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Reflecting on Reflections: An Autoethnographic Approach to the Phenomenology of Gender Dysphoria within Transgender Identity

Madeline Wiles
madeline.wiles@siu.edu

REFLECTING ON REFLECTIONS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF GENDER DYSPHORIA WITHIN TRANSGENDER IDENTITY

by

Madeline M. Wiles

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Approved by:

Dr. Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, Chair

Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Sandy Pensoneau-Conway

This research report focuses on the author's narrative in understanding her transgender identity through her relationship with mirrors and reflective objects. The author argues gender is not inherently located within biology or the body, and society's misperception of gender norms creates gender dysphoria for transgender people. The gender dysphoria is then phenomenologically understood while gazing upon the reflection in the mirror. Using an autoethnographic approach, the author recalls painful memories of her journey to understand gender as a performative experience that does not rely on anatomy limitations. She draws upon research from performative scholars to further her argument that everyday acts, materiality, and the idea of play are all factors in creating a gender identity. Lastly, the author showcases the importance of using narrative-based learning to further comprehend the lived experiences of transgender people and the nuances that gender invites all of us to embrace.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all the transgender people who have lost their lives to violent acts of injustice. Rest in power.

This project is dedicated to my younger self. Without you, I would have never found the courage to write this paper and share my story with the world. Thank you for being so brave.

PREFACE

I have spent my childhood and adolescence trying to suppress my womanhood, and now I am writing those archived memories as evidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee member, Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, for our one-on-one meetings where you taught me to believe in my ability to write and narrate.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender is complicated, and the closest I have come to understanding its nuances is the relationship I have with my own identity. Growing up and realizing I was different from the other children assigned male at birth at school was only the beginning for me. Over time, I resented my body. Feelings of loneliness, dread, and discomfort grew from the resentment and became an integral part of my daily routine. There is a link between gender dysphoria, the relationship I have with my body, and how society raises transgender people in our culture. When we raise transgender people with a strict education on how gender is related to our bodies and the binary structure of "boy and girl," the transgender community can develop gender dysphoria from negative feelings. Dysphoria continues to be a struggle for me, especially when I look in a mirror-like object. I police my actions and performance of gender based on the reflection I see before me.

My unsettling education on gender shapes my obsession over my body's features commonly associated with males. I have always understood gender as biological, and that hurt my relationship with myself and others. I thought there was this perfect ideal that I had to work to achieve from my perceived disadvantage being “born in the wrong body.” In reality, I was never born in the wrong body but taught the wrong information about what gender is and how everyone can bend the concept to fit their own will. Of course, the materials such as clothing, makeup, and jewelry assist in our gendered performance. The way we communicate and hold ourselves are notable methods that continue to create the performance we want others to understand.

However, we are still operating under the binary limitations of gender. Gender is a social construction and should not limit a new way of learning about it. As a transgender woman, I have reflected on my reflection, and I have confidence that gender is far more than a label assigned at birth connected to our bodies. We write and rewrite gender through history because we can. Gender is a tool that wields in favor of those in power and marginalizes many. Gender is malleable. Gender is expression.

This paper is reminiscent of my journey with understanding gender and where my identity belongs. My gender identity started in front of a mirror, and I continue to use my reflection to understand how easily the concept of gender changes phenomenologically. Most people grow up with learned expectations in terms of gender expression. Representation is an essential factor in reinforcing those ideologies, and children can feel lost if proper representation is not available. I did not understand or see my identity in television or films in ways that were both positive and accurate. As the kids around me could relate to fictional or real people and feel their gender as seen, I felt lost and confused until later in life. Without the feeling of my gender identity being seen, I developed an understanding that my emotions were wrong and should be kept secretive. Suppressing my identity and working to perform as a male took an emotional toll on my mental health, and I drifted farther from breaking through the binary thinking of gender. When I came out to my family and friends, there was an expectation of having all the answers. I quickly realized I knew little about gender outside of what was taught and reinforced as a child. Until recently, I never questioned my restless efforts to perform as a cisgender woman. As I look at myself in the mirror, I try not to see male or female. I take a deep breath, and I try to see myself: a person who deserves to belong

in their body despite what others want me to believe or think.

There is far more to gender than we understand but listening to narratives of struggle, pain, and survival is key to being more open to and aware of the world outside of our tiny boxes we categorize ourselves in. The narrative I write provides a different perspective to the problem with how we talk about gender. A shift in our cultural teachings about gender and its relationship with our biology needs to occur for gender dysphoria to not develop in transgender communities. Suppose we can shift our comprehension of gender as a more performative, fluid experience. In that case, transgender people can be more understood and feel they belong in society, in their bodies, and deserving of life. Through my story's heartbreak and pain, I call to important issues often overlooked because feeling a sense of belonging with one's assigned gender is a privilege. I speak upon the hardships transgender people must face through school and medical discourses working against a greater understanding of gender identity. Those hardships also manifest in emotional conversations with family, friends, and the self. My story is one of many deserving to be heard and used as a tool to challenge discriminatory gender expectations and norms. I am aware of my privileges outside of my transgender identity, and I encourage my narrative to be but a stepping stone to “unlearning” what it means to be a man or a woman.

I begin by outlining my phenomenological and autoethnographic approach to transgender identity and gender dysphoria. I then explore the discourse of gender to understand both the biological and performative rhetoric and put this discourse in conversation with my own experiences. I apply these narrative recollections to my own assumptions of gender being an everyday act that is highly ritualized through

communicative practices of language, materiality, and rituals. Finally, using my memories as a tool, I highlight the relationship between mirrors and gender dysphoria. Readers will encounter personal details of my life that speak to larger cultural influences on the experiences of dysphoria. These details may be painful and jarring; they include body violations I experienced, hurt-full coping mechanisms that were all I had available to me at the time, and messages of invalidation from those around me. But I leave these details on these pages to provide as full an experience as possible of my transgender identity. These details are real. These details inform my interpretation of dysphoria and reflection. These details will resonate with others. These details matter.

HEADING 2

APPROACH

This research report approaches the discourse of gender using the concept of phenomenology to look at the relationship between a transgender person's reflection and their awareness of their gender dysphoria. Phenomenology as a framework allows the focus to be on the way we experience the world and how we create meaning through our lived memories (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 88). This means that locating my understanding of gender and gender dysphoria through my recollections bring important realizations to the surface. The consciousness that one has with their dysphoria while gazing at their reflection exposes our society's problem teaching gender as a limited binary structure. The phenomenon of dysphoria in the transgender population directly links to their physical appearance, categorizing themselves with the education on gender they have received growing up, and attempting to communicate their identity to others. Communicative devices like language, materiality, and ritualized practices assist in the direct linkage between the subject and object of the phenomenon (Langsdorf, 1994, p. 2).

Using phenomenology as an approach allows the finding of that essence, or link, of consciousness from the lives of transgender people (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2014, p. 88). I use my narrative to understand mirrors as objects that bring consciousness to the viewer, and in a transgender person's perspective, the consciousness of not belonging in their body. There is meaning to the debate between gender being inherently biological or more performative and the approach used in this paper. I use my experiences and communicative interactions (Langsdorf 1994, p. 6) with the mirror to

provide a rationale for my performative leaning thesis.

As the relationship a transgender person has with the mirror is crucial to understanding gender dysphoria, this project calls upon an autoethnographic approach to find its importance. Throughout the remainder of the paper, I use my narrative to reflect on the phenomenon of reflective objects and gender identity. Focusing on the importance of epiphanies and its lasting effects on a person's perception of a cultural practice (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 275), I recall moments that have shaped my understanding of who I am. These moments of awareness to gender calls for the reexamination of our belief system. There is the utmost importance to being educated using other people's lived experiences as a tool for uncovering the nuances of gender identity. The reflexivity of looking back at personal memories of consciousness allows a large range of possibilities to be explored and understand the meaningfulness of those recalled events (Langsdorf, 1994, p. 7-8).

Personal narratives invite the reader to step in the shoes of transgender people, experience the weight of their trauma, and reflect on the reader's own experiences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 280). The weight of this burden can be changed, and an unlinking can occur between gender and genitalia; we need only listen to the struggles and self-discovery of transgender and nonbinary communities battling against these misconceptions for most of their lives. Listening to and reading other people's stories brings a greater focus to the silencing that weighs heavy on communities who do not fit within the binary.

HEADING 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

I remember from the early age of three I knew I was a girl, because I was expected to behave and act like someone completely different. I was more confused at why nobody could understand that I was a girl and confined my identity into a series of masculine boxes. I frequently dressed in my mom's clothes and paraded around the house with materials draped on my head as long hair like Ariel's in *The Little Mermaid*. I expressed my identity so young that the adults in my life did not see the value in these little performances that contradicted the clothes and mannerisms I was being taught. My dad asked me at a very young age, "Do you want to be a girl?" and at that time, I had developed the understanding that the correct answer was "no" based on how he responded to my feminine disposition.

Weeks before the question, we were in Wal Mart, and I was allowed to choose a toy that dad would pay for. My cheeks hurt from smiling the entire trip because I knew what aisle I wanted to walk down—the dolls. The overwhelming shades of bright pink blinded me as my joy controlled the quick darting of my eyes from doll to doll. I had to look left and then right, back and forth, to the point where I became dizzy with making a perfect choice. The smell of plastic and sickly metal from the cart riding my tail complicated my decision-making process. I was too overwhelmed and distracted. I looked up for dad's guidance and immediately became sick to my stomach from a different kind of overwhelming feeling. He was uncomfortable, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his hands gripped tight enough on the cart to make his knuckles turn pale yellow. He never looked at me but kept looking behind his back as if he was

looking for his son, who had escaped him. I suppose I *did* go down this aisle. I felt guilty for even choosing the doll I chose, but I decided on one anyway. Dad immediately said, "Are ya sure you don't want to look at any other aisles? Because if you're getting a toy from this aisle, I'll make you carry it with you instead of putting it in the cart. I wanna make sure you're comfortable making this decision." My heart sank. Dad was so upset with me that he threatened me; I would have to showcase to the world that I was someone who played with dolls. I nodded my head, and we left the toy aisle to the registers. I was afraid of each person who passed us, hoping they were not going to look down and see the bright pink plastic box in my hand. I would try to hide the box on the opposite side of my body each time someone would pass by and look down. I dared not look at my father because I already could assume the disappointment lurking on his face.

My answer to dad when he asked if I wanted to be a girl was "no." I replied accordingly and went through my years suppressing who I wanted to be. My education on gender was limited, and I was taught to understand gender as something we were born with, like lungs or toes. Dad asked the same question again when I was 18 years old, "Do you want to be a girl?" and I finally dared to say "yes." My understanding of gender and its location in our culture has always been complicated at best, but like scholars through the years, I have accepted that gender is not something you are born with. You are taught the idea of gender, like race and sexuality, but this construction is not something that is there by itself. We create gender through the clothes we wear, the interpersonal interactions we make, and the ways we navigate our everyday acts. Gender is a performance, and we are the actor, choosing every day to reflect on our

reflections and accept the person staring back at us in the mirror.

In this section, I reflect on my journey with understanding my own identity and how gender has been theorized. There has been a significant shift in defining gender away from a fixed variable to a performative nature that is continuously changing and evolving every day through actions of play. The shift in defining gender will help locate the phenomenology of gender dysphoria and the effects that mirrored reflections can have on the development of a transgender person. Lastly, using my own experiences to navigate these changing systems allows there to be an emphasis on actively empowering trans voices and increasing representation within our culture for the generations of young minds to come. Proper representation and awareness will continue to change the definition of gender and understand gender dysphoria in transgender communities.

Through conversations with transgender friends, my own perspective, and encounters with the work of transgender scholars and memoirists, I have noticed that many of us have complicated relationships with mirrors because our reflections (before self-acceptance, in particular, but not exclusively) rarely represent the gender we know ourselves to be. I can gaze into the mirror, staring right into my eyes, and see the culturally created male everybody wanted me to be. I strain my eyes to see every masculine characteristic the people wanted me to see while growing up. I see nothing more than a monster in the mirror, a deformed creature of our culture who defies the normal. I remember this monster is me, and I am them.

The outdated term for those feelings that transgender people can have was identified by medical providers as *gender identity disorder* (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2019). In

recent years, researchers have moved away from the name because of its insensitive use of "disorder," which created a more considerable stigma against transgender people. Currently, the term that is often used is *gender dysphoria*, a feeling of discomfort that occurs in transgender and gender-nonconforming people when their identity differs from their culturally ascribed gender (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2019). The feelings of despair are not just created from our reflections on ourselves. We are subjected to others determining our own performance of gender, and we react according to their current belief system. Gender is a system phenomenologically created long ago and is now understood as a set of ideologies taught, maintained, and reinforced to uphold the tradition of gender binaries that we all continue to contribute to unless we are educated differently. Cisgender people see themselves represented in this tradition; the tradition is created to include them, and they are represented in media, in language, in everyday practices, and so on. Transgender people are at a disadvantage with tradition, as we have only seen an emergence of representation trickle into society's mainstream. We have only recently heard the voices of those who live beyond the binary and refuse to be defined by old tradition. I look up to these brave individuals who tell their stories while I still stare at myself in the mirror, crying, "You are not good enough."

In the remainder of this section, I explore the research connecting gender identity to our bodies and the importance of shifting our focus to a performative practice. I push for readers to use my personal experiences as a reason to reflect on their own identity as it pertains to their body and comprehension of gender.

Understanding Gender as Biological

Growing up in the early 2000s taught me that gender was a fixed variable, and there were only two options for every person: male or female. Saying gender is "biological" means we are all born with a paved path that we are expected to follow. Identifying as anything different than what you are born is not an option in our culture's discourse. Transgender people deviate from the path and, as a result, they develop feelings of dysphoria commonly associated with being taught an ideology that does not fit with their sense of self. As a young transgender girl trying to figure out who I am, the distress was overwhelming and uncontrollable. Researchers continue to discover how gender dysphoria is identified and its progression in adolescents (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018, 31). This means the treatment for gender dysphoria varies in how accurate and helpful it can be for someone struggling with their identity. Zucker (2017) wrote that there are different perspectives to looking at gender dysphoria, and the chosen perspective can determine the outcome of treatment. From a biological standpoint, locating and identifying gender relies upon assigned sex at birth, and to find gender dysphoria in transgender patients means to look at the hormone exposures during sensitive perinatal periods (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018, p. 32). Finding gender dysphoria also means rationalizing transgender identity through the reinforcement that to claim to be transgender, the individual must have had a chemical imbalance at some point that forced them to break the binary. In "Gender Dysphoria in Adolescence: Current Perspectives," Kaltiala-Heino et al. (2018) provide new perspectives about the transgender community and the community's relationship with gender dysphoria, and these new perspectives perpetuate identity as biological. They looked at genetics and how the individual was exposed to hormone levels to determine the difference that

could be equated to a transgender person (p. 32). Even with finding similarities amongst transgender people, the researchers cannot conclude that the model works for everyone in the community. This means that we cannot rely solely on labeling gender dysphoria as innately biological.

Like Kaltiala-Heino et al., Foreman et al. (2018) hypothesize that gender dysphoria are caused by biological, genetic variants in sex hormones that feminize the brain. The authors conducted one of the most extensive studies on gender dysphoria and found that their research could lead to more critical discussions of locating gender within the body. Unfortunately, the research points to their theorizations, but nothing was conclusive, and they stated that genetics has some play into gender dysphoria but are not the sole determinant (p. 394). Researchers are attempting to find gender and dysphoria to be genetically linked, but they cannot find any direct connection. The lack of substantial knowledge of gender was a point of fear for me when expressing my own identity to others. If no one could find a reasonable explanation of why transgender people feel they are born in the wrong body, how do transgender people exist and survive in our culture? The idea that transgender people were reduced to their distress of being born in the wrong body (known as gender identity disorder) only strengthened the research towards gender dysphoria. Researchers wanted to find similarities amongst transgender individuals in order to locate a cause for and treatment of dysphoria (Olson et al., 2015).

I recall attending therapy sessions in my teen years because my parents were worried about my mental health. They knew I was unhappy but knew very little about the enormous role my concealed gender identity had in causing that unhappiness. They

were not oblivious to the challenges I had had with my gender identity, but they feared and hoped that my mental instability was from my unreal expectations regarding schoolwork. I hated therapy. Each session felt like I was being forced to expose my thoughts and feelings. The professionals never touched on my gender identity or even considered this was the root of my problems. Part of me could not blame the two different therapists I saw because I was skilled at concealing the transness. I was merely diagnosed with a general anxiety disorder and they defined my discomfort with my own body as a need to control uncontrollable factors in my life.

Gender Dysphoria and Mental Health

As many transgender people suffer from mental health issues, there are often dysphoric complications created through the intense stigma that is not caused by being inherently trans (Ashley, 2019, p. 1). The research on transgender patients seeking care for gender dysphoria has also found that cisgender people are often uncomfortable with their bodies, perhaps even how their bodies are manifesting the characteristics that match their assigned gender, which they happen to identify with like size, height, relative prominence of features, traditional attractiveness. Like my own discomfort, scholars found one cause of this mutual feeling: bodies are often socially and medically stigmatized, resulting in a person developing poor mental health and self-image (Olson et al., 2015, p. 375). The common treatment for transgender people is to try and have them achieve one or the other binary gender statuses (male or female) and then align their body type with the cultural ideal image. Not only are transgender communities limited to what resources are available to achieve the binary status pushed in our culture, but the term "gender dysphoria" also marks those struggling with dysphoria as

sick people. Currently, gender dysphoria is still considered a disease in the DSM-5[1] and is commonly associated with transgender communities (Zucker, 2017). Gender dysphoria is classified as a disease that can potentially interfere with transgender rights and respect for the community (Lev, 2013, p. 4). In “The Misuse of Gender Dysphoria: Toward Greater Conceptual Clarity in Transgender Health,” Ashley (2019) explains that medical practitioners who label gender dysphoria as a disorder or disease are misusing and misunderstanding the phrase altogether: "this may have less to do with the worth of the wielder than the misshapenness of the instrument" (p. 1).

Some agree that transgender people are not inherently unhappy (Lev, 2013, p. 169), let alone mentally ill, and that the treatment they seek is really for the distress they face living in a culture that regularly reinforces binary ways of thinking about gender through social punishments that range from microaggressions to violent assaults. The treatment is not for something wrong with the transgender person; the treatment is for the effects of an abusive society. I only started to seek hormone replacement therapy when I transitioned; my previous education and options led me to believe that gender is biological, and I only had two different paths to follow. Walking into the doctor's office for the first time at 18 and coming out as transgender seeking hormone treatment was the first of many experiences in which I was terrified and humiliated. Why was my personal identity something that needed to be diagnosed by an outside gatekeeper (Lev, 2013, p. 4)? After countless hours of therapy and money being wasted, the medical professionals were finally ready to give me the label of gender identity disorder, a title that will follow me in my medical records until my last breath.

[1] The DSM-5 is an acronym for fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

Defining Gender Dysphoria

My gender dysphoria is a direct result of gendered norms and expectations growing up. As Ashley (2019) states, "The distress in gender dysphoria is not indicative of mental illness but is a normal psychological response to having a body that does not correspond to one's gendered self-image" (p. 2). I never had control of when or how others were going to reinforce the belief that my body was not one that a woman has. Only if transgender identity is located in biology, is gender dysphoria the name of the problem medical providers are trying to cure when treating trans patients. Unfortunately, the term *gender dysphoria* has been used since the early 1970s to ascribe transgender people as diseased (Ashley, 2019, p. 2-3). Still to this day, I must live with every medical provider picking up my chart and assuming they know where my gender is located in my body (Ashley, 2019, p. 4). Dysphoria, then, has the force that it has in my life because people (often violently) insist on the belief that gender has a biological basis in the body harms my mental wellbeing.

Progressive professionals have theorized about moving away from gender being the focus and looking further into the distress of dysphoria (that is, treating the distress rather than treating the gender; Lev, 2013, p. 7). But we are still not there. Doctors and nurses have looked me in the eyes and told me, "Don't worry. You are feeling this way because you were born in the wrong body. It's called dysphoria. We can treat this so you can be accepted into the world again." Transgender people have to endure these conversations about their credibility and their bodies as the centerpiece of medical conversation (Ashley, 2019, p. 1), only to feel more helpless and alone than they did before.

When I was young, my own dysphoria was centered in the feelings of distress and dread when I looked in the mirror and did not see the person I wanted to see. This took an emotional toll on my mental and physical wellbeing. The mirror was not the only distress I had to experience; my early years also included torment from other kids, parents, and even teachers (Kaltiala-Heino, 2018, p. 35) who were quick to assume that I was different than the rest. Studies have shown that transgender youth present with depression four to six times more often than their cisgender peers (Kaltiala-Heino, 2018, p. 34) and often have unhealthy weight concerns from hiding undesirable body features (Olson et al., 2015, p. 378, Peterson et al., 2017, p. 2). Transgender people commonly feel dissatisfaction with their bodies from the biological discourse deeply embedded in our education (Peterson et al., 2017, p. 2, p. 5). At an early age, I experienced extreme social anxiety and depression from being forced to fulfill a role that did not suit me. I knew the other kids around me at the playground were not experiencing the same self-consciousness and dissatisfaction with their bodies because they were more comfortable in their skin.

The belief that gender was biological and embedded into our bodies led me to grow up, embedding dark razor scars into mine. Before I came out to my family and myself, I self-harmed and punished my body for being too feminine and not protecting me against the bullying. No matter how much I adorned my body with masculine trinkets and clothing, I never felt whole. I allowed others to enter my body, abuse me, and judge. The dominant narrative in western society tells that gender is biological, located in the body. Our genitalia are the oracles of all our answers. As scholars continue to theorize gender, identity, and the body, the narrative moves to de-centering cisgender

assumptions of normality (Lev, 2013, p. 2). Transgender people are ordinary, and they are valid. Gender is far more than the classification of body parts we are born with; gender is an everyday process we all do. We look in the mirror, and we adorn our bodies with materials that communicate to the rest of the world who we are. Gender dysphoria is a result of the reinforcement of gender being binary and biological. Not until recently have I moved away from this thinking. My body is not male or female; my body is a ritual material used to perform my gender identity.

Understanding Gender as Performative

I remember vividly standing in front of the mirror with the bathroom door closed, breathing so close to the reflection that my breath left clouds of fog while applying mom's deep red lipstick onto my face, the waxy texture coating my lips as they slightly stuck together when I pressed them to one another. The silk-smooth lining of mom's heels loosely secured to my small feet and the red cape tied around my neck brushed against my body. I completed the look with one of my white t-shirts tucked over my head to symbolize long locks of hair. The weight of the shirt felt comfortable secured on my head, the slightest movements tickle the back of my neck when I turn. I stare at the mirror, and all my front teeth show from the giant grin on my face. I am nervous about leaving the bathroom and for others to see me, but I know in this moment, every piece of fabric makes me feel secure and safe. I know who I want to be even if the mirror and I disagree slightly. I prance around in the safety of my house and quote every Cruella DeVil line from *101 Dalmatians,* my parent's pained and scared faces reflecting in the TV screen as the movie plays.

My gender is not an issue for me until dad asks me one midafternoon if I want to

be a girl. In my head the answer is an immediate yes, as if the slight thought of being a girl is even a possibility for me, but I answer his question with a diminishing "no," as if the idea of wanting to be a girl repulses and angers me. As the years pass and I continue struggling with my identity, I stay up in the late nights, chatting to strangers on the internet in full female attire, pretending to be someone I am not, or finally being the person I am?

The endless questions of who we are concerning our body and gender identity are complex; each scholar has a differing approach to connecting our identities together. Butler (1988) has worked over her career to draw conclusions on gender being a performative act, a repetitious act embodying ritual gendered traditions and expectations. Phenomenologically, our understanding of gender is not only through biological discourse but through mundane acts of materials, language, and symbolism (Butler, 1988, p. 519) that help encompass how we perform gender. The biological discourse itself is a performative act constituted by the same categories of symbolism. That is not to say that gender is not real, but it is tied to our cultural assumptions we have about performing an identity. We draw conclusions, even unconsciously, in our minds of someone's gender by what they wear and how they act. Gender is not a stable identity that one is born with, but an act that is repeated through our everyday interactions that then becomes a reality (Butler, 1988, p. 519). As Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but rather, one becomes a woman" (as cited in Butler, 1988, p. 519). I may not have been born into the world as a reflection of how a woman appears in our culture, but this does not mean that I am not a woman confined by my performance's limitations.

Sometimes it often feels my cisgender counterparts have it all together. Their internal identity is congruent with their performance of their gender and harmonious in its attempt to receive the appropriate, positive reinforcement from themselves and others. However, it would not be safe to assume that a transgender or cisgender person operates under significantly different standards, or that understanding gender through our acts is always straightforward. Our acts of gender through the various symbolic materials and traditions we perform create reality for our own reflection on our identity. We believe ourselves, and others do too, when we perform our gender that is rightly fit for us under the constraints of our understanding of gender itself (Butler, 1988, p. 520).

Furthermore, my performance of gender is unique to my understanding of it. Using materials to create the illusion that I have a cisgender female body and matching genitalia is an object of belief (Butler, 1988, p. 520) that communicates to the world that I am female. But it is more than the superficial illusion of a cisgender identity. I only must create those illusions for my own safety, as my belief in my own gender is not centered on creating a fake sensory performance but living every day choosing the acts that have been expected of women—one of them is to use materials to constrict the body as tightly as possible between skin and fabric. The constriction of the body outlines the womanly figure to highlight parts of the body that are often hypersexualized and can reduce the person to their anatomy. Genitalia have been used to explain women's experiences and has dictated the meaning of what it means to be a female (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Both Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty have theorized that gender is an historical situation and not a biological fact (as cited in Butler, 1988, p. 520), where gender is performed through the relationship of our knowledge of gender and our own

identity. In other words, gender is continuously remolding and changing its definition based on the time period we are reflecting upon. An historical situation constitutes gender as a non-stagnant ideology in our culture that is rewritten and retaught depending on the cultural events within that time period. We simply cannot conclude that gender is directly correlated to the genitalia we are born with because gender is only real to the extent to which it is performed (Butler, 1988, p. 527). To many, I may have not been born a woman, or I was born into the wrong body, but I have always been a woman because I believe it and because I live every day through my material body and actions that constitute it.

Gender and Materiality

The first time I remember publicly wearing feminine clothing, my feelings were mixed. I wear an uncomfortable wig that obstructs my view from my left eye. The tight grip from the wig band around my head causes an immediate headache. I match the wig with a long sleeve top that partially exposes my dark-haired arms; the amount of insecurity I feel from this exposure is unnerving. My shoes come to an uncomfortable point, and I want to cry out in pain from the discomfort with each step I take. The slight puff of air created between my foot's sole, and the shoe's bottom part becomes alarmingly louder with each step. I'm in a downtown area full of busy bodied people, and I keep losing my pace from adjusting my shoes every two steps. I try to avoid mirrors. I make it my personal mission *not* to notice my reflections all around me in the shop windows and little trinkets in the store. If I see myself, I know my disappointment will be overwhelming, and I'll give up for this day entirely. I cannot give up. I avoid the wandering gazes of passersby, and I try to hold my head up high. I want people to know

I am a woman, and in this moment, the only way I can show people my identity is through the feminine materials and adornments I drape on my body.

In *Paradoxes of Gender*, Lorber (1994) writes about their own experience navigating the discovery of performing their gender: "Transvestites and transsexuals carefully construct their gender status by dressing, speaking, walking, gesturing in the ways prescribed for women or men—whichever they want to be taken for—and so does any normal person" (p. 14). My own performance that day was emphasized through how I know a woman to be understood in our culture, and the process is no different than how cisgender people wake up and choose how they are going to express their own gender on any given day. The materials we choose to represent and embody our gender are how others begin to phenomenologically understand the meaning of our identities (Butler, 1988, p. 521; Wight, 2011, p. 75). The fabric we wear and the face paint we smudge on is not a mere coincidence but instead represents and helps others understand us better.

Using the body to create a performance through materiality is meaningful but is constrained by its historical contexts, or how gender is defined and taught in the current time period (Butler, 1988, p. 521). Whether it is to dramatize our appearance or construct a new identity, every mundane choice is an embodiment of who we are and who we want others to know us as. The performance of doing gender and consciously understanding it is not just an exterior illusion and a set of historically located strategies (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Style, for example, is more than a surface appearance of an historical fad. The understanding of style connects to our account of “man” and “woman.” As Butler (1988) writes,

> to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (p. 522)

Our own appearance can change as fads evolve, and our understanding of what it means to maintain a sense of the gendered body will also continue to adapt based on the historical context. The body is an important material we use to display our gendered self, operating within the limits of history, and performing gender through a series of acts that are being reevaluated and revised as style is reevaluated and revised (p. 523).

How we stylize and perform our gender is contingent upon the current limitations in our culture that help us understand what is socially acceptable. We often use our bodies as a canvas to decorate ourselves in signifiers that allude to our gender. The relationship of our bodies to our gender identity is "deeply entrenched in the sedimentary expectations of gendered experiences" (Butler, 1988, p. 524), and that is how we phenomenologically understand our own performance of gender and the means to achieve that aesthetic enjoyment (Hopkins, 1990). As a child imitating Cruella, putting on those oversized heels and lipstick constituted my performance of being a woman, generating a feeling of familiarity and happiness staring into the mirror. Each piece worn on my body included a part of the feminine cultural ideology. Was this me? The shirt wrapped over my head represented women's beauty and cultural obsession with long, flowing hair. The heels were stilts of poise and graceful mannerism. The cape was the flow of feminine clothing, mysterious and confident like the fabric that rippled as I walked. I knew the woman I was before the age of five, and I, too, was an intelligible

and gendered being (Wight, 2011, p. 75). I was coherent and aware of the rules I was breaking by enjoying the materials that covered my skin; I knew the materiality that brought me joy would only be allowed in the confines of this singular mirror, the only place where I would be seen for who I am. My body was the vessel in which I was allowed to display my gender, and I experience the visceral relationship I have with my hunk of clay-flesh (Jones, 2015, p. 20) as I adorn it with feminine artifacts and fabrics. After my father asked if I wanted to be a girl, I had an understanding that I was not the only one asking who I really was. Over the following years, I would be asked the same mundane questions about my sexuality and gender.

The Feedback Loop of Gender Identity

I was often asked questions regarding my mannerisms, speech, and dress, such as, "Are you gay?" "Why are you such a ladyboy?" and "Why are you so feminine?" I was trapped between two worlds of performing for others and performing for myself. Unfortunately, our culture is surrounded by the ideologies of heteronormativity, which is often reproduced through bodies. These questions I encountered when I was younger came from others navigating their own cultural upbringing that held heterosexuality as the norm and all other acts as deviant (Butler, 1988, p. 524). My use of feminine gestures and mannerisms communicated to my peers that I was different from what they had learned. Through my encounters with negative reinforcement, I started to perform my gender as others wanted, reflecting their compulsory heterosexuality as if I held a script with me that negated my feminine tendencies. As Butler (1988) points out, gender is an act that is often rehearsed (p. 526). The metaphorical script I gripped in my hands was to communicate to others that I belonged. Communicating a gender identity

involves more than the actual performance itself; the reception and interpretation of one's scripted performance are crucial factors to finding a sense of belonging (Wight, 2011, p. 76). I became more obsessed with the feedback I received for playing a masculine boy than with having a sense of belonging with my body. Reflecting on my younger years showcases the yearning I had to embrace femininity, but my fear of receiving a negative reception that could lead to violence held me back.

Those who fail to perform gender within our cultural understanding are left to face punishment regularly (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Though gender may not be an absolute fact (Butler, 1988, p. 522), that does not diminish the reality that those who situate gender as biological impose their beliefs on others through verbal and nonverbal acts of reinforcement. Wight (2011) uses concepts of facework and face negotiation theory as means to understand the reactions and discourse around the treatment of transgender people, usually through negative reinforcement or punishment by those who are part of the dominant discourse (p. 78). Transgender people are especially under more scrutiny than their cisgender counterparts because their performance threatens the understanding that gender is strictly biological. The first few months of my physical transition were held under scrutiny because my performance was transparent; I possessed more masculine features than most cisgender women. I faced judgmental looks paired with huffs of disgust under strangers' breaths. I knew my performance as a woman was not adequate for the societal standards and that strangers categorized me as someone faking my gender. Acts of reinforcement based on someone's gender performance are, as Butler (1988) and Wight (2011) argue, a movement from the performer to the viewer and back again. Wight continues that within transgender

persons' performativity, the lack of agency in choices of assigned gender expectations is not a *personal* failure when they are negatively reinforced, but rather a *cultural* one (p. 83). Although that is true, the feeling of failure is difficult to avoid given the negative feedback transgender people often receive. I will continue to feel like a failure because my gender performance is often excluded from the dominant discourse.

The Culture Surrounding Gender

The idea of gender as only binary limits the experiences in which transgender, nonbinary, and queer people can freely and safely express themselves. Gender is no more than a fairytale we tell children to easily integrate them into a primarily categorized and commodified culture. Lorber (1994) writes about their thoughts on "doing gender" and how the construction of it is only a product:

> Gender is so pervasive that in our society, we assume it is bred in our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly "doing gender." (p. 13)

We have been taught that sex and gender are synonymous from an early age, and the idea that they are connected has created our rigid and straightforward codes of gender (Feinberg, 1993, p. 148). For example, pink is for girls and blue is for boys remains a cultural rule (as evidenced by contemporary "gender reveal" parties), even though a century prior, it was believed to be the complete opposite. A June 1918 article from *Earnshaw's Infants' Department* stated that pink is an accepted color for boys due to it being a "stronger" color than "dainty and delicate" blue (Maglaty, 2011). The colors

associated with gender we know today were not established until the 1940s for manufacturers and retailers to make a larger profit off parents having to buy all new clothes for their children. The article proves that gender is always changing and is not stagnant to our bodies.

The strict belief in binaries results in violence and public disdain for transgender people. The thought of interacting or being near someone who is transgender can bring others in a fit of rage and violence unwarranted (Butler, 1988, p. 527). Transgender people's performance of gender is represented as an act of illusion or malice by a predator in disguise. Performance and illusion have two different meanings, and what transgender people do is perform the way that their cisgender counterparts do every day. Butler (1988) works to make her statement clear about the difference between putting on an act to be enjoyed and what transgender people face performing their gender; she calls for others to understand her words' actual reality. Transgender people are not in a play performing for their audience; this is their life that becomes dangerous because of the gendered binary system we continue to uphold (p. 527). There will never be a universal agreement on how gender is defined or performed (Hopkins, 1990, p. 183), but phenomenologically speaking, there is a difference between performance being contested and gender being contested. Our culture is quick to punish and marginalize those who do not perform gender essentialism (Butler, 1988, p. 528); trans challenges the heteronormative culture that people prefer to operate under. and believe their agency is made through one of two choices (Wight, 2011, p. 74-76). One’s agency is culturally limited primarily to one of two choices, and those choices dictate how others will understand our performance. Even if we choose to live outside the binary, people

will try to categorize us by asking themselves, "Are they a boy or girl?" (Wight, 2011, p. 77).

The internal conversation one has with oneself deciphering if someone is a boy or a girl can go unrecognized in our ordinary every day. For transgender people, this is a concern we have, and how we choose to perform our gender is contested, given the relationship that genitalia have with the materiality of our performance. Connelly explains, "I'm not a boy because I have a penis, and just because I don't have a vagina doesn't mean I'm not a girl" (as cited in Wight, 2011, p. 79) because there is not a biological reason that limits who identifies within our binary system of gender. The problem with the assumption that all males have penises and all women have vaginas is that it simply is not the truth. We make these assumptions when we observe someone's behavior, the language they use, and objects we adorn our bodies with. Through these highly ritualized practices, we categorize who we think they are in our heads without really knowing. Becoming a woman or a man is highly ritualized, much like the process of becoming a bride or parent. Beyond the debate between individualism and collectivism (Wight, 2011, p. 80), the reinforcement of ritual holds a deep meaning in gendered performances. All my memories looking back on my gender performance led me to understand that there was a wide possibility of combinations that the materiality of gendered objects could have been used to satisfy my troubled identity, but I was only allowed to use more masculine adornments to my body. I had to walk solemnly to the boys' side of our recess line because that was our ritual. I could not hug my grandfather because a handshake is what men do, and only girls gave hugs. He would embrace my older sister with open arms as she approached him, indicating that he was happy to

share his personal space with her. We would go in order of birth, and my grandfather would immediately drop his left arm and hold out his right one for me to shake. My youngest brother still received a side hug, I suspect, because he was still young and cute enough to be a boy. I was older, and my grandfather was starting to consider me a "man." The maintenance of my gender was regulated by those around me (Lorber, 1994, p. 22) because I had similar body features to my father, an idea that has been passed down centuries of generations in our culture.

The Importance of Play and Rituals

Rituals and traditions, one reinforcing the other as our repeated practices, become sets of beliefs. Before we are even born, there are multiple gender reveal parties and birth announcements verifying our gender identity before a person has the opportunity to discover that for themselves. But children have their own sense of identity, even if the ideologies they have been taught do not align with how they feel (Lorber, 1994, p. 25). I knew my own gender identity from that early age, regardless of what everyone told me. I chose to say no to dad that day because I did not know being transgender was a possibility for me; without the language in my vocabulary, I thought it was more of a sick joke than an actual question that could be answered differently. Without gender differentiation, my experience could have been different, but the long tradition of binary gender and how we are conditioned to perform a particular role does not change overnight (Lorber, 1994, p. 27). I now look back on those memories where I struggled, and I try to understand the ritual of my performance, reflecting on those moments when I was younger where I would play dress-up and imagine a character for myself that would allow the possibility.

Dressing up in play allowed me to perform as a girl and push the boundaries laid out in front of me. Play gave me space to develop my identity and use it as an excuse to counter some negative feedback I received for wanting to play with “girl” items. McConachie (2011) writes that play is consequently self-reinforcing, allowing us to find enjoyment in the deviance of our ascribed statuses (p. 36). This notion that play as self-reinforcing is my parents' experience allowing me to dress up as a particular character in the safety of our home, little by little chipping away at the façade that there only exists man and woman. I could see in dad’s facial expressions that my play made him somewhat uncomfortable; my play threated his masculinity. He never had to say it aloud, but I knew that raising a more feminine son was hard for him; I picked up all the information of his emotions and fears with one look (McConachie, 2011, p. 37).

McConachie's work on play, performance, and ritual helps to understand the relationship that play has with gender performance; we can use play to project ourselves and create opportunities that are not limited by our assigned gender identity. A different understanding of our body—one that can be authentic and freeing—lives primarily when we are children; as we grow older, we are overwhelmed by the reality that most of the world around us becomes dull with shades of less fabulous colors. I never knew the little child playing, staring into the mirror after applying their mother's lipstick, was paving my way to becoming a woman. Little did I know that at an older age, in the middle of the night, dressing up in mom’s stolen clothes, seeing my reflection in my phone would be a moment when my path to understanding my identity was almost near its threshold. I then knew, at the age of 18, that my sense of play was over because I was staring in the mirror as myself, no longer playing an unreal character I

created in my head. She was real. Not anywhere near perfect like the projections I made growing up, but she was more accurate than any red cape or ill-fitting dress I had worn. I work and rework my sense of self and its relationship with the role (McConachie, 2011, p. 4), understanding that play is not an illusion or imaginary belief but a refashioning of gender ritual that allowed me to grow. If we disallow young minds to make decisions for themselves—if we condition boys to only play with trucks and punish them for playing with dolls, for example—they will learn to fearfully rehearse ascribed ideas repeatedly until those ideas appear to have become a part of their repetition of everyday, mundane acts that create gender performance. The restriction of play and choice internalizes the idea that it is not favorable for them to resist and create intelligible value in the phenomenon that they continue to be punished for.

Gender and the Mirror's Reflection

The relationship I have with mirrors and mirror-like objects allows me to consciously be aware of my gender dysphoria. Since I was young the fascination with seeing myself reflected in an object helped me gauge my femininity or masculinity dependent on my physical appearance. Many books, television shows, and stories use mirrors to reveal new dimensions of the self (Tucker, 2005, p. 187). Truth about gender can be found in reflections; while they allow a view of the surface of the body, there is space for reflection on self-perception. The tangible, reflective glass we so depend on every day is one of our connections to gender identity and how we perform it. Langer (2016) identifies that interoception is about self-perception, and it is a core understanding for transgender people and their identity (p. 307). The reflection of a transgender person may lead to an experience of misattunement that their cisgender

counterpart typically has not shown in studies. Misattunement describes a disconnect from their realized self and body that leads to a more difficult time understanding their own place in the world (Langer, 2016, p. 308). Therefore, mirrored objects are important to trans experiences because a transgender person's mind is more focused on performing to survive than being able to think freely.

Transgender people narrate the hardship they have had to face because their gender identity does not match what they see in the mirror. For someone who mirrored maleness for their childhood and young adult life, I was dissociated from my feelings and could only think of being male to survive the other's gaze (Langer, 2016, p. 309). A reflection holds great importance and remains a vital part of the maintenance of a gender identity. Mirroring is intertwined with recognition of a self and achieving alignment between body and environment (Langer, 2016, p. 307, p. 312).

The mirror was my place to create my gender, a reflection that was mine: the same blue eyes and large nose, the same goofy smile when someone told a funny joke. I nurtured and nourished my continuing relationship with myself in the mirror because that is where I had the choice to be authentic to at least one person honestly and openly. My possibilities were endless and full of wonder; the mirror was my tool to move a mental image out in the world and make it real. After I started to medically transition, seeing my reflection in the same mirror provided a different experience. I was no longer merely testing an identity that had a path, but was beginning to walk that path with each glance I took that showed me every transgender feature I possessed. I no longer smile in the mirror, and I find I am forced back to the worst memories I consciously hold in the most inconvenient times, my reflection creeping up on me and forcing me to relive my

trauma. As I have come to understand that gender is not biological, but rather a performance of authenticity and everyday repetition of acts reinforced by the self and others, I developed my gender to my dysphoria and every feature that was not overtly cisgender and feminine. Play and my body's materiality opened the possibilities for me to further explore my authentic self, but my body and physical form betray my safety by letting those around me know I am transgender. Those possibilities run through my head like a computer searching for the correct result to a typed question (McConachie, 2011, p. 39), and I am left meeting my eyes in the mirror and only seeing what others have punished me for all those years I struggled. My reflection became my enemy.

HEADING 4

BECOMING DYSPHORIC

February 7th, 2020, at 7:20 a.m.

The alarm goes off at precisely 7:20 in the morning. I slide out of bed, and my first steps walk me into my everyday routine. I always find my way into the bathroom staring at myself in the mirror. I acquired the habit in my younger years when I raced out of the bedroom to check if my silent prayers to wake up a girl would finally be answered. I look at myself now as a dream my younger self wanted come true. However, I lock eyes with my reflection, and the bright lights and blue accents in the room blur from my refusal to blink. Blinking would only allow me to see my body clearly; I would be disappointed and uneasy. There are days I wake up and my body seems very disconnected from my actual self. If it was not for the mirror consciously forcing the idea into my head, I would have difficulty recognizing myself. I blink as the drying of my eyes transforms into pain; I see myself. Immediately, I see the man everyone expected me to become. I turn my head to the left and examine my masculine jawline with my fingers. I can feel the slight prickle of my growing stubble. I trace my hand across my forehead and browbone and imagine what I would hate about it if I was not conditioned to have thought I was a boy. I stare down at the outline of my small breast underneath my t-shirt; I wonder what my younger self would be feeling at this moment.

October 31st, 2002 at 7:20 a.m.

The beating sun across my face wakes me up hopeful and excited for today. Today is my favorite holiday, Halloween. One of the few days of the year that I am courageous enough to ask mom and dad if I can dress up as a girl and leave the

comfort of our home. For a moment, I'm hopeful I won't have to pretend today because I fell asleep with one of my wigs on thinking this would do the trick. I touch the top of the wig, matted and snarled from my tossing and turning through the night, I attempt to remove it. The wig peels away, leaves an impression on my forehead, and I feel a satisfying physical relief. But I am not relieved. I look at the wig for a second in frustration and toss it. I get up from the bed, and I walk into the bathroom. I climb onto the counter because my six-year-old height doesn't allow me to examine my body thoroughly. I stare at myself in the mirror longer than I would like to admit. I am frustrated. I lift my shirt up, and I become incredibly distraught by the lack of womanly breasts. My chest could not be flatter compared to the images I hold in my head of who I want to be. I see a perfect woman with long ringlets of shiny hair, breasts, and an outfit that showcases her femininity. Someone knocks on the door; I slump off the counter, fold my shirt down, and walk away from my reflection.

October 31st, 2002 at 12:35 p.m.

I never dress up when Halloween falls on a school day because that leaves me shivering with the possibility of anxiety. Instead, I wear my best Halloween shirt, and I move through the day without stepping into another bathroom with mirrors. I hold the urge to relieve myself all day because I know what is waiting inside —a reflection void of a feminine-looking girl. I have learned to mirror my male peers' actions and mannerisms even though I wish to be seen as someone else. I yearn for my classmates to see me as I know myself; I want my gender performance to be different but accepted through positive, mirrored eyes (Devor, 2004, p. 46). I yearn for my classmates not to stare at me, to not wonder what's wrong with me and why I can't fit in with their perception of

acceptable. As a girl, seeing myself isn't enough when everyone else sees me for my masculine jawline or my male clothing. They assume they know me. My performance places me in a box. We are all defined by these categories that we are told are absolute, like the teacher shoving laminated words on the board for us to learn: the days of the week, numbers, *boy*, primary colors, animals, *girl*, verbs, nouns, *binary*, spelling words. I'm categorized as who they think I am and who they think I'm not, and I begin to believe this mirrored reflection (Devor, 2004, p. 46). I walk over to where everyone's playing house, and I volunteer to be the mom.

My cheeks flame scarlet when the other four kids shoot me looks of confusion and disgust. One of the more masculine boys stands up and tells the teacher. My heart beats faster and faster in my chest as she walks closer. My lower lip trembles as all the other kids shout to our teacher that I want to be the mom. As if my words were poisonous. I'm eventually allowed to petition my role as the mother after two long minutes of my teacher explaining this wasn't "normal." Still, we should be allowed to use our "imagination" when it's recess. The other kids elect another girl to be the mother, and I am left being the house pet. It's just like last week, the ridicule when I brought my Betty Spaghetti doll to after school dance.

I'm angry at not being able to play the way I'm allowed to at home. It's not fair that the other kids imagine themselves in these roles of mother and daughter, and I'm left to only witness their possibilities.

October 31st, 2002 at 3:49 p.m.

As mom applies the thick, bright green face paint on my cheeks, dad walks into the room with a worried look across his face. I avoid his gaze because the past week,

he's been encouraging me to change my mind on the costume I want to wear for trick or treating tonight. (I told my parents I wanted to be a witch—a witch with a wig and dress.) My mom finishes the last few touches on my face, and I run to the bathroom to look in the mirror. I can't help but smile from ear to ear while I reposition my wig and hat.

We visit six different houses before we come to a simple house with a simple old woman who smells of caramel. Walking right up to her and her genuine and warm smile, I open of my candy bag and say, "trick or treat!" She gives a small cooing noise and places a large handful of candy in my bag as mom and dad catch up to the house's front steps. I walk past them to visit the next home when I overhear the old lady sweetly say,

"Your daughter is such a cutie."

My heart flutters at the word "daughter," and I quickly glance at my mom and dad's expressions. They both give a smile and turn to follow me. If the woman I had never met before this moment could tell I was a girl, why could mom and dad not see the same? I spend the remainder of trick or treating imagining a world where I belong and feel comfortable in my skin. Did nobody realize this simple, ill-fitting dress and wig give me a sense of belonging to my body? I can look in the mirror and realize the skinny torso and broad shoulders are mine. I'm conscious of my gender because I can't play dress-up and wear Halloween costumes without worry, or hesitation, or backlash; I'm only allowed to publicly act like dad or grandpa or the other male students in school.

After trick or treating, we drive to grandma's house. I go into the bathroom to look at myself one last time until next year; I'm the only fully realized person who understands my identity. I meet my own gaze, and I beg for her to stay only a little

longer.

February 7th, 2020, at 7:23 a.m.

I pat my face dry after shaving the slight stubble that grew overnight, and I close my eyes, trying to forget those memories when I was young. When I recall those moments as a child, I reminisce on the unbearable longing to see myself in the eyes of others as I see myself in the reflection (Devor, 2004, p. 46). I can still feel the anguish from my childhood of never receiving the validation I needed to be self-assured.

February 7th, 2020, at 1:06 p.m.

I finish typing a sentence in my Queer Theories graduate class, and I stop to listen to what more my professor is saying. My laptop suddenly dims after a minute passes; the computer is conserving energy until I awaken it again. The screen goes black, and I am staring at myself in my reflection. Immediately I notice the same features that I've been told for years make me a boy: strong jawline, broad shoulders, hairy arms, large forehead. I feel lost in my reflection, and the words my professor is saying slowly become muffled vibrations around me. I stare into my own eyes with disdain. I'm letting my younger self down.

December 8th, 2009 at 11:39 p.m.

Lying in bed, lights off, with my phone screen practically pressed against my nose, I search on Amazon.com for "dressing like a female." I scroll through the numerous items and defeatedly place my phone on my side to look up at the ceiling. I've searched about men who become women, and I can never find anyone that feels like I do without them being something grossly sexual. The lack of representation for my feelings clouds the mirror I obsess over (Devor, 2004, p. 48). I quietly whisper, "What's

wrong with me? What did I do to feel this way and be punished? Please, God, please make this feeling disappear." At the age of 13, I contemplate the importance of my life and its relevance to others. Would I be missed?

After minutes pass, I get up and turn the room light on. I wince in pain as the shock of light forces my eyes to readjust and glance into the mirror across the room. I stand in front of the mirror, and small tears race down my cheeks, onto the dressing table. I break my stare and rummage through my dark closet, hoping I don't wake my brother in the next room. I pull out a stuffed box in the back of my closet, and I place it on the bed. Inside the box are old clothes mom thought she threw out of her closet: dresses, tops, bras, shoes. I pull out a knotted, old wig and place it securely on my head. I undress and slowly slide a simple dress onto my body. I hook the bra to my torso and tuck it underneath the dress. I slip my feet into the open-toed shoes that hug my soles. With the makeup I stole from mom's cabinet, I meticulously swipe the waxy lipstick on my lips in front of the mirror.

I look at myself as a whole. I am a girl, and if I was not a few moments ago, I know surely, I am now. Time becomes irrelevant when I meet my own gaze in the reflection. Imagining waking up the next morning and being proud of this mental image I captured in my head is far out of reach. Am I a pervert for liking this? Questions of this nature often plague my thinking at night, along with indescribable euphoric feelings of comfort. I feel a sense of familiarity in my body that I lost as a child. The doubts and mixed emotions I think about cannot be expressed in words with others. I know the backlash and the stigma surrounding my thinking process, and I don't know if I am ready for all of it. Backlash from family and friends often are big deterrents for

transgender and queer communities (Devor, 49). These clothes and feminine mannerisms bring a sense of both freedom and entrapment. After an hour of obsessing over my reflection, I pack up my secrets and shove them deep in the closet. I'm lost. August 26th, 2011 at 11:30 a.m.

The bell rings in the school, and my classmates and I migrate to the cafeteria for lunch. I feel a sense of relief and confidence after last night. I had come out to mom and dad as gay, and I now feel I can express myself more in public without fear of my behavior blindsiding my family. I reach the booth with my friends; they're already inquiring about the man I'm seeing and my opinions on certain feminine pop culture news. This is freeing; I can be more comfortable in my skin and act as feminine as I want without fear of hate from my friends and family. This is a step closer to feeling a sense of belonging to my body and gender (Devor, 2004, p. 49). I get up from the table with fifteen more minutes for lunch, and I make my way down the hall near the school's art gallery showcase. I take a glance over, and I stop dead in my tracks. There I am, my reflection in the clear glass covering that was meant to be no more than a protector for the art pieces. Those feelings of comfort and freedom now seem caged behind my reflection, displaying my body as a foreign picture. I feel a disconnect from that man who moves when I move, mimicking the motion of my arm swinging my lunch box at my side. I remember that coming out as gay is not a solution to my relationship with my body; yet I allow a more feminine performance to yield its control over my actions and mannerisms. I no longer have to hold back entirely.

As I look at myself in the mirror, a group of juniors walks past and whispers "faggot" while snickering into the hallway. I'm one of the art pieces on display, available

for judgement without repercussions. My friends catch up with me, and I let go of myself. I say, “The art sucks, doesn’t it?”

November 8th, 2011 at 1:49 a.m.

I huddle on the floor with a man I’ve known for three days. My friend’s house is cold, and all six of us are “sleeping” in the living room under blankets; my new friend and I are on the love seat, one friend nestles on the couch, and the other three are huddle on the mattress that was dragged in. My new friend and I make out silently while the others are fast asleep; my heart races and euphoria overcomes my mind. This is my second experience with a man, and his hands are seemingly caring for my body. His gentle touch glides underneath my clothes like a fallen leaf switching directions in the wind. He looks at me and says, “Is there somewhere private we can go?” We both get up as quietly as possible and head outside. He holds onto my hand as we move into my friend’s garage, up the ladder, and onto the second story. We stumble our way to find a camping lantern that illuminates a soft glow to our faces. He pulls down an old mattress hidden away in the corner of the room and pulls me in.

Hours before this moment, I stared into the mirror and hated my body. I cursed at myself for even imagining to be the girl that I created in my head. Now, I have someone who appreciates my body, who wants to see it stripped of materiality and to stare into my soul. He wants to know my secrets and understand my flaws. I’m at a loss for words trying to understand how this man can wish for something I’m disconnected to and not be aware of this disconnection. He never again meets my eyes because, in one swift motion, he flips me on my stomach, and breathes into my ear. The hot air condenses on my cheek, the pressure of his body on mine, my throat presses hard into the stiff

mattress making this exchange excruciatingly confining. I can't find the words to scream out in agony because I am being pushed deeper into the mattress as he rapes me. My eyes fixate on a single nail on the ground. What if one of us had stepped on that nail protruding from the wooded floor? I begin to compare my experience with other cisgender men and women. Does this make me more of a man or a woman? If the woman I've been longing to be was in my scenario, would it be different because my body would be my own (Devor, 2004, p. 54)? As I am being rocked back and forth, I can almost step outside of my skin and watch what's happening from a third-person perspective. I can see the helpless and pained face of the boy who's fighting to survive. I wish I could help her.

February 7th, 2020, at 2:03 p.m.

I start to hear the words of my professor again, and I look up from my laptop. Tears swelling in my eyes, I take one dry gulp of air, and I look back at my device. I remember that day far too often. The most painful memory I hold was also a turning point for my gender identity. I hated my body, and my resentment became destructive. As I had little control over that night's outcome, I pushed myself to accept that my body was not deserving of respect. I gaze further in the reflection of my laptop screen longingly for an escape from my own self.

January 14th, 2012, at 7:43 p.m.

I scroll through my phone on the couch in the living room as my brother plays a videogame. We have the lights off, and my face is illuminated by my best friend's newest picture on Facebook with our friend group; I'm not in it. They didn't even invite me. I get up from the couch and walk to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face

to calm myself down. I peer at myself in the mirror, the feeling of irritation spreading up my neck and to my temples. Clenching down my jaw, I think that if I was my authentic self, then I would be more confident in this. I would be less bothered and more comfortable in my skin. I wouldn't have to always wear sweatshirts and garments that completely cover my body out of fear someone will look at my masculine features. There's a slight burning sensation on my arm, and I roll up my sleeve. I see 20 small scratches from the tip of blunt scissors engraved on the inside of my forearm. Last night I took those scissors that were in my room, and I angrily carved those lines into my skin. Each small cut for a different part of my body that I hate because they aren't feminine enough. Each short cut a reminder that I'm not allowed to be a girl. I run my finger over the lines, and I feel each piece of raised skin caused from extreme irritation. I'm mesmerized by them.

I can hear my phone chime in the living room, and I pull down my sleeve while leaving the mirror. I sit back down on the couch, grab my glass of water, and look at my phone. My friends are texting me random words and sentences compiled together in copious messages. They think it's funny to spam me with messages because I'm absent from their adventures. I'm disconnected from my friends the same way I'm disconnected from my body. I hear glass shatter. I look down at my other hand, and crumbles of glass lay in my palm and litter the floor. I can hardly see in the dark room, but my brother's game illuminates my hand enough to see tiny pools of blood start to spread. Calmly, I look at my brother, who has been staring at me this whole time, and signal to him go fetch mom and dad; I need to go to the E.R. He quickly runs out of the room, and I walk back into the bathroom to clean off my hand. The blood from the

wounds continues to gush out of my skin. I look in the mirror, and it feels like time slowly comes to a stop. I can almost see the boy staring back at me, smiling from my pain. He finds humor in watching my suffering.

Mom and I wait in the emergency room with a rag over my hand. Red slowly bleeds through as if I had touched red watercolor paint to the surface of water. The nurse calls my name, and I enter the back room alone. She asks me questions and examines my hand. I answer them, but I'm not very coherent in her questions or my responses. I only can focus on the discomfort of my body and portraying a masculine presence. She lifts my arms and sees my cry for help slashed on my body. She looks up, almost annoyed, and starts to ask invasive questions about my "self-harm."

I refuse to answer and play into her word choice; I look away. She can't begin to comprehend the reasoning behind my need to torture my body. She tells another nurse to bring in mom, and I try to pull my sleeve down. The nurse stops me and gives me an aggressive look. Mom walks in and stops to look down at me. I can't meet her eyes. Her treasured son, who, if only he acted more masculine, wouldn't be in this situation. The doctor comes in and starts to dress my wounds, cleaning out any glass fragments that remain and stitches my hand. I finally look at mom after minutes of silence, and I tell her I'm sorry. Before she can speak, the doctor starts a conversation with her about my arm and the services offered in the area that could help me. I remain silent, and I focus on the pain in my hand, having just been sewn up like a broken stuffed animal. I only wish it was other parts of my body that were ripped open and sewn together to make me whole. The thick, waxy threads pulling my skin together are like my mind trying to re-fragment my twisted relationship with my body. You can never pull tight enough for

them to fit perfectly into place again.

February 7th, 2020, at 2:48 p.m.

One of my classmates accidentally bumps my shoulder with their book, and I realize the class is packing up to leave. I look down at my hand; I can still see faded dots where the thread infiltrated my skin many years ago. The small lines slightly visible where my skin met itself and healed. I still struggle with forgiving myself for that night where I let my dysphoria harm mom and the ones who love me. I invited the pain and frustration into my body as a guest, and it burned down my temple. My broken body wears scars that force me to remember these memories of loneliness and confusion. However, I know I must give myself forgiveness because those events were not all my fault. I get up from my chair and walk out of the classroom. I open my car door and just sit there. Tears start to trickle, and I lay my head on the steering wheel. I begin to think about all those years I spent switching my answer when people asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” because I thought that finding my niche profession would satisfy my obsession with my gender. The nail technician, architect, wedding planner, and art teacher never made me more comfortable with my body or helped me understand my transgender identity. I continue to understand my identity through hearing other people’s experiences with their gender and reflecting on my experiences. I searched for a sense of belonging that I could not locate in myself, looking at both internal and external discoveries that would help (Devor, 2004, p. 53).

I gather myself from the steering wheel, exhale, and drive home for the day.

February 7th, 2020, at 5:16 p.m.

While making dinner with my fiancé, I try to divert my attention to the food. He

stands behind me, waiting for an opportunity to help with the recipe I know by heart. I continue without giving him any instructions because cooking helps me cope with my thoughts. The meal is the only thing I can control today. We eat dinner, and we go for our daily walk. As we walk, I can see his sunglasses slipping down his nose. He props them up to be flush with his brow bone. One of his fingers touches the lens, and I clearly notice a giant smudge in the light. I stop and offer to clean his glasses for him; he obliges. I use the bottom of my sweatshirt as a rag, and I peer at the lens in the sunrise. Instead of seeing a smudge-less lens, I see my reflection.

The sunglass's reflection is a stranger that I feel I know, a foreigner in appearance but familiar in every other aspect. I am brought to memories of Caitlyn Jenner coming out in 2015, when my "aha!" moment arose to assure me of my gender identity. The "aha" moment is often found in transgender people's testimonials regarding how they came to terms with being trans. (Devor, 52). I was so sure that I had shared feelings with Jenner because I felt the loneliness and pain she had to endure in her life. I felt scared I would survive through my life keeping this secret and never truly living. Watching Jenner come out for the first time was a significant memory I will hold dearest to my heart. I don't want to feel trapped. I want to belong in my body. A few months after Caitlyn, I came out to my family.

August 7th, 2015 at 6:02 p.m.

My family's annual murder mystery party theme is the 1920's. I recently came out to everyone that I was transgender, and tonight I'll play the role of a crossdresser in the 19th century. My brother and I wrote my role together to fit it accurately in the specific decade. I'm excited and nervous because this will be the first time everyone sees me

dressed as a woman. I bought my little flapper dress, wig, and shoes that all complement each other. I look in the mirror after finishing my makeup, and I'm disappointed. In my head, I've imagined this specific moment for weeks, but I can still see all those masculine features that are so prominent in my face. No amount of hair, jewelry, or makeup seem to erase the fact that for 18 years, I've been told I'm male. My neck slowly transitions into a deep pink color that gradually climbs up to my cheeks.

I'm overwhelmed and upset. The gender dysphoria I feel disconnects me from my body, and I can only think of my lack of belonging in the world. I shouldn't be allowed to live because I'm making this hard on everyone around me. Everyone who loves me is pained by my choices. Choices to come out and to express my authentic self. My breathing becomes shallow, and the room blurs for a moment before I lay on the ground and close my eyes. The cool tile of the bathroom comforts my hot cheeks. What would younger me say right now if she found me crippled with discomfort and anxiety? I stifle a small whimper, and I get back up from the ground, reapply my lipstick, and exit the door. The night is the first real experience with others where I am able to picture myself living this life of womanhood and learning new ways to communicate my identity with others.

For the next nine months, I continue to dress and act like a male while entering my first year of undergraduate classes at Northern Michigan University. My transition wasn't easy for anyone, including myself, and I delayed my transition to help everyone else's discomfort. There were many steps to consider before I transitioned, and I used these as an excuse because I was under the idea that I would only harm myself in the process (Devor, 2004, p. 59). Delaying my transition only created more confusion for my

loved ones and I had heightened moments of gender dysphoria that would manifest themselves into grueling depressive states. These states left me immobilized in my bed for hours staring at the floor. Only when I couldn't handle the pain any longer did I seek hormone replacement therapy from the university health center and began my transition.

June 9th, 2016 at 11:28 a.m.

I'm in a hotel bathroom in New Orleans with my family on vacation. I'm almost finished curling my hair for our long day around the downtown area. I'm incredibly nervous because this is my first time out in public as my transitioned self. My mind keeps shouting in my head that I'm not pretty enough. I'm not feminine enough. I'm not good enough. Mom walks over and tries to help me with the curling iron. I'm sure I must look to her like that small boy who wanted to play dress-up with her clothes. I have on a dress and sandals. I wish the dress had sleeves. My hairy arms exposed at my side makes me look like a Barbie body with Ken's arms. After mom finishes trying to style my hair, a tide of disappointment overcomes me. I see a boy pretending to play dress up as a girl. I'm unrecognizable in my reflection, and I reconsider if I'm strong enough to be myself (Devor, 2004, p. 61). I ask mom if I look okay, and she immediately responds with an affirmation. She tells me to step away from the mirror; she knows if I don't, I'll convince myself to never step outside.

After a few hours of eating food and walking downtown, we stop to look at a vendor who is selling art on the sidewalk. Two tall and lean women, one at the till and the other watching the potential customers, beckon mom and me over to this one piece they think we would be interested in. As they talk to us, I only think of my discomfort. I

want to speak and have a conversation with them, but I'm afraid they will notice how low my voice is for a woman and know I'm trans. The thought keeps circulating through my head and expands into ideas of them looking at me and seeing me the way I see myself—a fraud. I walk away from the art piece trying to calm down, and a few minutes later, we venture off to somewhere new.

June 9th, 2016 at 7:46 p.m.

We arrive at dinner waiting for a table to clear so we can sit down. I stand between mom and my brother. Mom leans in and tells me that when I walked away from the art piece today, she overhead the two women arguing if you were once a man or born a woman. My heart sinks. Mom says I should be proud I make people think, and I should not care about their opinions anyway. I know she's right, but I refuse to believe her. I want more than anything for passersby to look at me and not think twice about my gender. Why should my genitalia dictate what I can wear and how I can act? Mom, unaware of my breakdown, urges the three of us to snap a picture. We huddle together, and she takes it with some technical difficulty. She shows me the image. Immortalized in her phone is my struggle with the expectations of socially conditioned gender. I was taught all my life I was a boy, and there were certain expectations in the role that required me to be less feminine. Today, I broke those rules, and I'm both the most uncomfortable and comfortable I've been since I was three or four years old. I'm uncomfortable because I've never been allowed to be authentic, and I'm comfortable because I'm finally showing my authenticity through feminine acts and materials. I may feel broken and hopeless now, but I know that I can look back and be proud that I didn't let my reflection fool me into thinking this isn't real.

November 2nd, 2016 at 3:53 p.m.

I keep checking my phone to see if he's sent an updated text message. It's a warm day out, and I'm growing impatient from his lack of punctuality. We agreed we would meet at my dorm to hook up. I'm nervous because I know I'm placing myself in a bad situation. He texts me the conditions: this is just about sex, and he has a fetish for transgender women. Although he made it clear I was not the "prettiest tranny" he has seen, there are not many in the small area for him to meet. Before coming outside, I picked the dress I feel most comfortable in, straightened my hair to make it appear longer, and applied a moderate amount of makeup for the midday. Were these materials enough for him to see me as a woman?

After ten minutes pass, I quickly glance at my phone, and he says he's here. I look up, and I see a man walking towards me. He's strong and muscular; everything about his appearance was masculine. He smiles at me, and I lead him to my room. He starts to take his shirt off and kiss me. As I'm taken aback by the suddenness, I'm also relieved that he wants to kiss me on the lips. (The guy last week took advantage of me, never tried to kiss me on the lips, forced me to have sex with him, and later demanded he was not into "men.")

After an hour, we lay in my bed together, and he refuses to look me in the eyes. I ask him if he likes my dress, and he shrugs while saying, "for being trans you are pretty cute." He gets up and puts his clothes back on, wishes me a good day, and leaves. I sit, naked, on the edge of my bed, staring at my full-length mirror propped on the concrete wall. I'm learning that no matter my gender performance or the rituals I participate in, they don't protect me from what others have been taught for decades.

I try so hard to be feminine and pass as a cisgender woman, but I'm still not respected or valued by the same standards as cisgender people at the end of it all. I yearn to feel like I belong, that my body is perfect the way it was born. I mirror the women I want to be like, as does everybody else, so why are my acts frowned upon? I know the reason I feel disconnected from my body is because people believe that gender is interconnected with genitalia. It's a fixed value in the culture. Unyielding and unbreakable. You either obey your assigned gender and submit to its ideologies, or you are ostracized for not fulfilling your role as a binary category that everyone else values. I'm so much more than a "this or that" category, and so is everyone else.

February 7th, 2020, at 8:49 p.m.

While changing into pajamas I drop my engagement ring on the floor. I bend down and grab it before a particular feline child can sweep it underneath the bed, and I slowly stand. There I am in front of my full-length mirror, my naked body captured in its frames like an art piece at a gallery—the light creating harsh contrasts on my form, explicitly highlighting the left side of my face. I remember drawing body forms in my undergraduate classes when I was an art and design major—the violent glow of the lamps blurring tiny imperfections and casting parts of the body in complete shadow. My body looks like an object ready to be painted by a group of perfectionists who would scoff at every flaw that lessened their drawings. I understand my gender by my reflection of the body. It's an object I dress up with beautiful and feminine materials and use to perform an identity that best illustrates my wants and desires in life. I care how others view me because I grew up not feeling like my body was cared about. The signs were clear as day, but those I interacted with either thought my femininity was a phase

or bullied me into submission. I continue to ogle at the mirror. My body is feminine, and my body is enough. My genitals aren't male because they are mine. I'm not male, and I'm not a cisgender woman, and I still belong here.

January 20th, 2020, at 2:27 p.m.

The room smells of disinfectant and looks like a standard room where doctors do check-ups. The nurse tells me to sit and asks me the raw, probing questions for any standard visit. But this isn't any regularly scheduled visit. I made this appointment to look into the possibility of receiving an orchiectomy[2] to complete my gender transition. I've been on hormone replacement therapy for over 4 years, and this surgery is what I've wanted since the beginning of my transgender identity. The nurse's warm and kind words lessen my anxiety. She leaves the room, and I'm left waiting for the doctor. Minutes pass by on the clock while I stare at the generic-looking painting on the wall. I can see the outline of my body past the painted trees and meadows. I feel somewhat hopeful that I can proceed with this surgery and feel more comfortable in shorter, tighter clothing by the summer. Forty minutes pass before the doctor opens the door, and he immediately starts to apologize for the wait. As soon as he steps in the door, he stops in his tracks and stares at me. His mouth slightly opens, and he walks around me as if I'm an animal at the zoo. He's no longer staring but gawking at my body while whispering, "wow."

I shift awkwardly in my seat and try to hide the discomfort he causes me. He finally sits in his chair and starts asking me why I am here. I explain what I want to be done, and he says, "Well, you already look like a female and I was actually taken off

[2] An orchiectomy is a surgical procedure to remove one or both testicles.

guard when I walked in. I guess I was expecting a man in a dress to be wanting this procedure." I give him a half-smile, still trying to hide my continuing discomfort, and I ask him what the next steps are for this to happen. He proceeds to tell me he would like to see my genitalia to assess what needs to be done during this future procedure. I almost give a faint whimper because I was hoping this meeting would be a purely verbal consultation. However, I knew this was a possibility making the appointment. I stand, shaking, and I pull down my pants, gaff, and underwear. I look up at the light, and I hold my breath, hoping this moment will end. A minute passes, and he slides away on his chair from my body to his desk with a clipboard; I quickly pull up my garments, and I sit down. I can feel my cheeks are red hot with embarrassment, and I can't find the strength to look him in the eyes any longer. I obsess over my dysphoric thoughts until I hear the doctor refer to me as a male, and I snap out of the embarrassment to meet him directly in the eyes. I purse my lips, and I work to educate him on the meaning of my transgender identity. I see confusion spread across his face, and he asks again why I don't want a vagina to appear like other women. I'm in shock that a medical professional, who was recommended to me, is asking me a question through such a binary way of thinking. I explain what my transition means for me, and I push us in the conversation of the next steps to obtain this.

After a moment of silence, the doctor finally speaks and tells me that I'll need to see a therapist to confirm my "transsexualism" and that I'm fit to make this decision. I retaliate and explain this is not fair or useful since I've been on four years of hormones. I refuse to look away, and I cross my arms in anger. He explains that this is routine, and he wants to cover his own ass before he agrees to any schedule. Before I can say

another word, he cuts me off and starts to probe about my romantic life and the relationship my genitals play with my fiancé. I begin to explain my healthy sexual life with a cisgender man, and he cuts me off again in midsentence. He asks if my fiancé wants kids. He doesn't ask if "I" or "we" want kids, but if my fiancé wants to have children and if he's aware that we would not be able to. Defeatedly, I explain he is aware, and if we were to have children, we would use his sperm in the process and a donor's egg. The doctor raises his eyebrows and says, "Well, before we move forward, I think I'll need a sperm sample from your fiancé to ensure that he can have children before you make any rash decisions." Immediately I fight off tears of frustration and discomfort from this visit, and I shut down. I nod my head in compliance, and I look down at the floor while he leaves to write up the paperwork. I shouldn't have been so hopeful initially and realized very quickly I wasn't going to get what I want from this expensive consultation. Right now, I want more than anything to get up and leave this room, this building, and this world. My dysphoria feels like I'm being suffocated by the thoughts and feelings of not being pretty enough. Not feminine enough. Not good enough.

The nurse comes back into the room and hands me the paperwork and a sperm sample cup to bring back. I grab them in silence; I walk past her and out the door to my car. I slam my door shut, and big tears begin to fall onto the paperwork. I read it. There are 15 times in the document where I was referred to as "he," the form says I am a male with a gender identity disorder with bold lettering afterward stating "TRANSSEXUALISM." The paperwork continues: "I do not think a sperm count is necessary, but I do want to confirm that he [fiancé] does have live sperm present." I cry

so hard that I can no longer breathe. The fresh ink of the document smudges from the number of tears streaming down my face. The transphobic rhetoric of this medical report is a reminder that my body navigates a binary system. My performance is only one piece of the complex gendered puzzle. There is far more to gender and sex than the belief that our genitalia dictate who we will identify as for the remainder of our lives. The doctor's gaze and the words he spits are a reflection. Like the mirror, I was able to look at him and see his reaction to my transgender body. The resentment I hold for myself was mirrored in his face of awe and sick fascination. I am very aware of my gender in moments like this.

February 7th, 2020, at 9:03 p.m.

As my eyes scan the reflection for a sense of familiarity, I reflect on my day's gendered performance. I remind myself of my transgender identity, womanhood, and the many experiences I survived to be in this moment. I grew up fast because I was different and held a secret from everyone for far too long. I don't blame myself, though; the cultural teachings pigeon-held me in a box. The metaphorical box exists at the threshold of each new life that enters the world without consent; many individuals will conform to their prism's confinement. Even now, I am not excluded from conforming to the new box I've constructed for myself. Gender is reliant on our culture and continues to mold itself to fit to its shape. We rely heavily on mirrors as objects that allow us to do gender. The phenomenology of a reflective, mirroring object will enable me to perform an identity through materials, everyday acts, and rituals that define my gendered self. My reflection is critical in allowing me to recognize that the person I see is my own—is me. However, the relationship I have with my body conflicts with the version of gender I

was taught. Dysphoria is then the result of those conflicts being mirrored back to me in the reflective object. My gender or transness is not the root of the problem; the strict coding of gender and biological sex is the problem. They must be taught separately to find solutions to gender dysphoria and the inequalities that transgender communities face. We can be educated on these distinct differences by those who have endured such hardships to become comfortable with their bodies. My story is one of many that share similar struggles when taught that gender is strictly binary.

I close my eyes and exhale. I can feel the weight on my shoulders melt away, and a slight breeze kisses my skin reminding me to finish getting ready for bed. I leave the mirror, knowing it will be there for me tomorrow.

HEADING 5

CONCLUSION

The journey with gender does not end after this paper. Every year there are more nuanced experiences we get to digest, and we reflect on our working relationship with gender identity. I look back at my painful memories of the lost child, who only wanted to understand where she belonged in her world, and I'm grateful for what the future will hold for my relationship with my body. Each narrative vignette is vital to the argument: gender is not an inherently biological entity. Society must stop teaching younger generations that genitalia define experiences. Gender is a stunning performance that can be fluid and changing depending on the person's self-expression. Our society limits our potential when we limit ourselves to a binary that is cracking at the seams. The limitation on gender identity creates a caste system and silences many transgender and nonbinary communities' voices.

My written story highlights performance scholars who have argued that gender identity is created and expressed by many factors outside of the biological. The adornment of materials and the mannerisms we mold to our sense of belonging are more real than believing in a social misconception. Those glimpses in my childhood prove that gender and identity evolve with the language and representation we have accessible. I never knew there was a world outside of my teachings, and I am so grateful for the positive role models in my late teen years. Listening to the stories of other transgender people helped me understand my identity better and educated me on maintaining a relationship with my body when gender dysphoria is apparent. This is the power of narrative. My narrative. The pain some in the medical establishment would

want to say is an inherent part of me, the pain they would label as “dysphoria,” actually stems from cultural processes and the stigmatizing performances of others. This pain is a struggle in my life to this day. Those masculine features I obsess over were never masculine to begin with; neither are my "feminine" features any different. They are physical features that belong to me and my body, and my gender is my body’s performance.

I acknowledge that gender is not just performative, and we will likely not move towards a gender-neutral style of educating children on these issues soon. However, we can allow our language to move away from assigning children gendered expectations based on their physical body, and instead allow them to find their gender through performance. Exposure to the vast number of materials used for play and rituals without repercussions can give space to transgender voices. I was conditioned to only be comfortable dressing up as feminine in my home. I imagine that if the possibilities for my gender expression exceeded my role as a male, I could have found a sense of belonging and understanding very early in my life.

I wanted to write this paper because I thought I could unearth answers about gender and transgender identities. I end this paper by only scratching the surface of the significant and complex social construction we use to determine someone's entire belonging. My voice does not make up the answers, but it points to the importance of narrative-based approaches to unraveling gender identity. Transgender people are one of the most silenced groups in our culture, and in order to comprehend what gender is, our focus must turn to them. Even for myself, I have discovered that gender relies on our everyday performance using materiality and play to express our masculinity and

femininity. We will continue to live with the education we grew up on, and we will still assume someone's gender identity passing down the street.

Nevertheless, I walk away from this paper now, realizing that my reflections mirror what society wants me to see. I never thought I belonged to my reflection, but I do. The cultural pressure labeled as gender dysphoria will still be looming over my shoulder for as long as I unwillingly hold onto the binary of gender. The more I shift my cultural understanding and reflect on the phenomenon of my reflection, the more I can find my belonging.

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VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Madeline M. Wiles
wiles.maddie@yahoo.com

Northern Michigan University
Bachelor of Science, Communication Studies, May 2019

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