambiguous at all, only the meanings people misapply to them. She's a woman and her beautiful body is a woman's body; I am a woman and seeing how beautiful her body is makes me think my body might be beautiful too. (Zall 145)

Though many people in the United States believe that people should be judged on our merits, character, values, and beliefs, we are nonetheless often judged first on our outward appearances. In "Doing Gender," West and Zimmerman comment that one of the first things people do upon encountering other people is try to gender them, meaning assess whether they appear to fit into either the category of "man" or "woman" (134)[20]. Many feminist scholars have been working against this impulse to categorize people by disputing essentialist ideas of what it means to "be" or "look like" a woman or a man or a person of any gender. Instead of maintaining the idea that someone's sex, gender, and appearance are unified and fall into one of two categories (men and women), feminists have worked towards separating sex assigned at birth from gender identity and both of those from gender expression. This is illustrated in the Trans Student Educational Resources infographic "The

[20] I would add that people often also assess and categorize those they encounter based on perceived racial and ethnic categories.

Gender Unicorn," which uses a labeled image of a unicorn to artfully explain gender, assigned sex, gender expression, and sexual and romantic attraction (Designed by Pan Landyn and Anna Moore, Infographic pictured in Appendix 2). This graphic makes the distinction between these axes of identity clear: It locates assigned sex at the unicorn's crotch (marked with a drawing of a double helix), gender identity in a rainbow-filled thought bubble floating above the unicorn's head, and gender expression as a spunky dotted line along the unicorn's left side, indicating one's possibility for adornment with clothing, body art, and other accessories. Physical and emotional attraction are marked by two overlapping hearts in the center of the unicorn's chest. Sliding scales on the side of the graphic depict each of these axes of identity[21] as operating along multiple spectra rather than through "on" or "off" binaries.

The Gender Unicorn attempts to debunk the myth that someone's gender expression -the way that they look from the outside -means something definitive about their gender identity, their sex, or their sexual or romantic attractions. The two quotations at the beginning of this chapter are also working against this myth.

In the first quotation, Parcival grapples with the knowledge that his naked body does not align with his gender and worries that it will be taken more seriously than his identity. For him, this means that his partners must engage in imaginative work to "have an image of me, and the real me, and make it match." In other words, if his partners are to *really see him*, to recognize him as who he is, they will have to reconcile his body with his gender identity and "read [him] as male." As her solution to being misread, the speaker in Rachel K. Zall's story "The Visible Woman" employs the argument that one's gender identity determines the sex of one's body rather than the other way around. As Zimman

[21] Except sex assigned at birth, which falls into three categories: assigned other/intersex, assigned female, and assigned male.

puts it, "male and female bodies are not defined by their corporeal realizations, but by the gendered subjectivities of those who animates them. A man's body is simply the body of a man, no matter its shape or appearance" (25; "The Discursive Construction of Sex"). Zall's speaker does this to push back against a "stranger's" reading of her and her partner's bodies: "our bodies aren't ambiguous at all, only the meanings people misapply to them" (145). With this statement, she reaffirms her own recognition of her gender and the gender of her partner regardless of the arrangements of their anatomies: "I am a woman and seeing how beautiful her body is makes me think my body might be beautiful too."

In both examples, it is in the intimate sphere of partnership -in the "private" that Warner writes about or in what Hale terms "cultures of two" -that these meanings, mis-applied by outside eyes, can be re-wrought, re-imagined, and re-employed to recognize and celebrate people's genders and embodiments. One can claim the language that feels right for one's own identity and hear their partner speak that language back to them, naming them and their body, creating a social space in which they and their identities exist. Because it can be used to recognize the identities of another, speak them out loud, and thereby validate and construct them, language becomes a tool by which identity can be performed and constituted.

In this chapter, I address how language facilitates processes of "seeing" a partner's true self and conversely "being seen" for one's true self; that is, how language allows for the recognition (and construction) of someone's gender identity. I follow Zimman's argument that gender and sex are discursively constructed identities, and Butler's assertion that gender and sex are performative, rather than considering them to be inherent qualities of bodies. In other words, gender and sex are not predetermined attributes, but rather identity markers that people construct discursively and performatively, not through, as Zimman clarifies "the broad social processes through which power structures are

negotiated, linguistically and otherwise," but in everyday speech and interactions ("Discursive Construction of Sex," 2). Ultimately, he continues, "it is within discourse that we can discover how the body is inscribed with social meaning, rather than locating this meaning in the body itself" ("Discursive Construction of Sex," 2).

Therefore, my approach to analyzing the interviews and the erotic short stories that are the "objects" of my thesis has been to look at how the speakers employ gendered discourses in talking about and performing their bodies, rather than interrogating the bodies themselves. After all, there is no making meaning from bodily materiality outside of the discourses through which they are interpreted, imagined, and constructed. In this work, I do not claim to access some bodily materiality that transcends text or representation. Instead, I acknowledge that language is central to the "social construction of particular bodies and body parts as 'female' or 'male'" (Edelman and Zimman 681) and that "social meanings do not exist prior to their semiotic referentiality" (Edelman and Zimman 681).

It occurs to me that some readers may fear that my argument that transgender people utilize gendered language in the construction of their own embodiments essentializes gender to particular arrangements of sexed anatomies or particular arrangements of sexed and gendered vocabularies. This concern is most likely to occur, I suppose, when I provide examples that include transgender men calling their genitals "cocks" to access masculinity and transgender women calling their genitals "cunts" and/or their chests "breasts" to access femininity. However, I am hesitant to engage in debates about whether transgender people (for any reason) subvert or maintain hegemonic regimes of gender. We live in a world of gendered language that cisgender people use non-controversially as signposts against which to delineate and construct their genders. If cisgender people's language choices for their bodies are not questioned on this account, then neither should be those of transgender people who have systematically been denied

access to the gender (and the gendered language) that they desire. Furthermore, according to Zimman, the simultaneous use of the same words to talk about cisgender and transgender bodies of the same gender identity works to break down the naturalization of sex, and thereby centers self-identification, in two ways. First it suggests that "there may not be a clear line between female and male bodies," and second, it foregrounds social gender over "biological gender" ("Discursive Construction of Sex," 16).

It is this validation of people's self-identified gender identity to which I refer when I say recognition is about "seeing someone's true self." I do not mean that transgender people have some essential gender hidden inside them (in their brains or their DNA) or that they only have one central self that is "true." Rather, I mean that people have close-held identities that are valid, and that language, everyday discourse, allows them to communicate those identities across and through hegemonic systems that impose normative meanings. For example, a transgender woman trying to communicate her womanness to her partner by emphasizing her breasts is not essentializing herself to her body or reducing "women" to "having breasts." No. Rather, utilizing what Zimman and Hall call a "tactical claiming" (174) of gendered terminology and what Sandy Stone acknowledges is "the language of the oppressor culture" (Stryker 305), a transgender woman's emphasis on her breasts is an attempt to foreground the validity of her gender identity, a request for others to recognize that gender identity, and an act of defiance against our complex, coercive, and biologically deterministic system of gender.[22]

In this chapter, I do not seek to conflate "recognition" with "passing" or to plop my toes into the already frothy water of debates about the politics of passing. As a cisgender person, I do not think it is my place to suggest that transgender people should try to pass

[22] For more on biological determinism and the sex/gender system, see Chapter 1.

or to call for transgender folks to cease attempts to pass "as a political action begun by re-appropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body" (167-168) as Sandy Stone does in her landmark essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto." I will leave such sweeping claims for transgender people to make on their own, in collaboration with one another, should they so desire. For my purposes, "seeing" and "being seen" have more to do with the ways that people communicate their genders to other people -regardless of the extent to which that communication becomes legible within the normative zones of "man" and "woman" -than it does with fitting one's gender expression within the narrow confines of those zones.

While much of the previous chapter on affirmation and vulnerability could be mapped on to these concepts, I believe that exploring how language can facilitate the recognition of transgender people's gender identities merits its own chapter because many of my interviewees, including Parcival who I quoted at the outset to this chapter, as well as the characters in the anthology, introduced the themes of recognition, or "being seen," despite that phrasing not being included in my interview questions or initial research questions. Indeed, in her introduction to *Take Me There*, Taormino writes:

> One theme that emerged is the power of seeing and being seen… It's not simply about passing or not passing, which is an idea often explored with transgender characters, but about being acknowledged and desired in a sexual context. Being truly seen for who you are by a lover is where affirmation and want collide. (x)

To me, thinking about recognition as the place "where affirmation and want collide," is a fitting way to round out my argument that language, particularly that which Butler refers to as "speech act[s] that conveys love" in an exchange with J. Hillis Miller ("Performative Reflections," 236), is performative and constitutive of identity.

In this chapter, I first situate the concept of recognition within the field of performance studies by considering it alongside Richard Schechner's concept of "restored

behavior." Then, I expand on the influence of Althusser, Butler, and Hale on my understanding of recognition, using "audience" and "publics" as metaphors to link recognition and legibility. Furthermore, I explore how recognition appears in the interviews and the erotica. Next, I employ Warner's theorization of public and private space to consider how the context in and audience by which my interviewees and the characters in the erotica might be "seen" (that is, recognition from the public versus recognition within an intimate relationship) affects their sense of being recognized. Finally, I consider how, in addition to constituting one's gender, these conversations also index each partner's' attentiveness to people's language needs.

THEORIZING RECOGNITION:

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "Recognition" in several ways.

> 1: The action of recognizing: the state of being recognized: such as
>
> a : acknowledgment; especially: formal acknowledgment of the political existence of a government or nation
>
> b: knowledge or feeling that someone or something present has been encountered before
>
> 2: special notice or attention
>
> 3: the sensing and encoding of printed or written data by a machine <optical character recognition> <magnetic ink character recognition> ("Recognition")

Recognition, then, is closely tied to both acknowledgement and to repetition, i.e. "feeling that someone or something present has been *encountered before*" (my emphasis). Breaking down the word into its constituent parts, I am left with "re" and "cognition," as in *thinking twice* or *thinking again*. In the context of performance studies, this repetition calls to mind Schechner's definition of performance as restored behavior, or twice-behaved behavior.

That is, for Schechner, performance is made up of "physical or verbal actions that are not-for-the-first time, prepared, or rehearsed" ("What is Performance?" 29).[23] In drawing a connection between recognition of gender identity and restored behavior, I do not mean to suggest that gender identity is not authentic when it is "prepared, or rehearsed." Rather, following Butler, I stand firmly behind the belief that gender (and perhaps identity of all kinds) is always already performed and performative, that is, constructed through doing and re-doing.

What might we learn by expanding this comparison between recognition and restored behavior to think about recognition as "twice-thought thinking" or "twice-acknowledged acknowledgement"? For some transgender people, the first image someone has of them, their "first acknowledgement" as it were, could be wrong, a mis-recognition. For example, a classmate could misgender them at first. But the second time, or in subsequent meetings, this classmate could learn to re-cognize (literally *re-think*) their perception of the transgender person and learn to recognize their gender correctly. I know that it has sometimes taken me a few weeks and some concerted mental effort to re-write my initial perception of someone's gender and get to the point where I gender them correctly without hesitation even within the confines of my own thoughts. That is work that I happily undergo and which I recommend others practice.

Not only must gender be performed in order to be "real" as Butler argues in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (527), but it must also be legible to be considered real in social interaction. There must be both a performer and an audience for its social recognition. In their book *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the*

[23] Schechner's theorization of restored behavior in the context of cultural performance and ritual is more fully fleshed out in the second chapter of his book *Between Theatre and Anthropology.*

Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux argue that social recognition is central to the formation of identity:

> Who you are is dependent on recognition of your identity by others. Our various identities—as learner, friend, lover, athlete, partier, etc.—can't come into being divorced from a recognition of those attributes by other people. Like signs, people don't "mean" things inherently; again, all meaning and all identity come into being through a process of social negotiation, and a "successful" negotiation of identity involves recognition by other people. (43)

Identity, then, at least theoretically operates under the logic the old adage: *If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, did it really fall?* That is, if you are a transgender man and no one recognizes you as such, are you really a transgender man? On the one hand, Yes, the tree fell. And, Yes, you are a transgender man. You are valid. Your identity is real. On the other hand, it probably would not feel as if that were true if no one else recognized your identity. As humans we are social beings, and, as I argued in the last chapter as well, feeling affirmed really matters in terms of one's health and well-being.

Butler asserts that naming is one way of recognizing someone's social identity. Drawing from Althusser's theory of interpellation which posits that one becomes a subject of the state through an interaction in which the state "hails" you and you recognize that you are being "hailed," Butler argues that people are, "brought into social location and time through being named" (29) and that we are "dependent upon another for one's name, for the designation that is supposed to confer singularity" (*Excitable Speech*, 29). That is to say that identity is created through interaction, either with the state or with other people.

In their discussion of identity, Nealon and Giroux also connect interpellation to the recognition of identity. Because, they say, we "freely and willfully make ourselves subjects in all of our responses," Nealon and Giroux argue that people are "self-interpellating creatures," by which they mean that "we can only recognize ourselves -much less have others recognize us -in terms of preexisting social laws or codes" (46-47). That is, in order

for an identity to be recognizable, it has to be legible through the laws and customs of one's culture.

Not all identity formation occurs through an interaction with the state, however. Hale's "cultures of two" concept theorizes how people can create and embody social identities in their intimate social relationships even when those identities might not be recognized by the larger world. Hale explains how receiving recognition of his boy identity from his leatherplay play partner, who he calls "Daddy," helped him become more confident in that identity and ultimately come to embody it in his everyday life:

> When I was a boy with my dyke daddy, in that culture of two I was a boy. I was not an adult woman playing a boy's role or playing a boy, nor was I an adult woman doing boy in some other way. Daddy's participation was necessary for me to be a boy with her. I was a boy with her by engaging in a gender performativity that made sense to both of us as a boy's gender performativity... In this culture of two, informed and structured by leatherdyke community gender codes, my communication of a masculine gender identification was legible to someone else, despite my female body. I needed to know that my gender identification could be enacted legibly to at least one other person for it to be convincing enough to me that it could transform from a self-identification fully contained within my fantasy structure to a self-identification with a broader social sphere of enactment. (229)

To use a theatrical metaphor, having an audience that recognized, understood, and encouraged his identity allowed Hale to consider his identity performance successful. Without Daddy there in the capacity of the audience to see Hale's boyness, and to recognize and affirm it, Hale's boyness would not have registered as real to him, despite his performance of it. In other words, without an audience that recognizes them, identities can be illegible, sometimes even to the people who hold them.

As Butler writes in *Excited Speech*, "If the speaker addresses his or her body to the one addressed, then it is not merely the body of the speaker that comes into play: it is the body of the addressee as well" (12-13). Similarly, Motschenbacher contends that "gender

construction is effective only if the recipient recognizes a performance as intelligibly gendered" (20).

Having someone else see your identity and treat you how you want to be treated is important for the validation and social formation of identity. Using the correct language is one way of conferring recognition. Moreover, as I argued earlier, language, for transgender folks and more broadly, is not simply a tool for describing or reflecting gender identities. Instead, as Zimman and Hall note, "the relationship between language and the body is a recursive one, with language shaping conceptualizations of the body, and embodied action functioning as an integral part of language" (167). That is, for transgender folks who often must negotiate between the way they see themselves and the way they might be seen from an outside perspective, language -the way they speak about themselves and the way that others speak about them -becomes an important tool for forging and communicating gender. By coopting culturally available scripts for gender and utilizing that gendered language as a resource as Kulick describes in his essay "Transgender and Language: a review of the literature and suggestions for the future," transgender people are able to work against biologically deterministic ideologies of gender and construct gendered embodiments that they feel are coherent and reflective of their identities.

"THERE'S PART OF WHO I AM THAT YOU DON'T SEE"

The theme of recognition and feeling or being "seen" arose as a prominent concern in my interviews. Skylar explains that, when working on a play about a transgender sea monster, one of the central questions she has been grappling with revolves around how to write about a body of a mythical creature who is uncomfortable in that body. She boils it

down to this question: “How do you feel seen?” and explains further that this question is “important to me as a person too, of making sure that I’m making people feel seen how they want to be seen and maybe not necessarily how they look currently.” Seeing, then, is more than just making sense of the light that reaches one’s brain through their eyes. It is about recognizing who a person is and treating them correspondingly.

Andy, with whom I spoke in the Fall of 2016, is also thinking about “feeling seen” in relation to their gender identity. They are polyamorous and were in several relationships at the time of our interview. They share that in their relationships with women, they often present more masculine-ly to play off of the femininity of that partner, whereas they present more femininely in their relationships with men. At the time of our interview, they were just figuring out that they identify as genderqueer. Knowing this about themself, Andy determines that even though they have enjoyed “flipping around” their gender presentations both with clothing and in interactions with their variously gendered partners, they have not felt like their partners have fully recognized their identity. Andy explains, “I’m just I’m kind of realizing that I can have sex with someone as a woman, but there’s always a little bit that’s dissatisfying. There’s always a little part that’s dissatisfying. Like you didn’t see that part of me.”

Because these realizations are so new, Andy explains that they have not brought up their concerns with their partners very much, but expresses a desire for both the masculine and feminine aspects of their body to be recognized during sex. Usually, they explain, they “will get a little uncomfortable when someone is talking about features of my body” because the comments people make often emphasize their femininity: e.g. “Oh, your tits are so great.” This makes Andy uncomfortable because they do not want their gender to be reduced to a singular identification as woman. In those moments, they want to respond, “Yeah, but that’s not all of me” or “[that] doesn’t mean that I am that person.”

Andy explains that they want their partners to also talk about and enjoy masculine things about their body as a way of recognizing that they are not a woman. They explain that, when they imagine their body, they have a penis in addition to their current anatomy and that having partners talk about their penis or other parts they identify as masculine "would turn me on more than if they were talking about female parts of my body. Or if they were talking about both of them, that would be awesome." By expressing a desire to keep what they consider to be their feminine attributes while also wanting to gain recognition for their masculine attributes, Andy is not essentializing their gender to their body, but rather looking for social recognition of their genderqueerness.

Sex toys have helped Andy substantiate the body that they want their partners to recognize. They explain, "I have a dildo that inserts inside, like half of it inserts inside and the other half kind of comes out and a partner once grabbed it and was doing like a hand job on it and that was really hot. I was so insanely turned on." In this case, having their partner recognize and take pleasure in their dildo, which for Andy symbolizes their masculinity, causes them to experience sexual pleasure despite limited physical stimulation.

Because they have not found "a lover who is willing to talk about that stuff," however, Andy laments that they are often left feeling dissatisfied and unrecognized during sex. They say, **"**I've got these parts and they're here, but that's not all of my body. That's not all of who I am. And there's part of who I am that you don't see, and you don't know, and you don't recognize. And I wish that people would see and know and recognize those parts."

In our interview in late spring of 2016, Parcival (who you remember from the beginning of this chapter) explained his relationship with his body, language, and

recognition using semiotic terms. He said he likes the words that he uses because they are signifiers of maleness:

> I feel like they enable me and my partner to see my body in the way I want it to be seen. Um like the fact that –it's like two-sided right? It's like I want you to call this a 'penis' because you have an image of a penis when you hear the word that is not what you're seeing right now, but that's what I want you to –to see or to pretend you see, I guess. But by pretend, I mean like –like get in that mindset. Not like actually pretend because I feel like at the same time I feel like that's what it is. So there's no need to pretend.

In other words, the language that he uses for his body enables a semiotic dialogue between a lexicon of images of maleness and the materiality of his own body. The word "penis" is a signifier that evokes a normative image of an elongated reproductive organ –the signified. By using this word to describe a part of his body that would not on its own signify it, Parcival forces his own body to be considered in terms of both the word and the normative image: "It's like trying to project an image onto a material reality and thus creating the reality." He describes the process of communicating this to his partner in these terms: "Think of a penis and like, got it? Great. So now look at me and, like, think of that."

Parcival also thinks about the language that he uses in relation to the larger web of context, images, and meanings of normative male bodies. This web puts him in a double bind because, he realizes,

> I'm like relying on, on there to be a stereotypical image of something and I use that, and at the same time –like it's like beneficial to me and harmful at the same time. And that's really strange... The fact that the image exists is the thing that originally hurts me in the first place. The –the reason I need it to be there is that it's there.

By this, he means that, if there was not a normative understanding of what a penis was and looked like, then he would not be able to use it as a reference in constructing his maleness. However, if there was no normative understanding of what a penis was, then he would not have to construct his maleness in relation to it in the first place. The words, and the images

that they signify, both help and hurt the likelihood that his identity will be recognized by his partner.

"SHE HAD MADE IT REAL"

Linguistic anthropologist Paul Friedrich suggests, "The imagination is the great connector, the great lubricant, and the great catalyst" (14). I recognize that Friedrich does not necessarily mean to imply that imagination can "lubricate" sexual interaction, but I find the wording fitting (and amusing) in my research. If one is imagining their partner as they want to be imagined, one will likely talk about and touch them as they would like to be touched. Thus, the imagination -and the language that that imagination enables -is indeed a great lubricant! *Take Me There* depicts many instances of transgender characters becoming aroused or achieving orgasm because their partner demonstrates recognition of their gender identity.

As I discussed in the last chapter, the main characters in Zanin's "THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN" consider language as a potential stumbling block for affirming someone's gender. However, once the butch and Crystal manage to get past the awkwardness of not knowing how to talk about each other's bodies by opening up a space for direct communication ("Tell me what you like"), both touch and language help them conjure correctly gendered embodiments and ultimately orgasm.

Non-verbal interactions can signal recognition through language. As Crystal touches their chest, the butch explains how the word "chest" comes feel right for them: "she ran her hands over my chest while she [kissed me]. My chest, yes. Not my breasts. There was something about the way she touched me that made it clear that she was touching the body I felt I had rather than the one that I actually had" (113). The way that Crystal

touches the butch signals a language shift for the butch. Because there was "no cupping, no squeezing together," the butch felt like Crystal was recognizing their chest as a masculine chest and thereby recognizing their gender as not-woman. Even though this interaction is non-verbal, the language implied behind Crystal's actions confers recognition.

The work that language does is communicated subtly during the description of Crystal's orgasm. Because the scene is narrated from the butch's perspective, readers do not have access to the internal effects of the butch's actions, but language, in the form of direct address, plays a role in furthering Crystal's pleasure. Crystal communicates what she likes out loud to the butch, explaining "how hard to suck on her dark, stiff nipples and…. how softly to press into her super-sensitive clit with my thigh" (112), and then she "stopped talking, and… simply took what she wanted" from the butch. In this case, language in the form of verbal instruction allows Crystal to explain to the butch what she wants and how she wants it. The author does not share what she says with the readers, though, leaving us only with the butch's narration of the encounter, their delight in participating ("I was thinking I could do that forever and die a happy dyke" (112)) and their experience of Crystal's orgasm ("she made a sweet sound and her body shook under mine" (112)).

Different from the verbal instruction that she gives the butch, the way that Crystal speaks to the butch, seducing them, signal recognition of their masculinity by speaking directly to and about it:

> "Your cock," she said, "I can feel it getting so hard for me. I can see it through your pants, you're straining, you want me to take it in my mouth. Is that right? Do you want me to suck your cock for you?...I'll take the head in my mouth, I'll be careful not to use my teeth,' she whispered. 'I'll suck it slow; I'll let it fill my mouth and press on my tongue; I'll take it all the way back into my throat. I'll lick the shaft and I'll tug on your balls with my fingers and I'll let you fuck my mouth until you come. Is that what you want?" (113)

As Crystal describes what she will do to their body in minute detail, thereby conjuring a series of images for them to jointly imagine, enact, and manifest into reality, the butch feels like their inner self is being recognized: "Her words were sending electric shocks down my spine. All I could do was moan. How did she know?" (113). In other words, they are thinking, *how did she know that "the body I felt I had" has a cock and shaft and balls? How are you seeing me even though I haven't shown myself to you?*

Crystal's language, as well as the way she touches them, both of which draw upon cultural scripts of male sexual pleasure, clearly signal to the butch that Crystal recognizes they are not a woman. She recognizes their desire to have their cock seen and stimulated. And it is this recognition that causes them to experience their gender becoming real:

> Her warm, wet mouth was on me, and she was sucking my cock, and yes, it was my cock and not my clit, and as her head moved up and down I felt the tip of my cock press into her palate and rub against her tongue…. I desperately drove my hard cock into her mouth and as I came, I finally found my voice, and I was roaring like a bear and letting my jizz shoot into her throat and feeling her swallow it down. (113-114)

As before with the butch's chest which is now definitely a chest, it is Crystal's attentions that cause the butch to feel as if their body is being seen as masculine: what might otherwise be called their "clit" is now definitively a cock in Crystal's mouth.

Furthermore, I read multiple meanings behind the butch's comment at the point of orgasm: "I finally found my voice." On the surface of the story, the statement refers to the butch's silence during Crystal's seduction, not counting the occasional moan, that finally erupts into "roaring like a bear" upon orgasm. More deeply, however, I read this statement as the butch finally feeling like they can articulate, or begin to articulate their gender. Like Hale describes, having their gender be recognizable to Crystal in the intimate context of a culture of two helps the butch feel like their gender is real enough to perhaps manifest in a

broader context. Notably, that night they dream "about looking in the mirror and seeing a different face: a new version of me, one that was both frightening and familiar" (114).

Another example of a sexual partner combining touch and language to demonstrate their recognition of their partner's gender is in Rahne Alexander's story "NOW VOYAGER." In this story, the narrator, a self-identified transsexual woman, relates her relationship with one of her coworkers, a man named Jonas. At first, she is nervous because she can see that he is clearly attracted to her, but she does not know if he knows that she is transsexual and, she says, she does not want to be his "tranny surprise anecdote" (12). A few days later she comes out to him on the phone, and, when both parties remain interested, they arrange a date. After dinner at her house, he gives her some lingerie to put on and says, "I'd really like to explore you… Let's figure out what you like" (16).

Through his exploration of her genitals through the lens of "what they're [i.e. doctors] able to these days for girls like you" (17), Jonas re-codes her body as a "woman's" body: her scrotum becomes her labia, her penis becomes "penish" (17), and beneath her "scrotum/labia, up into [her] pelvis" becomes her "pussy" (17). This is not an easy process for the narrator, whose "stomach rolled" when Jonas touches her genitals, but she wants him to continue because "we'd gone this far." She enjoys his fingers pressing up underneath her labia, asking him to "Fuck me there," and when "he rolled his fingers around inside" her, her "mind splintered." Having this part of her body, and thereby her gender, recognized and receive attention causes her immense psychological (and perhaps physical) pleasure.

The idea that a sexual partner's attentions can make someone's gender "real" emerges once again in Sinclair Sexsmith's "THE HITCHHIKER." Jack picks Alice up from hitchhiking on the side of the road and they drive together to the beach. From the beginning of the story, sexual tension is high between the characters, with descriptions of

Jack's hand "maneuver[ing] the stick shift" and Alice's eyes on his mouth, wanting "to feel its suck and bite" (188). Before the car even stops moving, "Alice already had her hand on the bulge in the crotch of Jack's overalls… [and pulls] a thick, marble-blue-colored strap-on from soft grey Calvin Klein briefs. It was bigger around than her hand would fit. She milked it with her fingers, real as anything" (190). From the first contact, Alice (who is not the narrator, but from whose perspective the story seems to be coming) is already affirming the realness of Jack's genitals, and thereby his masculinity. This interpretation is furthered by the section, just after Alice brings Jack to orgasm, that reads:

> "Fuck." Jack shuddered, bringing a hand to Alice's long hair and pulling her off of the cock. She wiped saliva off her mouth with the back of her hand, lips swollen, eyes wide. Waiting. She had made it real; now it was Jack's turn to make her real. (191)

By bringing him to orgasm with her mouth on his blue cock, Alice made "it" -the cock and Jack's masculinity -real. Because she could see it as real, it became real for him too.

These erotic stories, by having the characters become aroused and achieve orgasm primarily due to their partners recognizing and affirming their gender, construct recognition and affirmation as sexy. If we acknowledge that pornography and erotica determine how people understand and think about sex and what is considered sexy, as many scholars have argued,[24] then it follows that these stories encourage readers to associate respecting transgender and genderqueer folks with sexiness and pleasure. Admittedly the intended public (or perhaps this would be one of Warner's counterpublics) for this anthology, which was written by transgender and genderqueer authors with the intent to

[24] See Mireille Miller-Young's book *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* and Eliza Steinbock's short essay "Pornography" in Transgender Studies Quarterly's inaugural issue "Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies" for more information on how pornographic material affects popular perception of those who are represented in it and of sexuality and the erotic more broadly.

provide erotic material to transgender and genderqueer readers, probably already make such associations on their own. However, the book, because it circulates publicly is likely to also reach a broader audience. For those who stumble onto it and recognize themselves in its pages, I am happy. And, for those who stumble onto this anthology and do not recognize themselves, I hope that the relentless power of narrative will create respect and delight where perhaps there was fear or apathy.

"THAT'S A THING THAT YOU CAN BE?": RECOGNIZING ONESELF IN OTHERS

Up through this section, I have addressed how transgender people represent their feelings about language and recognition in the context of intimate relationships with their partners. However, this is not the only context in which recognition arose as salient. For a number of the people that I interviewed, learning about other people who were transgender, seeing them on television or in person, and listening to them talk about their gender identities helped them realize their own transgender identities. In other words, encountering the representation of another transgender person or meeting one in person allowed some of my interviewees to begin to recognize and validate that same identity in themselves.

Andy explains that even though they "never really felt either male or female" it was not until they started going to PFLAG meetings that they learned about genderqueer identities. They were surprised and delighted to find this word and category that seemed to fit for them: "I was like: that's a thing that you can be?" Further discussion and friendship with another genderqueer person has helped them recognize and validate their own genderqueer identity.

Gil also points to language and transgender representation as the origin of his own realization of his transgender identity. Following Chaz Bono's transition, "seeing pictures

of Chaz in his 20s," he says, caused him to start thinking about his own gender identity. While he struggled thinking about the difficulty of obtaining and paying for genital surgery, fears about losing sensation, and the reaction of his conservative community, the visual representation of Chaz as another person who was experiencing some of the same feelings and public scrutiny helped him navigate those fears. After starting to transition, transgender representation continues to aid his identity formation. Around sex, he says, "watching trans male porn has been helpful to become a little more comfortable with, you know, terms to use. And like it's OK to like penetration. That kind of thing. That's been really helpful for me." He specifically cites Buck Angel's pornography as what introduced him to the term "boypussy," which he now uses during penetrative sex as a way of reclaiming and masculinizing his genitals "as a source of pleasure, even if they are simultaneously a source of emotional pain" (Zimman, "Discursive Construction of Sex" 29).

"Being Seen" By Who? Legibility in "Cultures of Two" and in Public

As Althusser makes clear in his interpellation scenario, the identity of the person who sees you matters. If the policeman who hails the subject were not a policeman, the subject would not in that moment become a subject of the state. Perhaps if it were a community organizer they would become a subject of that particular community or if it were a family member they would become a subject of that family. Regardless, the person participating in the process of recognition will in part determine the kind of recognition that occurs and how the subject feels about it.

At the beginning of my research, one of my central questions was about whether being affirmed and recognized by one's partner was different from feeling affirmed and recognized by an institution like the government or one's school. I assumed that my

interviewees would all feel like being recognized by their partner was more meaningful than having that same recognition from the state. However, I did not find this to be true. While many of my interviewees did place more weight on recognition coming from their partners and other close friends and family, others considered that recognition suspect, *precisely because* it was coming from people they knew so well.

Like the narrator in Zall's story who denies the validity of a stranger's reading of her and her partner's bodies, a number of my interviewees also place more importance on being recognized in intimate interactions with their partners than on receiving recognition in public. I surmise this is in part due to the ways in which, as Warner explicates in *Publics and Counterpublics*, non-normative genders and sexualities are coded as private subjects and discouraged (with everything from social norms and violence) from being discussed in public. For transgender people, then, emphasizing the importance of recognition in intimate spheres may be a way to reclaim this hegemonically enforced privacy as a source of strength.

Rick acknowledges that, because he no longer feels offended if he is misgendered in public (he just waves it off with a "whatever, dude."), it may be different for him than it is for other people, but he believes that "when it comes to having real relationships and having intimacy," he does not think that interactions with strangers matter as much as those he has with his partner. He gives the example of interacting with someone working at an ice cream counter:

> They're looking at gender cues. They're looking at what I'm wearing. They're looking at who I'm with. They're looking at how I stand. They're looking at all of those things to get cues for whether they say "Yes, Sir" or "Yes, Ma'am." Those are just social cues. That's great. I'm doing that correctly.

However, Rick considers those kinds of interactions to be qualitatively different from interactions with his partner:

> When your partner who is very close to you is saying "Yeah you're a dude. You're a dude," that is to me *more* intimate. They've seen me in my vulnerabilities. They've seen me ugly cry and they're still like "Yeah. You're a dude. It's okay." So I feel like that is more affirming than someone at [the ice cream shop] being like "Thanks Sir. Have a great day."

This is probably affected by Rick's appearance during our video interview as what I consider to be a somewhat normative looking straight man in his mid-to-late thirties whose gender likely is already recognized in most public interactions.

When I ask him if there is something qualitatively different about being affirmed during sex, he responds in the affirmative and goes on to articulate a pyramid of the relative importance he places on being recognized by various groups of people. As one might guess from his ice cream counter example, he places the least amount of importance on interactions with strangers and the most on sexually intimate interactions with his partner:

> Theres –I don't want to say there's a hierarchy of it, but it kind of feels as if there is, right … At the very bottom of that hierarchy is how I'm viewed in public, right? So I have, how everyone views me in public is how you know I want to, I want to be represented when I'm called sir. That's that's very gender affirming. Then I have this other level of friends, um and even within that there's a different hierarchy. So I have my friends who I recently just met who have never known me any other way and they're very gender affirming for me, you know. They've never dead-named me; they've never called me anything other than "he." Um so that's gender affirming. So the other level of that. I have friends who I've known pre-transition who've never dead-named me, who always used the right pronouns, those people are great. And I have my family. And, you know, it kind of keeps going up and up and up. And I have this like really great thing with my family and then I have this next level of partner. You know, who is going to be the closest, that closest person to you? Are they going to be gender affirming? And then you take it to that next level of sexual -that sexual intimacy. That's the closest you can possibly be with someone, right? Can we make sure that -you know using the right words is really the only way to be gender affirming because sex is such a grey area. It can be -sex with anyone -it can be a thousand different things. It can be however you want to do it. You know I could –You could lick my armpit and that could be sex for me. So, you know, because there's all these different ideas of what sex is, using the right words is the only way to be completely gender affirming. Because, if you –especially when it comes to your genitalia, because that's the –Those things are going to be the closest to you, so calling them the

> right things is the only way to be specifically gender affirming because sex can be a thousand different things.

Morgan, an agender, genderqueer, and trans identified person, agrees with Rick that having their gender affirmed and recognized during sex is more important to them "because that's when you're in the state that you're most vulnerable." That vulnerability, they explain, is because sex forces people with bodies that fall in between what are normatively constructed as "male" and "female" bodies to confront their deviance from that norm in the presence of another person. In such a state of vulnerability, Morgan adds, "it's really just comforting to know that somebody is on your side."

Even though they acknowledge that they "love having my gender affirmed by the institution" in the form of "mainstream pieces of media that have been written to talk about all genders, not both genders," feeling affirmed during sex is more important to them because it is "a spot where it is the most possible for somebody to just say the wrong thing, immediately being able to see your body, and launching you into horrible dysphoria" and when that does not happen "it's so great."

Gil, another transgender man in his mid to late thirties, explains that he does not want to place importance on the way that people in the world see him, but rather on just being his authentic self. He says that, rather than approaching transition like "once I transition I'll be happy" or "once I transition, you know, I'll be more myself" (in other words thinking that he would need to "behave or present… an act to the world"), he thinks that if he "could have stayed at home and just been with people, you know, who understood, it wouldn't have mattered as much."

Two of my interviewees, however, placed more meaning in being recognized in a public space or by a stranger, in particular an officer of the state, than receiving recognition from their close friends or partners. For Skylar, who considers herself to be nonbinary and

a woman, having "a positive sexual interaction" with an intimate partner is affirming: "It feels really powerful to have a positive sexual experience where I'm like 'Oh wow! Yes, they definitely saw me for who I am' and it gives me confidence to be more myself again and more." However, she does not consider those interactions as affirming as "a random interaction with someone like a doctor or someone in the wide world." The most affirming type of interaction, Skylar says, is "a split-second reaction from someone on the street" who Skylar can tell cannot quite place them in either gender category. Skylar gives the example of having a customer at work do a double-take. Because Skylar is nonbinary, having people not automatically categorize her as only being a woman is satisfying because it signals to her that her identity registers even to those who do not know her and have not talked to her about it. In this, perhaps, it is a *mis*-recognition that Skylar enjoys -not in being recognized incorrectly, but in the muddiness of watching people unable to easily place her into either of the two categories with which they are familiar.

Parcival is often suspicious of recognition that comes from people who know about his gender and instead feels more affirmed when an official member of the state recognizes his gender. He tells a story about a TSA officer who genders him correctly despite his passport, which at the time was printed with his birth name and an "F":

> Even though [the TSA officer is] a person like who works with obviously people's, like people's bodies and like people's legal documents… something about how the way he like –like literally looked at me –gave him like a stronger impression than what he saw on my passport. And so that's what made me feel like he saw me. Like he looked at me. And there was no ambivalence in what he thought he saw. Um and that's like –that's just like different from, from the people that you know are gonna just do the right thing because they want to be nice.

In this anecdote, Parcival contrasts the "authentic" recognition he received from this TSA official who recognized his gender correctly in spite of all of the "official" information on

his travel documents with the more suspect recognition he feels he gets from people who he knows who he's worried "are gonna do the right thing because they want to be nice."

At the same time, when I asked him specifically about recognition during sex, he does not draw the same kind of hierarchy of recognition that Rick does. Instead, by likening the way he felt when the TSA person recognized him to the way he feels when he has sex "with someone who you can just tell can like feel you and the way you feel about yourself," he creates a system that privileges both institutional recognition and recognition from people with whom he is intimate. He says that those are both examples of "real affirmation," which is different from the "Ally 101 kind of thing" that people engage in on the surface even if it is clear that they do not actually consider his gender to be valid. Those people, he says, are "super annoying."

The idea of recognition from a stranger also arose in one of the stories in *Take Me There*. Shawna Virago's story "CANADIAN SLIM," is told from the perspective of a transgender woman who for years was fetishized for her transness by cisgender people. Eventually, after deciding that she does not want to endure that treatment any longer, she meets a transgender man who she calls Canadian Slim and they end up building a lasting relationship. At the end of the story, she relates an experience on their ninth anniversary where she and her partner were mistaken for being a straight couple:

> We had dinner in the Castro and were walking by one of the boy bars, when a drunk older gentleman yelled at Canadian Slim, "Lose the fish, honey," referring to me. We both laughed at his obnoxiousness, and also at the fact that he didn't know he was looking at a transgender couple. I felt some satisfaction, I admit, at having my gender affirmed by this clown, and so did Slim. (Virago 186)

For this character, who for so long was fetishized for her transness, it is refreshing to be seen by this "clown" as just another woman in just another straight relationship, unremarkable, save their location on the streets of San Francisco's gay-coded Castro

neighborhood. As this chapter winds down, I want to reiterate the importance of valuing (and implementing) the ways that transgender people desire affirmation, with one's intimate partners and with strangers, in public and in private, verbally and nonverbally. Everyone deserves that respect.

CONCLUSIONS: "I JUST WANT EVERYONE TO FEEL THE WAY THEY WANT TO FEEL"

I have argued that the language that transgender people use for their bodies during sexual interactions is both performative and constitutive of gender- the words themselves and the recognition conferred by them call gendered bodies into being and point to gendered social identities. However, I also want to suggest that this language *does something else too*. Michael Silverstein asserts that reference, that is, that which links a word to the concrete object or abstraction it represents, "is just one, perhaps actually a minor one, among the 'performative' or 'speech act' functions of speech" (Silverstein 19). Rather, Silverstein suggests, indexes are also doing performative work. Silverstein defines indexes as "those signs where the occurrence of a sign vehicle token bears a connection of understood spatiotemporal contiguity to the occurrence of the entity signaled. That is, the presence of some entity is perceived to be signaled in the context of communication incorporating the sign vehicle" (27). In other words, the indexical work of language, or the information that language communicates not about the meaning of the words themselves but about the person speaking them is, in Silverstein's view, perhaps even more important than the words' referentiality.

In addition to conjuring the bodies that refer to gender, then, I argue that language also *indexes* (points to) people who are attentive to these alternate ways of imagining and interacting with bodies. In other words, the use of such language flags its speakers as people

who are willing to imagine others complexly and defer to self-identification over that meaning which hegemonic regimes of gender claim to be true. Both transgender people and their partners (no matter their genders), by engaging in meta-conversations about ways each want their body discussed and touched, identify themselves as people who care about the performativity of language. This shared indexical ground creates the conditions for "cultures of two" to arise.

I would like to close this chapter, as I began, with two quotes. In the first, Morgan explains why it is important to them that their sexual partner be someone who indexes that they care about the language that Morgan prefers. In the second, the origin of the title I chose for this section, Skylar demonstrates why it is important to her to care about the language needs of others.

> I could not have sex with anybody that does not know that they need to be checking in all the time and needs to be completely aware even in the moment that if one word slips out that's gonna cause me to freak out that day that it's just not gonna end well. (Morgan)

> You can just completely change someone's mood with one word, so like um that's why I'm so careful about it. I mean also because I just want everyone to feel the way that they want to feel. (Skylar)

More Reflections on "How to Make Love to a Trans Person" and Suggestions for Further Research

I began my introduction with an excerpt of Gabe Moses's poem "How to Make Love to a Trans Person." It is notable to me that its title is not "How to Have Sex with a Trans Person," as would echo the incessant question often at the heart of cisgender discrimination towards transgender people: *How do trans people have sex?* Instead, Moses's title plays against the harm of that question, inverts it, and optimistically conjures a world in which the impetus behind this question is cisgender people's desire to learn strategies for respecting transgender folks in vulnerable and intimate contexts. The opening stanza, which I quoted at the beginning of Chapter One, urges readers to redefine the words that we have come to understand as gendered and sexed in a particular way. As the poem continues, Moses suggests we "get rid of the old words altogether/ [and] make up new words" that are more reflective of the experience of the people involved. Rushing forth in a flurry of images of pleasuring and pleasured bodies, the next lines of Moses's poem re-center the embodied interactions of flesh and skin and breath and sweat, of appreciating the body one is offered, and refraining from treating it like a "trauma patient" or remarking it "looks almost natural." Moses implores that cisgender readers consider and touch trans women as we would any other women we love, that we consider and touch trans men as we would any other men we love. In closing, he reminds us that "bodies are only a fraction of who we are," that "half the fun is figuring out/ all the different ways we can fit them together," and that "we could never forget how to use our hearts/ even if we tried."

Like Moses, I too am invested in an approach to gender affirmation that is both linguistic and embodied. Though my thesis focuses on the ways that transgender people use language when they "make love," it is also at its core about, as Moses puts it, "all the

ways to car crash our bodies beautiful." Over the last three chapters, I have argued that language is as much a tool for constructing gendered embodiment as are medical interventions and choices around gender expression. Just as a surgical knife and hormone treatments sculpt flesh, words -whether spoken about oneself or given with respect to another -can reify, conjure, affirm, or deny someone's gender.

Another reason I want to return to this poem is to point to the ways that Moses, as a poet, is intersectionally engaged with transgender identity, (dis)abilities, and class status. "How to Make Love to a Trans Person" is saturated with medical imagery, of "paramedic[s] cracking ribs" to plunge their hands around "failing hearts," of "changing dressings" and "needlepoint bruises" and "scar tissue." While these images are directly connected in this poem to transgender and intersex folks' interactions with medical professionals either willingly as part of their transitions or without their consent in attempts to "normalize" "irregular" bodies, they could also be relatable for people who have had surgeries for reasons connected to illness or disability status. Moses, an autistic person who has also experienced difficulty with mobility and, as a result, maintaining regular employment, is undoubtedly making these connections as well.

More intersectional work like Moses's around the language that transgender, genderqueer, and intersex folks use around their bodies and sexual practices is needed. As I mentioned in Chapter One, all of my interview participants were either white or white passing and none of the characters in *Take Me There* were racially marked as non-white. None of them brought up ability in connection to their feelings about language and gender. It is vitally important that the questions I have taken up in this thesis be expanded, adapted, and employed for research on transgender, genderqueer, and intersex people of all abilities and racial and ethnic identities.

Furthermore, I want to stress that, while I focus on transgender and genderqueer people in this research, my central argument that language is a tool for the construction of gendered embodiment holds true for all people, including cisgender people. This is important to note because cisgender people are more invested than anyone else in gender being considered a "natural" biologically determined characteristic. It is, however, less noticeable for a cisgender person to use language already associated with their assigned gender and sex to reify their gender and sex than it is for a transgender or genderqueer person, and it is perhaps for that reason that not much work has been done to illuminate this. Even though Butler makes the argument that cisgender people engage in gender performativity in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," more research, particularly research from performance studies scholars that approaches the issue both linguistically and through embodiment, is needed on how cisgender folks use language to construct gendered embodiments in order to demonstrate how cisgender gender identities are not any more "natural" than other gender identities.

In closing, I also want to reiterate that, as a cisgender person, my primary intended audience for this work is other cisgender people, perhaps other cisgender partners of transgender folks. If you take nothing else away from reading this document, this is what I want it to be: Our language matters. Just as it has the power to convey our desire, appreciation, and respect for those around us, it can also be wielded, purposefully or unintentionally, to harm people, even those people whom we love dearly. And, used carelessly, language about bodies and sexual practices has the potential to disproportionately harm transgender and genderqueer folks. Let us be aware of that power and our privilege as cisgender people, talk to our partners about what they want to hear (and not hear) from us, and choose our words carefully.

Appendix 1

“How to Make Love to a Trans Person”
By Gabe Moses

Forget the images you've learned to attach
To words like cock and clit,
Chest and breasts.
Break those words open
Like a paramedic cracking ribs
To pump blood through a failing heart.
Push your hands inside.
Get them messy.
Scratch new definitions on the bones.

Get rid of the old words altogether.
Make up new words.
Call it a click or a ditto.
Call it the sound he makes
When you brush your hand against it through his jeans,
When you can hear his heart knocking on the back of his teeth
And every cell in his body is breathing.
Make the arch of her back a language
Name the hollows of each of her vertebrae
When they catch pools of sweat
Like rainwater in a row of paper cups
Align your teeth with this alphabet of her spine
So every word is weighted with the salt of her.

When you peel layers of clothing from his skin
Do not act as though you are changing dressings on a trauma patient
Even though it's highly likely that you are.
Do not ask if she's "had the surgery."
Do not tell him that the needlepoint bruises on his thighs look like they hurt
If you are being offered a body
That has already been laid upon an altar of surgical steel
A sacrifice to whatever gods govern bodies
That come with some assembly required
Whatever you do,
Do not say that the carefully sculpted landscape
Bordered by rocky ridges of scar tissue
Looks almost natural.

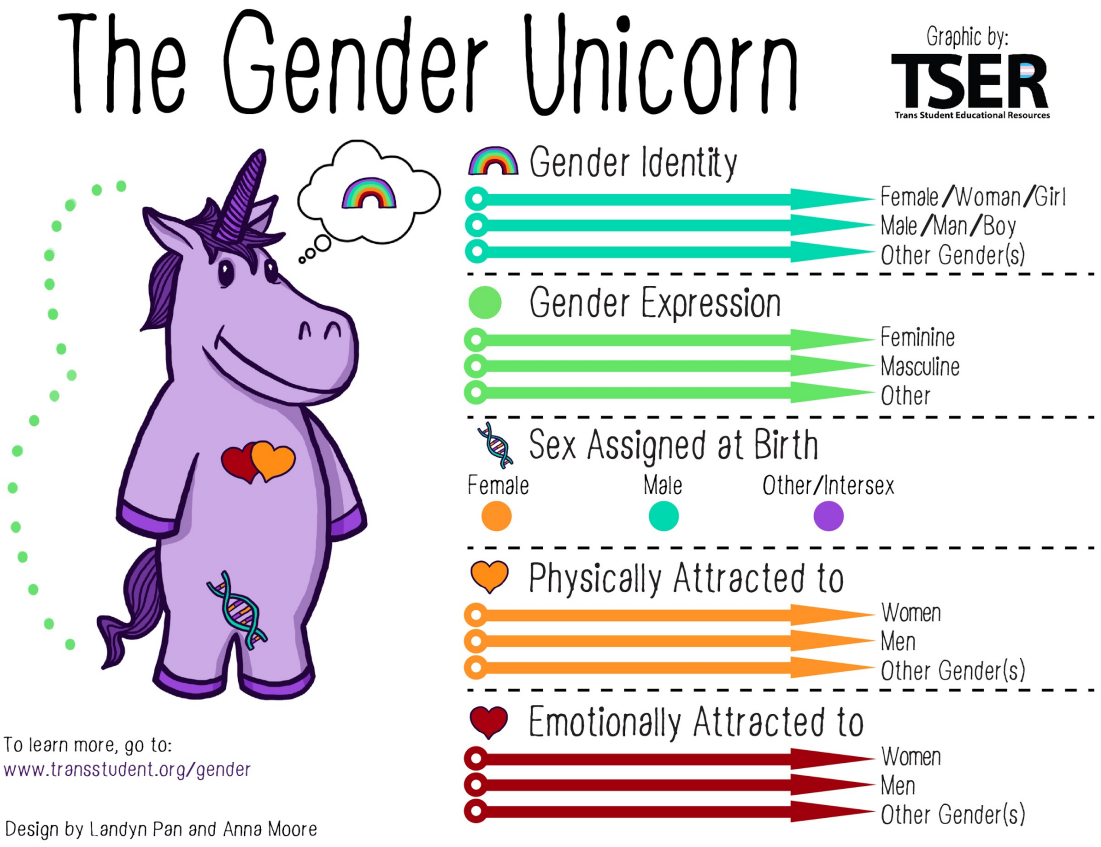
If she offers you breastbone
Aching to carve soft fruit from its branches
Though there may be more tissue in the lining of her bra
Than the flesh that rises to meet itLet her ripen in your hands.
Imagine if she'd lost those swells to cancer,
Diabetes,
A car accident instead of an accident of genetics
Would you think of her as less a woman then?
Then think of her as no less one now.

If he offers you a thumb-sized sprout of muscle
Reaching toward you when you kiss him
Like it wants to go deep enough inside you
To scratch his name on the bottom of your heart
Hold it as if it can-
In your hand, in your mouth
Inside the nest of your pelvic bones.
Though his skin may hardly do more than brush yours,
You will feel him deeper than you think.

Realize that bodies are only a fraction of who we are
They're just oddly-shaped vessels for hearts
And honestly, they can barely contain us
We strain at their seams with every breath we take
We are all pulse and sweat,
Tissue and nerve ending
We are programmed to grope and fumble until we get it right.
Bodies have been learning each other forever.
It's what bodies do.
They are grab bags of parts
And half the fun is figuring out
All the different ways we can fit them together;
All the different uses for hipbones and hands,
Tongues and teeth;
All the ways to car-crash our bodies beautiful.
But we could never forget how to use our hearts
Even if we tried.
That's the important part.
Don't worry about the bodies.
They've got this.

Reproduced from: http://genderqueerchicago.blogspot.com/2011/02/how-to-make-love-to-trans-person.html

Appendix 2



Trans Student Educational Resources, "The Gender Unicorn"

Find the graphic (in multiple languages) and more information at:
http://www.transstudent.org/gender

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