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by

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The Spectacle of Transformation: (Re)Presenting Transgender Experience Through Performance

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Abstract

The Spectacle of Transformation: (Re)Presenting Transgender Experience Through Performance

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In December 2015, when The Public Theater cast two cisgender actors in the leading roles of a musical based on the true story of two transgender individuals and their fight against transphobia in the United States, performance makers from across the country spoke out against the casting decision. This outrage joins a chorus of transgender people and allies speaking out against a continuously growing film, television, and theatrical archive of performance which focuses on transgender characters without centering actual transgender people. While media attention on transgender individuals in the United States might be at an all-time high, when it comes to representing transgender experiences in performance, transgender-identified characters are repeatedly performed by cisgender actors whose gender identities do not match that of their character.

This thesis argues that these casting choices and the critical praise that these performances (termed "cross-gender performances" by the author) garner reinforce cissexist and heteronormative ideology wherein biological sex and gender identity are inextricably linked. Therefore, self-determined gender identity is invalidated and the lives of transgender individuals are devalued in favor of valorizing the "spectacle of transformation" that the cisgender actor undergoes in preparation for the role. This thesis tracks the legacy of these "cross-gender performances" across U.S. film and stage history in order to demonstrate how critical responses to these performances shift attention away from the transgender character and onto the body of the cisgender actor. After tracing this legacy from the late 19th century theatrical stage and late 20th century Hollywood to early 21st-century Broadway, this thesis arrives at the work two contemporary transgender performance artists, Sean Dorsey and Annie Danger, in order to demonstrate how transgender stories told by transgender performers refutes, reclaims, and repurposes the harmful tropes and stereotypes perpetuated by performances helmed by cisgender directors and producers with cisgender actors for mostly cisgender audiences. Finally, this thesis imagines the revolutionary and liberatory possibilities of finding joy through queer and transgender bodies and experiences, ultimately asserting the value of these lives through their celebratory presence in performance.

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Chapter One: Introduction

THE BOULDER WE ROLL

Within the first week of March 2016, two different UT Austin faculty members familiar with my research sent me separate emails related to *Southern Comfort*, an (at the time) upcoming production at The Public Theater which focuses on the real-life experiences of two transgender people in the rural south of the United States. One email asked if I had heard about the production with a link to its official page on PublicTheater.org, and wondered whether or not there were any trans people cast in the show (which was also my immediate thought as soon as I read "play about a group of transgender friends" in the subject line). The other message asked if I was going to watch the livestream of The Public Theater's open forum on "Gender Identity, Representation, and Theatre" that evening. I was grateful for both emails, as I had not known about either of the events mentioned before I received their messages. What I also did not know at the time was that the two events were inextricably tied to one another and, subsequently, the crux of my research into the discursive consequences of cisgender actors' performances of transgender characters.[1]

On November 5th, 2015, The Public Theater in New York City released a casting call for "actors and singers who identify as transgender" to perform in an upcoming production entitled *Southern Comfort*, described as "a folk and bluegrass-inspired musical that explores transgender life" (Playbill). A little more than a month later, the theater published the official casting announcement for the production, which revealed a cast and crew made up entirely of cisgender people, save for two supporting roles. Annette Bening, a cisgender female actress, was cast as the lead character, a transgender man named Robert Eads; the role of Lola Cola, a transgender woman and the other lead character, was given to cisgender male actor Jeff McCarthy.

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[1] A note on vocabulary: Though I will define the terms I choose to use later in this paper, I want to acknowledge that many of the texts with which I engage use a variety of different terminology to indicate things like transgender, cisgender, gender nonconforming, etc. In direct quotations, I will use the terminology that is used in the source text, so as not to retroactively apply labels to ideas that would be anachronistic. When describing individuals, I will use the terminology that they use for themselves, even if it is outdated or, in a contemporary context, considered offensive, out of respect for their self-identification.

Two days after the casting announcement, genderqueer theater artist Taylor Edelhart penned an open letter to The Public in response and circulated the letter for electronic signatures. In just one week, the letter gained over 200 signatures, including that of Taylor Mac, a trans-identified performance artist who frequently presents and stars in performances on The Public's stages. In their letter, Edelhart poses a series of questions which they explicitly state are not meant to be rhetorical. "The past couple of years have been incredibly difficult for American trans communities on many levels," Edelhart states in the middle of a deluge of question marks. "On a cultural level, more and more trans narratives are being highlighted in plays, movies, and television shows every year, but only a small fraction of the roles in those narratives are being given to trans performers. Why would The Public further fuel this damaging notion that trans people aren't competent enough to tell their own community's stories?"

In response, The Public delayed the planned opening of the production (originally scheduled for February 23, then re-scheduled for March 12) and, on March 8th, 2016, the Public Theater held a town hall meeting to discuss "Gender Identity, Representation, and Theatre." The event was livestreamed from HowlRound.tv, ensuring that the discussion could be witnessed by folks from outside of the theater, and encouraged live and livestream audiences to tweet using the hashtag #publicforumny. I, and others, engaged not only in viewing the livestream but also livetweeting comments from the panelists/audience speakers and our own reactions to what was being said. The panel was made up of cis and trans folks alike, all related in some way to the topic being discussed: Stephanie Ybarra, Director of Special Artistic Projects at The Public; Polly Carl, Director at HowlRound and Dramaturg for *Southern Comfort*; Michael Silverman, Executive Director for Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund; Cecilia Gentili, NYC-based Argentinian performance artist and transgender woman; and Kate Bornstein, performance artist/writer/activist and self-proclaimed gender outlaw. The panelists took five minutes each to make opening statements, and then the floor was open to statements from the audience. Before the first audience member spoke, Ybarra, who was moderating the discussion, announced that the panel would not respond to comments made by audience members -- they would simply listen, because that is what they needed to do most.

The three actions mentioned above (The casting of Bening and McCarthy in *Southern Comfort*, Edelhart's letter in response, and the public forum in response to the letter) are a sequence of events that lead perfectly to the cultural moment within which I am writing this thesis. As Edelhart mentions in their letter, this casting decision is not an isolated event, coming at a moment in time where we are seeing an abundance of transgender representation from non-transgender performers and performance-makers. But what sets this particular event apart from others is the response from New York's transgender and artistic communities, and the theater's (albeit not perfect) acknowledgment of that response. The Public Theater has used this moment to declare its intention to ally with the transgender community and fulfill its stated goal to be "an advocate for the theater as an essential cultural force in leading and framing dialogue on important issues of our day" (PublicTheater.org). However, despite Ybarra's call for the panel to listen to its constituents, who continuously voiced their own and echoed one another's pain, grief, frustration, and anger, the production is still being mounted as planned, with Bening and McCarthy in the lead roles.

Here, I will make clear my positionality and stake in this subject matter. As a transgender actor, performance maker, and Performance Studies scholar, this issue is deeply personal to me. When I clicked on the link in the first email I received and scrolled to view the production's cast list, I was filled with the kind of dread and subsequent defeat one feels after anticipating, and then receiving, terrible news. In a cultural, creative, and artistic landscape within which, as Edelhart points out, "trans narratives are put on display, but actual trans people are pushed to the side," one cannot help but feel as though their work is akin to that of Sisyphus -- though, perhaps unlike the mythological struggle, we never manage to make it to the top of the mountain before we are sent back to the bottom to start all over again. Time and time again, the personal experiences of transgender people are used as narrative vehicles through which cisgender actors, directors, and producers can "stay relevant or on-trend," as Edelhart suggests The Public may be doing with *Southern Comfort*; or, I will suggest, as costumes that cisgender actors can put on in order to prove their mettle as performers and their successful fulfillment of gender and sexual normativity as people.

Moving forward, I'd like to return to one of the questions posed in Edelhart's initial letter: "Why would The Public further fuel this damaging notion that trans people aren't competent enough to tell their own community's stories?" I believe this question refers to the oft-spouted notion that there is simply not enough transgender talent to fill the increasing number of transgender roles being cast. This is an excuse that is heard over and over again from cisgender directors and producers who are keen on telling the story of a transgender person but not on working equally as hard to find a transgender actor to play this role. For the purposes of this project, however, I'd like to trouble Edelhart's suggestion that transgender actors are kept out of transgender roles because we are not deemed "competent enough to tell our own community's stories." Instead, I argue that we are being kept out of these roles because, while the story may belong to the transgender community, the performance does not.

THE SPECTACLE OF TRANSFORMATION

Throughout this project, I will argue that cisgender actors are given transgender roles in order to create a "spectacle of transformation" during which the actor can not only use the experience of a person deemed abject from society to prove their worth in the industry but also to remind us of our hegemonic ideals of gender, sex, and sexuality, and how well they fit those ideals. I will refer to these performances as "cross-gender performances" not just for the sake of brevity but also because I find it politically and intellectually imperative that we view these performances as someone of one gender portraying a character of a different gender. This simple turn-of-phrase acknowledges and validates the gender identity of the character by recognizing, for example, that a cisgender man performing the role of a transgender woman is, in fact, portraying a woman.

In the interest of adding nuance to my working ideas regarding transgender performance, this thesis also explores performance work created by transgender individuals. In examining these transgender cultural artifacts—performance-based pieces of art created by and about transgender individuals—I not only refute the misconception that transgender performers are sparse within this country, but also highlight the ways in which art about the transgender experience created by non-transgender people succumbs to exploitative and sensational pitfalls. Trans-centric work by cisgender artists revolve around the character's trans identity while simultaneously refuting the validity of this identity through the disruptive presence of a cisgender body in this role. This practice, I argue, perpetuates hierarchies of knowledge and creation where cisgender individuals exclusively have the power to tell transgender people when, how, and where to speak on our own experiences.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the word "transgender" to describe individuals (real and fictional) whose gender identities do not match the associated gender of the sex that they were assigned at birth. There has been much debate in both academic and activist circles about the use of this term and to whom it applies. I will be using it in the above manner, meaning that, in this thesis, "transgender" will encompass: women who were Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB), men who were Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB), and non-binary identified individuals. Additionally, forms of physical transition sought in order to change one's physiology (Hormone Replacement Therapy, Gender Confirmation Surgery, etc.) will not be taken into consideration when determining whether or not an individual fits the definition of "transgender." Therefore, I do not use the word "transsexual" because, while I find no objection to those who wish to use the term to self-identify, I do not prioritize any process of physical transition for actualizing one's identity. However, "transgender," in this context, will not include gender nonconforming people who identify with the gender associated with the sex they were assigned at birth (masculine women, effeminate men, etc.), nor will it include men or women who cross-dress for entertainment purposes.

In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Jack Halberstam defines "transgender" as "a marker for all kinds of people who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender normativity" (55) which "refuses the stability that the term transsexual may offer to some folks [and] embraces more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification" (53). Halberstam goes on to argue that any construction of a "transgender history" needs to "allow the gender ambiguous to speak" and resist the urge to "rationalize rather than represent transgender lives in the glory of all their contradictions" (55). While I agree with the intention to encapsulate rather than consolidate what it means to be "transgender," within this thesis, being "transgender" refers to a person's gender identity, not their gender expression or sexual orientation.[2] I make this distinction because of the importance of the divide between externally imposed ideals of sex and gender and internally located identifications of these categories that originate from one's understanding of oneself that is crucial to this thesis and my analysis. In short: because the work I am critiquing is operating in a landscape that privileges the birth assignments of biological sex over the self-professed gender identities of its subjects, it is imperative that gender identity, and not expression, is the means by which a "transgender" subject is identified.

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[2] See "Report of the APA Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance" for definitions of these terms as they are being used in this paper.

Additionally, unlike many of the theorists with whom I will engage in this project, I am not interested in theorizing the act of "being transgender." On the contrary, I take umbrage with the ways in which theorists like Judith Butler and Halberstam, whose work is otherwise essential to my own, take the transgender or transsexual subject and attempt to bring into the realm of the postmodern and academic an experience that is rooted firmly in the realm of materiality and the mundane. I agree wholeheartedly with Canadian scholar and activist Viviane Namaste when she states, "[While] we can read page after page on the deconstruction of the hegemonic sex/gender system, queer and transgender theory offer us absolutely nothing when it comes to the substantive issues of our lives" (18). Neither queer theory nor transgender studies, Namaste argues, concern themselves with the day-to-day realities of the transsexual[3] community, such as access to healthcare, addiction, and social/political disenfranchisement. As such, it is not my intention in this thesis to grapple with the ways in which transgender or transsexual identity may or may not be a physical manifestation of postmodern or neo-liberal queer politics. Instead, this thesis will engage with the ways in which transgender identity and experiences are represented and received through performances of those experiences by cisgender and transgender performers. However, I recognize just as saliently that the work in this project still is not directly addressing the issues Namaste outlines above as the issues that are most pressing for transsexual and transgender individuals attempting to survive in North America. I will say that what draws me to this work is the impact that I believe performance, more so than any other form of art, has on a viewer's capacity to understand and empathize with another's experience. Therefore, while I cannot, at this time, make any definitive correlative claims that the performance representations I examine in this thesis in any way directly affect the day-to-day lives of trans people in the U.S., I still believe that this analysis is imperative because, as critical ethnographer D. Soyini Madison claims, "[We] must still be accountable for the consequences of our representations and the implications of our message— because they matter" (5).

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[3] I use "transsexual" in this context to respect Namaste's push back against the term "transgender" in her work, viewing "transgender" as a "catch-all" term that includes gender variant cisgender people and, in doing so, often ignores the "health care and social service needs of transsexuals," wherein "transsexuals" refers only to trans people who seek medical intervention "to live as members of their chosen sex" (Namaste 1-2).

With that being said, much of this project's theoretical framework is taken from Judith Butler's text *Bodies That Matter*. In this text, Butler addresses the question of bodily materiality within her previous theories on performativity and the constituted nature of gender proposed in *Gender Trouble*. Published three years after *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter* extends the idea of construction to categories of biological sex as well as gender, wherein Butler claims that sex is "a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies" (*Bodies* Location 203). Butler understands sex as not a natural state of being that precedes socially constructed or mandated categorizations but, rather, as one of those socially constructed AND mandated categorizations upon which additional categorizations (such as gender) are placed. To illustrate this, in the preface to her book, Butler specifically uses the example of the sexing of a newborn baby which, in turn, dictates that child's gendering as well, an example which has lead to the vocabulary of "assigned sex" and the acronyms AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth)/AMAB (Assigned Male at Birth) within transgender social and academic circles.

Essential to this system is not only the designation of what falls within the boundaries of an acceptable "assumed sex" but also what falls outside of it. Butler addresses this as the "domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (Location 203). These "abject beings" are imperative to the process of assuming a sex because, as Butler argues later in her text, the bodies that fall within the matrix of acceptability are the "bodies that matter." Hence, a subject's desire to achieve "autonomy" and "life" will be predicated upon that subject's ability to deny their association with or presentation of the abject. Butler claims these are the "bodies that matter" by positing them as the "lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving" (Location 478). In other words, the bodies that matter, the bodies that exist within the "exclusionary matrix" by "materializing the norm," are the bodies that we deem to be truly alive and, therefore, worth cherishing while they are here and mourning when they are dead. The abject bodies are, then, invisible at best and disposable at worst.

In her book *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, Ann Cooper Albright engages with the ideological separation of mind and body that has pervaded Western styles of thinking and theorizing for centuries. Albright, in conversation with Butler, as well as the theories of philosophers like Rene Descartes and Plato, acknowledges that this ideology privileges the idea of the universal, masculine subject by bestowing upon him selfhood because of his transcendence from his body. In contrast, Albright conjectures, in addition to its effect on women, this also affects "people of color, gay men, the disenfranchised, as well as people with disabilities" by keeping them "tied to the material conditions of their bodies" and subsequently "structuring an identity that has repeatedly been constructed as oppressively and basely physical, as a lack of selfhood— a lack of moral, spiritual, and social agency" (6). In other words, bodies that materialize in ways that contradict that which has been deemed universal (white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class, etc.) are prohibited from claiming selfhood because their identity is relentlessly and solely defined by their physical form.

Using this framework, I situate transgender bodies in this realm of the abject and argue that representations of transgender people that use cisgender bodies to do so continue to relegate trans bodies to the realm of the abject by using "bodies that matter" to elicit empathy for a body that could not instigate such an affective response on its own. The expendable nature of transgender bodies, according to the U.S. government and, it seems, general population, is plainly evident in the statistics surrounding the overwhelming amount of discrimination and violence that transgender people face in the U.S., despite the illusion of social and legal progress touted by the mainstream gay rights movement. It is statistically proven that transgender women of color are the members of the LGBTQ community who are most vulnerable to discrimination, violence, and homicide. In 2014, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects reported that 55% of all documented anti-LGBTQ and HIV-affected homicide victims were transgender women, all of whom were women of color (NCVAP 24). With staggering statistics such as these, it is clear that transgender identity, particularly non-white transgender womanness, is inordinately responded to with physically threatening and, often, fatal reactions. Additionally, the fact that this borderline genocide of transgender women has not been officially addressed by any member of the U.S. government, and is often only addressed in grassroots activist groups that focus specifically on the issues faced by queer people of color and/or trans women, demonstrates the ways in which the bodies deemed abject are subsequently considered less precious the further away from the hegemonic (white, cis, straight, able, etc.) that they fall.

Many of the performances of transgender identity and experience created within our cultural landscape are based on the experiences of transgender individuals who are already deceased or will be by the end of the performance. The two pieces I will discuss in Chapter 2, the film *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce 1999) and the play *I Am My Own Wife* (Wright 2003), both exemplify this narrative structure. To quickly cite some other performances that follow this narrative: the films *The Danish Girl* (Hooper 2015), *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée 2014), *The Crying Game* (Jordan 1992); and the musical *RENT* (Larson 1992). Each of hese performances take audiences on the narrative journey of the transgender person's life which, inevitably, ends with their death. There are two other qualities that all of these performances have in common as well: All of these performances feature a transgender character portrayed by a cisgender actor and all of the actors in the transgender roles were given at least one award nomination for their performance.[4] The audience, therefore, is presented with the body of a cisgender actor who performs the symbolic death of their character, at which point they can return to their own identity (gendered and otherwise) in order to receive an award for their performance. The transgender body, however, effectively remains disposed of through the death of the character.

The continual practice of a cisgender actor receiving accolades for their portrayal of a transgender character who meets a tragic end to their life is the epitome of Butler's argument that the bodies that matter are the cisgender bodies, and those bodies belong to the performers, not to their transgender subjects. Furthermore, this practice also exemplifies Albright's contention (supported with/by Butler's argument) that bodies which display qualities that deviate from our conception of the universal are denied recognition of their personhood and defined solely by the "material conditions of their bodies" by placing a cisgender body in a role that directly contradicts hegemonic constructions of which gender identity that kind of body should logically produce in order to call into question the validity of the character's self-identification of their own material experience. This ethical conundrum only becomes more complicated when the subject of the performance is based on the real life story of a once-living transgender person who has since passed, an issue I will touch upon later in this chapter and in more depth within Chapters 2 and 3.

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[4] Hilary Swank (*Boys Don't Cry*): 2000 Oscar winner - Best Actress in a Leading Role, 2000 Golden Globe winner - Best Actress in a Lead Role; Jefferson Mays (*I Am My Own Wife*): 2004 Tony winner - Best Lead Actor in a Play; Eddie Redmayne (*The Danish Girl*): 2016 Oscar nominee - Best Actor in a Lead Role; Jared Leto (*Dallas Buyers Club*): 2015 Oscar winner - Best Actor in a Supporting Role; Jaye Davidson (*The Crying Game*): 1993 Oscar nominee - Best Actor in a Supporting Role; Wilson Jermaine Heredia (*RENT*): 1996 Tony winner - Best Featured Actor

However, I strongly push back against the questions that Albright later brings up in her text, where she expresses anxiety about destabilizing "the body's genitalia as a category of difference" (8) which she identifies as a strain of thought beginning to enter feminist theory as she writes this text in the mid-to-late 1990s. Albright's fear, specifically, is that if we (the "we" in question here is unclear) "lose the category of women altogether" through "a rigorous feminist questioning of cultural constructions of sex and gender" then we will subsequently lose the ability to "form any kind of political coalition focused on the rights of women to control our own bodies" (8). While Albright goes on to explain that she is interested in theorizing a way to "affirm a sense of unity without essentializing the body" (8), by expressing this fear, she is acknowledging that trans women are a site of political conflict for her as a feminist. What further indicates her position on the womanhood of trans women is the fact that Albright does not mention trans people in her list of the marginalized groups who are relegated to the realm of their "material conditions," nor does she explicitly identify trans women as being central to her desire to build a "political coalition on the rights of women to control [their] own bodies" that does not "[essentialize] the body." By leaving trans women out of the conversation on these topics, whether through intentional exclusion or ignorant mistake, Albright contributes to a tumultuous feminist history of trans exclusion and erasure in the name of female solidarity.

Additionally, even in attempting to address that realm of abjection and question the process of signifying subjecthood via the assignment of sex, Butler reiterates the primacy of the biological in her discussion of transsexual subjects. Responding to bell hooks' review and critique of the film *Paris is Burning*, Butler wonders about the possibilities of a "transsexualized" lesbian gaze within the film, positing the camera as both a "phallus" and a "surgical instrument" which bestows upon the director, Jennie Livingston, "the power to turn men into women who, then, depend on the power of [Livingston's] gaze to become and remain women" in a (as Butler potentially imagines it) "visual pacification" of "Black and Latino men" (*Bodies* 93). In this analysis of the film and its relationship to its subjects from an ethnographic standpoint, Butler has placed the biological sex of the trans women in question at the forefront of their identities. By suggesting that Livingston, by virtue of being in control of the film's gaze, is in a position to create a version of the film's subjects, rather than portraying them as they are in person, Butler has implied that these subjects, some of whom identify as transsexual women and some who do not, are only what they are able to be interpreted as, not who they truly are. In other words, Butler dismisses the gender identities of these trans women by suggesting that they only become women by the way in which Livingston chooses to portray them in her film, which reduces them to and privileges the hegemonic signification of their material bodies.

What Butler keenly recognizes in this moment, however, is the role that the camera plays in mediating our understanding of the bodies with which we are presented. I use the term "mediating" in the same sense as Stuart Hall in his seminal essay, "Encoding/decoding," wherein Hall lays out the process of televisual communications from the moment of production to the moment of reception. Using the sign and signification theories of Roland Barthes, much like Butler, Hall provides communications studies with a new method of understanding and analyzing audience reception that acknowledges the inability for any information or imagery created and distributed to be done so objectively and outside of a discourse of hegemony. In the same way that Butler argues that sex and the materiality of the body is not “prior to the sign” (*Bodies* 5), Hall posits that “[t]here is no degree zero in language” (Hall 132).

Hall goes on to address the discursive fallacy of natural codes which “appear not to be constructed” because they have been “profoundly naturalized” (132). Using the example of a visual representation of a cow and the word “COW,” Hall demonstrates how we come to understand that this sequence of letters and this image is not the cow itself but a representation of the cow that we understand to be such because of how ubiquitous this coding has become. Additionally, Hall identifies that the linguistic indicator of “COW” is not at all like the actual animal, but gains legitimacy as an indicator of the cow when coupled with a visual referent that, at the very least, looks somewhat like an actual cow. With this description of linguistic and visual signs, Hall exemplifies his claim that “[reality] exists outside language, but is constantly mediated by and through language” (131). In other words, much like how Butler argues that acknowledging the constructed nature of gender and sex does not negate their importance or the materiality of the body’s experiences, Hall argues that reality and language exist in a cyclical process whereby reality dictates how televisual communication will be disseminated (*encoding*), and the reception of that communication will dictate how reality shifts and changes over time (*decoding*).

I bring up Hall's insistence on the separation from yet the importance of the signified referent in order to utilize this theory for my argument, in reference to both screen media and live performance. Since Hall is speaking specifically about televisual communication and materials, he clarifies that the image of the referent is incapable of being the referent because it exists in a 2-dimensional space; in his words, "the dog in the film can bark but it cannot bite" (131). However, as previously mentioned, receivers of this coded image still read that image as "dog" despite the fact that it is incapable of fulfilling the corporeal acts of a real dog in that moment. The visual sign of the dog, or of the cow, or any other "iconic sign" that is read as "natural" is read as such because it is reiterating the ways in which we, as receivers and decoders, experience reality -- an experience that, as previously mentioned, is extremely codified in order to reproduce a particular hegemonic narrative. To bring this all back to the subject of this thesis in particular, I lay out this theory in order to make clear my intentions in reading and decoding the performances I analyze and critique. In my consideration of these performances, I am not concerned with the verisimilitude of their depiction of transgender identity or experience. Rather, I am concerned with the ways in which the bodies in these roles become naturalized signs of transgender identity, and, further, the bodies in these roles become naturalized signs when they are seen outside of these roles as well. In short, what I mean is this: I am concerned with the ways we are naturalizing a visual code for "transgender person" through the bodies of cisgender actors, which are constantly on display as paragons of idealized cisnormative ideology.

Hall's example of the dog that "can bark but it cannot bite" speaks back to Butler's theories of performativity in her essay, "Performance Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In this essay, Butler delineates between a performance of abject gender seen on a stage and the same performance of abject gender witnessed on the street. Butler claims that, "the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" ("Performance Acts" 527). As a performer and scholar of performance, I, like many others, are troubled by Butler's insinuation that performance that is theatricalized cannot be challenging or "dangerous" to its audience and their sensibilities. However, I will shift Butler's statement on the "transvestite onstage" vs the "transvestite on the seat next to us" in order to prove a point that I think is more salient and that fits the confines of this thesis. A transgender person onstage is just as "dangerous" as a transgender person on the bus, because, unlike the dog on the screen, the transgender person onstage can bark AND bite, if they are so inclined. The performance of abject gender onstage that is rendered, for lack of a better word, impotent within "theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act" (527) is the performance of abject gender by a performer who does not perform abject gender outside of those conventions. Here, I am making a distinction between the gender identity, gender expression, and constructed public life of the performer in contrast to the character that they portray onstage/on the screen.

NORMALIZING NARRATIVES

This separation between performance on stage/screen and performance in life brings us to the issues of biography and ethnography mentioned earlier. In a chapter on biographical media about Billy Tipton (a male jazz musician who was discovered to be AFAB after his death) and Brandon Teena (a young transgender man who was murdered by his girlfriend's ex-boyfriend after Brandon's status as trans was revealed) in *In a Queer Time and Place,* Halberstam addresses the need for a "transgender history" that is "sensitive enough not to reduce [transgender men] to either 'women all along' or 'failed men'" (53). Here, Halberstam refers to three different "motivations" for narratives about transgender people created by cisgender people: stabilization, rationalization, and trivialization. Work that engages in stabilization explicitly posits the subject's transness as something that is "strange, uncharacteristic, or even pathological." By doing so, the narrative reaffirms hegemonic ideals of sex and gender as "normal" by specifically situating the transgender subject's identity as outside of normalcy and, subsequently, what is natural. The processes of rationalization and trivialization are very similar to one another and, I argue, inextricably connected to the process of stabilization as well. Work that seeks to rationalize will create some kind of "reasonable explanation" for the gender transgression that occurs, such as historical stories about women who dressed as men in order to enter the workforce. Halberstam claims that the narrative of rationalization "placates mainstream viewers by returning the temporarily transgender subject to the comforting and seemingly inevitable matrix of hetero-domesticity" (55) once their gender crossing is no longer necessary for survival or personal gain. Similarly, the trivializing narrative dismisses the gender transgression as “non-representative and inconsequential” (55), rendering the transness of the subject as something that is not central to their identity or experience but, rather, a glib factoid about their life that is otherwise ignorable.

I argue that all three of these narratives are often at work simultaneously, and that by engaging in the processes of rationalization and trivialization, cisgender storytellers and biographers are also working to stabilize through establishing that the rationalized and trivialized subject is not actually one of those “strange” transgender people. I’d like to carry the notion of these three narratives on in my analysis of work by both cisgender and transgender artists in order to highlight the ways in which both of the works in Chapter 2 engage in these processes of stabilization, rationalization, and trivialization; and, in contrast, how the works in Chapter 3 avoid and, at times, explicitly refute these narrative frameworks.

Additionally, I would like to pull the narrative of rationalization into my central argument for this entire thesis by tying it back to Butler’s distinction between performances on and off stage. When a cisgender actor engages in a cross-gender performance of a transgender subject, the decision to cast that actor is an attempted act of rationalization (as defined above by Halberstam) because the transgender subject’s identity becomes akin to the ephemeral and situationally necessary gender-bending disguise utilized within the fictional or ethnographic narrative itself. Much like how Halberstam critiques the ways in which the various biographies of Billy Tipton frame Tipton’s male identity as an “elaborate [deception]” orchestrated in order for Tipton to make it as a jazz musician and carry on relationships with women (56), I argue that cisgender actors are given transgender identity (not male or female identity but specifically *transgender* identity) as a costume to put on in order to accomplish several goals: to demonstrate the performative prowess of the actor and to place the actor's cisgender (read: normative) identity in direct contrast to that of their character, effectively rationalizing the performance that, if performed by a trans actor, could no longer be rationalized. I will specifically address the ways in which transgender performers portraying transgender identity and experience refute the narrative of rationalization (as well as trivialization and stabilization) in Chapter 3.

In the previously mentioned chapter, Halberstam also poses a critical question for scholars of almost any subject in the humanities: "[Who] has the right to tell tales about whose life" (49)? Halberstam is prompted to ask this question through an analysis of two pieces of literature inspired by the life of Billy Tipton, one which tells the story of Tipton's life and paints Tipton as "cad, deceiver, seducer of young women" (55); and another which, through a fictionalized account of both Tipton's life and the subsequent attempt by a cis woman biographer to write about him after his death, manages to "praise, memorialize, and elegize [Tipton and his fictional counterpart] and countless transgender men, and not to bury them" (61). The difference between the two texts, Halberstam purports, is that the first biographer, Diane Middlebrook, empathizes more strongly with the women in Tipton's life rather than Tipton himself. Halberstam claims that Middlebrook moves from the role of "supposedly objective, scholarly biographer" to "judge and juror" by evaluating Tipton's gender identity, gender expression, and sexual practices on a scale of morality that is tipped in his wives' favor (although it theorizes them as vapid, virginal victims of deceit instead of women with sexual and romantic autonomy) precisely because Middlebrook can only imagine what it would be like to "desire" Tipton, not what it would be like to be him (57-58).

All of the previous theory and discourse leads me to the extraordinarily important work of Viviane Namaste. As mentioned earlier, Namaste is critical of queer theory and transgender studies for focusing on issues of identity politics and the deconstruction of the gender binary to the detriment of work that progresses true social change for trans communities. In *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism*, Namaste lobbies this critique at queer/transgender studies through a series of conference papers and essays that seek to address the issues faced by trans people in North America, most notably issues surrounding access to comprehensive and affordable healthcare for transsexuals. Namaste calls out specific transgender/queer activists, such as Leslie Feinberg, for supporting legislative change that is in line with transgender politics, yet actively limits access to healthcare for transsexuals. Feinberg was a proponent of the "International Bill of Gender Rights," which called for the removal of Gender Identity Disorder as a psychiatric condition. While on the surface this seems to be a progressive move toward the de-pathologization of trans identity, it also creates an additional barrier for transsexuals who need access to transition-related medical intervention by eliminating the ability for these procedures and prescriptions to be covered by health insurance. These activists, Namaste states, "argue that they are the cutting edge of social change" while simultaneously being "involved in political work that is deeply conservative"

(Namaste 8). The intervention that Namaste stages in critiquing these notions of transgender activism/radical politics is crucial to keep in mind for any artist, scholar, or activist wishing to embark on a project that attempts to identify the unjust treatment of transgender/transsexual people in North America and, therefore, I wish to keep her critique present in the work I will do in this thesis.

But Namaste's critique is not only of transgender activists who misstep on their way toward liberation (or, at times, deliberately sidestep around it) -- another facet of her argument in *Sex Change, Social Change* centers around media portrayals of trans people, trans experiences, and trans-centric narratives. Central to this critique is her argument, based on personal experiences with Canadian journalists and television media personalities, that cisgender people control not only when and where but also how and why and which trans people can access venues through which to tell their stories. Namaste tells numerous anecdotes about moments when trans people have been denied the ability to speak on their own terms by cisgender people, including the exclusion of resource list for trans people in need from a newspaper review of *Boys Don't Cry*, as well as the story of a documentary about two trans lesbians being denied acceptance to a gay and lesbian film festival which hosted a night dedicated to "gender bending" film. Additionally, Namaste critiques not only the moments where trans people are denied the ability to speak, but also the moments where they are given a platform to speak. These moments, however, are equally as fraught as the moments of imposed silence and willful ignorance. Namaste identifies what she calls an "autobiographical imperative" in which trans people, in order to be given a chance to speak, are required to:

> "[Tell] our stories of sex change on demand, that we speak about our bodies, our sexualities, our desires, our genitals, and our deep pain at the whim of a curious non-transsexual person. It requires that we recount all this--whether in a public cafe, a university classroom, or on the set of a television studio--on command. And by extension it ensures that we will not have the time, space, or authorization to address the underlying political and institutional issues that make our lives so difficult: the legal context of name change, or the administrative policies governing the universal health insurance of sex change surgery and other services related to transsexualism." (49)

Additionally, when these narratives are demanded of trans subjects, the individuals specifically sought out to tell these stories are white, engaged in "some professional career" (by this, Namaste essentially means anything but sex work) and "usually at the beginning of their transition" (49). Namaste claims that these subjects are specifically chosen because they "abide by the codes of a middle class discourse" (51) wherein their race and class privileges, coupled with the hyperfocus on their transition, precludes any opportunity to discuss the material consequences of institutional oppression faced by trans people, particularly those who do not share those privileges. Bringing this back to the position of the abject body mentioned in the discussion of Butler's work, Namaste's assertions further reiterate the notion that having a "body that matters" means having a body that can be identified in ways that align with hegemonic ideals, and the matrix along which these bodies fall is more of a sliding scale than, say, a fence with a locked gate. Bodies can move closer and further from the point of inclusion depending on the fluctuating nature of their material categories.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SPECTACLE

In this chapter, I have established many of the theoretical frameworks with which my analysis will engage. By acknowledging the work of theorists on the subject of trans identity and activism, as well as theories of cultural and performance studies, I have situated myself within a particular matrix of discourse that I hope my work will simultaneously fit alongside and push back against.

In the second chapter, I walk through a historical overview of cross-gender performance in the U.S. over time and across mediums in order to establish the trajectory of cross-gender and trans-centric performance that has lead us to the moment within which we presently find ourselves. Beginning in the late 19th century, I discuss the cross-gender performances of actress Charlotte Cushman and female impersonator Julian Eltinge in order to highlight the ways in which these performers embodied gender identities and expressions unlike their own and how those portrayals were perceived by the press/their audiences. Through this focus, I demonstrate the ways that critics and audiences not only focused on the assigned sex of the performers, but also the ways in which the performers were perceived to be more adept at performing cross-gender identity because of their assigned sex, which I relate to contemporary readings of cross-gender performance of transgender characters which privilege the actor's assigned sex over the character's gender identity.

Moving forward in a historical trajectory, I identify the presence of cross-gender performance in film during the late 20th century, with a particular focus on Kimberly Peirce's 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*. I single out and spend time with *Boys Don't Cry* because it is a significant film for transgender film history (presenting the first portrayal of a transgender man on screen), as well as being the first on-screen representation of an actual transgender person's life. With the critical response to Cushman and Eltinge in mind, I survey marketing materials, interviews with the press, and reviews from established film critics in order to assess how *Boys Don't Cry* was advertised to and received by audiences and critics. I embark on this analysis in order to prove that the same principles which heralded Cushman and Eltinge's cross-gender performances, privileging the assigned sex of the performer and lauding their ability to "sell" themselves and their gender performance, still applies to Hilary Swank's portrayal of young transgender man Brandon Teena. Additionally, I attempt to address the lasting legacy of *Boys Don't Cry* as a touchstone for contemporary media portrayals of transgender characters, as it is, I argue, the film that establishes the lucrative nature of the "spectacle of transformation" surrounding a cisgender actor's portrayal of a transgender subject.

I reach the early 21st century with an analysis of Doug Wright's 2003 solo play, *I Am My Own Wife,* a one-man piece of ethnotheatre[5] which purports to present the life and experiences of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a transgender woman who survived the Third Reich and rise of communism in Germany during the mid-20th century. Utilizing the same analysis of marketing materials and critical reviews, as well as comments and reviews from audience members, I argue that Wright's text manages to bring itself closer to the realm of ethical, "dialogical performance" than previous ethnographic performances of transgender subjects, but still falls back on the same tropes and participates in the same processes of stabilization and rationalization that plague works about transgender subjects by cisgender performers/ethnographers. While Wright presents his audience with a complex subject who is not reduced to solely her status as abject and transgender, he also places the question of Mahlsdorf's narrative honesty alongside the actor's fluctuating embodiment of her and 39 other characters within the piece, effectively asking the audience to wonder if she is telling the truth about any aspect of her life -- including her gender identity.

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[5] Identified as such by Johnny Saldaña and defined as a form of ethnography that "employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre production to mount for an audience a live performance event of research participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data" (Saldaña 3).

The third chapter will usher our discussion into the time period I am classifying as the present. In contrast to the performances discussed in the previous chapters, the two performances discussed in this chapter are works created by, performed by, and centered on the experiences of transgender people. I will use the same criteria used for the works discussed in Chapter 2 to analyze this material. My hope is not to argue that the works in Chapter 3 are better pieces of art than those in Chapter 2, nor do I wish to posit them as more "authentic" or, even less so, flawless and unable to be critiqued. What I will show, however, are the ways in which these performances, by virtue of having transgender performers/ethnographers at their helm, successfully resist and actively challenge the notion that cisgender bodies are the only bodies that matter.

I begin Chapter 3 with a discussion of *Uncovered: The Diary Project,* an ethnographic dance performance created and performed by Sean Dorsey, a transgender male choreographer based in San Francisco. *Uncovered: The Diary Project* uses archival research and techniques of performance ethnography to present the story of Lou Sullivan, the first gay transgender man in the U.S. to undergo medically-sanctioned physical transition and one of the many lives lost to the AIDS epidemic. In my discussion of *Uncovered*, I address how Dorsey, as a transgender man embodying and speaking the words of his transgender male subject, subverts the narrative of the transgender subject's inevitable march toward death and subsequent spiritual obscurity by presenting himself (Dorsey, I mean) as a material witness to and vessel for Sullivan's transgender legacy. Additionally, I highlight Dorsey's use of autobiographical moments within the piece and argue that these moments complement, rather than eclipse, the ethnographic story that he tells about his subject and work to further illuminate his identification with his subject, a quality that, as previously stated, Halberstam identifies as integral to pursuing an ethical means of transgender biography.

Chapter Three continues with an analysis of *The Fully Functional Cabaret*, a performance piece created and performed by Annie Danger, a transgender female performance artist also based in San Francisco. Danger is joined in this vaudeville-esque variety show by a cast of five other transgender women who sing, dance, and act their way through the past, present, and future of transgender women's lives in the U.S. *The Fully Functional Cabaret* does not describe itself as ethnographic, and to categorize it as such, I fear, reduces it to its depiction of Otherness, if we abide by Madison's definition of ethnography. However, I purport that *The Fully Functional Cabaret* provides a potentially revolutionary form of creating transgender history by utilizing techniques of dialogical performance ethnography and allowing transgender performers to embody identities and enact experiences that are not typically accessible to them by virtue of their status as transgender women.

Furthermore, I end this chapter, and this thesis, with a discussion of what the future of transgender performance and representation might look like with Dorsey and Danger as our potential models for progressing forward. Returning to Halberstam's discussion of "queer time" and Namaste's charge that transgender/transsexual people must be in charge of their own narratives, I end with an expression of hope for what performance studies and the aesthetics of performance in the U.S. could learn from these experiences. "In an institutional sense," Namaste writes, "non-transsexual individuals have the first and final word on the matter" (45). Here, Namaste is speaking to a larger issue that this thesis attempts to address: it's not just the bodies on stage/screen, but the bodies behind the scenes as well. As long as cisgender people are the minds and bodies in charge of casting, producing, editing, and directing, the centering of cisgender minds and bodies will continue. By acknowledging and devoting critical attention to the work of transgender artists in addition to my critique of cis-centric performances of trans experience, I hope that this thesis will contribute to the effort to equalize the means of artistic and critical production.

Chapter Two: Threads of a Legacy

WHOSE FUSS IS IT ANYWAY?

In “An Introduction to Transgender,” the first chapter of her book, *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker takes a moment, after a lengthy discussion of trans and queer-related terminology and vocabulary, to address the surging wave of public attention on transgender identity at the time of writing the book in the early 2000s.[6] Stryker cites the staggering number of search results when entering particular trans-related terms into Google and makes passing references to the number of representations of transgender identity and experience present in what she terms the “contemporary media,” which includes everything from animated television shows to daytime television talk shows to newspaper articles. Before launching into a speculation as to why this media surge has occurred, Stryker frames her exploration of this phenomenon as an answer to the following question: “What’s all the fuss about” (25)?

I am tickled by the way in which Stryker, as a transsexual woman, asks this question. By framing her inquiry in this way, she formulates not just a question to be answered but an implication of the media attention that she describes. Through this phrasing, she categorizes the media’s attention to transgender issues specifically as a “fuss.” Stryker goes on to argue that transgender issues have become a “hot topic” in the early 2000s because the ways in which transgender individuals embody their gender identities and expressions are counter to antiquated ideas of fixed binaries and a world without biomedical engineering. Transgender identities, Stryker comes to conclude, "offer a window into that coming world" which "completely [separates] biological reproduction [...] from the status of one's social and psychological gender" (28), a future which appeals to a millennial generation increasingly more comfortable with technology's complementary relationship to their daily lives, as well as feminists and queer people who seek to "break down old divisions between sexual identity communities" (26). However, this glimpse into the future that Stryker proposes as an optimistic perspective on the contemporary obsession with transgender identities is decidedly beneficial only to those subcultural groups mentioned above: politically-progressive millennials, trans-inclusionary feminists, and queer people.[7] In contrast, Stryker mentions a handful of groups for whom the visibility of trans identity indicates "the moral debauchery" that plagues contemporary society or the effects of drastic changes to our environmental atmosphere (25). For these folks, trans identity and the existence of trans people is, at best, a scientific anomaly and, at worst, a symptom of the ills suffered by a morally-bankrupt society.

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[6] *Transgender History* was published in 2008, and Stryker, in her introduction, explicitly dates internet statistics she cites with “as of late 2007;” however, because of the expansive timeline of writing, editing, and publishing a book, Stryker could be speaking of a cultural context from any time between, presumably, 2000 and 2008 - thus, I categorize it as “the early 2000s.”

It seems as though the people making "all the fuss" are people who possess an insatiable curiosity about our lives due to hopeful excitement or abject disgust. But who is absent from this litany of sub or countercultural groups who are either repulsed or fascinated by the lives and experiences of transgender people? It is the *subject* of all of the fuss, transgender people ourselves, and it is this absence from Stryker's list of people involved in the media attention to trans experience that makes her identification of this attention as a "fuss" so poignant to me. A "fuss" is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "activity or excitement that is unusual and that often is not wanted or necessary." Whether or not this media attention is "wanted" is certainly subjective and impossible to argue for or against without comprehensive qualitative data gathered from a survey of fellow transgender people, and we could debate philosophically about whether or not it is "unusual" for the rest of our mortal lives. What I will argue, however, is that this media attention is not "necessary" for transgender people, because it is not actually *for* transgender people. Indeed, as Stryker implies with her exploration of why transgender identity has become a popular source of discussion and mediation, transgender people are not benefitting from the examination of their lives by others. Not once in her speculation on why transgender identity is intriguing or enticing in the early 2000s does Stryker indicate that "the fuss" is actually "about" the lives and experiences of transgender people. It is about a fascination with transgender identity and experience by non-transgender people because of the ways in which non-transgender people can either project their anxieties about and hope for the future onto transgender bodies.

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[7] I make this distinction because, as evidenced by the disparaging comments made by feminist icons such as Mary Daly, Janice Raymond, and Andrea Dworkin, as well as the rise of trans-exclusionary radical feminism in online activist circles, there needs to be a distinction made between trans-exclusionary and trans-inclusionary feminisms.

In fact, Stryker specifically follows up this series of speculative statements with a personal anecdote about her experience at the Fourth Annual Trans March and Rally in San Francisco, which concludes the first chapter of *Transgender History*. In this anecdote, Stryker expresses her awe and admiration of the "beautiful range of human diversity" that faced her from the audience as she stood on the stage to deliver an address to the crowd. She describes the crowd as “a bewitching spectacle” and proceeds to describe the various types of people she sees:

> brilliantly tattooed, biologically female queer femme women and the trans guys who used to be their dyke girlfriends; straight-looking male-to-female transsexuals with nail salon manicures sitting side by side with countercultural transsexual women sporting face jewelry, deadlocks, and thrift-store chic; lithe young people of indeterminate gender; black bulldaggers, white fairies, Asian queens, Native two-spirits; effeminate trannyfags and butch transsexual lesbians; kids of parents who had changed sex and parents who support their kids’ rejection of the labels their society had handed them. (29)

What is striking to me about this passage, in contrast to the section preceding it, is that for Stryker, a transsexual lesbian, it is not the representation of the trans-sexual[8] teacher in an animated comedy series or the talk show interviews about the ethical debate surrounding puberty blockers for adolescent children which inspire her. It is the physical presence of a “beautiful range of human diversity” within transgender, queer, and gender-nonconforming bodies at an event specifically conceived of and executed by transgender and transsexual people[9] which incites Stryker’s delight.

I use this analysis of Stryker’s work in order to support my argument that performances about transgender experience that do not center transgender bodies on their own transgender terms is work that positions cisgender bodies as the "bodies that matter." I place as the focus of my analysis in this chapter the "fuss" of representing transgender identity and experience by non-transgender writers, directors, producers, and actors in order to highlight the fact that the "fuss" is really what this is all about. For these particular performances, the "fuss" is what I am calling the "spectacle of transformation" that the cisgender actor undergoes in order to embody the transgender character they perform. The phrase "spectacle of transformation" is not a unique string of words, but I will use it to signal a particular moment of the performance that, I argue, shifts the focus of each respective performance away from the representation of the transgender experience and onto the physical transformation, via production elements (costumes, blocking, and, for film, the perspective of the camera), of the performer across gender lines.

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[8] My use of the hyphen here to designate “trans-sexual” rather than “transsexual” is to acknowledge that, with no context for the character spoken about on this show, it is unclear whether or not this character is supposed to be a representation of a person who identifies as transgender or transsexual, or is simply used as an avatar for the experience of sex change. I feel the need to make this distinction because of the ways in which changing sex is often used as a trope separate from transsexual identity in television and film, usually for comedic effect.

[9] The annual Trans March and Rally in San Francisco was inspired by an anonymous letter which described the trans experience using “we” and “our” language which signified the author’s identification with transgender/transsexual identity. Further, the language of the mission and vision for the event reflects this language of “we,” indicating that the event intends to be for, with, and by trans people.

To this end, this chapter intends to move the reader through a discussion of two performances of transgender individuals by cisgender actors whose gender identities do not align with that of their character. Moving forward, I will refer to these types of performances as "cross-gender performances" for two reasons: for the sake of brevity, and to privilege the gender identity of the character by acknowledging that the gender identity of the character should not be supplanted by the assigned sex of the actor -- a man playing a trans woman is a man playing a woman, full stop. I will analyze these performances with two areas of focus: the ways in which the performance uses conventions of their respective mediums to privilege the codification of the actors' bodies, and the ways in which the critical receptions of the performances reinforce the ways in which the former effect occurs.

My intention with the above analysis is to display the historical and cultural evolution of cross-gender performance, in order to fully contextualize my discussion of recent performances by transgender artists in the third chapter. As such, this chapter will begin with an examination of the cross-gender theatrical performances of Charlotte Cushman and the critical response to this work. These performances were perceived by their critics to be the most successful performances of these roles the theater had ever seen. Cushman's portrayal of Romeo, in particular, is considered by some critics to be the most successful Romeo precisely because of what Cushman brings to the performance as a woman. Critics indicated their suspicions that only a woman was able to access the deep emotional well that is required to portray Romeo's youthful passion and impulsivity. It may seem antithetical to begin this chapter with an uncritical discussion of a performer lauded for her cross-gender performances. However, my intention in this section is not to suggest that either Hilary Swank or Jefferson Mays—the two other actors that I discuss in this chapter that participate in what I have termed cross-gender performances—could learn a thing or two from Cushman; my intention is to situate cross-gender performance in a historical context, beginning with what I see as a significant figure for this practice in U.S. performance history.

To this end, this chapter acknowledges that Cushman was performing in a time before U.S. culture had terms for transgender experience as we understand it in a contemporary context, meaning that her performance is able to be received without speculation about her personal life because there is no available vocabulary to suggest that her desire to perform as a man is linked in any way to her gender or sexual identity. However, I acknowledge that Cushman did face critical backlash based in anxieties around how her performances might have the potential to influence her personal gender expression, and how, once homosexuality and gender non-conforming behavior became linked, Cushman's fame dissipates. I bring up Cushman's career as a performer of cross-gender roles in order to recognize the evolution of cultural, social, and medically-influenced ideologies about sex and gender and the effects that these ideologies have had on performance and the entertainment industry in the U.S. By historicizing the critical response to cross-gender theatrical performance and the connection between a performer's public persona and the roles that they play, I aim to show the roots of these phenomena to better understand the way that it continues to occur in our reception of contemporary performance and the effect that it has on our reading of a cross-gender performance which has the added layer of being a representation of a transgender person.

My engagement with the presentations and receptions of the actors' bodies acknowledges the ways in which performers face scrutiny for their public personas and the ways in which those embodiments adhere to particular parameters of hegemonic physiological idealism. When a cisgender actor engages in a cross-gender performance, this scrutiny is heightened, in an attempt to ensure that the cross-gender nature of the cultural performance does not have any lasting effects on the actor's social performances and public appearances. When an actor engages in a cross-gender performance of a transgender character, this scrutiny shifts in its focus and intention because the actor's body maintains primacy over the gender identity of the character. Therefore, for example, when a cisgender male actor performs a character who is a transgender woman, his public performances of hegemonic masculinity do not serve to reinforce his own gender identity for fear that he is actually a transgender woman; rather, they work to undermine the gender identity of his character, because the reality of this actor being transgender is simultaneously terrifying and utterly unfathomable.

I exemplify the above argument through a consideration of the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry,* directed by a cis woman (Kimberly Peirce) and starring a cis woman (Hilary Swank) in the lead role as Brandon Teena, a young transgender man from Nebraska who is raped and then murdered by his girlfriend's jealous ex-boyfriend upon discovering that Brandon is transgender. This film has historical significance because it introduces a variety of "firsts" to wide release film at the time: the first to feature a transgender character as the protagonist and the first to feature a character identified as a transgender man. In this chapter, I focus on the legacy of *Boys Don't Cry* and its impact on not only film history but also the history of transgender characters in performance as well, and I argue that *Boys Don't Cry* sets the precedent for the continuing phenomenon where an actor is given critical praise for the ways in which they transform themselves, primarily with a focus on the physical, in a cross-gender performance of a transgender character. The actor is lauded for the "spectacle of transformation" that they present and, subsequently, eclipses any presentation of the systemically oppressive reality of any given transgender experience. Through an analysis of audience and critical receptions of the movie, as well as the marketing and advertising tactics for the film, I argue that the film is not about the violence enacted against the body of actual transgender man Brandon Teena but is, rather, an opportunity for director Kimberly Peirce to feature young up-and-coming Hollywood star Hilary Swank and her cisgender female body.

Then, the chapter moves to an analysis of Doug Wright's script for *I Am My Own Wife*, a solo play produced on Broadway in 2003 which documents a series of interviews the playwright conducted with Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a transgender woman who survived the Third Reich in Germany. I place the text of Wright's play, including his stage directions, alongside the ethnographic theories of Dwight Conquergood and Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, as well as Jack Halberstam's theories of ethical transgender biography, in order to highlight the ways in which Wright attempts to co-opt the story of a transgender woman as a piece of gay (and, subsequently, cis male) history. I pay particular attention to the costuming choices that Wright suggests in his script, which, I argue, place the questions of truth and authenticity on Charlotte's body, particularly as it is presented on stage by a cis male actor.

By moving through these three specific moments in time, I hope to create a framework of shifting historical discourse within which to move into my third chapter, which focuses on two more recent pieces of work created by transgender artists between 2010-2012. Through this work, I seek to track the trajectory of transgender representation in performance and highlight the legacy of a system of representation which dismisses the bodies that it purports to represent. In this discussion, my aim is not to critique these performances as a film or theater critic might, implying that the ethical dilemmas involved in these performances entirely negate their value as pieces of art or their significance to our artistic or cultural landscape. Rather, my intention is to provide the following: a sense of where this practice originated, how it has evolved, and what it looks like now, so that in Chapter 3, we might better understand where it has yet to go.

A QUESTIONABLE (UN)SEXING

In 1849, Charlotte Cushman's portrayal of Romeo on the American stage became a national sensation. In a culture that was not yet entirely accustomed to the performances of women on the theatrical stage, let alone women portraying men outside of vaudeville variety shows, Cushman's success was a fascinating anomaly, gaining critical accolades across the board. At this period in time, cross-gender performance, mostly in the form of male or female impersonation, was a form of entertainment that lived mostly on the fringes, in the vaudeville circuit or in revues known as "benefits," which we would most likely now call "experimental" works. Male impersonators were, very specifically, performers who identified as women and performed variety show-esque performances, the entertainment value of which was predicated upon the shock and surprise of a woman cross-dressing and performing stereotypical masculinity. However, Cushman is not included in the ranks of vaudeville's successful male impersonators. Cushman is identified, by her contemporaries and mine, as an actress who played men's roles, not a "male impersonator." The few women who performed roles written for men in theatrical productions were not considered to be engaging in "male impersonation" because their performances were not explicitly about the crossing of gender lines but, rather, focused on their performance of a character's emotional qualities and dramatic arc.

But this does not mean that gender identity and expression were not qualities that factored into the reception of these performances. To the contrary, Cushman's work was revered for having a sense of truth to her performance of Romeo that many believed male actors could not harness because it required a certain femininity that male actors were not, at the time, comfortable with portraying on stage. In her writing about women portraying the role of Romeo on stage, Anne Russell addresses these contradictions present in the critics' receptions of cross-dressed women on the dramatic stage in reviews which were surprisingly positive. In "Gender, Passion, and Performance in Nineteenth-Century Women Romeos," Russell claims that the potential for "a possibly unsettling perspective on the essentialist ideologies of sex and gender" of the time is "muted as actresses carefully constructed conventionally gendered representations of their private lives " (163). In other words, the performance on stage is not perceived by critics and audiences as having the potential to illuminate the constructed or unstable nature of sex and gender categories because the actresses are identified off-stage as dutifully fulfilling hegemonic gender roles in their private lives. Russell identifies here the practice that I purport remains true of contemporary cultural performances which, thinking about the representational verisimilitude of Hall's barking but bite-less dog on the television screen, render the on-stage or on-screen performance unthreatening because it can remain safely within the conventions of temporary, ephemeral performance.

However, in her discussions of the critical receptions of Cushman's performance, Denise A. Walen attributes what negative reviews Cushman received to "the belief that by performing the role of a male character [Cushman] was denying her femininity" (49).

The reviews that Walen cites all express an anxiety around what performing the role would do to Cushman's sense of her sex and her gender expression (though not in so many words, of course). Walen makes particular note of the fact that these reviews do not critique Cushman's acting ability, but, rather, criticize the performance because of the threat of what it might indicate about her identity or lead her toward an unseemly state of gender inversion and perversity. In fact, because of this fact, Walen suggests that perhaps the problem is really that Cushman was actually too good at acting, that her performance of Romeo was so realistic that "she unsexed herself in the role" (49). While I think that there is some merit to this interpretation, I'd like to suggest that the fear is not that Cushman had "unsexed" herself, but, rather, that she illuminated the constructed nature of a sex-gender connection by performing a gender incongruous with her continuously present sex. To use the term "unsexed" is to imply that there is ever a time when a human body can escape the constructions and signifiers of sex. Cushman's performance was not threatening in its potential to render her sex invisible; it is threatening in the continued visibility of her sex, despite a performance which is contrary to the behavior that is perceived to be innate to people of that sex.

Clearly, even though Cushman performed in a time before U.S. American culture had words to describe transgender or queer identity[10], anxiety over a woman taking the stage as a man and being able to perform a believable masculinity was present in some audiences. However, the fact that Cushman continued to be able to perform the role on stage, as well as the success of Sarah Bernhardt and other women who took to the stage as the lead male roles in classic theatrical productions, indicates that cross-gender performance, at least for women, was not a career killer quite yet. Unfortunately, as the work of Krafft-Ebing and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld began to find traction in the U.S., actors wishing to perform in roles written for another gender or continue their acts as cross-gender impersonators found themselves needing to heavily emphasize heteronormativity in their personal lives in order to maintain their lucrative careers. Walen notes that Cushman had been dead for over 30 years when "her memory was obscured with the passage of time and the potential […] to identify her behavior as lesbian" (50). The "behavior" that Walen indicates is not just the way she conducted her personal life, but also the roles that she portrayed on stage as well. Walen quotes directly from Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis,* one of the cornerstone texts of sex-related psychology, which states that willful engagement in cross-gender theatrical performance is a potential indicator of lesbianism in women (50).

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[10] It was not until 1869 Richard von Krafft-Ebing popularized the term "homosexuality" in his seminal work, *Psychopathia Sexualis: eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* (Sexual Psychopathy: A Clinical-Forensic Study). In his book, Krafft-Ebing uses "homo-sexual" to describe an individual who exhibits qualities of the opposite sex, including but not limited to sexual desire for individuals of the same sex (Krafft-Ebing 285).

THE EMPRESS'S NEW CLOTHES

U.S. American film history gained its first transgender male character in a wide-release film in the form of Brandon Teena, as portrayed by Hilary Swank, in Boys Don't Cry (1999, dir. Kimberly Peirce). The U.S. film industry was, at this point, not a complete stranger to women playing men on the big screen, having given audiences films depicting women taking on male personas as far back as Greta Garbo's 1933 performance in Queen Christina, where she portrays the eponymous Swedish queen who disguises herself as a man in order to sneak off into the night, an action that she is unable to execute safely as a woman. In most of these performances, as in *Queen Christina,* masculinity and its corresponding physical accoutrements are temporary costumes and disguises required in order to authenticate the female protagonist's cross-gender ruse. If these performances were biographical, they would be categorized under Halberstam's system as "projects of rationalization" which present transgender existence as cross-gender performances initiated for the sake of survival or extenuating circumstances (54). Halberstam identifies this as a way in which historians and biographers can take the stories of people who exhibited indicators of transgender identity and fit them back into a structure of heteronormativity. Still, I believe that Halberstam's system is applicable to fictional narratives as well. Even in his book, *Transgender on Screen,* John Phillips uses the terminology of "rationalization" to describe cross-gender performances such as Julie Andrews' in *Victor/Victoria,* wherein a character cross-dresses "as a means to an end, a temporary transgression which never really threatens the status quo" (69).

In *Boys Don't Cry,* however, we are presented with Brandon Teena, who claims a gender identity and expression that is incongruous with that which is associated with his sex assigned at birth: he is a transgender man. For Brandon, "man" is the gender with which he identifies; the act of flattening his chest and creating a bulge in his pants is an attempt to make his body reflect conventional ideals of maleness, which, as a transgender man, he needs to portray in order to survive. Despite this misconception held by many characters in the film, as well as reviewers of the film, these actions are not attempts at putting on a "costume" in order to "fool" anyone – they are the means by which transgender individuals, to varying degrees, navigate a world in which the external perception of a gender identity is privileged over the assertions of the individual. In other words, attempting to appear to have a body that is congruous with the sex associated with one's gender identity (an action known as "passing") is not a matter of disguise for a transgender person but, rather, a means by which to avoid the ridicule and violence often enacted toward bodies which seem to confuse or cross hegemonic gender lines.

Within Kimberly Peirce's dramatic interpretation of his life, Brandon is murdered by cisgender men who feel betrayed and emasculated by his ability to garner female sexual interest and successfully "perform" masculinity despite the physiological reality of his AFAB body. The consequences of Brandon's claim to maleness and exhibition of masculinity are brutal violence and death, whereas in the examples listed above (*Queen Christina* and *Victor/Victoria*), the characters revert to the gender that hegemonically aligns with their sex and manage to survive until the end of the film. In all three instances, the assigned sex of the character in question is a site of tension and crisis in some way. For Queen Christina, her AFAB body prevents her from moving freely about the world in the ways that she would like to because of strict regulations on women's independence; Victoria Grant must conceal her AFAB body, less it destroy the legitimacy of the male persona she adopts in order to make the money that she needs to survive; and Brandon's AFAB body is, according to hegemonic constructions of sex and gender, in opposition to the gender identity that he knows to be true of himself. In all three performances, the female coding of the protagonist is a crucial part of the dramatic arc of the film's narrative. However, the way in which these performances deviate from one another is that Garbo and Andrews perform the roles of women who adopt disguises that rely on the shrouding of their AFAB bodies in order to successfully deceive. Swank, on the other hand, performs the role of a man who is prevented from having his gender identity validated and, inevitably, his life valued by the imposed coding of his body by others.

In the cases of *Queen Christina* and *Victor/Victoria*, the actress's AFAB body, as well as her congruous identity as a woman, is something that she shares with the character that she plays. These are not cross-gender performances as I am defining them, because Garbo and Andrews are women performing women. Swank's performance is cross-gender because the gender identity of her character is different from her own, regardless of the AFAB body that they share. I bring up this point, long-winded as it may seem, in order to situate the discourse surrounding Swank's performance with which I am about to engage. In short, my opening argument is this: Queen Christina and Victoria Grant are played by cisgender women because they (the characters) are women who simply pretend to be men in order to gain something; Brandon Teena is played by a cisgender woman because, for the dramatic arc of this film to work, the very same hegemonic codification of Brandon's body that lead to his murder in real life must occur before, during, and after the film.

Ironically, director Kimberly Peirce states that her decision to cast Hilary Swank, a relatively unknown actress at the time, was made in order to avoid additional preconceptions being placed upon Brandon's body by the viewing audience if he were to be played by a well-known actress. What she needed, Peirce asserts, was someone who "could pass day to day" (Fuchs). By making this comment, Peirce recognizes the fact that the audience will bring their own ideals of femininity and masculinity, of female and male, to the theater when they view the film. In Peirce's mind, Hilary Swank, as an actress who had not yet made her wide release debut, yet had proven her acting skills in *Beverly Hills 90210* and *The Karate Kid 2*, was a blank slate onto which she could safely place Brandon's identity. This also seems to be a comment on Swank's potential to appear "androgynous," with her protruding jawline and sharp cheekbones, features that are often highlighted in featured articles about Swank and her role in the film. What Peirce subsequently fails to acknowledge is that being an unknown actor does not exempt Swank from bringing to the role the codifications associated with her own gender identity and expression; and she fails to anticipate the ways in which critics and audiences alike will attempt to reclaim Swank's femininity in the wake of this Oscar-winning performance as a transgender man.

In her article "The Performance of White Masculinity in *Boys Don't Cry*: Identity, Desire, and (Mis)Recognition," Jennifer Esposito employs the concept of "border patrol" in order to highlight the ways in which the film strips away Brandon's ability to claim manhood and masculinity. Esposito argues that the film situates the cisgender male characters within the film and the audience members viewing the film as border patrollers, tasked with finding the moments in which Brandon fails to enact an acceptable form of masculinity. In describing his body as a "contested site" (238), Esposito places Brandon's biology as the main object under scrutiny, the evidence which we use to determine on which side of the gender binary Brandon's actions and words seem to fall.

As a result, the moments in the film where Brandon's biology "betrays" him are the only things that matter, in the end (239).

Similarly, in her article "Brandon Goes to Hollywood," scholar Melissa Rigney identifies what she calls a "twofold pleasure/tension" in the film, which is found in the audience's simultaneous acceptance and dissection of Brandon's masculinity (Rigney 188). Informed by the "prior knowledge" they have that "he is really a she" – "he" being Brandon, and "she" being not only Teena, but also Hilary Swank – Esposito calls upon Laura Mulvey's scopophilic theory of the male spectator to echo Rigney's claims with her argument that *Boys Don't Cry* positions the audience (and, in particular, the cis white male spectator) as "border patrol." According to the rules of this border patrolling, Brandon is not a (cis) man because his body does not possess the qualities associated with maleness via hegemonic constructions of sex, and his ability to convince others that he is a man is threatening because he is passing through the borders set up around cis male identity. Hegemonic identities, such as whiteness and masculinity, "[remain] normative by policing the borders and keeping out the Others." By constantly exposing Brandon's masculinity as a performance, the film itself posits him as "Other" and repeatedly reminds the cis male spectator of the border that keeps his identity safe by constantly positioning Brandon as an outsider. The male spectator is then reminded that he is the ultimate border patrol because, returning to Butler, the cis (white straight able) male is at the apex of that exclusionary matrix outside of which Brandon's trans (white, potentially queer, able) maleness sits in the realm of the abject, the unreal, the disposable.

Before he even enters the theater, the spectator is assured that the man he is about to see on screen is nothing more than a woman in disguise. The audience is introduced to Brandon through the film's promotional posters and television advertisements, which depict Brandon, as portrayed by Hilary Swank, superimposed over a long stretch of highway, walking alone, wearing a white t-shirt, jeans, and a hat. Melissa Rigney identifies this as an attempt to "[align Brandon] with the figure of the drifter or the mysterious stranger who wanders into town with no name and no history" (192). These images locate Brandon within a framework of masculinity that is familiar to a mainstream audience, recalling the Hollywood iconography of James Dean or Marlon Brando, and they provide the audience with plenty of identifiable reference points to identify within Brandon's image. While these recollections of familiar masculine icons are meant to make Brandon more palatable to the audience, they are also ways in which the film presents Brandon's masculinity as a performance, and this is further exhibited by the choice to cast Hilary Swank as Brandon.

When the spectator looks at the poster, he is not seeing a young transgender man performing a desirable masculinity: he is seeing a cisgender female actress wearing the costume of a young transgender man who is performing a desirable masculinity. Unlike films such as *The Crying Game,* which hid the "shocking twist" of Dil's transgender status behind unknown actor Jaye Davidson's androgynous name, *Boys Don't Cry* makes no attempt to make Brandon's AFAB body a secret to the audience. This creates multiple layers of simulacrum for the audience to unpack while they watch the film. The audience sees Hilary Swank playing Teena Brandon, who played Brandon Teena in real life, who is performing the beloved Hollywood masculinity of James Dean. The layers of this performance within a performance within a performance contributes to the "spectacle of transformation." The audience is enraptured by the aplomb with which Hilary Swank performs Teena's performance of Brandon, which is a performance of a particular kind of masculinity that exists deliberately in stark contrast to the violent, aggressive masculinity of the two main cis male characters, Tom and John.

Furthermore, adding to the spectacle, the spectator is hyper-aware of the emphasis on Brandon's body and the indicators of his identity as performance because Brandon's body is represented by Swank's, which, as belonging to a young female Hollywood actress, is constantly under public and media scrutiny. This is knowledge that the spectator has prior to entering the theater and which, subsequently, informs his view of Brandon, the character. Before the audience even enters the theater, they are aware of the many layers of performance involved in the production, and that prepares them for their role as "border patrol." Audiences are well prepared to investigate and judge an actor's performance, but in this film, they're asked to scrutinize not only Swank's performance as Brandon Teena, but Brandon's performance as Brandon as well.

In her review of *Boys Don't Cry* for the New York Times, critic Janet Maslin describes newcomer Swank as, "a beautiful, lanky actress with 'Beverly Hills 90210' to her credit and no residual vanity to come between herself and Brandon." Maslin chooses to emphasize the feminine parts of Swank's body, specifically referencing her appearance on "Beverly Hills 90210," a show known for its casting of young, conventionally attractive actors. Maslin also notes Swank's lack of "vanity" as a strength which enables

Swank to connect more closely with her character, who is implied, by this comment, to be less attractive than Swank. Additionally, Swank's appearance on screen as Brandon is not a time for her to show off her body but, rather, cultivates an excitement around the moments where she will be seen capitalizing on her own beauty off-screen. Another article on the film, written for the New York Times by Ted Loos, starts off by saying, "[Most] actresses know that their careers are largely dependent on their looks. But last year, Hilary Swank had to worry about her appearance both as actress and actor." Loos's article documents the process through which Swank prepared herself for her role as Brandon: cutting off her hair, attempting to simultaneously lose weight and gain muscle, and trying to pass as male in public. "'It's absolutely amazing," Swank says in the interview with Loos, "what happens when a woman chops her hair off."

Loos's article also highlights how reviewers, and those associated with the film, did not see the role of Brandon as that of a transgender man, but rather, as a "role within a role:" the role of Teena Brandon playing Brandon Teena, as played by Hilary Swank. In the interview, it is noted that Swank alternates between using he and she to refer to Brandon, which is, allegedly, how the rest of the cast and crew referred to him as well. Reading a number of reviews of the film, as well as interviews with the cast and crew, it becomes clear that Brandon's identity as a transgender man is either ignored or completely missed by audiences and collaborators of the film alike. Almost every review refers to Brandon using she/her pronouns and a large portion of them also identify him, in some way, as a girl in disguise as a boy. Roger Ebert's review identifies Brandon as "a lonely girl who would rather be a boy," though Ebert respects Brandon's pronouns for the remainder of the review, going so far as to textually acknowledge that when Brandon arrives in Falls City, the place where the main events of the film take place, “she has become Brandon Teena, and we must use the male pronoun in describing him” (Ebert).

In his review, Ebert also makes it clear with whom he believes the film intends for the audience to identify: Chloe Sevigny’s character, Lana Tisdel, Brandon’s cisgender female lover and the ex-lover of Brandon’s rapist and murderer, John Lotter. In the section of his review in which he acknowledges Sevigny’s performance and the audience’s connection with Lana, he says,

> The Lana character is crucial to the movie, and although Hilary Swank deserves all praise for her performance as Brandon, it is Sevigny who provides our entrance into the story. Representing the several women the real Brandon dated, she sees him as a warm, gentle, romantic lover. Does Lana know Brandon is a girl? At some point, certainly. But at what point exactly? There is a stretch when she knows, and yet she doesn't know, because she doesn't want to know; romance is built on illusion, and when we love someone, we love the illusion they have created for us.

In his book *In a Queer Time and Space*, Jack Halberstam questions the ethics of transgender biography when the biographer does not identify with their biographical subject. Theorizing on this phenomenon within a discussion of biographical materials about jazz musician and transgender man Billy Tipton, Halberstam claims that accusations such as “eccentric, double, deceptive, odd, self-hating” are lodged unfairly at subjects who are “the passing woman, the cross-dresser, the nonoperative transsexual, the self-defined transgender person,” without an equally moralistic assessment of the ways in which “gender-normative lives [are] odd, [are] duplicitous, [are] doubled and contradictory at every turn” (57). Engaging in a specific criticism of two biographical texts based on Tipton's life, Halberstam claims that the biographers, both straight cisgender women, identify more with the women that Tipton was romantically involved with and, therefore, read his story as one of a "cad, deceiver, seducer of young women, or simply the delusional charmer" (56). Ebert, by positing Lana as the character who embodies our "entrance into the story," engages in this same identification of the cisgender individual, who has been duped by the disguise of the transgender subject, though Ebert's language is certainly, on the surface, less inflammatory than that which Halberstam is critiquing. It is important to acknowledge that Ebert is not the biographer himself, but, rather, an audience member experiencing a film directed and co-written by someone who does fashion herself a biographer of Brandon's story. However, rather than spend time in this project interpreting whether or not Peirce truly identified with her subject, I would like to put forward that, in the same way that I am not interested in the authenticity of the representation of Brandon's life, I am also not interested in the intentions with which this film was approached. I am interested in the results of the final product, the consequences of the decisions that were made and the impact of the images that came from those decisions, because that is what creates the legacy.

Continuing with an analysis of the film's reception, the critical emphasis on the lengths to which Swank had to go in order to prepare herself physically for this role focus our attention not on what Brandon might be, but what Hilary Swank is not – which is neither male impersonator nor transgender man. Even when viewing Brandon as simply a girl who disguised herself as a boy, there exists the need to differentiate Swank from her character both physically and mentally. In an feature article on Chloe Sevigny, New York

Times writer Dana Kennedy interviews Hilary Swank, along with Peirce, about what it was like to work on the film together. While the featured story is supposed to focus on Sevigny and the seemingly miraculous way that she continues to be cast in Hollywood films despite not succumbing to narcissistic celebrity culture, inevitably, the article turns into a discussion about Swank's portrayal of Brandon Teena in the film. Speaking on the experience of working alongside Swank for the film, Sevigny tells the following anecdote:

> [Sevigny] rarely saw Ms. Swank out of character as a boy, she said, except for one unsettling evening when Ms. Swank's husband, the actor Chad Lowe, came to visit the set: "We all said good night to them as they were heading off to their room. But then it was like, 'Oh no, I can't imagine Hilary having sex as a woman.'" (Kennedy)

The framing of this story is interesting in contrast to a line earlier in the article, which identifies the film as the story of "a 20-year-old woman who calls herself Brandon Teena and pretends to be a man." If the story is not about a man, then what does it mean for Hilary Swank to be identified by her co-stars as never being "out of character as a boy?" Additionally, perhaps the choice of language to examine here is not Sevigny's recognition of Brandon as a character who is male but, rather, Kennedy's implication that Sevigny's inability to imagine Swank "having sex as a woman" is "unsettling" to her. In this moment, Kennedy reveals her own anxieties about what kind of instability this role may be creating or even highlighting in Swank's public performance of femininity and womanhood. This anecdote is mediated through the way in which Kennedy frames it; we are not privy to the raw material of an audio or video recording of Sevigny's oral delivery of this story, which might belie a sense of humor or, perhaps, considering Sevigny's later comment that she “got a ‘little flirty’” with Swank while off-camera, a sense of erotic curiosity. Instead, we are goaded to understand this moment as one of disturbing disruption in which Swank’s performance of this role shrouded her co-star’s ability to validate Swank’s adherence to heteronormativity. That this article about Sevigny is titled, “OSCAR FILMS/FIRST TIMERS; Who Says You Have to Struggle to Be a Star?” creates an additional layer of implication for this moment, as Sevigny’s ability “to succeed with little effort” is contrasted with Swank’s from start to finish, beginning with the title, which applies to both Swank and Sevigny, first time Oscar nominees in the same year for the same film, and continuing through the article as Sevigny is interviewed at a cafe in Manhattan, while Swank conducts her interview over the phone from on-set for another film.

The enduring legacy of *Boys Don’t Cry* is not, then, a national spotlight on the systemic oppression of transgender individuals and the violence that they face in a heteronormative and cissexist society. Rather, it is a testament to the bravery and skill required for an actor to step into the role of a transgender person, and that the successful execution of a role like this can result in a sky-rocketing career boost. Indeed, Hilary Swank went on to win the Oscar for Best Actress in a Leading Role for her portrayal of Brandon, though Sevigny did not win Best Supporting Actress for her role as Lana Tisdel. Swank joins the ranks of cisgender actors receiving prestigious awards for their portrayal of a transgender character who ends up dead by the end of their respective performance. One could, potentially, trace this legacy back to Jaye Davidson, the unknown actor who portrayed the transgender character, Dil, in *The Crying Game* in

1992 and received an Academy Award nomination for the performance. But Swank is the first actor to *win* the Academy Award for her performance, and it catapults her into the spotlight; Davidson recedes back into obscurity after his performance, only to crop up in the occasional "Where are they now?" article on the internet. Additionally, regardless of whether the award is won or not, the reality remains the same: The cisgender actor is lauded for performing transgender tragedy, while the transgender individual struggles to survive in a society which continues to actively perform acts of emotional, physical, and systemic violence against them. Jennifer Esposito expresses this tense contradiction beautifully in one of the disclaimers to "Identity, Desire, (Mis)Recognition:" "Hilary Swank was awarded an Oscar® for her performance of Brandon's performance. Brandon Teena was sentenced to a brutal rape and murder for his performance" (231).

AN ESSENTIAL (DIS)BELIEF

With his one-man play, *I Am My Own Wife*, playwright Doug Wright also joins the ranks of cisgender individuals who are lauded for their work's depiction of a transgender life that culminates in death. For this play, Wright received the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in Drama; the Broadway production, directed by Moises Kaufman of the Tectonic Theater Company, won the 2004 Tony for Best Play; and the actor who plays the lead (and only) role, Jefferson Mays, won the Tony for Best Lead Actor in a Play that same year. *I Am My Own Wife* depicts the playwright's relationship to Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a transgender woman who survived living in Eastern Europe during the mid-to-late 20th century. Charlotte's story follows her personal journey of love, self-discovery, espionage, and, most importantly, her role as a preserver of historical artifacts that keep alive the memory of the underground social movements that resisted the Third Reich. *I Am My Own Wife* is aptly subtitled “Studies for a Play About Charlotte von Mahlsdorf” because Wright intends to chart through this script not a biographical account of Charlotte’s life but, rather, “[his] own relationship with [his] heroine” (Wright xv).

In “Portrait of an Enigma,” the essay which precedes the script of the play in its 2004 Faber & Faber print edition, Wright recounts the difficulty he faced in conceiving of this play. Drawn to Charlotte’s story, Wright wanted to bring it to the stage, but felt unequipped to adequately and accurately portray the historical details of Charlotte’s life. After facing a seemingly endless writer’s block, Wright was re-invigorated with motivation for the project by the suggestion from a friend to write about the one thing on which Wright, in that moment, was an expert: “[his] ongoing obsession with a remarkable character” (xv).

In “Rethinking Ethnography,” Dwight Conquergood addresses the shifting notions of ethnography in a post-modern globalized society. Building upon the theories of Renato Rosaldo, James Clifford, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, Conquergood identifies contemporary ethnography’s focus on the “borderlands” of identity “not simply as barriers but as bridges and membranes” (Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography,” 184). As each global culture becomes more and more accessible to one another, traditional notions of difference and otherness begin to break down, causing a panicked re-building of boundaries that continue to fail to, as Trinh states, “separate, contain, and mend” (Trinh, in Conquergood, 184). Conquergood states that these borders are more than just physical geographic borders but also the boundaries we place around identity. While discussing Clifford, Conquergood writes, “The idea of the person shifts from that of a fixed, autonomous self to a polysemic site of articulation for multiple identities and voices” (185). In other words, post-modern ethnography must recognize the ways in which its subjects’ identities are affected by one another, and the environment within which they are created.

Wright’s play shows its audiences Charlotte’s story as she told it to him during the course of several meetings at her home in Berlin. Throughout the play, one single actor portrays the playwright, Doug Wright, along with the myriad of characters that arise during Charlotte’s story, including Charlotte herself. The production notes indicate that the (male) actor should wear one costume throughout almost the entire performance, using only gesture, facial expression, and vocal intonation to indicate the differences between each character. This costume, the note states, is a black dress, a kerchief, and a string of pearls – indicating Charlotte as the visual touchstone for the entire performance.

The play opens with Charlotte telling the audience the history of the phonograph. After this, the actor shifts into the character of John Marks, a journalist and friend of Wright’s, as he tells Wright about Charlotte: “She’s way up your alley,” Marks says, attempting to entice Wright to use Charlotte as a subject for his work, “And, believe me, I use the term ‘she’ loosely” (Wright 11). While Charlotte has not yet been named, the information that Marks gives us in his monologue indicates that the woman who opened the show must be the one in question. Marks’ remark about Charlotte’s pronouns creates an additional atmosphere of intrigue around her character. Since we know that the show is only performed by one male actor, we begin to wonder to what extent Wright attempts to tap into a sense of "authenticity." Our suspension of disbelief, presumably allowing us to see the actor in the opening monologue as performing "female" or "woman," is shattered by Marks' suggestion that Charlotte might be something other than "she." This admission, immediately following our first introduction to Charlotte, functions as an iteration of the "shocking reveal" present in most media about transgender individuals, wherein the audience is presented with information about the character's transgender status in a way that surprises them. In this case, however, instead of dramatically revealing to us the actor's genitals, or lack of breasts, or some other biological indicator of their "true" sex, the audience is merely taunted with the thought that they might be expected to scrutinize the actor's performance of Charlotte – thus, by extension, Charlotte's performance of Charlotte.

Additionally, since the actor does not change his costume when he embodies Marks, a character that is described in the text as "masculine" with a "Texas twang," Charlotte's dress begins to exist in a liminal space. We are not supposed to believe that this man would ever wear something like this, so the dress becomes invisible to us; we see, instead, the actor underneath it, his body language and inflection a stark contrast from that which we just experienced as he embodied the owner of the dress and pearls. By immediately following Charlotte's opening monologue with a monologue from Marks which questions the authenticity of her identity, while the actor is still in costume as Charlotte, the production asks the audience to immediately engage in the same process of questioning that Marks does when he questions Charlotte's pronouns.

The choice not to have the actor change out of Charlotte's clothing throughout the performance also indicates the fluidity with which Wright views Charlotte's identity. What might change if the "neutral" costume was that of the playwright? The artifice of the actor's performance is highlighted by the fact that he is playing multiple characters, regardless of what costume he wears. However, by wearing Charlotte's costume while embodying the experiences of other characters, Wright puts Charlotte's identity in flux instead of his own. The juxtaposition of the actor embodying Charlotte, with her "feminine lilt" and German accent, immediately followed by the actor embodying the macho American character of Marks is intentionally stark, and the presence of the dress on the actor's body heightens the contrast between the two. Again, this places the dress in the liminal space, both invisible and hypervisible to the audience, in the same way that Charlotte's claim to womanhood might be equally as tenuous in their eyes.

Returning to Conquergood's words from the opening of this section, "polysemic" seems the perfect word to describe the theatrical elements of *I Am My Own Wife*. The actor, himself, becomes polysemic: a single body, or sign, which holds multiple identities, or meanings. Yet, the body is not entirely signless in its "neutral" state. The actor is fitted in Charlotte's clothing as he takes on multiple identities, embodying the identities of multiple individuals from various cultures and time periods while continuing to root himself in the existence of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, as the playwright saw her. These costume pieces act, much like the antiques that Charlotte keeps in her basement, as a way to keep the audience rooted within the story. "Performance-centered research," Conquergood claims, "takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history" (187). The subject of Wright's piece is not simply Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, nor is it Charlotte von Mahlsdorf's experiences in Berlin during the reign of Hitler. As he states in the introduction, the subject of the play, as Wright intends it, is his relationship to Charlotte as he attempts to learn about her life from the stories that she tells. Wright even uses the terminology of preserving history in his introduction, when he claims that he will "present [himself] in the play as a curator of [Charlotte]" (Wright xv). It seems that Wright intends for this move to be reflexive, following this proclamation of himself as curator with a series of questions which trouble the lines between "objective truth" and the "personal motive of the historian" (xv). But this language, coupled with the ways in which Charlotte's identity is embodied on stage, calls into question, too, the validity of Charlotte's words and, subsequently, her value as a historical artifact.

Wright also includes other qualities of Charlotte's life and identity that indicate the ways in which she, for him, operates in a space of "borderlands." Charlotte speaks both English and German, and there are multiple moments in the play where she switches between the two languages seamlessly. Wright, on the other hand, attempts to learn German in order to better communicate with Charlotte, but fails miserably. In one particular scene, Wright discusses his failure at learning German by telling an anecdote about how one night in his German class the only phrase he could remember was from Magnus Hirschfeld's *Die Transvestit*, and introduced himself by saying, "Hi, my name is Doug Wright, and I am wearing black lace panties" (30). Doug is mortified by this exchange, but the scene is played for laughs – the comedy is found in Doug, a cisgender man, saying something we perceive to be embarrassing in another language. There is an inherent humor in such trans-cultural gaffs, and an unfortunate cultural humor to be found in the attribution of femininity to men. In other words: the joke is funny because it's funny when people make mistakes in their non-native language, and it's also funny when men adopt femininity. But Charlotte is firmly ensconced in these two areas: she can easily switch between German and English, and she is, according to other figures in the play, a man who has adopted femininity.

Wright's attempts to keep himself present and acknowledge his role as writer, ethnographer, and "curator" speak to claims by many scholars of ethnography that ethnographic work, regardless of the medium used to display it, is incapable of escaping the skewed lens of the ethnographer. In "The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity," Joni L. Jones states, "Ethnographers do not present the culture but are conscious of how they act as interpreters of the culture" (9). Further, addressing the notion of subjectivity, Jones suggests that ethnographers must not simply acknowledge their own subjectivity, but consider how subjectivity functions in their work. Subjectivity is, perhaps, one of the main themes addressed in *I Am My Own Wife*. By embodying the various individuals involved in the story, and performing their words, Wright attempts to dispel any presupposition of objectivity or authority that might be granted to himself as the ethnographer or biographer. As stated in the introduction to the play, Wright sees himself only as an authority on his love for Charlotte, not on any aspect of her life or history.

However, despite Wright's intentions to present only his relationship to Charlotte, her identity as a transgender woman, socially disadvantaged in comparison to his cisgender gay male identity, turns this inquiry from one of genuine intrigue into a violent exertion of transmisogynistic patriarchal power. Wright states in his introduction that he decided to make Charlotte's costume the only costume in the piece and have one male actor perform every role in the production because he wanted to establish that in "[in] our production, transvestism would be the norm, not the exception [...] *I Am My Own Wife* would be a one-woman show, performed by a man" (xix). An effort of egalitarianism, to be sure, but the decision to use a transgender woman's identity as the site of questioning our ideals regarding gender and sexuality plays directly into the same harmful explorations Namaste indicts pseudo-progressive queer theorists for carrying out. Furthermore, Wright does not shy away from including the horrific things that the media and other characters say about Charlotte and her gender presentation, and while he does not paint those figures in a sympathetic light, he is complicit in their violence, as he exploits the mistrust with which others view Charlotte's assertion of her identity as a way to heighten the drama of his text. As a collector of historically-meaningful antiques, Charlotte is, in a way, an ethnographer herself, leading visitors to her home and introducing them to the lives that the artifacts lived throughout their time as more than museum exhibits. When Charlotte's honesty is questioned, arguably from the moment that she is established as only "loosely" a woman, her subjectivity is brought into the harsh spotlight of scrutiny. As the writer/ethnographic researcher, Wright is in a particular place of power over Charlotte. He controls how her image is portrayed, and the way that he constructs her story, as well as the story he wishes to tell about her on the page and stage, are entirely at his mercy.

In order to highlight the delicate ethical quandaries surrounding embodiment, representation, and authenticity across cultural divides, Dr. Jones relies on what she calls "referents" to supplement her performance ethnography work. These "referents" are pieces of media, whether video, audio, or still imagery which the audience can compare to the live performance. In her work on Yoruba culture and women, for example, Jones presents her audiences with video footage of Yoruba women dancing, which plays behind the performers in the exhibition space as they attempt to re-create the dance as precisely as possible. Jones argues that this gives the audience "an opportunity to examine both authentic identity and authentic performance" (13). The authenticity of the performance, Jones continues, comes from the performers' attempts to embody the cultural practice (in this case, dancing) with as much precision and attention to detail as possible. For Jones, this commitment to embodied practice "create[s] an authentic identity" within the performance, one that is not a perfect re-creation or re-presentation of that which is being emulated, but has, for itself, a sense of authenticity as its own performance. In other words, the authenticity that is validated in this moment is the authenticity of the performer's earnest efforts to pay homage to the women in the video, not that their dance is achieving an authenticity as a piece of Yoruba culture. Jones also posits that this creates a form of accountability to the ethnographer's subject(s) – though the Yoruba women in the video could not be present, the performers could be held accountable for their performance by the audience by offering the video footage as a cross-reference.

As I've mentioned previously, I am not concerned necessarily with the authenticity of the performances I examine. However, I find the concept of the referent to be an important one for performance ethnography work because of its power to invoke a sense of accountability to subjects who are unable to hold the storyteller accountable on their own, by virtue of being a continent away or, in the case of Charlotte and Brandon, deceased at the time of the first performance. *I Am My Own Wife* offers one such referent. The play ends with a recording of the real Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, speaking the words that make up the opening monologue of the production. We begin, then, with the actor's performance of Charlotte, and we end with those same words from the person being performed. To end with Charlotte is, in a way, a form of returning to her outside of the space of representational performance, bringing in a piece of the archive that survives when the body cannot. The script dictates that the actor, embodying Doug in this moment, stands silently beside the gramophone and listens while the tape recording of Charlotte's voice plays. This moment is immediately preceded by the final conversation between Charlotte and Doug as the actor will portray them on stage:

> DOUG WRIGHT: Does a piece ever get so old – so damaged – that you throw it away?
>
> CHARLOTTE VON MAHLSDORF: *Nein.* You must save everything. And you must show it – *auf Englisch,* we say – "as is." […] It is a record, yes? Of living. Of lives. (Wright 76)

These are the actor's final lines as Charlotte. After they are spoken, the stage directions indicate that "CHARLOTTE removes her kerchief and becomes DOUG." Then, switching to the prounouns he/him, the directions state that “DOUG unclasps CHARLOTTE’s pearls from around his neck” (76). The dialogue transitions into a monologue from Doug’s perspective, during which he delivers narrative exposition regarding the final years of Charlotte’s life: she moved to Sweden, and, after returning to Berlin for a visit, suffered a heart attack and died. Doug continues on to explain that after Charlotte’s death, he received a package from her which contained a single photograph of herself as a child. Doug identifies the child as “Lothar Berfelde,” Charlotte’s birth name, and describes what he sees in the photograph:

> He's at the zoo in Berlin. He's wearing a sailor suit, with a blue collar and matching cuffs. His ears are sticking out at an angle; he's got a very adorable smile. He's on a bench. Sitting on either side of him, two tigers. Cubs, sure, but they're still as big as he is. And they're not fond of posing, either. Their eyes are dangerously alert. At any moment, they might revolt; they might scratch or bite. (*He says with awe*) But Lothar has one arm around each tiger, and they're resting their forepaws on his knees. (77)

Then, the recording begins to play, beginning with a short clip of Doug Wright’s voice, followed by the recording of Charlotte’s.

In “Performing as a Moral Act,” Conquergood advocates for what he calls “dialogical performance,” which he defines as “a way of having intimate conversation with other people and cultures” (Conquergood, “Performing,” 409). Through the search for truly dialogical performance, Conquergood argues that ethnographers should embrace the differences between their culture and their subjects’ while making an “empathetic leap” in order to “[bring] together two sensibilities” (409). One might argue, then, that this final moment is Wright’s arrival at dialogical performance. The actor sheds part of his costume, leaving the embodiment of Charlotte, who is furthest from his lived experience, and entering into Doug. Then, with the audio recordings of both Doug and Charlotte's voices, the "conspicuous artifice of performance" is fully illuminated, allowing for the "vivid reminder that each voice has its own integrity" (409). But why does the curtain get pulled back only after Charlotte has died? Charlotte's death is the catalyst for Charlotte's kerchief and pearls to come off. Only when we find out that Charlotte has passed can we acknowledge the tangibility of her accessories, and only after she is no longer occupying space as a living being does Wright feel it necessary to shed what is, for him and the cisgender male actor portraying him, a costume. Wright leaves us with the image of himself, sans pearls and kerchief, describing a photograph – an artifact – of Lothar Berfelde, precariously posed between two wild animals, because the play is not actually about Charlotte von Mahlsdorf at all. Much like when Jack Halberstam criticizes Diane Middlebrook for her identification with Billy Tipton's wives, whose existence as young cisgender women allows Middlebrook to place centralize her empathy on them and leads her to victimize them and villainize Tipton, this is Doug Wright's story. The photograph of Lothar Berfelde represents the tumultuous existence as a gay man in a homophobic society that Wright identifies as one that he and Charlotte share. The tiger cubs, holding Lothar in place but not actively attacking him, represent a homophobic society that demands gay men and lesbians stay in their place if they don't want to get hurt. This is the person with whom Wright truly identifies.

In the second monologue of the play, John Marks indicates to Wright that he will be interested in Charlotte's story because she is "eccentric" – indeed, John only recommends that Wright connect with her because John wants to write a story on her but is afraid his editor won't allow it. Doug is interested in Charlotte's story because of its eccentricities, but his investment in her life increases after he meets with her for the first time and the "impossibility" of her existence strikes him. "I grew up gay in the Bible Belt," he says in his letter asking for her permission to write this play, "I can only begin to imagine what it must have been like during the Third Reich" (Wright 17). Later, after the first set of interviews, Wright writes to Charlotte, "You are teaching me a history I never knew I had" (26). That is because this history is not his to have. Consistently throughout the introduction to the play, and the play's script itself, Wright refers to Charlotte as a "gay hero" and he imagines that telling her story will be "a boon to gay men and women everywhere" (xi). It is clear, from the very beginning of Wright's journey to know and learn about Charlotte, that he sees her as Lothar Berfelde. In fact, the edition of the play in which this introduction is included begins, after Wright's bio printed on the inside of the cover page, with the photograph of Charlotte as a child that is described at the end of the play. This communicates to me that, for Doug Wright, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf is a heroine worthy of obsession and immortalization through performance because of her previous existence as Lothar Berfelde. Wright places the worth and value in Charlotte's story on Lothar, on the gay male body, rather than in Charlotte's transgender body, which receives only suspicion, scrutiny, and ridicule throughout the stories that the performance presents.

The discussion of this performance, as well as *Boys Don't Cry* and its legacy in U.S. popular culture, leads me to return to the question posed by Susan Stryker in *Transgender History* and which opened this chapter: "What's all the fuss about?" For critics and audiences of Charlotte Cushman's performances as Romeo; for Kimberly Peirce and the audiences of *Boys Don't Cry*; for Doug Wright and the audiences of *I Am My Own Wife*, it seems the fuss is not at all transgender lives and experiences, but the effect that those lives and experiences have on the cisgender bodies that encounter and, in performance, inhabit them. However, as I also mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, I am not here to discount the significance or critique the quality of these performances. Simply put, these performances are presented as examples of the cultural, artistic, and aesthetic atmosphere within which questions of transgender experience and performative embodiment continue to unfold. They are also presented as an exploration of the work of cisgender folks that focuses on transgender experiences, in order to create a backdrop for the exploration of work by transgender artists about their own and other transgender people's experiences, which make up the content of Chapter 3.

Chapter Three: Reflections of Greater Possibilities

THE GIFT OF A PRESENT PRESENCE

In *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, D. Soyini Madison dedicates a chapter to theories and methodology employed by performance ethnographers. Through her discussion of the theories of anthropologists Milton Slinger and Victor Turner, Madison breaks down the differences between *cultural performance* and *social performance*, the former of which is defined, by Madison interpreting Slinger, as "more conventional forms of performance" which are "framed by cultural conventions" and, subsequently, "consciously heightened, reflexive, framed, and contained" (Madison 169). In this way, cultural performance is defined by the ways in which the performance exists within established parameters that carry with them particular norms and actions or behaviors that are associated with that framework. Additionally, Turner argues that cultural performances not only exist within these conventions but also "*show ourselves to ourselves* in ways that help us recognize our behavior, for better or worse, as well as our unconscious needs and desires" (169). Through this descriptive language, both Turner, and Madison as she interprets Turner, call to mind the image of cultural performance as *mirror image,* and argue specifically that "cultural performances are not only a reflection of what we are, they also shape and direct who we are and what we can become" (170).

Madison's notions of performance ethnography as mirror help not only contextualize but provide me with the possibility of critical language that allows me to explain why this particular chapter, and the project as a whole, is so important to me. In

August 2009, I bought tickets to see a performance by a choreographer named Sean Dorsey. I knew nothing about Dorsey or his work, except that he was a transgender man and this particular piece, titled *Uncovered: The Diary Project*, was about the life of another transgender man. I was 19 years old, queer-identified and gender-confused, having just completed my first full year of college at a small, liberal arts school in rural southern Maryland, and feeling more unsure of my identity than I ever had before. Dorsey was performing at Dixon Place, a small performance venue in downtown Manhattan that describes itself as a "local haven [that] inspires & encourages diverse artists of all stripes & callings to take risks, generate new ideas & consummate new practices" ("Mission/History"). I dragged a good friend along with me, a cisgender straight woman who endured my anxious energy for the entire hour and a half it took for us to make it into Manhattan and navigate the subway system from Port Authority to the tiny theater, tucked into what seemed like the crevice of a building on Chrystie Street. I entered the theater a person who had no language for what they felt or who they thought they were, floundering in a tumultuous sea of queer theory and feminist ideology into which they had been tossed haphazardly by the academy and asked to swim; and I left that evening feeling as though Dorsey, through his 57 minute autobiographical and ethnographic dance performance, had fitted me with a lifejacket that has kept me afloat for the past seven years and counting.

What happened within the hour that I spent in the audience watching Dorsey's performance was not an epiphany of language or the sudden realization of an innate understanding of my gender identity; instead, what I was given was the opportunity to share physical space with someone whose life experiences and, most importantly, whose body, reflected the particular contradictions, confusions, and (in)coherence of my own. What occurred between us was the showing of *myself* to *myself* within Dorsey's performance. What I mean here is that Dorsey's performance did not provide me with terminology or theory that I could use to describe or interpret my experiences as a young person who did not feel comfortable with the gender associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. Rather, it provided me with the corporeal form of someone with whom I identified on an emotional and physical level. To put this very bluntly: For the first time in my life, to my knowledge, I was in the same room as someone who identified as a transgender man. For the first time in my life, I felt like there was hope for a future where I did not feel lost, alone, and completely abjected from my own body.

The impact of this performance on my personal life, as an artist and as a transgender individual, has lead me to this project and, more specifically, this chapter in particular. Here, I will focus on the performance work of two artists whose identities as transgender individuals are essential to the creation and presentation of their performance work. While there are a multitude of transgender performance artists actively creating work in the United States, for the sake of scope, I will focus on two: Sean Dorsey, a transgender male choreographer, and Annie Danger, a transgender female performance artist. Both of these artists, based in San Francisco, create work that highlights, examines, and is informed by their existence as transgender individuals. I focus on Dorsey's *Uncovered: The Diary Project* (2010) and Danger's *The Fully Functional Cabaret* (2012) because I view these pieces as exemplary in their direct reference to and focus on the artists' existence as transgender people, as well as subject matter that speaks to a broader idea of the transgender experience in the United States.

In *Critical Ethnography,* D. Soyini Madison discusses the methodology and ethics of performance ethnography and what she terms "the performance of possibilities," a phrase she uses to describe "staged, cultural performances [...] based on ethnographic data" (190). The "data" she refers to comes from three separate spaces: subject, audiences, and performers. Madison walks us through a series of questions regarding the ways in which a particular performance functions as "a movement culminating in creation and change" for individuals within those three previously mentioned spaces. In doing so, Madison identifies that subjects benefit from these performances by being embodied by performers as "made by and makers of meaning, symbol, and history in their full sensory and social dimensions" (191). By this, Madison means that subjects are represented in performances that encompass the entirety of their existence, within a constructed social and historical context. The key, Madison states, is that the performance communicates that the subject is "in the world under particular conditions that are constructed and thereby open to greater possibility" (191). A truly successful performance within this context, Madison argues, will result in audience members that are "affected by what they see and hear in ways that motivate them to act and think in ways that now beneficially affect [...] either the subjects themselves or what they advocate" (192). While I can neither adequately nor accurately measure whether or not audience members left these performances feeling more empathetic to the lives of transgender people, I can, and will, analyze archival footage of the performances in order to determine whether or not the performance was executed in a manner that such an audience response seems possible.

The two pieces I analyze focus on the experiences of transgender people in the United States from the perspective of transgender artists who share this experience. Dorsey's *Uncovered* presents the audience with two dance pieces in succession to create one whole: "Lost/Found," an autobiographical story of Dorsey coming to terms with his gender identity as an adolescent through the process of writing in his own and then reading a stranger's diary; and "Lou," a series of dance vignettes that traverse the life of Lou Sullivan, a transgender activist, through the diary entries that he donated to the San Francisco public library after his death. In Danger's *The Fully Functional Cabaret*, six transgender women perform a series of skits in a vaudeville-esque performance framework which are not explicitly autobiographical (in that they are not framed as being true stories performed with any attempt at authentic replication) but were devised based upon their own personal experiences as transgender women.

Through an analysis of these two particular performances, I argue that performances by transgender artists about transgender experiences center the bodies and experiences of transgender people in a way that argues for the value and worth of transgender lives. Considering the "exclusionary matrix" established by Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, these works take the "abject" bodies which are excluded from the realm of the lives worth saving, protecting and mourning and present audiences not only with a representation of these bodies which speaks to their value, but a reality of these bodies which acknowledges their existence and, subsequently, their worth. While considering the ways in which her theories of critical ethnography are informed by the theories of performance ethnography by Dwight Conquergood, D. Soyini Madison makes the following observation: “The aliveness of interactive engagement requires the touch, smell, sights, and sounds of physical, bodily contact free from the mediations of distance and detachment” (184). Thinking back to the theories of semiotics discussed in Chapter 1, here we again encounter the idea of what is discursively “dangerous” based on whether it is a replication of the dog which cannot bite or the real thing, which can. With these theories in mind, as well as my personal experience seeing Dorsey’s piece live, I argue that *Uncovered* and *The Fully Functional Cabaret* implicitly argue for the worth of transgender lives because their performances prevent audiences from being able to “distance” and “detach” themselves from the experiences being represented.

THE MIRROR IN/OF THE ARCHIVE

Sean Dorsey’s official bio regards him as “the U.S.’ first acclaimed transgender modern dance choreographer” (“Bio”). Dorsey’s official website describes *Uncovered: The Diary Project* as a “powerful” piece that “[reveals] lives and stories that history has tried to erase” (“Uncovered”). These “lives and stories” are those of transgender and queer people, and Dorsey’s work continuously grapples with what Crandall and Schwartz identify as an attempt to “[claim] the dance stage as one place to reveal what has been hidden from history” (565). While Dorsey’s later projects, *The Secret History of Love* and *The Missing Generation* take an ethnographic approach to the queer and transgender communities of the present and past, *Uncovered* focuses on the experiences of two transgender men from the past and present: Lou Sullivan and Sean Dorsey himself, respectively.

Lou Sullivan is a figure in transgender and queer history known as the first openly gay transgender man who pursued and underwent medical transition (Hormone Replacement Therapy [HRT] and Subcutaneous Mastectomy with subsequent 'male' pectoral contouring) Lou's struggle to gain access to medical transition is rooted in heteronormative ideology that continues to plague the medical field in 2016, roughly 40 years after Lou won his battle against them. Because Sullivan expressed an attraction for and desire to be sexual with men, psychologists were reluctant to grant his requests for medical transition. During this time, doctors and psychologists "were far more concerned with restabilizing the gender system," granting access to medical transition for transgender patients "to the extent that the practice did not trouble the gender binary" (Stryker, *Transgender History*, 93-94). In short, transgender individuals were given access to medical transition only if their intention was to pass as cisgender and carry on heterosexual relationships. Hence, Sullivan's requests to transition were continually denied by doctors because it was not a path toward heteronormative identity.

Sullivan's success in his pursuit of medical transition mark him as a prominent figure in transgender history. Additionally, his existence as a gay man, along with his fight against and eventual death as a result of AIDS, marks him as a figure in queer history as well. As Maxe Crandall and Selby Wynn Schwartz note in their article, "Moving Transgender Histories," *Uncovered*, as well as Dorsey's subsequent pieces of work, "inserts trans stories and bodies into familiar queer historical narratives that have often excluded trans people" (566). Dorsey often speaks to this absence when asked about his work in interviews. In an interview with Paulette Beete from the National Endowment for the Arts, Dorsey states that his career in dance was, for a long time, uncertain and fraught because, he says, "I didn't see anyone like me in dance. Ever. So how could I see my future there?" This highly personal admission seems, to me, indicative of Dorsey's artistic and civic intentions through his work: to bring to light the presence of a transgender past in order to imagine a transgender future.

In its quest for historical reclamation of transgender experience through dance, *Uncovered* presents two major movements, "Lost/Found" and "Lou," the former being mostly autobiographical, while the latter is biographical with Sullivan as its subject. In "Lost/Found," Dorsey portrays himself as a pubescent child in possession of a "Diary for a Young Girl," the pages of which young Sean is desperately trying to fill with thoughts and feelings that fulfill traditional girlhood. The scene opens with a mellow guitar melody played over the speakers as Dorsey dances by himself on a black-box stage, wearing a brown vest, white t-shirt, and blue pants that end at his knees. His movements are fluid and almost languid, his arms opening wide as he takes long steps with his legs and pointed feet. As he dances, Dorsey's own voice begins to play over the music and fills the theater with the story of receiving the aforementioned diary. Dorsey describes the book, its corners and edges, and his physicality reflects the qualities as dictated by the narration: as we hear about the titles on the pages, Dorsey holds his arms above his head and places the words invisibly in the air with the pulsing of his open palms and splaying fingers; as the narration describes what is to be written, Dorsey's hand mimics the scribbling of a pen up and down his own arm. “I filled out the diary,” Dorsey’s voice tells us from the recording as he mimes writing, “but not the shoes of womanhood, clearly.”

Dorsey highlights the presence of his body immediately after that line, when the narrator explains how he “tried to squeeze [his] experience into the lines of the diary” -- and here, Dorsey jerkily moves his hands up and down along the sides of his body, scrunching his face as though attempting to literally squish his body uncomfortably into the boundaries that he has mapped out around himself on stage. The description of trying to fit an experience into the confines of a constructed ideal via the act of writing coupled with the image of Dorsey contorting his body in order to fit into narrowly defined yet ultimately invisible and incorporeal physical barriers creates a clear connection between Dorsey’s experience of his body and his adolescent understanding of what “the shoes of womanhood” required of him.

After this first solo phrase, Dorsey’s voiceover begins the story of finding a “Diary for a Young Boy” at a pawn show one day and is joined onstage by another male dancer (Brian Fischer of Dorsey’s Fresh Meat Productions company), who wears an identical outfit to Dorsey’s. The two dancers mirror one another’s movements before breaking away, Dorsey watching as Fischer glides around the stage, long limbs swinging languidly. “The entries,” Dorsey’s voiceover says, and Dorsey’s body in the space follows Fischer’s, like he is being led through a labyrinth, the path through which Fischer knows by heart: “Here they are, exactly how they were written.” In this moment, Dorsey is shifting us from his role as autobiographical subject to biographical researcher. Dorsey’s voice reads the entries written by the young boy while on stage, Dorsey and

Fischer engage in a series of movement phrases that are at times in unison and at other times completely different. When they are in tandem, it seems as though Fischer is the leader of the duet, Dorsey just a half second behind or taking his cues from Fischer's movement. This reflects how Dorsey's younger self, when he finds the diary of this young man, hopes to find in it, as he later states, "a boyhood role model, you know, all budding macho tendencies, breakouts of latent masculine energy and puppy dog tails." The moments in which they are not mirroring one another include many lifts and turns, and in these moments, it seems Dorsey is in control, lifting Fischer or turning him around, manifesting in their bodies Dorsey's physical engagement with his archival material. When Dorsey's voiceover tells us that he "turns the page," Dorsey physically turns Fischer's body; and, when Dorsey reaches the last entry the boy has written, leaving the rest of the diary frustratingly blank, Dorsey turns Fischer again, but this time, Fischer's body remains facing upstage. When we are no longer able to see his face, we are also no longer able to read his diary.

In *Choreographing Difference*, Ann Cooper Albright opens her chapter titled "Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell" with the claim that both autobiography and dance are "situated at the intersection of bodily experience and cultural representation" (119). Likewise, in the introduction to the book itself, Albright identifies dance as a practice that "can help us trace the complex negotiations between somatic experience and cultural representation" (Location 77). What Albright means by this is that the dancer's body, by virtue of being both the object of spectacle and the subject of the performance, exists in the crucial space between the dancer's physical experience of their own body and the interpretations applied to that body based on cultural ideology. Albright's argument is that autobiography, too, as a practice, places the subject as object at the intersection of these two phenomenological experiences. Additionally, Albright calls upon the work of Paul Eakins to encourage an understanding of autobiography, in any medium or genre, to be viewed as an act of performance. By reframing autobiography as performance, Albright argues, we can "keep the physical body in mind yet paradoxically [refuse] any essentialist notion of bodily experience as transparent and unmediated by culture" (120). Autobiography, in this framework, is not "a truthful revelation of a singular inner and private self" but rather "a dramatic staging of a public persona" (119).

If we think about "Lost/Found" as an autobiographical piece of dance, and we operate under Albright's suggested framework of autobiography as performance, then the piece functions as more than just an exploration of Dorsey's experience as a gender-confused child searching for an instruction manual on how to be a man. The piece also centrally locates Dorsey's body and his experiences involving his body for the remainder of the performance, including the piece as it moves into "Lou," which uses as its archival material not the diary entries of its choreographer or the anonymous former diary owner, but of its identifiable biographical subject, Lou Sullivan. By presenting Fischer as a physical manifestation of the young boy's diary, rather than the young boy himself (indeed, once the entries are gone, Fischer no longer embodies the experiences of the young man but does, rather humorously, embody a photo of George Michael torn from a magazine and stuffed into the pages of the diary, which Dorsey finds ten years after reading the final entry), the performance reminds us that later, when we see Dorsey dancing while his voice reads the entries from Sullivan’s diary, he is not attempting to *be* Lou Sullivan. Rather, he is a curator, interpreter, and presenter of this work *about* Sullivan’s experiences.

“Lou” roughly follows the chronology of Sullivan’s life. The piece begins with diary entries of Sullivan discussing how he feels different from other people, feeling desire for men in a way that feels divorced from heterosexuality, and perfectly parallels the opening solo and duet of “Lost/Found.” Dorsey dances on stage as Sullivan now, and Sullivan’s words have been read and recorded by Dorsey, so that both his voice and body are the representations of Lou with which the audience is presented. However, the two do not live simultaneously in the same body. Dorsey’s decision to pre-record his reading of Sullivan’s diary is, first, a practical one, ensuring that Dorsey can focus on his movement without concern for line memorization. However, it is also a decision almost Brechtian in its effect of divorcing the voice from the body, making no attempt to convince the audience that Dorsey’s voice is actually coming from his body as it exists in the space. Sullivan’s diary entries become the music to which Dorsey and his company dance their author’s experiences. Furthermore, hearing the choreographer speak the words while moving to interpret them, reminds us of Dorsey’s work not just as a dancer but as an archivist and an artist, putting his subjectivity front and center on stage. The audience knows that this is Dorsey’s interpretation of Sullivan; the embodiment, the (disembodied) voice, the words, and the experiences are four completely different things, the former two being products of Dorsey’s creative lens being applied to the archival materials that Sullivan has left behind.

Dorsey's work as a choreographer who performs in his own dances, in addition to his use of autobiographical material and performance, places his body at the center of his work. *Uncovered,* in its exploration of Dorsey's own search for the truth of his identity and the parallels between Dorsey's life and that of Lou Sullivan's, asks the audience to see Dorsey's body as a vessel for storytelling. In this way, *Uncovered* allows for Lou's spirit to live on in a body that understands what it means to be a transgender man and creates a space for Sullivan's legacy to exist in sacred solitude. Crandall and Schwartz identify this practice as a way in which Dorsey's body acts "as a conduit for the archive" (569) and Dorsey reinforces this idea in an interview with Rachel Howard of SFGate.com when he states, "I'm not trying to physically embody Lou onstage or impersonate him" (Howard). Dorsey is not taking on the task of trying to *be* or even *re(-)present* Lou Sullivan. Rather, Dorsey continually reminds us throughout his performance that he is the performer/ethnographer/archivist, a relationship that is significant in its acknowledgment that the performer/ethnographer/archivist is someone who shares the identity of their subject. Crandall and Schwartz indicate that Dorsey's archival practice is rooted in embodied practice and Dorsey's physical interaction with Sullivan's archive. The questions Dorsey grapples with in his research and artistic practices are, "how the body encounters the archive, how the body moves in the archive, and how the archive moves the body" (Crandall and Schwartz 568). Dorsey explains in his interview with Bo Luengsuraswat that a part of his archival research practice was to transcribe Sullivan's diary entries by hand from their original source (568). We see the movement of the archive and the body moving through the archive on stage in "Lost/Found," when Fischer embodies the Diary for a Young Boy itself, and in “Lou” through the ways in which Dorsey interprets the words of Sullivan’s diary through abstract movement, not simply narrative-driven direct translation. Through these practices, Sullivan’s spirit is able to find expression through a body like the one he fought to inhabit during his lifetime.

As Lou’s diary entries reach the time Lou began medical transition, what was, for me, the most transformative moment of the performance occurs. The diary entry begins as follows:

> Dear Diary,
>
> I want to look like what I am, but I don’t know what someone like me looks like. I mean, when people look at me I want them to think, “There’s one of those people who has their own interpretation of happiness.” That’s what I am.
>
> I’ve spent years in libraries going through everything I can find, wondering if there was anybody who felt the way I did. And I couldn’t find anything, anything. Years of this wondering, not validated by anybody. Alone.
>
> Hidden from view, I am losing touch. Serious, threatening, sad, ferocious, stormy, overwhelming, lost world. But, I still yearn for that happiness. I look in the mirror and say to myself, “That’s you? That girl over there is you?” My voice and my body betray me. I mean, no one looks deeper than the flesh, do they? Do they?
>
> So, practice being invisible. Learn to look in the mirror and see only the mirror.

During this opening text, Dorsey is onstage alone, dressed in a tan t-shirt and white pants. He stands downstage left with his hands clasped behind his back and walks upstage a few paces before launching into a movement phrase that recalls the swooping arms, bending knees, and pointed toes of his movement in “Lost/Found” -- in fact, much of the choreography of this section recalls “Lost/Found,” and with good reason, as I will explain later. The narration speaks to the erasure that Dorsey intends to combat with his work and the invisibility felt by those who do not see themselves represented. Much like Dorsey asked of his own dance career, unsure of how to imagine a future in the field without a referent for anyone who had come before him, Sullivan expresses in this entry his struggle with the simultaneous invisibility he felt by not having an external referent for himself and the hyper-visibility of his AFAB body because of the ways in which that body was identified by social construction. In other words, by not knowing of any other transgender men, either personally or historically, Sullivan seeks invisibility for himself because the only reference for the body that he has is one which is identified as female, woman, feminine.

When the narration speaks of the mirror, Dorsey moves downstage center and stands in a spotlight, illuminating his body in ways that the lighting of the rest of the stage where he previously danced did not. He peers out into the audience, as though the mirror is what stands between the stage and the seats. This becomes a moment of implication for the audience -- perhaps the mirror is not what separates them, but, rather, the mirror is the audience’s perception of what they are seeing. When the mirror tells Sullivan/Dorsey “That girl over there is you,” by staring directly into the faces of his audience members, Dorsey forces them to question whether or not they believe that statement, whether or not they are complicit in the misidentification of this body. This, I argue, is one of the moments where the “possibility of performance” turns into a moment in which the audience is “affected by what they see and hear” by being required to acknowledge Dorsey’s presence and their own complicity in the pain of which Sullivan’s entry speaks.

Fischer returns to the stage now and joins Dorsey in the spotlight, wearing a black tank top and black pants which serve to almost camouflage him against the blackbox theater within which they perform. He stands behind Dorsey, facing the audience, peering at them over Dorsey’s right shoulder. The narration continues:

> See only the person there that I imagine myself to be. Then make this change. Take the next step. You are the beauty that you create, Lou.
>
> I think of myself as two people finally coming together, in peace with each other. And of my other half, I say, “Nobody loves me, but me adores you.” I am positive I want to do this, this change, my own body. This limitless joy. Imagine, I’m finally going to be able to look in the mirror and see the person there that I imagine myself to be. And my heart was beating a million miles an hour, catching my breath. He asked if I was scared and I said, “Just the opposite.” Afraid for so long, I know now, I can do anything. I can be anything. Exactly who I am.

During this section, Fischer and Dorsey embark on a duet that begins within the confines of the spotlight, with a lift and turn that ends with Dorsey tracing his hands over Fischer’s chest as Dorsey, narrating Sullivan’s diary entry, reads, “Take the next step. You are the beauty that you create, Lou.” This launches the two of them into the full duet, which traverses the entire stage. Their choreography is not identical and simultaneous but a series of movements where they complement one another, gracefully stepping around and between each other, leaning and holding each other. When Dorsey’s voiceover reads, “Nobody loves me, but me adores you,” the two men on stage glide for a few steps in a formation reminiscent of a waltz. Fischer is clearly marked, by the choreography and his shadow-like costuming, as the “other self” of which Sullivan speaks - the self that he wishes to imagine and attain, but cannot fully comprehend. Much of the movement in this section recalls the movement from “Lost/Found,” but the use of chromatically opposed costuming, in contrast to the identical costuming in “Lost/Found,” emphasizes how Fischer is not meant to be a mirror image of Dorsey, as he was in the first piece, but is also the “other self” that Dorsey once had.

They eventually return to the spotlight as the narration of this entry draws to a close. Fischer approaches Dorsey from behind and, snaking his arms under Dorsey’s and around his torso, grabs the hem of Dorsey’s shirt and begins to lift it. It slides up Dorsey’s toned stomach, over his diaphragm, and he lifts his arms to allow it over his head. His skin is white and the stage lights reflect almost blindingly off his bare chest, which heaves with labored breath. Under the lights, against the black backdrop of the stage, the scars from his top surgery gleam like diamonds in the dark. The narration concludes:

> I always knew it would turn out to be like this. Did you know? I always knew it. Limitless joy. Just joy.

Dorsey holds his shirt to his chest and runs his hand over his pecs, staring out into the audience, mouth agape. His direct eye contact with the audience and the embodiment of his admiration of his own body forces the audience to see him as he sees himself, to participate in this moment of “limitless joy.” To look away, to deny this moment of seeing and being seen on his own terms, is to acknowledge the way in which witnessing this moment forces the audience to participate in the “pursuit of possibility” (Madison

194), the future in which Dorsey can see himself as a transgender male choreographer, the future as a gay trans man which Sullivan, even fleetingly, was able to experience.

Placing “Lost/Found” immediately preceding “Lou,” and including moments in “Lou” which mirror the choreography and imagery of “Lost/Found,” force us to see Dorsey in our witnessing of Sullivan’s life. Opening the show with an autobiographical moment of gender confusion and eventual acceptance, Dorsey is telling the audience that what they are about to see is more than just the story of one man who was erased from history. It is the story of one man through which, as *Uncovered* purports to accomplish, the lives of others can resist erasure. In presenting the audience with Lou Sullivan’s story, Sean Dorsey is ensuring that his story will be told as well. In this way, Dorsey levels the playing field between himself and his subject. The privileges that he may hold over Sullivan (being straight, living in a more progressive time and place) exist alongside a shared identity that puts Dorsey at risk of the same historical erasure as his subject. It becomes clear that this work is equally as important for his own legacy as it is for Sullivan’s and, therefore, Dorsey is just as dependent on his subject as his subject is on him. Despite never having the opportunity to actually speak with Lou Sullivan, Dorsey engages in Conquergood’s ethical square of dialogical performance, approaching what he has of his subject with an investment in not just representing an experience but creating a mutually beneficial situation for himself, his audience, and his subject. Sullivan donated his diaries to the San Francisco public library and while his true intentions for this are unknown, this action implies a desire for his story to be told. I can attest to its power in not only revealing a history otherwise ignored and willfully forgotten, but creating an opportunity for recognition within the community of people at the mercy of time and a society attempting to tell us that we do not exist.

CRY UNTIL YOU LAUGH

I have emphasized thus far the importance of transgender performances that focus on and centers the corporeal existence of transgender bodies, placing the stories of transgender people into the actual bodies of transgender people. Sean Dorsey's work as a transgender choreographer working with archival materials from transgender and queer individuals exemplifies this kind of embodiment, which this thesis wishes to highlight. However, this thesis also intends to highlight the vast breadth of transgender performance as it exists and how it may continue to be produced. In this vein, this next section will focus on Annie Danger's *The Fully Functional Cabaret: Trans Women's Secrets… REVEALED!*[11], a performance that uses humor as an avenue through which to explore the gravely serious realities of transgender lives within the U.S. Danger describes herself as "an artist, activist, and trans woman" whose work "combines humor and savvy with deeply earnest invitations for her audiences to reexamine their relationships to the world around them with eyes on politics, ethics, and the good of all people." This intention, Danger states, can be summed up in one phrase: "The joke is: it's not a joke" (Danger "The Great Church").

In *The Fully Functional Cabaret*, Danger presents the audience with a cast of six trans women, including herself, who perform a series of song, dance, and acting routines which navigate the experiences of trans women past, present, and future. Using expertly executed and delicately placed moments of comedy and sobering reality, Danger and her performers implicate the audience for their complicity in transmisogyny, teach the audience some history, flip the script on common media tropes, and celebrate the lives of transgender women. *The Fully Functional Cabaret* compels audience members, both trans and cis alike, to take an active role in the preservation of trans history and culture, the first step of which is attending the performance of this show.

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[11] Title as it is listed in the video descriptions for MMc Projects recording of the July 6, 2012 performance at Buriel Clay Theatre in San Francisco

T.L. Cowan, in her article "Transfeminist Kill/Joys: Rage, Love, and Reparative Performance," identifies *The Fully Functional Cabaret* as a performance piece which exemplifies qualities of what she terms the "affective trope" of "the transfeminist kill/joy" (501). This trope, she explains, is "a set of proliferating dialectics expressed as the rage that comes into being through living the violent effects of transphobia and transmisogyny and the practice of transformational love as a struggle for existence" (501). In other words, the transfeminist kill/joy trope is one in which trans women are acknowledged as a source of and reason for (trans)feminist joy through the eschewing of feminist ideology that requires the exclusion and abjection of trans women's existence in order to find joy. In this way, a performance which exemplifies the transfeminist kill/joy Cowan speaks of is one that also, implicitly, seeks to achieve the goals of critical performance ethnography as Madison understands it. Trans womanhood is subjectified by a performance which presents its existence within constructed and oppressive cultural contexts that, by the end of the performance, the audience feels the potential and compulsion to change. With this in mind, I feel that *The Fully Functional Cabaret* performs transfeminist kill/joy performance ethnography which values and argues for the worth of the lives of trans women through the presentation of trans women performing in ways which satirize and, subsequently, subvert common media tropes, stereotypes, and misconceptions about trans womanhood.

The performance opens with a stand-up comedy act from Red Durkin, a California-based performer, visual artist, and writer. Durkin enters the stage in a white button down and brown slacks, with a bright red bowtie adding a pop of color to the rest of her ensemble. Durkin tells us that, in stand-up comedy, you have to find an audience that you can trust. “You can’t just jump right into your edgy material,” she says, right before announcing, “Anyway, I’m pro-abortion.” The audience laughs at the contradiction, but Durkin is doing more in this moment than simply delivering a clever joke. This joke sets up the tone of the evening for the performers and the audience alike. By acting as though she will ease us into the “edgy material” of her act, then immediately launching into a discussion of abortion rights and topical political controversy, Durkin is letting the audience know that tonight’s performance will not be mincing words about the experiences being discussed. These women will not be toning down or taming any parts of themselves, as trans women are so often expected to do. Much like this opening act, this performance will get to the nitty-gritty, whether the audience is ready for it or not.

As the performance moves forward, Annie enters the stage as the emcee for the evening and proceeds to indulge in a number of linguistic faux-pas utilizing derogatory or exploitative language for trans women. After her monologue, Danger mounts the stage and prepares us to meet the ladies of *The Fully Functional Cabaret*, who are all standing in a line with their backs, draped with silky robes, facing the audience. Danger paces the stage in front of the four women and riles the crowd with a series of questions, delivered in the manner of a circus ringleader or, dare we say, carnival sideshow jockey: “Did you come ready for thrills? Have you come prepared for secrets? Did you come here this evening just to find out what’s going on down there?” When she says “down there,” Danger points to her cummerbund, which holds a large, black piece of material covering something that protrudes from her pelvis, bulbous and bouncing as she trots from one side of the stage to the other. The audience cheers wildly after the first two questions, regarding “thrills” and “secrets,” but when asked if they’re interested in finding out “what’s going on down there,” Danger is met only with sparse laughter. This is an audience that is aware of its position, the history behind this performance, and is not prepared to engage in what they perceive to be offensive behavior. “Yes, you did,” Danger responds, insisting that the performance knows what the audience wants and is prepared to give it to them. Then, she explicitly calls out the trope: “Every good trans show worth its salt revolves around a fantastic reveal scene.” After this, she removes the cover on her cummerbund prop to reveal a mass of puppet hands, which flop flaccidly atop a pair of pink bloomers. Then, each performer gets her own introduction, wherein she reveals a cartoonishly large puppet phallus with its own name and innuendo-laden introduction.

The ladies of *The Fully Functional Cabaret* subvert the trope of the transgender genital reveal by engaging directly in it. However, instead of the audience getting a peek at what is, physiologically, between the ladies’ legs, they are treated to a comedic burlesque involving absurd strap-on props that are complemented by the women's own invented innuendos. By utilizing a variety of comically cartoonish constructions, the performance is highlighting the absurdity of the genital reveal scene by turning it into a true moment of comedy, much like films such as *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* and *The Naked Gun* have done in the past. But unlike these films, the comedy is in the hands of the women themselves. They are in on the joke, evidenced by the fact that they deliver the punchline related to their respective props, such as Cookie's invitation to "give [her pussy] a pat" or Vanesssa DeCamp's declaration that if you rub her "fish stick" the right way, "we won't even need tartar sauce." Additionally, the subject of the joke is not their own bodies but a separate, clearly non-biological element of theatrical design and costuming. By doing so, Danger and her performers shift the focus of the audience's attention and the punchline of the joke from the costuming of an actor in order to portray a trans character to larger-than-life props clearly designed to draw attention and elicit laughter. Furthermore, by wearing the props in the same fashion as one might wear a strap-on dildo, the women are reinforcing their identities as women within a framework of cisnormativity. Women, in this framework, do not have penises - therefore, if you want to see a woman's penis, she must wear an artificial one.

Cowan identifies this framing as a way in which the show "performs the pedagogical function of the political cabaret form" within which the performers "[teach by] bad example" (510). The audience's laughter is slow and seems somewhat forced - but Durkin's comedy warned us that the performance was not here to be comforting. However, placing the offensive terminology in the mouth of the affected party (that is, a trans woman referring to other trans women as “trannies”) puts the question of reclamation into the hands of the audience. If they laugh, are they contributing to the negative power of the term? Or is it okay, because Annie is trans? This moment is one of many during which Danger and the other performers directly implicate the audience for their complicity of the transmisogyny that the performance highlights and dismantles.

Creating comedy within that framework does not, however, imply that *The Fully Functional Cabaret* is operating solely within a cisnormative understanding of gender identity and expression. The performance pushes back on this framework in two subsequent scenes within the performance: one which is played comedically, and a chilling piece which ushers in the ending of the performance. The first of these scenes is one in which Danger asks for a volunteer from the audience in order to turn them into a woman. The audience volunteer is, in fact, performer Bryn Kelly wearing a (again, comically cartoonish) hipster get-up complete with fake handlebar mustache, thick-rimmed glasses, knit beanie, flannel shirt, and skinny jeans. Danger brings the “volunteer” on stage, who introduces themself as Darryl Chad Banks. Darryl steps up onto a pedestal and begins to undress as Danger hands them clothing, beginning with a patterned black A-line dress. Danger announces to the audience that she’ll be needing their help in order to get her to “pass.” As Darryl puts on the dress and removes the tight pants, Danger turns to the audience and asks, “What is wrong with her?” There is complete silence from the audience and Danger goades them to respond, facilitating the conversation with leading questions such as, “Is it her posture? Is it her hands?” After the audience suggests changes for Darryl to make to their appearance as a woman, the other performers come on stage and begin giving her instructions on how to hold herself. The group devolves into an argument over how and where Darryl should place her hands, citing different reasons why different positions mean different things with regard to femininity and her ability to be "clocked" as a trans woman, including a hilarious exchange between Ryka Aoki and Star Aramesu about outdated trans-centric websites and the rise of YouTube tutorials on passing (a joke which is only funny if you know anything about trans internet culture).

Kelly's transformation from Darryl into a woman under scrutiny for her embodiment of cisnormative femininity is one of the moments in the performance that hearkens most closely back to the sideshow-esque setting that Danger's emcee occasionally seems to be referencing. Placing Kelly on the pedestal and subjecting her to audience and performer scrutiny recalls the role of side-show attractions which were considered biological anomalies, such as the Bearded Lady (note Kelly's fake mustache and unibrow as "Darryl"). Danger's invitation to the audience to point out the ways in which they considered Darryl's embodiment of womanhood to be flawed is another of many moments in this performance where a trans woman initiates an action of behavior steeped in transmisogyny. The added layer of Kelly in drag as "Darryl" creates an effect similar to that of the advertising for *Boys Don't Cry* addressed in the previous chapter, presenting multiple layer of simulacrum for the audience to unpack as they engage in this activity. When Danger asks, "What is wrong with her?" the "her" to which she refers is Darryl's new persona as a woman. However, at the point when this question is asked, "Darryl" has begun removing the costume which covers most of their body, including the hat, under which Kelly's hair has been tucked (which Danger refers to as a "wig" and criticizes for being unrealistic and messy). To put it simply: the more clothing Darryl removes, the more exposed Kelly becomes, leading the audience to begin scrutinizing *Kelly's* appearance and body, not Darryl's.

As argued in the previous chapter, emphasizing the physical transformation of the performer encourages the audience to examine the performance of not just the cisgender actor as the transgender character, but also the transgender character's performance of their gender identity and expression. Since Danger is the person to initiate the scrutiny, the script is partially flipped on its head. Instead of a cisgender director or playwright using filmic or theatrical techniques to draw attention to the flaws in the character's performance of gender, the audience is encouraged to do so by another transgender woman who engages in the investigative and objectifying behavior in order to model what she is asking the audience to do. By doing this, Danger once again plays with Viviane Namaste's assertion that "[i]mages of transsexuals are displayed to pique the curiosity of the non-transsexual" (46). Danger opens her show with an insistence that her audience is there for "thrills" and "secrets," and here she attempts to convince her seemingly progressive (deemed so due to their hesitance to engage in problematic behavior) audience to indulge that desire to seek out what has been hidden, to chase that elusive "reveal scene."

However, Danger's intention is not to trap the audience into perpetuating transmisogyny so that she can call them out on it later. What she brilliantly crafts in this moment is an opportunity to highlight the nuanced and highly fraught experiences of transgender women, particularly in reference to the concept of "passing." Danger acknowledges the harm in asking a trans woman to pass while subsequently and simultaneously acknowledging the harm that comes to trans women who do not pass, and her interaction with the audience makes this perilous balance impossible for them to ignore. This is particularly evident in the moment when Danger provides the audience with statistics on discrimination faced by trans women in the United States. After reciting the statistics, Danger implores the audience to help Darryl's female persona pass as cisgender, because if she does not, Danger cautions that she will fall victim to the very discrimination mentioned. When the other performers join Danger on stage and begin to advise Kelly/Darryl on how to hold herself, it is with loving concern that they take her arms and re-position them over and over again. Their squabble over which way is the "right" way exudes care and compassion for one another in a way that falls into the realm of concern trolling[12] when this rhetoric originates from cisgender individuals. This is, perhaps, one of the moments where the performers exhibit "the mobile tension between *kill* and *joy*" which exists in "the willfully resistant joy, thrill, love, and hope offered by transfeminist aesthetics, politics, and knowledge production" (503).

Later in the performance, a scene similar in content but strikingly different in tone is played out between performers Star Aramesu and Ryka Aoki. At the top of this scene, Aoki stands center stage in a white lab coat, feet spread and gloved hands clasped behind her back, and asks the audience, “Have you all been paying attention?” They respond with a murmur of “Yes,” but Aoki is not convinced: “No, you haven’t,” she says, “I know how you students are. [...] You say you want to understand trans womanhood, but you’re just counting the minutes until class is over.” Here, Aoki establishes a clear hierarchical relationship between herself and the audience which positions her as the authority figure with students, and, soon, a subject, under her purview. Unlike Danger’s ringleader, who commanded the audience with a wink and a smile, Aoki’s professor is not fooling around. Aoki announces that they will begin with “your standard trans woman” and Aramesu is brought onstage by a performer in medical scrubs and a white mask which covers their entire face. Aramesu is wearing nothing but bikini-style bottom underwear that matches her skin tone and it is the first time that we’ve seen any of the performers in any state of nudity onstage. Aramesu’s vulnerability is palpable and jarring, topless and accompanied by a faceless nurse while Aoki, in her starched lab coat and gloves, stifles a laugh. She approaches Aramesu while wielding a thin metal stick she’s just pulled from her hair and uses the stick to gesture to Aramesu’s face as she says, “I know what you’re thinking: why would anyone do this?” This moment lacks the light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek quality of the previous scenes wherein the performers have commented on and critiqued one another’s appearances.

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[12] "Concern trolling" is a term that originated within online activist circles and refers to the actions of someone who justifies utilizing oppressive language & rhetoric by claiming to be looking out for the best interests of the targeted party (e.g. a cisgender person justifying their unprompted criticism of a transgender person's gender expression by claiming to be concerned that the trans person is in danger by not adequately "passing")

Aoki’s costume and condescending tone create an uncomfortably clinical atmosphere within which Aramesu, the only black trans woman in the ensemble, is presented as the “standard trans woman” at the center of what unfolds to be a traumatizing sequence of events. Aoki proceeds to shove the metal stick between

Aramesu's legs while dreaming of one day achieving "perfection" as more faceless nurses enter the stage. Then, as a low and ominous bass tone begins to play in the background, Aoki turns to the audience and repeats the sentiment that opened the show: "But, of course, perfect isn't why you're here, are you? No. You want to see the failures, inconsistencies." Unlike in the opening sequence, when Danger's boisterous and playful emcee called upon the audience's desire for a good "reveal scene," Aoki's cold and calculating doctor removes the entertainment value from her ensuing scrutiny and places the audience directly in the position of the curious voyeur. Likewise, Aramesu's nudity is in stark contrast to the outfits of the opening sequence, where the robes are stripped away to reveal costumes and detachable pelvis props straight from comedic neo-burlesque. Now, it is neither Vanessa DeCamp's comically large "fish stick" nor Darryl Chad Banks's removable mustache which is up for examination, but Star Aramesu's actual body, unclothed and bare for all to see.

Aoki continues on, with the aide of the masked nurses, to point out the parts of Aramesu's body that prevent her from achieving "perfection." With each part, she suggests a morbid medical intervention that would "improve" Aramesu's current state of being, such as replacing Aramesu's hands with those of a female cadaver or shaving off sections of her skull and jaw with a grinder to resemble a more feminine shape. Between each section of Aoki's examination is a sound cue of a voice reciting a story that pertains to that particular body part: first the hands, then the skull, voicebox, brain, and, finally, the heart. These body parts are not chosen at random or arbitrarily. Each one is a site of particular contention and anxiety for transgender people, reiterated by the voiceover that the audience hears between each of Aoki's abusive yet not unrealistic transphobic diatribes which each describe a way in which the subject has struggled with that particular part of their own body. The voicebox voiceover, for example, tells of a performer who would not allow themself to perform or sing because audiences "seemed more interested in [their] gender than in [their] music." These anxieties have also been presented to the audience over the course of the performance, creating for the audience a memory bank of experiences to recall when witnessing the intensity of this scene. And by starkly contrasting this scene of dissection and examination with that of the feminizing of Darryl Chad Banks, Danger's catch phrase is placed front and center: The joke is, it's not a joke.

When highlighting the final three parts, Aoki's examination is punctuated by the repeated rhetoric of "What use is there for a…?" She points to the voicebox and asks, "What could it possibly have to say?" She pulls a brain from one of the buckets held by a nurse and says, "What use does a tranny have for a brain?" And finally, she pulls a heart from another bucket and says, "What use could there be for something that cannot be [unintelligible]?" In this moment, Aoki's character addresses all of the reasons why Fully Functional Cabaret needs to exist. As the show's description states, "We are women, whole and complete, and our lives are long obscured by the hideous apparitions of the medical industry, the mass media, and even some feminists!" The three parties implicated in this statement (the medical industry, mass media, and "some feminists") view trans women as less than human, having nothing to say, nothing to think, and nothing about them to love. Aoki demands that Aramesu speak when she begins her examination of her voicebox, and Aramesu's refusal to do so prompts Aoki's dismissal of a trans woman's right to speak. After dismissing the necessity of her heart, Aramesu is chased around the stage, screaming and pleading for the audience to help her, while Aoki calls for the nurses to "collect the specimen."

This scene, with its emphasis on the clinical and scientific and Aoki's doctor's attitude toward Aramesu's "standard trans woman," seems to embody the identification with Frankenstein's monster that Susan Stryker describes in "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." In this article-cum-manifesto, Stryker acknowledges the ways in which the circumstances and cultural contexts surrounding transsexual embodiment lead to transsexuals, such at Stryker herself, to be "perceived as less than fully human" (238). In response to this, Stryker calls for transsexuals to reclaim their identifications as "monster" and "creature," encouraging what seems, to me, to be a transfeminist kill/joy decision to "risk abjection and flourish" because "the prospect of a monster with a life and will of its own is a principal source of horror for Frankenstein" (241). In this case, non-trans feminists who reject the womanhood of trans women stand in for Frankenstein in their anxiety-fueled hatred for what they perceive to be, according to Stryker, "the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends" (238). Here, we go back to the "exclusionary matrix" mentioned by Butler, as well as the anxieties expressed by Albright when she asks if decentering the physiological will dismantle our understandings of womanhood altogether, preventing women from banding together to fight for their reproductive rights.

It seems completely fitting, then, that this scene transitions us into "Love Letters," the portion of the performance that Cowan identifies as "the kill/joy manifestation of love" (510). As the performers gather on stage, dressed in "fabulous gold lamé fabric," they read letters of admiration, devotion, and longing to one another, to themselves, and to any and all trans women who may or may not be listening. The extended plot of *The Fully Functional Cabaret* takes its audiences from a stand-up comedy act, to a series of tongue-in-cheek variety acts, which transition swiftly into a scene straight from a horror film, and end in a "a shared moment/feeling of creating change" (512). The effect, here, is to establish the context within which these lives exist, and bring the audience (and performers) to a place where the transgender future, much like the one that Dorsey imagines, can be made manifest.

OUR EROTIC (R)EVOLUTION

In her explanation for her performance art piece, "The Great Church of the Holy Fuck," Annie Danger explains the reasons why she came to create a performance piece that connects queer sex and ritual religious practice:

> The human body is still the center of how we experience the world, and holds unending potential as a tool and a canvas for very good art. [...] I want us all to see the humanity in ourselves and in each other. I want us to understand the lived experience of political awareness. I want to use the social currency of sexual desirability to buy us our freedom. I want to short-circuit the subtle and powerful currents of hegemony in our countercultural circles. I want us to know we're not alone because that remains an enormous, rudimentary stumbling block to our collective liberation. I wanted us to move forward; to evolve. And by golly, I wanted it to feel good, too. (Danger, "Great Church")

I am struck, first and foremost, by Danger's acknowledgement of the body as "a tool and a canvas for good art." As a performer and performance scholar, I believe that there is value in something that is useful for artistic endeavors, a belief that is not shared widely in a society that believes, for instance, that financial support for international warfare is more important than funding the arts or arts education. And what strikes me further about Danger' s words is the connection between the human body's potential to create art and the recognition of humanity in ourselves and others. What better way, then, to argue for the power of performance in advocating for (or, at times, actively denying) the value of particular lived experiences in particular bodies?

I have advocated, throughout this thesis, for the importance of transgender experiences and histories to be embodied within the bodies of transgender people. I have argued this by presenting examples of performances which utilize cross-gender performances of cisgender bodies in the roles of transgender characters in order to locate historically and culturally the epidemic of prohibiting access to these roles from transgender performers; and, in this past chapter, I have argued for the discursive power of transgender bodies performing transgender experiences by the ways in which centering transgender bodies works to argue for the value of transgender lives.

What I hope for, now, is a turn away from the practice of placing cisgender bodies in the center of the conversation about transgender issues. Perhaps we will see this in the wake of an outcry by the transgender artistic community in New York City; or, the loss of federal support faced by a state government for actively passing anti-transgender legislation; or, increased attention to and emotional power of performances by artists like

Dorsey, Danger, and others like them. However it happens, I look forward to participating in and writing further on the artistic work that will emerge.

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