

Trans Joy: Celebrating Diverse Transgender Narratives

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Introduction

As transgender people in our society receive more civil rights, respect, and social understanding, media representations of this population have started to become more realistic. While trans people experience discrimination, dysphoria, harassment, and hardship, media portrayals of trans lives focus overwhelmingly on unsettling aspects of the trans experience. Solely portraying moments of danger and distress in trans lives reinforces the societal notion that the transgender experience is, inherently, a hardship and that trans people are not useful or functional in our society because of the pathologization of transness by the medical system. These portrayals are intolerable and unbearable to those who identify as queer or trans, for this constant helplessness and hopelessness is reinforced by societal attitudes and historical events. As a result, these feelings become a part of their queer or trans identity. In her book *Feeling Backwards*, Heather Love—a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania who focuses primarily on queer studies—analyzes the ways negativity and backwardness are historically intertwined with queerness. Love explains that queers (non-cisgender and non-straight people) have been historically and are still seen as perverse, immature, and melancholic. This process of associating queerness with melancholia and loss is so regular and commonplace—such as with the framing of the HIV/AIDS crisis as a gay death wish and the continually-rising rate of violence against trans women—that queer and trans people have, according to Love, an “obligation” to counter these associations.¹ Therefore, in the face of backward feelings, the creation of positive or neutral representations of trans people is a duty with which trans authors are tasked. Otherwise, narratives of loss and melancholy will overwhelm the sphere of trans representation and continue to reinforce the idea that trans people are unproductive, perverse, melancholic, and tragic—while our society makes no effort to change this status quo for the trans population.

Representations of a marginalized population matter and can influence future representation, legislation, and stereotypes. In fact, when a cisgender or non-transgender writer is writing a script about trans people, that writer pulls from what they have already seen and heard represented for transgender people: loneliness, loss, suffering, self-hatred, and death. However, trans people—who are seen as unable to reproduce, experience joy, or contribute to society—are, in fact, doing so in new, trans-positive, nonheteronormative ways that may surprise, confuse, or anger cisgender people. While there is more to trans experience than agony, this pain comprises the majority of what is represented in the media. For example, in the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, the film's plot focuses directly and exclusively on the brutalization of the transgender lead character. Ultimately, the victimization of the lead, Brandon Teena, ends in his horrific and violent death, which is a fate that is not uncommon for trans people. Forbes Magazine reported in 2021 that, across the world, at least 375 transgender people were murdered, with a fourth of those in their own homes.² Since the start of recording violent trans deaths in 2015, every year has been more violent and deadly for trans people. To be beaten and murdered is not a particularly new, inspiring, or surprising narrative for transgender people and, yet, this portrayal of fatal suffering dominates the stories of trans lives and continues to overwhelm trans audiences with the idea of their demise.

Many trans authors, realizing the weight that these narratives carry, feel an obligation to challenge this norm by centering joy even when hardship is present. The Oxford English Dictionary's simplest definition of joy is "a vivid emotion of pleasure arising from a sense of well-being or satisfaction." In the narratives studied in this project, joy manifests in a trans-specific manner. While I refer to this trans-specific joy, I also acknowledge the obstacles that trans people may face in accessing this trans joy in their own lives. This tension between the

definition's implication of pure happiness and the existence of this happiness right alongside trans-specific hardship makes it difficult to understand why I have decided to refer to it as trans joy. No word I have found captures the immense relief that this happiness—this trans joy—can provide when trans people are faced with adversity. While these narratives are not continuously happy, they are joyful in the fact that they celebrate the differences among trans people and the things that can provide even the smallest comfort—such as makeup, a correct pronoun, or a group of people who all understand this experience. This comfort is the power of trans joy, which I argue can be categorized into three different subsets. The first subset is the trans joy of community and belonging, which presents itself when one feels at home with other trans people. The second subset of this joy is the trans joy of gender performance, where gendered roles, presentations, or mannerisms can produce joy. The third subset of this joy is trans joy at the mastery of gender, as these gendered behaviors (such as painting one's nails or grooming one's facial hair) now feel comfortable or “right,” often accompanied by the instant recognition of their gender by others. These moments of joy are supplemented by gender euphoria—the positive feeling one feels in response to how they are performing their gender—and provide a relief from difficult life experiences, as well as the number of narratives that fall into this trope of trans suffering.

Throughout this project, I explore how narratives written by trans people differ from and subvert the cisgender, heterosexual narratives of trans people by emphasizing joy and community in these stories. Additionally, I display the importance of relatable representations by other trans people, and how these representations can produce social change, relief, and comfort. I showcase the significance of joyful, diverse, and complex narratives of trans people, by conducting literary analysis of several different fiction pieces written by and about trans people.

Detransition, Baby, by Torrey Peters is a realistic novel in which one detransitioned trans woman and her ex-girlfriend experience womanhood and femininity, community and trans kinship, and the implications of a baby-on-the-way. These women reflect on formative moments of gender euphoria before and during their transitions. While gender euphoria is an aspect of trans joy, this joy encompasses more than just the feeling of happiness in one's gender and presentation.

Emphasizing this gender euphoria, *Euphoria Kids* by Alison Evans is a contemporary young-adult fantasy novel that follows three, magical trans and nonbinary teens as they learn to accept their mystical powers and celebrate their trans identities. Similarly, "*Satan, Are You There? It's Me Laura*" by Aisling Fae is a short piece of religious fantasy that follows Laura, a trans woman, as she summons Satan—also a trans woman—and is granted a wish that subverts cisgender expectations regarding trans people's relationships with their bodies. All three texts show a sense of obligation on the part of each of the authors to the trans community to produce new, diverse, and more positive narratives. In that same vein, the author of this thesis feels his own sense of obligation to the trans community to capture the importance and implications of a supportive community, alternative narratives, and how a trans-specific emotion – trans joy – can influence art and inspire more joyful trans lives.

I supplement my literary analysis of these works with personal observations and experiences of trans joy encountered through my work at South Press Coffee, a trans-owned coffee shop and queer safe haven nestled in Knoxville, Tennessee. I include italicized vignettes in the body of this thesis to demonstrate, through others' and my own life, the importance of realistic, joyful, and different representations of our community. I provide these informal interviews with the local trans population which contain their experiences of trans representation, gender euphoria, the medical and healthcare systems, and chosen trans family structures, in order

to display a larger and more representative sample of the trans experience. Interspersed and analyzed throughout the body of this thesis, these testimonials display the effects of representation and community on trans livelihood. In this region, transgender people have been victims of discrimination, violence, and anti-trans legislation. In this context, the existence of a physical queer space of belonging – manifested as a coffee shop – provides a place for trans people to experience trans joy and different aspects of radical trans self-acceptance, such as gender euphoria.

The first chapter of this thesis has four sections that discuss and explore trans reality, from contemporary legislative and civil rights struggles to the healthcare system, current representations of trans people in media, and how trans people use joy to overcome harsh realities. In the first, I focus on the reality of contemporary trans life and the challenges that arise daily for this population, and I discuss these views of trans people and the impact this ideology has had on the trans population. The second section focuses specifically on healthcare, the institution in which this negative perception of trans people is rooted, and explores how the medical system aids in the bio-essentialization of gender by emphasizing the sex of babies at birth and how this medical institution has also pathologized gender dysphoria, informing the public that trans people are mentally ill and unnatural. The third section focuses on trans joy, which I define as self-acceptance and a will to live life openly and freely as oneself, even when faced with adversity. The final section of the first chapter examines the impact of current and historical media representations of trans people on said population. Transnormativity, a major theme in this section, is the reduction of trans experience to what one sees on screen or in literature. Examples of transnormativity include medicalized narratives that pathologize transness, as well as narratives that depict trans lives that end in fatalities.

The second chapter also contains four sections, focused on the creativity of trans people, through works of literature, in sermons, and the creation of new community spaces. I begin by turning to my first primary text, Torrey Peters' realistic novel *Detransition, Baby*. Within this section, I discuss reasons for gender detransition, and I analyze this detransition with secondary literature on this topic. The second section of this chapter discusses the second primary text, Alison Evans' young-adult fantasy novel *Euphoria Kids*. As a nonbinary person, Evans' goal in writing this novel is to introduce transgender and nonbinary teens to the concept of gender euphoria before they encounter gender dysphoria. The third section of this chapter discusses Aisling Fae's short story "Satan, Are You There? It's Me, Laura," which subverts cisgender expectations regarding how trans people perceive their bodies and what they want to do to them. The final section discusses community, physical space, and real-life representations of trans role models, as seen through my review of Knoxville's community spaces. Through my interviews with several trans people, I discovered just how powerful this sense of community can be.

Chapter One: Trans Reality

Contemporary Trans Life

In general, existing as a transgender person can be a difficult endeavor, especially when one's society is heavily gendered as shown in gender reveal parties and sex-segregated restrooms. The gender binary reigns over society, instructing us how to dress, how to act, where to work, and, even, where we are allowed to relieve ourselves. Transgender people face discrimination for their gender expressions, their voices, their bodies, how visibly trans they are, and what spaces they are inhabiting. This surveillance happens online, in-person, on the phone, in the street, and at the store. Gender policing dominates the experiences in trans people's lives. Each instance of gender enforcement has the potential for violence –verbal or physical– and resistance. Because every aspect of our society is gendered, the media and the government have made the cisgender population terrified of transgender and gender-variant individuals, especially in gender-segregated spaces. When a transgender person decides to express their gender in a way that contrasts with existing gender norms or even 'passes' as cisgender, this expression is a direct and inherent challenge to the gender binary and gender as a construct. This feeling, this radical trans joy, is a relief from being seen and feared as a monster. This joy is a challenge and threat to the existing structure of our gender-conforming and gender-binarist society, and it is why these genuine expressions of gender can be viewed as radical.

As established, we transgender people have been painted as predatory, inherently sexual, perverted, and inappropriate or displayed as tragedies ending in death and unhappiness, centering the trans story around hardship. What are the ramifications of these narratives on the lives of young people that are just realizing they are trans? Is it discouraging, misleading, or fatal?

According to data collected by Forbes Magazine, “52% of all transgender and nonbinary young people in the U.S. seriously contemplated killing themselves in 2020.”³ Even as the media begins to have more trans representation, the rate of suicidal ideation in transgender youth continues to rise. Increased depression and suicide in trans youth might be due in part to the obsession with transgender suffering in TV, films, and the news media. Narratives about disownment, suicide, bullying, harassment, and hate crimes bombard trans youth online, on television, in films, in books, and in the news.

When not displayed as a sad story full of suffering, trans people are perceived as pornography categories, fetishes, or sexual objects meant to be consumed. In their study, nonbinary psychologist Thomas Billard looks at the effect of viewing pornography on attitudes surrounding trans people, in which they found “highly significant and substantively large associations between shame about sexual attractions to transgender people and attitudes.”⁴ That is, when someone discovers transgender people through pornography, they are likely going to experience arousal, which is likely to produce shame and disgust in the viewer. It is not solely because of the pornography itself, Billard explains, though it is a result of the feelings that the pornography produces in the viewer—in this instance, shame at the attraction to a group of people that has been deemed pathologically flawed.⁵ For example, one of my trans classmates told me that her first experience of transgender people was through a movie that depicted a so-called “ladyboy” (an offensive term or slur), which caused her to get curious and search this term on the internet. The contents of that Google search were full of pornographic pictures and images. Faced with a myriad of emotions upon discovering the existence of trans women, she told me how these representations made her feel in our interview.

*Learning about trans people from pornography, I had mixed feelings. I felt perverted, sexual, and creepy, but I wanted to celebrate trans beauty.*⁶

For this trans woman, honoring this beauty at that moment was an unattainable goal because of the way trans women are fetishized as something to be consumed. As a trans girl, she wanted to look like and live like the women she saw being objectified on screen. However, that made her feel inherently dirty and inappropriate as she watched, with shame and secrecy, these videos in the dark, on her phone. She wanted to partake in the reverence of trans women like herself, but because of the representation and mediums she saw them in, she felt like this was something inherently perverted that she could not mention to anyone without fear of being judged, scolded, or punished for finding the most accessible form of trans representation—online pornography. This introduction to transness also led her to equate sex and sexuality with repression, which prevents her from accessing both the sexual and gendered parts of herself. As we will see later in the discussion of *Detransition, Baby*, pornography plays an important role for trans people, as the main character's introduction to trans women and informs her understanding of beauty, sexuality, and future relationships.

These negative social attitudes and media representations permeate the daily lives of trans people, including their ability to create income. In his work on the trans body in a capitalistic society, sociologist Dan Irving found that, instead of recognizing the creativity, persistence, and worth of trans people, the transgender body is depicted as innately unproductive, useless, and obsolete.⁷ Trans people, however, are a part of society and the workforce, primarily working in food service because of discrimination in education and employment.⁸ This idea of trans worthlessness, combined with the disregard for so-called “unskilled” workers, creates a

toxic work environment for the trans person, while fulfilling society's idea of trans people as a nuisance to society.

In particular, for trans women in the workforce, transfeminine brokenness—the ideology that condones the marginalization of the labor of trans women and transfeminine people—dictates their experiences in the workplace. Not only are they performing work under capitalism, as queer poet Dr. Raha writes, but they also experience both misogyny and transphobia, increasing the toll that this work takes on trans women.⁹ This cisgender ideology of what Raha calls “transfeminine brokenness,” or the idea that trans women are inherently sexual or are too overwhelmed with violence, healthcare, misogyny, and transphobia to function properly. This transfeminine brokenness prevents employment opportunities, one factor that leads trans women to turn to sex work. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, in a study about trans people and sex work, roughly 448 or 15% of the sex workers in the study were trans women who had issues with gaining employment due to discrimination.¹⁰ From these examples, we see that trans people are devalued, which can cause difficulty when looking for work and can cause trans people, particularly trans women, to look for alternative and, often, seemingly criminal forms of work. This sense of transfeminine brokenness and the perpetuation of the trans suffering trope increase the anxiety of transgender people who are realizing their identities, delaying the coming-out and transition processes and, in turn, the happiness and fulfillment that those processes may bring them.

A trans child does not feel enabled to transition if the trans experience is portrayed repeatedly and exclusively as one of suffering, perversion, criminality, objectification, or wrongness. The hostility of these representations affects almost every decision a trans person must make regarding their transition. While adversarial experiences happen to transgender

people, the consistent reproduction of these experiences in the media, such as ones focusing only on violence, discrimination, and death can help influence growing bias towards transgender people, both in and outside the community. In their note to the reader of *Euphoria Kids*, Evans writes they want “the young trans kids that will read this book to be proud of who they are, and imagine wonderful, magic lives for themselves.”¹¹ Evans communicates the importance of gender euphoria and trans positivity through their fantasy plot, which differs from how Peters uses realism to display trans joy and the complexity of the trans experience in their novel. Unlike realism, this genre allows the magical or impossible to happen. Additionally, since all the main characters have supernatural powers, their transness is perhaps not the most interesting thing about them. Portrayals such as this, with different trans characters having distinct personalities and beliefs, break from the conception of a cohesive trans experience. With trans narratives centered on joy, magical adventures, and coming-of-age, Evans breaks from a tradition that scares transgender youth into staying closeted and making that trans joy impossible. I know firsthand the impact that negative and loss-centered trans narratives can have on a young trans person:

I see myself at thirteen, searching for transgender representation in media. I see trans women. I look for myself in film. I watch Boys Don't Cry, with only the knowledge that the main character, too, is a transgender man. I see myself on screen and, for a moment, I connect with the main character—I see myself. I see myself tortured, assaulted, beaten, and killed. Will this be my reality? This is the life that I've come to expect for myself as a transgender man. I will grow up, and I will be loved little, if at all, before a violent and brutal death. This is not the life I want to imagine for myself. This is not a life I want to live. I see myself as a teenager, frightened, tucking himself deeper into the gender closet, scared of retaliation, resistance, and the violent

encounter that I am convinced will eventually end my life. I tell no one that I see myself on-screen, and I do not watch that film again until I am an adult.

Due to violence and prejudice in the workplace, housing, or on the street, if a trans person intends to exist safely, society presents two options, both involving concealment. These paths aid in protecting trans people from physical harm by helping to avoid trans-related aggressions at the expense of access to positive ones. The first path is to detransition, and the second is to go stealth. Both of these approaches display conformity and adherence to a rigid gender binary. Detransitioning is the act of undoing the gender transition, while going stealth is the act of hiding one's transition by assuming a cisgender identity. In his research on gender detransition, psychiatrist Jack L. Turban finds that the majority of trans people detransition due to external factors, which are often not related to the termination of one's gender identity.¹² In his own work on the subject, psychologist Pablo Expósito-Campos finds that there are two types of gender detransition: primary and secondary (core and non-core) gender detransitions. Primary detransition is when a person ceases to identify as transgender and returns to their birth sex; such are unlikely to retransition. By contrast, secondary gender detransition is motivated by social factors such as discrimination, financial access to health care, and health concerns.¹³ Trans people incur questions, discrimination, and transphobia simply by being perceived as trans, so trans people who detransition for these reasons experience "non-core" detransitioning and are more likely to retransition or resume transitioning.¹⁴ As we will later see in the novel *Detransition, Baby*, non-core gender detransition prioritizes the physical safety of the trans individual, while relinquishing access to positive feelings such as gender euphoria and the many facets of trans joy.

Regardless of trans or cis identity, one may view detransitioning as a negative process, but gender identity is so personal and intimate that some detransitioned people still consider themselves trans, because they have, once more, changed their gender or may still plan to transition again. Anti-trans cis people have used detransitioners as proof that trans people are “wrong” to transition in the first place. For instance, the website TransgenderTrend.com aims to prove that transness is a fad by highlighting detransitioning, implying that trans people are only trans because of exposure to trans representation and the increase in individuals identifying as transgender.¹⁵ These harmful opinions overlook the reality of gender detransition, which is one laden with external and psychological factors that can make the reversal of one’s transition a viable option for survival. There is not an inherent problem in core detransitioners’ transitions—they weren’t wrong in their initial decision to transition. Having gone through gender transition, they have more experiences and more language now to accurately describe their relationship with their body and their gender. Many core detransitioners side with anti-trans rhetoric regarding gender detransition, affirming a rigid gender binary and devaluing the experiences of trans people who do not detransition, in order to be a part of the cisgender majority and to escape stigma and oppression. This year, amid online debates about trans people and healthcare in Texas, detransitioners took to the internet to defend this legislation, with one detransitioned person calling her initial transition the “darkest time of her life,” furthering the ideology that trans people are incorrect about their own identity.¹⁶

The other path of trans conformity is to go stealth, which affords individuals social comforts similar to detransitioning. According to communications professor Elizabeth K. Eger, stealth is “a transgender vernacular term sometimes used to signify not disclosing transition.”¹⁷ Going stealth involves intentionally hiding one’s trans status to ensure safety and social

privilege, while still identifying and presenting as that gender unlike in detransition. Going stealth can provide security, which is a condition of happiness. However, for the stealth individual, this experience of going stealth is not one entirely of *joy* because of a lack of access to community or one's entire self. Being stealth is similar to but still different from being closeted, as the trans person is identifying and presenting as their gender yet not informing others that they are trans. Eger notes that stealth is associated with concealment and deceit, so she proposes using "not publicly identifying as transgender" as a more accurate and academic term.¹⁸ However, the term stealth is important. If a trans person notices or encounters another trans person in a group of cisgender people, they need a discreet way to let this other trans person know not to reference their trans identity. Simply saying that one is "stealth" is shorter and more discreet, affording the trans individual safety in these settings.

Going stealth is not accessible for all trans people and is, usually, only available to those that are able to medically transition—whether that be Hormone Replacement Therapy or surgery—or pass as the desired gender. For some trans people, especially disabled trans folks, medically transitioning—and, therefore, stealthing—is off the table entirely. A stealth person also has to be in an environment where no one from their pre-transition life knows or interacts with them, which can make stealthing almost impossible for trans people in rural areas. While going stealth can afford someone social privileges, it is simultaneously a privilege to be able to go stealth when many trans people do not have the resources or opportunity to do so.

The owner of a trans-inclusive and LGBT-centered coffee shop sat down with me to discuss her experiences as an older trans woman, especially around going stealth. While I personally do not think that I 'look trans' (whatever that means), I talk about my experience as trans often in order to raise awareness and stand up for my community. I feel a sense of moral

and political obligation, as an out trans person, to challenge cisgender ideals about what it means to be trans. When I told her that I am not interested in being stealth, she shared her own short-lived experience with going stealth. She had just moved to Florida, which is as trans-friendly as Tennessee. She was content to let her coworkers assume she was cisgender, until those same coworkers started to discuss and praise recent anti-trans legislation, which led to her coming out and breaking her stealth:

*The only time I ever tried to go stealth was when I moved to Florida. Moving to a new state and starting at a new Cracker Barrel. To all of them, I was just a cornbread country-fed farm girl from East Tennessee. They were really none the wiser. It was at the height of my being on HRT, my skin was great. By society's standards, I was very passable, and I leaned heavily into that. But then, the bathroom bill in NC was submitted, and I felt a moral responsibility to out myself to defend my community against the old women I worked with at Cracker Barrel.*¹⁹

Trans activism, love of the trans community, and the ability to challenge gender norms are not accessible to trans individuals going stealth. In going stealth, one must silence non-normative beliefs regarding gender in order to hide one's trans status and prioritize safety and privacy. This stealthing is similar to being 'closeted' or not 'out.' When no one knew of her transness, her coworkers made hateful remarks about her community and, ultimately, herself. At the detriment of her physical safety, privacy, and comfort around her former co-workers, she finally came out as trans in opposition to the anti-trans bathroom bills in the North Carolina legislature at the time. Socially, she faced consequences, such as snide remarks behind her back and harsh looks when she had to use the restroom, but her loyalty and commitment to her

community outweighed her need for comfort and secrecy. Going stealth, like detransitioning, requires the trans individual to almost shed themselves of their transness, as if their trans identity is a weakness which our society regards it as such.

As Jack L. Halberstam notes, both detransitioning and going stealth reaffirm the societal belief that transgender people are worthless, useless, burdensome, and “fatally flawed” for not fitting neatly into traditional, binary views of gender.²⁰ These paths further the shame attached to transgender identity as something that must be hidden. When stealth, one forfeits the ability to proclaim transness and to show that trans people are not what society deems them. In going stealth, an individual gives up their ability to claim pride in their identity, participate in a community, or even experiment with gender presentation. Similarly, detransition promotes the normative idea that it is impossible to live as trans, that transness is a phase, and that being trans is not sustainable, survivable, or successful. In pushing transgender people in these two directions, society telegraphs its disregard for transgender people, their livelihood, and the beautiful contributions they offer and bring to the world.

Both of these methods rely on secrecy, in order to keep trans identity concealed. In his research on the social implications of coming out, psychologist Chad M. Mosher notes how being closeted may benefit the subject, noting that “passing as heterosexual, or not claiming a homosexual or bisexual identity, may actually be a self-preservation technique in a society often violent and hostile with homophobia.”²¹ While Mosher’s focus is on sexuality, this stance also applies to those with trans identities—as these identities function and are marginalized similarly in society. While this might provide temporary comfort and safety from the threat of potential violence, hiding their trans identity can prohibit the trans individual from being able to experience certain aspects of trans joy, such as seeking out resources may require disclosure of

identity. However, the trans community itself understands the risk one may face when publicly identifying as trans and accepts these individuals, providing trans joy on the basis of community.

While being out can have negative implications, if one wants to experience, create, and disperse trans joy, one may feel a moral obligation to proclaim their trans identity. In this vein, my friend mentioned in our interview that she has not since and will not be going stealth again. Right now, going stealth isn't even available or necessary to her at present because she lives and works somewhere she feels comfortable and safe enough to be entirely herself, regardless of societal norms, as she tells me below:

I've not aspired to be Stealth since then. I kinda like owning my transness and being forwardly trans because I feel like being a decent human being and being very visible is how we remove the stigma of transness.

For me, the aspiration is not stealth. It is about feeling authentic to myself. When I look in the mirror, this is the person I like seeing. I like the way this hair, outfit, or presentation makes me feel.^{[22](#)}

For her, stealth limits her creativity by forcing her to follow rigid gender norms, while she remains quiet about any aspect of her trans identity. Having spent much of her life following strict masculine and feminine gender norms, she is now unapologetically herself. However, being perceived as trans potentially exposes her to stigma and discrimination. Today, she defines her well-being by how she feels rather than how she is perceived by cisgender society. Through her business, she is affirmed by each queer person that enters the space. Rather than focusing on

her individual safety by detransitioning and going stealth, this woman is helping to forge a new path for trans people, one of radical self-love, acceptance, and community.

In other words, she has chosen a path of resistance in the face of oppression and narratives of hardship: radical self-love and self-acceptance within the trans community, which advocates for an expansion outside of the gender binary and celebration of transgender achievement. In this vein, in 2019, writer and producer Janet Mock became the first openly transgender woman able, in her own words, “to call her own creative shots at a major content company,” partnering with Netflix in a three-year, multimillion-dollar deal to tell stories that are often overlooked, including trans narratives.²³ Just five years prior, in 2014, Mock released her autobiography *Redefining Realness* which detailed her gender transition, her experience with sex work, her family’s slow acceptance, and how she has come to embody “realness,” embracing herself as exactly who she is. This wholehearted acceptance of herself results in this trans joy, as she exists publicly as her authentic self. Mock’s success is a testament to the power and worth of trans people, regardless of whether they achieve this same fame. A real-life example of a positive trans narrative, Janet Mock is a perfect role model for trans youth, who yearn to see such stories of successful trans existence.

Trans Healthcare

The healthcare system shapes societal beliefs about trans people and is where the struggle first begins and will continue for the majority of their lives. Despite medical knowledge of intersex bodies, upon one’s birth, their genitals are examined, and, then, the child is wrapped in a pink (vagina/female/girl) or blue (penis/male/boy) blanket, signifying the gender and subsequent roles that the individual will be expected to follow. Informed by our society’s ideas regarding

gender, the healthcare system reinforces the cisgender binary and still retains antiquated ideas about gender. Gender assignment at birth determines the colors we wear, the activities we will do, and the way we are perceived for the rest of our lives. For trans people, this first instance of gendering by the medical system seems to be the source of gender dysphoria.

Fraught with transphobic ideology, there are roadblocks in every part of the healthcare system, designed to make trans people conform, suffer, or fail. Sociologist Michelle O'Brien discusses how the insurance industry disadvantages trans people simply by not acknowledging them. Many insurance companies explicitly state that they do not cover transgender-related healthcare, such as HRT or surgeries. According to O'Brien, this lack of coverage "fuels a widespread institutionalized perception that the bodies and needs of trans [people] simply do not matter."²⁴ This lack of coverage also suggests that trans people must obtain medications and operations with their own money, either within or without legality. This widespread lack of care means that transgender people are forced to inhabit the roles of unproductive and criminal people that society has designed for them.

In addition to policing gender at birth and restricting access to insurance and healthcare, the medical system also pathologizes transness. In order to receive Hormone Replacement Therapy and other important procedures, such as gender-affirming surgeries, most providers require that individuals meet the diagnostic criteria of gender dysphoria, or, historically, Gender Identity Disorder. According to the DSM-5, gender dysphoria is characterized by "clinically significant distress or impairment related to a strong desire to be of another gender." This desire can manifest in one's chosen name, fashion, makeup, or presentation.²⁵ Because gender dysphoria and, subsequently, transness, is treated as a medical condition, it becomes a doctor's job to determine what is "clinically significant." new sentence despite what the individual may

testify in regard to their gender; that is to say, the well-being of this individual is, ultimately, left up to the provider. Therefore, if a person does not fit neatly into the healthcare system's idea of the gender binary or gender dysphoria, they will be unable to access this life-saving health care. Moreover, trans people who identify outside of the binary (i.e. the nonbinary) may not be able to receive hormone therapy or surgery if a doctor does not think they are "trans enough." This refusal might occur because their clothing, presentation, and manner do not align with a binary gender.

What implications does this rigidity have for trans people, who might not present in a binary fashion, who do not have access to gender-affirming clothing, and who disregard a rigid, binary system? Is it ethical for cisgender doctors to use gender norms disguised as diagnoses to keep trans people in need from enjoying their lives? Because doctors decide that they don't qualify for or require it "medically," trans people are routinely kept away from treatments that may decrease dysphoria or save their lives. In *Feeling Backwards*, Love describes how queer people have been historically understood as "children who refuse to grow up."²⁶ Similarly, trans people are infantilized and traumatized by a medical system that poses them as mentally unfit and unable to make medical decisions for themselves.

Gender dysphoria, as characterized by the DSM-5, has been used to police gender trans people's gender, their expression, and their relationship to their bodies. As a professor of health sciences, Zowie Davy notes in her research how the diagnostic of gender dysphoria controls the narrative surrounding trans people, painting the population as chronically sad (dysphoric), hopeless, disconnected from their body, and non-productive.²⁷ This narrative produces and pathologizes what sex therapist Jaxx Alutalica calls the "Wrong Body Narrative," which is "a dichotomous explanation of a complex and vivid experience of gender, diluting the transgender

identity experience and bifurcating it into a binary expression of right and wrong, male and female, certain or uncertain.”²⁸ That is, this narrative only acknowledges a definitive kind of transgender identity—an entirely male or entirely female perspective with either correct or non-correct feelings, with no room for ambivalence in one’s identity. In this way, this narrative excludes nonbinary people from identifying as trans, though they do not identify with their sex at birth. In addition to fueling anti-trans stereotypes and upholding a rigid gender binary, the tropes of gender dysphoria and the Wrong Body Narrative cause in-fighting within the trans community regarding who is “really” trans.²⁹ This characterization of gender dysphoria is a tool of gender policing used both by the medical system, in our society, and within the trans community.

In addition to negative experiences trying to access trans-specific healthcare, trans people have difficulty simply trying to receive healthcare of any form.³⁰ Data collected by the Center for American Progress shows that 18% of trans people in metropolitan areas (41% in rural areas) have no alternative medical provider if they are turned away.³¹ This data also shows that trans people would rather risk injury, serious conditions, or death than be mistreated and misgendered at a facility. Because of trans people’s understandable mistrust of medical professionals, some forgo care altogether and end up in a worse state than before. Because of its more rural location and its situation in the so-called Bible Belt, Tennessee is an extremely difficult state in which to seek Hormone Replacement Therapy. In a 2017 interview with Human Rights Watch, the mother of a transgender child in Knoxville communicated how difficult it can be to receive this healthcare:

In Knoxville, we have a lot of hospitals, a lot of doctor’s offices, but even with all of that, finding hormone therapy is very difficult. So difficult. Gynecologists don’t do hormones, GPs don’t do hormones, you have to see an endocrinologist. And that can be cost

prohibitive, or maybe you don't find one you like.... It's hard to find medical care for trans people even in a city around here—and that's just for hormones. Finding a GP where you can go in the office that you're comfortable in, where the doctor is good, the office is good—that's hard for anyone, even if you're not trans. But having them treat you like a normal human being when you're trans is even more difficult. If you're in a rural area, you're up a creek.³²

While the healthcare system has pathologized transness, reaffirmed the gender binary, and routinely turned trans people away, it is still a useful and necessary system for trans people. The main benefits the medical system provides trans people are HRT and gender-confirmation surgeries, as well as other trans-specific procedures. In an interview, a trans male church worker in his mid-twenties told me that the healthcare system, despite its blindspots concerning trans people, is one reason his parents were accepting of his identity:

I've had negative experiences in medical settings, as a trans man just trying to receive healthcare. However, I also believe that the medical system is a major factor in my parent's acceptance. My mom is a medical professional, and, for the past 30 years, she works exclusively with newborn babies, so she has been aware of intersex issues. She is constantly looking at newborn babies.

So, when I came out to her. Her first response was "Okay, what does Pediatrics have to say about this?" and so, by the time I came out, the pediatric community had decided to come to the conclusion that being trans isn't a mental illness, did not need fixing, was a normal part of human life. So, because of the authority they had in her mind, she was able to take a lot of steps

toward accepting me. So she's like 'these people know what they're talking about, I can trust them.' ³³

The authority of the medical system in establishing the validity and acceptance of transness can be observed in this account. Because of his mother's position as a medical professional, when she researched transness, the medical community had come to the decision that transness is not abnormal. While the ideology that trans people are mentally ill still persists, the research in the pediatric scientific community and the attitudes held by those scientists were enough to convince the church worker's mother that his transness was a normal experience. If his experience had been a decade or two previously, instead of in the mid-2010s, medical attitudes would have been much worse.

Trans Joy

As human beings, transgender people have a will to survive amid adversity. They strive for survival by generating happy experiences through radical self-acceptance that challenges cisgender ideas, as the media and society they inhabit will not create these representations for them. This self-acceptance of one's identity and the implication of defying societal norms can be seen in inclusive, trans-positive art and in novels with all or majority trans casts. Central to this thesis, I term this treasuring of transgender people "trans joy," after Imara Jones, a trans woman herself, podcaster, and critical gender theorist, who starts off each episode of her critical trans theory podcast *Translash* with a segment on trans joy. We can find moments of trans joy in contemporary transgender literature and within lived reality. Recognizing the importance of true and positive (or, at least, non-negative) representation, Imara Jones insists "trans people telling our own stories will save our lives."³⁴ When trans people see expressions of trans creativity and

success, they are more likely to access this joy. Here, I explore transgender joy and gender euphoria in real-life experiences, as well as how trans joy can manifest for myself and other trans people. Moments of this trans joy include three main subsets: the trans joy of belonging, of being perceived as one's chosen gender, gender performance and mastery of gender as a skill, and, even, trans mothering and kinship.

Trans joy is the description and manifestation of the satisfaction that trans people derive from living as their gender, even while facing discrimination for their trans identity; it is that pride in their gender regardless of gender presentation or expression that propels transgender people forward. This joy includes positive trans experiences, such as ones of gender euphoria, which can override the negativity of transphobia, rejection, and discrimination and provide temporary or lasting solace for the individual. However, trans life is a marginalized one, so negative experiences are routinely commonplace. Though this negativity might be present, as philosopher HK Sloan explores, joy is more than a series or conglomeration of feelings. In Sloan's words, "it involves intentionality and can be rational or irrational."³⁵ For example, in an instance where an individual intends to be perceived as female, the affirmation of her identity as a woman is intentional—she may dress or present herself in a particular way to achieve being recognized as feminine. This altering can be rational, such as voice-pitching or adhering to gender roles, and it can also be irrational—such as joy at being 'mistaken for a woman' while someone simultaneously affirms and disregards her gender. The pleasure and correctness one feels when experiencing their gender provides motivation for trans people to continue living as that gender.

Framing transness by moments of gender euphoria—gendered behavior, and target gender roles—instead of moments of bodily disconnect and sadness actively subverts the notion that trans

people are melancholic or mentally ill by depicting a realization based upon gender euphoria instead of gender dysphoria. Gender euphoria is what bioethicist Ashley Florence defines as “a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person’s gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth.”³⁶ This gender euphoria is the enjoyment produced by presenting as one’s gender, being perceived as that gender, and falling into those gendered behavior patterns. Moments of gender euphoria are instances in which performing traditional gender roles generates a feeling of “rightness” for trans people that they do not feel when performing their birth gender’s roles. This feeling of being right can manifest itself physically in laughter, smiling, or any other signifier of happiness.

Moments of gender euphoria can be pivotal in the realization of one’s transness, as the church worker describes in the following:

*In my first experience of gender euphoria, I remember there being this really rare moment in high school, where I was home alone. I was not home alone very often growing up, because I am one of four siblings, the oldest. I was never home alone. Anyway, I had no experience with makeup, so I wasn't into it. I have a bunch of sisters, and they had mascara. I don't know where the idea came from, but I put a bunch of mascara on my face and made it look like a beard. I took a bunch of pictures of myself, like, dude. A. LOT. This was right, right before I realized I was trans, but I loved it! I still have those pictures on my phone, and I laugh at them regularly because they are so silly and so bad! I took those pictures, and I looked at them and it was the first time I looked at myself like “I can vibe with this.” I grew up in this constant state of gender dysphoria, so that when I experienced gender euphoria, I was like, oh wait, that’s actually been bad this whole time. Then, I realized, soon after that, that I am trans.*³⁷

This moment of gender euphoria is what helped him realize his transness. Growing up, he was unhappy with his gender, but his disconnect with the gender the world told him to be was so ever-present that, even though dysphoria is regarded as a diagnostic for transness, this disconnect was unidentifiable as dysphoria. Only when in, what he called, a “weird compulsion” to create mock facial hair with a mascara wand, was he presented with a feeling that helped him realize his internal desire to look like his bearded photos. In the moment, it was just an embarrassing moment from his adolescence, but, now, it is a moment of silliness that helped him come to a realization he couldn’t have made without this experience of performing a masculine gender.

While the pathologization of transness poses gender dysphoria as an easily identifiable marker of transness, when a feeling is present and constant your entire life, it can be challenging to name that feeling. Using moments that disrupt the ever-present dysphoria to identify transness forces the discussion to be about the individual’s happiness and pleasure from their gender, instead of about the pathological implications of one’s bodily disconnect. In their research, Alutalica presents gender euphoria as a counter-narrative to the narrative of bodily disconnect. The notion of gender euphoria introduces “a pleasure-focused lens through which to view the transgender experience, as moving towards satisfaction instead of avoiding discomfort (dysphoria).”³⁸ In the church worker’s narrative, his compulsion to dab mascara across his chin, lips, and cheeks—though he saw it as weird— is his natural impulse to move toward being comfortable instead of staying in the discomfort, similar to the way one would fix one’s shirt if it were fitting uncomfortably. Once exposed to the comfort of looking and feeling masculine in his body, he realizes that he broke a streak of gendered discomfort, thus facilitating the realization of his trans identity.

Gender euphoria is a feeling felt at all stages of transition and is present even in individuals who have been transitioning for a while. The ability to feel comfortable with how one's gender presentation is perceived is what I am calling the trans joy at the mastery of gender functioning as a skill. Framing gender as a skill, when one plays with makeup or clothing to achieve that gendered look, one is practicing their gender to improve its function—being perceived as male, female, or other. When one has been medically transitioning for a while, one may feel this joy at being able to achieve these gendered looks, mannerisms, or behaviors without even putting much effort into it.

For me, a transgender man three years into my medical transition, gender euphoria often comes in the morning. It is caused by the recognition both in myself and others of my gender as male, as Andrew, even if my masculinity is not the abrasive one preached in society. As I look in the mirror, as described below, I see and notice myself as the man I have worked so hard to create, and I feel joy at mastering my version of manliness and masculinity:

Wild, tired eyes stare back at mine; slept-in mascara has smudged and given me dark circles. Above them are unruly, thick, and dark eyebrows, and above those is my receding hairline. These masculine features of my body bring a smile to my lips. My small, pencil-y, somewhat handlebar mustache frames the top—my lips are covered in hair, I need to trim my mustache but I don't—while my attempt at a goat-tee hugs my chin. My chest, absent of scars from surgery, swells, but I am not fazed—my attention turns to the hair that covers it, my stomach, my arms, and my legs. As I move to brush my teeth, my phone rings with an early morning call from my mother—my day is made as she whispers “Good morning, Andrew.”

In addition to feeling recognized by others as one's gender, trans joy also manifests in moments when one feels like one is belonging to a part of a gendered group—most often with

other trans people but, occasionally, with cisgender people of the same gender group. In her research, social worker Ashley Austin analyzes the impact of community and social connection on the trans population, explaining that “evidence has suggested that positive connection to a supportive community and a sense of social connectedness may be particularly important sources of well-being for members of the transgender...community.”³⁹ That is, a positive and encouraging environment, likely of similarly-identified people, increases resilience against negative external factors. The importance of community is especially true for a trans classmate that I met at the campus Pride Center, where she had also met her main friend group, all of whom are transfeminine. This community of similarly-identified people helped her become more confident in herself as a trans woman:

*Having people there to talk to, support you, and validate you contributes to that sense of joy, as well. Being able to talk with my transfeminine friend group about transition stuff just brings me so much happiness, getting to hear their side and my side, and having everyone’s experiences validated. Someone said I had the best glow-up of the group, and I loved it. It was totally euphoric. I was the ugliest boy and the prettiest girl.*⁴⁰

Partaking in this larger community of trans people, in addition to this smaller community of other trans women to talk to, share resources with, and relate with is a major cause of trans joy, causing her to feel less alone in her transition and as she makes her way through life as a trans person. As Love argues, “longing for community across time is a crucial feature” of queer and trans experiences.⁴¹ The fulfillment of this longing for trans kinship and community produces joy in the individual because of the tradition of trans isolation.

Impact of Trans Representation

As the number of representations of transgender and gender-diverse individuals in the media steadily grows, one might make the assumption that this increase is inherently positive for the trans community. In his discussion about the impacts of this representation on the trans population, researcher Richard Mocarski notes that these media representations are “both positive, due to increased public understanding, and problematic, due to the often stereotypical and narrow representations available.”⁴² By simply portraying trans people on screen, more people are exposed to trans people, increasing visibility and understanding among those who watch these films or shows. However, these representations are also negative, for when these films reiterate cisgender conceptions and stereotypes of trans people, they are also communicating that this film is exactly what the trans experience is like.

For example, *The Danish Girl* (2015) follows a transgender woman—played by a cisgender male actor—who undergoes one of the first successful bottom surgery operations, dubbed a “sex-change surgery.” Because of a talented (though male) actor, this portrayal of a trans woman’s struggle is compelling and commands sympathy and understanding from the cisgender audience. However, because the actor is a cisgender male, this movie reinforces the idea that trans women are simply men acting in wigs and women’s clothing, instead of living as women full-time. Furthermore, the movie focuses on the woman’s bottom surgery and the struggles surrounding it, painting trans people as incomplete and surgery-obsessed, reinforcing transphobic ideologies. Trans women are too often depicted as either weak, effeminate men or as “tricksters” who ‘disguise’ themselves as women in order to conspire against or corrupt heterosexual men, women, and children.⁴³ As discussed previously, trans people are regarded as “fatally flawed” by society, so this film and its depiction of trans women reduces the entirety of

the trans population, to the audience, as either impersonators or as trying to literally “cure” this flaw by ascribing to this list of societal norms. By portraying gender-reassignment surgery as a one-size-fits-all solution to someone’s gender dysphoria, the film perpetuates and reaffirms existing stereotypes about trans people, spreading misinformation and falsehoods.

Due to such negative trans representations, the coffee-shop owner interviewed above was hesitant to identify as trans. She describes the tenor of these representations:

*The typical representation on screen, through the 80s and 90s, was like a dead prostitute on SVU or a story about murder and sexual assault. You don’t ever want to claim transness for yourself if transness is dead prostitutes and death. When all you see is these ‘characters’ in tragedy-type situations, that doesn’t feel very inspiring to try to emulate.*⁴⁴

With only these glimpses into the reality of trans people, she was persuaded into believing that she could not live that life safely and happily. Only knowing what she had seen reiterated on screen, she found that there was no space for people like her in the so-called proper society. Because of these negative interactions and emotions surrounding transness, her realization of her identity and, in turn, her coming out and transition were delayed for several more years. Because her coming to terms with herself was halted due to this lack of positive portrayals, she strives to be that figure for others. She is aware that society has very rigid expectations for trans people, and she is eager to facilitate the smashing of those expectations:

But as much as I would have benefitted from seeing adult trans people who were healthy, happy, and well-adjusted, my hope is that for these young trans people, I am that healthy, happy well-adjusted adult. I think seeing fearless, older trans people, who are active in the community, is important because today’s kids are so bold and brave, anyway, but I know what the world will do to you, to them. When they go out into the world feeling so brave and get knocked down every

single time, I think seeing adult trans people who have made a positive impact will help change the world for these kids, in terms of gaining respect and also empowering and emboldening those young trans people to keep pushing boundaries and the line in terms of gendered expectations.

Society's reduction of trans people and their experiences to what is only reiterated on screen reaffirms harmful stereotypes of trans people is what Morcarski et al. term *transnormativity*. Transnormativity is the ideology that the trans experience always mimics the current portrayals on-screen and in literature. Transnormativity in media prevents trans people from shattering the cisgender ideals of gender, sex, sexuality, and what it means to exist as a gendered being in a cisgender-dominated society while upholding the gender binary by policing transness in film, TV, literature, and online run-on. If one is only offered one option to be trans—with extreme adherence to binary gender roles—that is going to be the standard one feels obliged to replicate. For trans people, these limiting representations represent both a norm for trans people to model themselves after and a reminder that not all roles and experiences are available to them. This transnormativity is based upon the society, media, and rules that have been created and adapted by cisgender people, actively harming and hindering trans people who do not fit the expected mold.

Queer theory shows us that it is impossible to describe queerness, and by extension transness, without, according to social theorist Aleardo Zanghellini “without at least an oblique reference to normative commitments.”⁴⁵ That is, the queer conceptions of sexuality and/or gender can be based on the normative rules and standards upheld by heterosexual and cisgender people, insofar as that the way queer and trans people structure and live their lives can mimic or critique this standard. One cannot disentangle transness from normative gender roles. He notes that, while queerness and transness present themselves as counter- or anti-normative, the identity of

someone trans is not inherently anti-normative, depending on how they choose to perform that gender. Conversely, gender fluidity and the rejection of harmful norms are anti-normative because they inherently oppose this restraining and constricting gender system.⁴⁶ Trans men emulate and create their own personal brand of masculinity based on the society that they inhabit. While being transgender does not ascribe to the norm, it is not anti-normative to simply identify as a transgender man while emulating a hegemonic, cisgender male masculinity, complete with possessiveness, misogyny, and homophobia. However, a trans man who practices queer or anti-normative masculinity might engage in performing in drag, exploring makeup, honoring women and the feminine experience, and aspire for masculinity that is not defined by one's ability to assert dominance. For a trans man, this second example would constitute anti-transnormativity, as it breaks from the mold of dominating other groups in the pursuit of gender fulfillment.

The portrayal of trans romances, trans science fiction, and trans fantasy texts gives trans audiences permission to break with gender norms and to seek experiences that do not conform to transnormativity. In his research, Jackson McLaren analyzes different television representations of trans people and argues that programs that show trans people in healthy relationships break standards of “what it means to be trans.”⁴⁷ While these non-realistic representations are transnormative in the fact that the trans people in these stories experience unhappiness and assault, these narratives are also anti-transnormative, in that they show trans people in science-fiction and fantasy settings and at the center of romance plots, which have been previously withheld from the trans population.

Chapter Two: Trans Creativity

Detransition, Baby

While our society insists on portraying transnormative stories, Peters' *Detransition, Baby* breaks from the tradition of regurgitating the same trans narratives, as it follows two transgender and one cisgender woman as they try to navigate what motherhood, and subsequently, womanhood looks like for each of them—and all of them as a “throuple” or three-partner relationship. The narrative focuses on Amy and Reese, exploring the variety of life experiences that transgender people have, including moments of joy. Amy has recently detransitioned—or reverted back to living and presenting as male. Most of the narrative takes place in the present where Peters describes Ames—as he goes by now—with masculine language and he/him pronouns. When there are flashbacks in the narrative, Peters uses she/her pronouns, feminine language, and refers to her as Amy. Even after detransitioning, Ames still considers himself a transgender woman on some level. This detransitioning process started after Ames had gotten “got sick of living as trans” after repeated discrimination and instances of transphobic violence.⁴⁸ The only way for Ames to survive, in his view, is to simply not exist or be perceived as a trans person, justifying this decision with the tragic and fatal media depictions of transgender women, and generally negative attitudes toward trans people.

Recently, before the narrative began, Ames had started working for a new company, where he had begun to date his boss, Katrina. Because of his previous hormone treatment therapy, Ames assumes he is sterile and alludes to sterility with Katrina, who does not know Ames' past as a transgender woman. When Katrina realizes she is pregnant, she confronts Ames

and finds out about said past. Ames contacts Reese, who is her ex-girlfriend and had always acted as a mother figure to Ames and their fellow trans friends. While Ames still considers himself a transgender woman, he finds it is in his best interest—for his career, social life, and personal safety—to live again as a man. Ames’ detransition is an example of non-core gender detransition.

Before her detransition and while still dating Reese, Amy becomes suspicious that Reese is cheating on her with someone else, so she decides to follow Reese that night. Angry and hurt to find Reese with a man—who begins to attack and assault Amy, she begins to question herself and her femininity. She just punched a man out of sheer jealousy. As a stranger helps her walk to the hospital, she interrogates herself “how could she [Amy] believe in the demure little office worker she had been playing? Some other character had revealed itself, an angry man who postures and shouts “Bring it bro,” a possessive brute.”⁴⁹ Intoxicated by anger and horrified at the brutal and violent emotions and behavior she displayed during her supposed performance as a woman, Ames strips himself of that label and thrusts himself back into the world of manhood, donning his business suits, his beards, and changing his name once again. His costumes have changed, his mannerisms have changed, and so has the name of the gendered character he inhabits. Ames feels that the only possible path for him is to detransition and embrace masculinity once more if he is going to act possessive and brutish.

In this scene, the use of “playing” with gender operates within the sphere of gender performativity and shows how this performance can shift. Ames has convinced himself that, while gender is a performance, he must have been acting. Both the “demure little office worker” and the aggressive masculine character fall into traditional gender roles, which shows the specific ways in which gender can manifest. A binary gender system can be limiting, especially

when experiencing emotions and feelings that are gendered by society. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states that “gender is always a doing.”⁵⁰ In other words, repetitive actions, activities, and speech can all signify one’s gender, even if their presentation doesn’t. These include—but are not limited to—dressing, grooming, speaking, laughing, walking, or specifically gendered activities. The mere doing of these activities is exciting and can bring gendered joy to an individual. Butler also notes that “gender reflects or expresses desire.”⁵¹ As such, this presentation can bring even more joy to a trans person because, in doing these activities, they are fulfilling their desire to exist and express themselves in their correct gender. This specific joy is the trans joy of gender performance, where happiness and satisfaction are produced in response to, previously illicit, gendered experiences that feel natural, correct, and right to the individual.

Traditional narratives paint the trans character as a lonely individual. Breaking away from this portrayal, Reese and Amy describe their experiences with other women as a community. In both these flashbacks and throughout the plot of the novel, we can see examples of trans joy, gender euphoria, and a sense of belonging, especially when the two transgender women are with their fellow trans friends. This camaraderie provides comfort, solidarity, a support group, and a network of resources.

Amy’s first experience of femininity and gender euphoria occurs at an adult toy store, where the trans sales clerk and her closeted trans friend explore the various lingerie and prosthetics together. This is not a traditional masculine experience—heterosexual cisgender men do not normally take their friends to adult stores in this manner. Conversely, it is very common for cisgender women to take trips with their girlfriends to adult stores. This is a typically feminine experience that Amy had never gotten to have, alone or with others. The fact that Amy is there with other people, other trans women, makes it, firstly, a prime example of the trans joy

of belonging. As she tries on and sorts through garments alongside her fellow trans women “a vague euphoria wafted over Amy. Here they were: a bunch of girls talking clothes.”⁵² Here, Amy feels intense glee and elation at performing specifically gendered tasks with other women. Peters specifically uses euphoria, a popular community term, to denote this joy. She was experiencing joy at being a “bunch” or group of girls, specifically talking about fashion. This group and these gendered activities are feminine, and, for the first time, Amy is experiencing joy at feeling sameness with other women, feeling as though she fits in.

For trans people, expressions of gender euphoria can occur when one’s curated performance or appearance feels correct or natural. While trying on her first bra with prosthetic breast implants, “Amy put it on and the weight, naturally pulling on her chest triggered something like an endorphin rush ... A giggle slipped out.”⁵³ Her elation at embodying femininity and at feeling right and *natural* in her body for the first time manifests itself in a giggle, which is a very feminine expression and seems to be almost childlike, as dressing up and dolling oneself up are girlhood activities that have been withheld from her for the entirety of her life thus far. Until now, she has never felt the weight of a bra or breasts tug at her chest, which produces pure joy in Amy, and by giggling, she is expressing extreme gender satisfaction. This joy, as signaled by Amy’s “endorphin rush” and giggling, is manifesting itself in a drug-like way. As Amy tries on these intimate, feminine garments, she is experiencing a naturalness and correctness she hadn’t felt before and is experiencing the trans joy of performance.

However, these experiences are not isolated ones and, while these scenes do not always display solely happy existences for trans people, they are portraying the complexity of transgender life. The situation at the adult store is the first time Amy feels she embodies femininity, and it is heightened by the company of the other trans women. The sales clerk is also

trans, and it creates a sense of comfort for the women. This spell, however, is broken quickly when a cisgender mother and daughter enter the store, and Amy, the sales clerk, and her friend all begin to feel intense shame as “the sense of safety she had spun over the store vanished,” causing gender dysphoria that tarnishes their collective joy.⁵⁴ Even though Amy experiences shame and dysphoria in this scene, it is a more unique, realistic, and positive representation of trans experience because the suffering, offset by the portrayal of trans joy and moments of gender euphoria, is not as heightened or tragic as the suffering in stories such as *Boys Don’t Cry*.

Unlike those narratives that exclusively portray trans suffering, this novel is displaying a path of resistance to those solely tragic representations of trans life. Amy’s encounters with trans joy in these passages are subverting cisgender expectations of the lives of trans people. By showing Amy’s first interaction with her breasts, Peters is offering a beautiful glimpse into realistic trans portrayals of joy and, in a way, coming-of-age. In this seedy adult store, Amy is coming to recognize herself as her gender as she explores these clothes and prosthetics, and it results in the most feminine expression of pure joy: a giggle. These expressions of joy are absent from films such as *Boys Don’t Cry* and other narratives that only focus on adversity. By displaying joyful and formative moments in Amy’s gender transition, the narrative is not solely dominated by shame when the cisgender mother and daughter enter the store and embarrass the trans women. These dual experiences of joy and shame are also present in Reese’s narrative.

Differing slightly from Amy in her experiences, Reese is a trans woman who has, according to her narrative, always known she was a girl. Her childhood consisted of figure-skating, longing for dresses, and feeling envious of her cisgender female, figure-skating friends, who always got to wear beautiful costumes while she had to wear pants. In the present, Reese works at a daycare, chasing motherhood where she can. Reese considers her body barren and

infertile, and she is reminded throughout her job and her life as a trans woman, that motherhood is something forbidden for her. When Ames comes back into her life, now as a man, he tells Reese that he has gotten his new boss—a cisgender woman named Katrina—pregnant and that he needs Reese to help raise the child.

Attempting to emulate traditional femininity, Reese has always imagined herself in a feminine and mothering role, which manifests itself in the novel as Reese's mothering of her friends and her preschool students. Her aspiration is to embody the mothering style of Virginia, the figure skating mom who took care of her during her childhood. This woman's expression of her gender was "an entirely feminine, fussy sort of authority that Reese nestled into with satisfied sighs."⁵⁵ This moment solidified Reese's aspiration towards authoritative femininity, while also serving as the reason she longs to be a mother and inspires how she lives her life as a woman. She wishes to care for children in a traditionally normative, feminine way, as her figure skating mother did for Reese, and served as a blueprint for her future femininity.

As an adult, Reese assumes motherhood over her transfeminine friends, making sure they are safe, supported, and healthy. This form of mothering is not based on biology, as motherhood traditionally is. Because trans people face rejection upon coming out, often they must find a substitute for the biological family that has disowned, rejected, or refused them. This chosen family is a network comprised of other trans and queer people that can provide resources regarding medical transition, teach gendered skills and rules such as fashion or makeup, use connections to find employment, and provide emotional as well as physiological support. This is a network that knows the reality of existing and struggling as trans people and guides and cares for other trans people, in order to lead happy, safe, and well-adjusted lives, contrary to what society expects and demands of us. It also subverts the narrative that mothering is rooted in

biology by showing these trans women who cannot physically carry a child, such as Reese, but act in and assume mothering roles for their community, providing comfort, housing, food, stability, and love for those who may have been refused it.

Trans joy can be produced when one fulfills or masters gendered activities or traits. Most little boys, as Reese is perceived in childhood, are not allowed the opportunity to indulge themselves in feminine sports or activities. In this way, when she would play masculine sports or fulfill boys' gender roles, she would feel miserable and isolated. Conversely, Reese feels a sense of joy when she immerses herself in figure-skating alongside all the little girls. Figure-skating, with its grace, smoothness, and seamlessness, is a typically feminine sport, according to our society's conception of gender, something with which Reese aligns herself. Her teammates take this opportunity to skate for granted—something cisgender girls are “naturally” allowed to do—but, for Reese, the opportunity to skate is hard-earned and goes directly against the societal norms that ruled her life. While skating among the other girls, “her tiny heart fluttered between elation, envy, and the thrill of losing herself in the same activity as all the other girls.”⁵⁶ Like Amy's experience of euphoria, Reese's joy comes from participating in a gendered and communal experience. She has immersed herself in a feminine activity that might otherwise be off-limits to her. At this moment, she is the same as the other (cisgender) girls.

Here, Reese is experiencing the trans joy of gender performance and, because she is surrounded by other girls, she is feeling joy at belonging, at the communality of her experience, and at her ability to assimilate. Expressing her femininity, she is involved in a highly feminized sport, swooshing on the ice with the same grace and strength as the other children. Because these other girls are cisgender, it might be a little difficult to call this trans joy of *belonging*. However, she is experiencing trans joy at doing a feminine skill well, as the other little girls do, and this

trans joy is one of gender performance. Dressed differently than all of the other girls, she is still immersed in this highly gendered sport in the same way that all of her friends are. In this moment, for Reese, she is experiencing synchronicity and feeling a unity with the other female skaters that causes her to become more than herself, to lose her individuality as a ‘boy,’ and to transcend from that moment in happiness and pure joy—‘losing’ the sadness that she associated with boy-ness.

This failure to be seen and acknowledged as the same in a gendered group is at the root of gender dysphoria. Conversely, when this desire to be viewed the same as the rest of the gender group is reached and implemented, euphoria occurs. For example, one of the figure skating mothers—Virginia—takes Reese home after practice and for the first few weeks, they stop at McDonald’s where Virginia orders four ‘girl’ Happy Meals and one ‘boy’ Happy Meal. The gendering of these meals is unnecessary, as it does not change the contents, save for a toy. This repeat-ordering of the ‘boy’ meal upsets young Reese, as she wants the same Happy Meal as all of her friends—she is a girl, too. Reese voices her upset, and Virginia starts referring to the group of children as girls, treating Reese like the other little girls. After a few weeks of this, Virginia for the first time, “just ‘forgot’ and ordered five girl Happy Meals.”⁵⁷ To Reese, this is Virginia’s way of letting her know that she sees and understands Reese. Reese is elated, feeling overwhelmed with joy at being recognized as part of the girl group.

This scene is an instance of the trans joy of belonging—as Reese is surrounded by her fellow girls, being perceived and treated just the same. Virginia’s gentleness and her ability to perceive Reese as her authentic self is so important for Reese and form the foundation for her aspiration of motherhood. She even “forgets” and buys Reese the correct toy. Here, Virginia sees Reese’s gender performance and disregards societal norms that tell her this child is a boy. In an

outright show of validation, Virginia lets her know she notices and sees her the same. It is particularly ironic that the source of this trans joy is a gendered item called a Happy Meal, in which the prize is a gendered toy. It is such an insignificant thing to an adult, but, to a young trans girl, the Happy Meal is the most visible form of the gender binary. This moment, for this young trans girl, really affirms the name of her meal. Its correctly genderedness produces pure joy for her. The fact that Virginia bought this physical and gendered manifestation of joy for Reese affirmed Reese's gender and displayed her respect for her as a girl.

Peters's work continuously juxtaposes these experiences of joy with ones of shame or envy to convey the complex nature of trans life and, therefore, trans joy. While Reese is experiencing joy at becoming lost, in this activity, because her friends and peers are cis, she is also experiencing envy simultaneously. This envy, this drive to be like the other girls, would seem to be an aspect of gender dysphoria, similarly to the way that shame functions in Amy's adult store scene. In this scene, Reese feels joy at immersing herself in an activity meant for and with cisgender girls. Contrastly, Reese gets to experience these simultaneous feelings about two decades earlier than Amy, which shows that trans people's experiences all differ and are nuanced. In Amy's adult store scene, she is doing a feminine activity surrounded by other trans women. The absence or interruption of this feeling of sameness, such as a 'boy' Happy Meal or embarrassment at sudden the presence of cisgender women in a previously trans-only, causes dysphoric feelings. When sameness is affirmed, however, gender euphoric feelings are present, such as Reese's joy at her correctly-gendered Happy Meal.

In trans people's chosen families, gender is also taught. A 'mother' in a chosen family might have to teach her trans daughter how to do her hair, how to do her makeup, how to pitch her voice, and how to adhere to all of the unspoken feminine rules to which she has not been

exposed. Because estrogen-centered hormone therapy does not change the pitch of the voice, this is a skill that many trans women prioritize and teach each other, in order to pass. Through these chosen families and their teaching of gender and gender performance, trans people learn their chosen gender and the secrets to passing for safety. These people are not practicing femininity or masculinity in a way that mimics cisgender gender norms, but they are doing it in a manner that is accessible to them because of their transness. In learning and deconstructing traditional gender norms, transgender people are mastering gender as a skill, as children do when socialized as a particular gender. Trans people are not trying to be cisgender—an impossible feat—but are, instead, trying to achieve a feeling of rightness in their body, expression, and presentation. In this way, the trans expression and way of gender is a unique and creative performance that expresses the transgender individual's true and authentic self. This deconstruction of traditional gender norms and gender roles taught by the parent-figure of the trans group is how new paths are formed, similarly to the way trans authors generate new art forms and narratives.

As a trans woman, Reese, with no womb, is physically unable to carry life inside her. As Katrina is the physical carrier of the baby, she is an object of envy and desire for Reese, who longs for nothing more than to give birth to and raise a child. But as the pregnancy progresses, the two start to become close friends, even though Katrina cannot fully understand the scope or struggle of being a transgender woman. Katrina, as she learns more about Reese's dysphoria and her wish for motherhood, begins to incorporate Reese into more of the motherhood experience. Katrina creates a baby registry and, while at the store, lets Reese act as if she is the one carrying the child. This ability to publicly perform pregnancy and motherhood "is a little gift from Katrina, a tiny way of sharing the pregnancy."⁵⁸ The store worker fusses around Reese and treats her as if she were the pregnant party, which sparks joy in Reese. Katrina has given her the ability

to momentarily claim the spotlight of the expecting mother. However, the moment is temporary, and after it is over, Reese finds herself longing for it once more. In these moments, Reese's joy is based on Katrina's acceptance of her and her willingness to keep her involved in the process of motherhood.

The entirety of the novel is based on the premise that Katrina will have a baby. They are all planning on the child being born. Reese and Katrina shop for the baby's bedroom furniture and clothes, they discuss names, think about their own upbringings, and fantasize about their family structure. However, the baby is not born before the novel ends. On the last page of the novel, Katrina alludes to the fact that she might terminate the pregnancy but isn't certain. The novel ends unclearly, for the audience, for Reese and Amy, but not for Katrina. Her mind, while we don't know the decision, is made. This withholding of her decision from Reese and Amy displays the privilege Katrina has as the biological mother of the fetus and highlights the two trans women's lack of ability to be biological mothers, which is, as established, a huge trigger for Reese's gender dysphoria. While not inherently a tragic or fatal ending, this ending shows how unique and complex trans dynamics can be, while still having positive and joyful experiences present. Living with adversity while still being able to experience joy is in direct opposition to society's hegemonic beliefs about trans people, and these complex and unique stories and experiences reaffirm trans people's value to society.

Peters's portrayal of a family composed of many loving, encouraging, and empowering trans people is a direct contrast to portrayals such as *Boys Don't Cry*, where the main character, Brandon, is almost entirely isolated. He has a cisgender girlfriend but no one else to support him. Because he had virtually no one to guide, encourage, protect, or support him, he is unable to avoid the danger and violent reality present for trans people in his cisnormative world. Having a

community of transgender people to mentor each other and share knowledge is such an important part of existing as a trans person. Allowing trans people to exist as themselves in a space like this, without harassment, is a radical and still fairly new concept. Communities and their spaces, social or physical, are paramount to supporting and protecting the trans population and increasing trans joy, as we will notice in the next primary text.

Euphoria Kids

Complementary to Peters' novel, Alison Evans' young-adult fantasy novel *Euphoria Kids* is another work that defies the tradition of transnormativity by offering new directions for trans representation. Growing up as a nonbinary person with no representation of themselves in books or on-screen, Evans aims to provide a positive and beautiful representation of what it means to be a trans or nonbinary youth. This novel's purpose is to introduce younger people, specifically trans youth, to the concept of gender euphoria, through the adventures of three trans middle-schoolers. In fact, Australian children's author and journalist Will Kostakis, in his analysis of the novel, notes that "Evans wants young trans people to know about gender euphoria, the comfort and joy felt when thinking about one's true gender identity, and to learn about it before gender dysphoria."⁵⁹ As one reads Evans' inclusive, magical adventure, one can see how the author reaches their goal of centering the trans characters' happiness while making trans hardship and gender dysphoria tangential to the story. Instances of this comfort and joy are visible in the instances of communal belonging and gender euphoria in the selections from the novel.

The plot of this novel follows three trans middle-schoolers as they try to reverse a terrible curse. These main characters are Babs, Iris, and the boy. Babs is a trans girl who struggles with a disappearing curse, Iris is a nonbinary child who was grown from the earth, and the boy is a trans

male student who is new to their school and has yet to choose his new name. These middle-schoolers all have mystical abilities, and through these powers, find each other, friendship, discover comfort in their gender identities, and, for the boy, his name. Told from Babs' perspective, most of their struggles are related to their magical quest to cure Babs of her curse, so their trans identities, while important, are not the sole focus of the novel. Through this magical narrative, Evans displays how trans representation for youth can be joyful, realistic, and fantastical all in one, while still dealing with issues such as depression, coming out, and bullying.

Evans displays how trans communities sharing resources and knowledge functions to empower, educate, and elicit joy. In one scene, Babs asks the boy about his plans to transition, and he says he doesn't really know, so Babs introduces him to a gender specialist. After the appointment, Babs turns to the boy and reminds him of the joy he felt when he tried going by his surname during the appointment. The boy hadn't felt this type of happiness when he went by his old name. Babs, then, asks if he has ever heard of the term gender euphoria. In response to her question, he asks "'Is it just like, good feelings? About gender? ... I've only heard of gender dysphoria before.' He smiles lost in thought."⁶⁰ Having only heard of sadness associated with gender dysphoria, this concept is new to the boy. Using context clues and his knowledge of prefixes, he gives a pretty simple description of gender euphoria: good feelings about one's gender. The existence of gender euphoria as a concept brings this young trans child to express his happiness physically—gender euphoria is causing him gender euphoria. He becomes "lost" in his thoughts at the prospect of what these good gender feelings he's experiencing and learning about mean, especially regarding his name. The gender fulfillment the boy is experiencing causes him not to worry about these factors for a moment—to exist and transcend beyond this moment. This explanation and simultaneous experience of gender euphoria is functioning to

show how simple of a concept it is to explain to a young person. It is also highly impactful, as one can observe from the boy's smile and his immediate immersion in his thoughts.

Evans strives to make their book a casual and simple introduction to gender euphoria while displaying and highlighting the joy in these experiences with a simple and understandable explanation of what could constitute gender euphoria. This is the first time, as well, that gender dysphoria is acknowledged in the novel—directly after introducing gender euphoria. This prioritizing of gender euphoria goes back to Evans' goal to display joyful trans experiences over traumatic ones. In doing this, one can only imagine the impact that this narrative of gender euphoria and joy might have on a trans youth who has just picked up some random novel from a store or a library in the LGBT fiction section, where they hope to see themselves represented.

Trans authors placing an emphasis on community in the creation of trans joy and gender euphoria understand from their own experience that the feeling of belonging can generate empowerment. As part of this practice, Evans emphasizes the impact that a community, an all-trans friend group can have on young trans folks, as they figure themselves out. For most of the novel, Babs has difficulty controlling her disappearing curse that worsens with her depression. This disappearing curse allegorizes the trans experience. She describes in the first person what it felt like before she met Iris and the boy, saying that “I [Babs] was so lonely. It's so hard to make friends when no one can even see you!”⁶¹ Because of her depression caused by her gender dysphoria, Babs literally felt unseen, as if no one cared about or understood her. However, this sadness and invisibility were temporary for Babs, diminished by the presence of people who understood her. By displaying Babs' feelings and experiences of loneliness and isolation before she met her trans-only friend group, Evans highlights the importance of community for trans people.

In another instance of highlighting the importance of community, a well-meaning witch and fellow trans woman—is the answer to the problem of Babs’ curse. Seeing Babs distraught, the witch apologizes for the nuisance that the curse had caused; well-intentioned, she thought it would have been safer for a trans girl to be able to disappear when she needed, in order to shield herself from violence or discrimination. To make up for the havoc the curse has wreaked upon Babs’ life, the witch teaches Babs to control and master it. Upon being able to control her disappearance, her depression seems to have faded. The witch wants to know if she feels better than she had, if she can control it. At Zahra’s question and her voluntary reappearing, “I grin, bigger than I have in my whole life. ‘Yeah. I feel great.’”⁶³ Babs’ disappearing has been intertwined with her identity as a trans girl, present in the well-intentioned curse. At this moment, Babs has mastery of this curse, her newfound skill, and she smiles the biggest smile she ever has. This moment is a moment of gender euphoria. She doesn’t only feel good about this gender-entwined skill: she feels *great*. These feelings of gender are not only good gender feelings, as the boy put it, but are *Great* gender feelings. Kate Norbury—an author herself—in her analysis of young-adult trans representation, discusses the “creative achievement” script, where a trans character is only praised and respected for their ability to achieve greatness through their skill and creativity.⁶⁴ Breaking away from this mold of this script, In this novel, this character’s creativity—her art or skill—is her performance of her gender, which breaks from the mold of the traditional “creative achievement” script and affirms the author’s intent of bringing joyful and positive gendered experiences. Alongside a trans mentor and her group of trans friends, the expression of joy caused by her understanding of her ‘curse’ and transness is an expression of joy caused by her mastery of gender and magic.

This novel, much like *Detransition, Baby* focuses on the importance of community and gender-affirming experiences in the creation of trans joy. However, *Euphoria Kids*, because of its genre, overall theme, and target audience, does not deal with concepts like detransitioning or sex work. Both of these works, though, display non-normative trans experiences that challenge transnormativity and cisgender expectations. There are instances of joy and gender euphoria in both of these novels that could have only been written by someone who has first-hand knowledge of the trans experience and these feelings. As we will see in the next primary text, gender euphoria is a feeling that is experienced when one's body aligns with what feels right for them, personally, rather than what society has pushed onto them.

“Satan, Are You There? It’s Me, Laura.”

Also deviating from the tradition of realistic and transnormative depictions of trans people, Aisling Fae’s short, religious fantasy story “Satan, Are You There? It’s Me, Laura,” uses the religious figure of the Christian devil portrayed here as a trans woman to highlight the way trans women are ostracized from a larger group for their identities. This story discusses the demonization of trans people—specifically trans women—and their desire for community, with the appearance of the literal devil, who, ironically, is also a trans woman. As a transgender woman herself, the author Aisling Fae uses her own experiences to display how important community is to survival and self-worth, while including instances of trans joy and the celebration of trans bodies that do not appeal to cisgender norms.

In order to comment on the historic demonization of queer and trans people by a highly-Christian society, Fae begins the short story with Laura, a young trans woman, who decides to summon Satan during a bout of mania. She is depressed, bored, lonely, and living a life of

mundanity. Now seeking a friend, a confidant, someone to communicate with, Laura summons Satan. Immediately greeted by a traditional caricature of Satan, Laura realizes that she is in the presence of God, pretending to be Satan. Soon, God explains that Lucifer—now Lucy—was his wife but they haven’t spoken in thousands of years. Laura realizes that Satan—Lucy—does not know she has been portrayed in the media as a deceptive male being. Now, with the knowledge of her transness, Laura summons Lucy and informs her of this issue of representation, the reality of trans women on earth, and her own personal struggles. Appreciative of her, Lucy grants Laura a wish, though she promises she will never make her cisgender. The novel ends with Laura waking up to a new body modification that subverts the traditional thoughts about trans people’s bodies.

For centuries, Christianity has been weaponized to bolster hate against queer and trans folks, who are told that their desires are sinful and that their identities disobey God. There are Christians who claim that if we are made in God’s image, transitioning to another gender changes that image, deeming their gender inherently sinful, which they associate with Hell, Satan, demons, and damnation. For example, Focus on the Family produces Christian content “dedicated to defending the inherent honor, dignity, value and equality of the two sexes.”⁶⁵ Because of the emphasis on the “two sexes,” one can infer an inherently negative position on the concept of trans people in relation to this form of Christianity. In fact, according to this blog “transgenderism” violates God’s divine intent and transgender people should not be allowed to be part of the clergy.⁶⁶ This blog displays the scope of contemporary Christianity’s judgment of trans people and displays why Laura would identify with a demonized being, such as Lucy.

Gender transition is seen by some contemporary Christians as something that celestial bodies, such as God, would not bother with, condone, or understand. However, this portrayal of a

celestial body, such as Satan, as a transgender woman misunderstood throughout history reminds us that gender is an expression, a performance that anyone may don to match their personal feelings. When Satan learns of God's suppression of her identity and that she has been portrayed throughout time as a male, she realizes that humans think of trans-ness as unnatural. In her response, she scoffs and exclaims "Why, I am a primal force of nature! As are, I suppose, the interactions which produce nuclear armaments and energy."⁶⁷ This is a particularly powerful statement, as it highlights the self-awareness and strength inherent in knowing one's self and gender, comparing this intimate self-knowledge to nuclear weapons and electricity, both of which are frightening, powerful, and incredibly natural—or real. Pope Francis has called trans people dangerous and compared the population to nuclear weapons because they "do not recognize the order of creation," so, in this excerpt, Fae is recognizing the power and strength that trans people harbor in the face of bigotry and discrimination at the hands of an oppressive religion.⁶⁸

With the knowledge of this author's identity as a trans woman and her negative experiences with organized Christianity, this statement becomes even more impactful. Even though, she—Aisling Fae, Laura, Lucy, or, possibly, the trans girl reader—is seen as a threat, as something rare and incomprehensible, her identity, her feeling, and her embodiment of herself and her gender are all-natural because she is, in her words, a "primal force of nature." This framing of trans people as God's creations and as celestial beings is a beautiful and empowering narrative that is not seen outside of trans-inclusive religious institutions or writings. In this way, Fae is presenting a path of self-acceptance and naturalness regarding trans people's conceptions of their genders that goes against what centuries of Christianity and Christian-inspired institutions have taught about trans and queer people.

In particular, these Christian institutions have demonized trans *women*, who are perceived as “choosing” femininity over masculinity. Because of centuries of misogyny, homophobia, and a biologically essentialist view of gender, especially within the church, trans women have been seen as sinful, as perverted, and as unnatural. This demonization of trans women runs deep within our culture. LGBT people, in general, are seen as ‘sinners’ by religious people, and many of the villains in children’s cartoons are effeminate or crossdressing men, such as HIM in *Powerpuff Girls*, or even women based on drag queens, such as Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*. Our news media, especially the right-wing, evangelical media, paint trans women as a threat in the restroom, in the locker room, and even in the swimming pool or track field. For Laura, learning that the embodiment of evil is a trans woman just like her is empowering and a source of joy because being deemed as ‘evil’ and embracing it breaks these conventions. In the following passage, Laura expresses this empowerment to Lucy and explains that, because being trans can present certain obstacles, she wishes that she had had more representation of trans women in her life.

Trans girls get demonized so often that, hell, even before today, I always identified with you...Like, people think because I’m trans that I’m some devil worshiper... So I embrace it... Anyway, I convinced myself I was a demon, and that that was a good thing. But you, you live that, you literally are the demonic trans girl we all aspire to be. I just... I wish we’d known. I wish we’d had you around.⁶⁹

Seeing other older, trans people in powerful and impactful roles provides trans people a figure to seek out as a mentor or model themselves after. The representation Laura finds in Lucy

is impactful and transformative for Laura as someone who has experienced exile and ostracization. The demonization of Laura's gender was so ever-present that her admiration of a Satanic figure is not the result of Lucy's new-to-Laura trans-ness. Associating herself with the devil gave Laura an armor to deflect insults and discrimination by her peers or her co-workers, so when they associate her with Hell and with Satanism, she is not offended or hurt. She associates so much with an angel cast out of Heaven that she literally spends her Friday night alone, summoning this powerful being. When she meets Lucy—the literal devil and a beautiful, fierce, and threatening trans woman—she feels seen, complete, and correct. For Laura, Lucy is an aspiration—a goal. She wants to embody and perfectly perform this ethereal, threatening, demonic form of femininity that she sees before her. However, she is a little sad at this realization because she wishes she knew that the male devil she thought she was praying to and summoning was a trans woman like her—that she had someone older, wiser, and authoritative to look up to and to model herself after. Laura longs for a mentor and for a community of women like herself who know too well how society will tell their stories.

Seeing oneself represented or not represented in society, on screen, or in literature can be formative in one's conception of oneself, deciding if one fits in or not. Lucy, while she did not know that her truth was omitted from the *Holy Bible*, received prayers, emails, and summons from trans women who she assumed just contacted her because of her own, personal transness, as if being trans was just as accepted by society as being tall. She apologizes to Laura, to the transfeminine audience, "I really have no excuse. I knew something was wrong, how couldn't I? So many of you were writing to me. Asking, pleading for help."⁷⁰ While she didn't understand she was included in the narrative, she recognized that there was a community of women who were experiencing this demonization and were relating to Satan. Laura understands Lucy's

plight—trans women are rarely the ones who get to tell their own stories and, when the story is told, they are often the villain. Erasure of trans women’s stories and the posthumous de-legitimization of their identities, such as with Marsha P. Johnson, is so commonplace that even a celestial being has had her narrative erased and muddled, too.

This story celebrates the uniqueness of trans bodies and body modifications while displaying that not all trans people set out to emulate cisness in order to find their joy. For example, Lucy promises Laura a wish with the only stipulation that she will not make Laura cisgender. Laura’s transness is something to be celebrated, and she recognizes it, as well. She laughs and assures Lucy that she does not want to be cisgender before she whispers her wish into the devil’s ear, which produces a long laugh from the celestial woman. This leaves the reader to wonder what Laura could have possibly wanted—it was different and strange enough to cause the devil herself to laugh.

The short story ends with Laura waking up from her experience, wondering if the whole thing was real and if her wish had come true, so she inspects herself and exclaims “Oh, yes! I’m going to have so much fun with these! Two dicks! Fuck yeah!!”⁷¹ On its surface, this is a purely comedic expression of joy, one that the audience can now understand and one which is highlighted by Laura’s profane exclamation of the word ‘fuck.’ This word highlights the protagonists’ sheer delight at her new body modification. She is so excited to enjoy her body on her own terms without regard for the standards. This an experience of gender euphoria after being given what she had wished for most. Her profane exclamation signifies this euphoric feeling that is happening inside of her.

The fact that this body modification and source of gender euphoria is double what she already had can be slightly surprising when one thinks about what trans people purportedly want

about their bodies, according to those narratives written by cisgender people. The slight shock of Laura's realized wish also highlights the expectations of the audience and forces the reader to analyze what they think Laura might have wished for. When she does not get what the audience has imagined for her, they are forced to confront their expectations of trans bodies, gender dysphoria and euphoria, and think about why they have thought this. For one, media representations of trans people depict this population as longing to look a certain way in order to further the narrative that trans people are sad, melancholic people who strive to emulate the cisgender body.

In creating this suspense and shock of the wish for two penises, Fae is calling attention to these subversive modes of trans joy—instances of delight and elation that challenge transnormative expectations. Presenting this rather comical instance of joy and delight at the presence of this anti-transnormative body modification, Fae embraces her position as a trans author and creative and creates work for those trans people who do subscribe to normative standards. For these trans audiences, they might laugh, smile, and relate to Laura's apparently 'weird' aspiration for her body. There are transgender men who, after top surgery, do not want nipples, who want their nipples tattooed on, or might want them covered up with larger tattoo works. Trans peoples' bodies are their own, Fae shows, and, when binarist and transnormative standards are removed, they can embrace their bodies and modify them however they see fit to feel more comfortable in those bodies.

A trans woman herself, Fae understands the impact that her words, characters, and story as a whole have on her audience. In her short story, Fae tackles community, self-representation, the demonization of trans women, and acts of subversive trans joy through body modification. Fae uses the literal depiction of the devil and her identity as a trans woman to display the

demonization of transgender women that occurs in the media, on the internet, in the legislature, and in institutions, such as the church. This use of Christian deities and celestial beings displays how the Christian religion—specifically its iterations and bastardizations—is so commonly used to justify transphobia and discrimination while condemning the trans people. Aligning these transfeminine characters with Satan is Fae’s way of reclaiming this demonization and recognizing that trans people do not need to align with society’s transnormative, transphobic standards and rules in order to be ‘good’ and acceptable trans people.

Trans-Affirming Spaces in Knoxville, Tennessee

While most of these stories include accounts of trans-affirming communities, these spaces are not fiction. Many of them are small and new and growing slowly. Nestled between the Tennessee River and the Great Smoky Mountains lies South Press Coffee which first opened its doors in 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic. On the surface, it is an eco-friendly and sustainable coffee shop. This space’s greater purpose is to provide a sober, all-ages, all-inclusive setting, in which trans and queer people can gather without fear for their safety. There are cabinets of board games, happy and healthy adult, trans people serving coffee, and, among the cushy armchairs and quicksand couches are two, teal bookshelves that serve as the queer library. Drag shows, trivia, youth groups, food trucks, holiday markets, and HIV testing are routine events. This sort of community space is needed for trans people, especially in this area. Before South Press, the only other queer spaces in Knoxville were 21+ nightclubs, where transphobia and violence can make themselves present.

Tennessee is situated in the so-called Bible Belt of the United States, where conservatism, Christian-led bigotry, and state government, lend to the area being unfriendly for

trans people in the area. Tennessee remains the only state to prohibit sex marker changes on its state birth certificates, so that trans people born in this state cannot, even if they move states, change their original sex-marker.⁷² Recently, in 2021, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed SB 126, a bill that, according to the Human Rights Campaign, “unnecessarily regulates life-saving, best practice medical care for transgender youth.”⁷³ This bill was the fifth piece of anti-trans legislation passed in Tennessee in 2021. This “Slate of Hate,” as referred to by the Human Rights Campaign, includes a business bathroom bill, an anti-trans sports ban, an anti-LGBTQ education bill, and an anti-trans bathroom bill aimed at students. A local trans teen—Luc Esquivel—along with support from his family, the local community, and the ACLU, is suing the state because a recently-signed law by Governor Lee made it impossible for Esquivel to play golf as himself.⁷⁴ Additionally, fatal violence against transgender people has been on the rise. Every year since 2015 has been the “Deadliest Year on Record” for trans people, according to the HRC, and, in 2021, at least 57 trans people were murdered.⁷⁵

In addition to this legislative and physical violence, the local population is harmed by the lack of access to trans healthcare in Knoxville. The local Planned Parenthood—where the majority of East Tennessee’s trans population went to receive HRT and other services—burnt to the ground at the end of 2021 in an incident of arson that occurred months after a shooting at the clinic.⁷⁶ Planned Parenthood, in this area, was the only understanding and accessible form of healthcare available, but, due to these incidents, a significant number of trans people in this area must either forgo their healthcare or travel around 200 more miles to receive their care in Nashville—the state’s capital. For trans people in East Tennessee, the healthcare system and lack of infrastructure around trans healthcare has once again failed them and has made life unstable for those in the community who have to choose between hormones, bills, or food.

With the knowledge of this region, the recently-passed legislation, the ever-increasing number of trans people killed, and the lack of resources in the community, one can understand why a space like South Press Coffee is so important. South Press's foundation is community. The owner of the coffee shop is a 40-year-old transgender woman who, after being left unemployed during the COVID-19 Pandemic, asked her friends for donations of their old junk, anything they wanted to get rid of. This coffee shop has no new furniture; everything has been donated, thrifted, gifted, dumpster-dove, and second-hand. Each coffee mug, couch, and coffee table was gifted to this woman, to the larger community, in order to provide a new type of space for queer and trans people in the area—one they had wished existed but had never seen do so before. While she had not been a business owner, she knew this space needed to exist here in this area, where trans students were not allowed to play the sports they loved, where employment discrimination is common, where using the restroom is a hot-button political issue, and where religion has the potential to blind parents with hate.

Personally, I know the importance of such a space. As someone who is trans and living in Knoxville, I had begun to go to South Press to meet friends and mingle, to surround myself with older trans people, and to feel like I belonged. After becoming friendly with the owner and the expansion of the store into a larger space, I was asked to be a part of the South Press Team, and I was for seven months. I had been experiencing trouble with employment and was handed an opportunity to be a facilitator of community, just by making a latté or a hot chocolate and serving a smile. After leaving South Press, I have been able to discuss with the owner of the coffee shop what life for trans people is like in Knoxville and how she thinks spaces such as South Press facilitate this.

As a young, gender-ambiguous person slowly pushes open the door to a large, cluttered, rainbow-covered room with couches, armchairs, shelves of books and board games, they are transported from their cold and conservative town to a haven where other trans people greet them, compliment them, serve them, and welcome them home. As they peruse the community library's shelves and shuffle through the titles, they find the transgender literature section, a sense of belonging overwhelms them—there are shelves and shelves of texts for them to choose from, all of them authored by trans people or containing trans characters. Their hand flits along the spines of these books—Euphoria Kids in the young adult section, Meanwhile, Elsewhere in the anthologies, and Detransition, Baby in front of the other novels calling out to them, with its large print and bold-colored pattern. Surrounded by people just like them, sharing their experiences, the young person shuffles to the front living room and sits down in a large, blue armchair with the novel that had called out to them and the hot coffee in a mug with their pronouns (they/them) in big, bold print on the coffee table to their left while something flutters in their stomach.

This former employer of mine let me ask her about her experiences as an adolescent, growing up as trans in East Tennessee, her experiences with gender and gender euphoria, going stealth, and leading up to her opening of the coffee shop. Within the local trans community, many look up to this woman as a role-model. As she grew up, in the 1990s, the queer community was not as structured as it is now starting to become, especially in the rural South—right in the Bible Belt. Emancipated at 15, she moved to Knoxville, where she would hang out outside of the gay nightclubs because she was not old enough to physically go in but she could see people like her as they went in and out. At this point, she had not realized she was trans but had always had

effeminate energy and an admiration of the older drag queens, which is how she identified at the time.

There was a deli next door... There were a lot of times that older queer folks, when the bar would close, would go over to the deli and they would take me with them. They knew I was 16 and working at Cracker Barrel and going to high school, because that was a condition of my emancipation. They would feed me, buy me a basket of French fries or a burger. They didn't know it at the time, but sometimes, that was the only sustenance I had that whole day. I was also no contact with my family. These older queer folks stepped into this role and rallied around me when I needed somebody... By doing this, they created a safe space for me.⁷⁷

Having experienced the formative power of community, through her experiences with these older queer people, she understood what the city of Knoxville needed. It needed a physical structure where queer and trans folks could visit, congregate, feel validated, feel wanted, and see other people like themselves. By building this space, she gives back to the community. As she lets me know in the interview, this affirmation does not only go one way—she feels supported and loved, too, by the local queer and trans community.

In this space, I feel like we talk about how it helps the community feel comfortable to express themselves. It has also been a great place for me to experiment with fashion, makeup, and my look and be met with affirmation. Sometimes, when you're trans and 300+ and wearing your first crop top, people come in and affirm you, like "girl you look so good." The fact that they were affirming me helped me the next time I wore the crop top. It wasn't as scary when I left the house. Every time in the community where I was met with love and affirmation, I feel empowered to take these risks. It's easier to take risks in a safe space. Our community has been affirming in that regard.⁷⁸

For her, the people that visit her space create trans joy for her in several aspects, with regards to belonging, her gender performance, and how her gender performance is affirmed by the customers that walk in and compliment her appearance. This woman is a role model for many people in our community, and she, too, requires a sense of belonging, to embody herself entirely, and to be recognized and validated for that embodiment. Like the trans authors who have forged new trans narratives among genres, she feels a sense of obligation to create a space for the trans community because no physical space exists.

Having overcome tough, challenging, and exhausting experiences as a trans woman in Knoxville, which include a historic lack of structured community and the typical anti-trans discrimination, she has grown into a public figure. Because she owns this business, this could be perceived as simply a job, but she, also, requires this sense of belonging to function joyfully. She benefits from the praise of her physical appearance when she is trying out a new look, of the space she has curated, and the work she has done for the people she serves, creating joy in her that she is not the embodiment of the typical narrative of trans people. She is not a dead sex worker on a throwaway episode of *Law and Order: SVU*—she is an inspiring business owner and leader. She holds space for herself and people like her, building up every individual that walks through the door. Holding space for trans individuals, she is the embodiment of trans joy.

Through her work in opening her own business as a trans woman, in a society where she is set up to fail, this trans community leader has inspired others to create space. In 2021, several more LGBT resources appeared in Knoxville, such as one that caters to the physiological needs of queer and trans youth; Bryant’s Bridge, which opened in 2021, according to their website, “provides affordable housing for LGBTQ+ youth who have experienced homelessness or are about to experience homelessness related to their LGBTQ+ status and connects them to

resources in our supportive community.”⁷⁹ As homelessness is a major issue for trans youth, Sean Bryant—founder of Bryant’s Bridge and a nonbinary person himself, using he/they pronouns—set out to provide for his community, as he feels a sense of obligation to the community to provide this resource. This sense of obligation on the part of these trans and queer people to serve their community in meaningful ways is powerful and can inspire others to do the same.

While the owner of South Press herself is not directly responsible for the creation of these additional spaces, her own space inspires other members of the community to act on that sense of obligation and provide for others in the way that she can. This cycle of inspiration within the community also extends back to the discussion of literature. As more LGBT and trans-specific resources and businesses open, queer and trans people in other fields will finally feel able to fulfill their sense of obligation to contribute to the community, in the face of adversity. Like these trans community leaders, trans authors see a historic lack of trans representation in literature, confining trans people to specific narratives. With the creation of realistic trans works like *Detransition, Baby*—written in response to a lack of joyful narratives—more trans authors will write realistic narratives that trans people have traditionally had access to, such as the romance plot. Similarly, as more young-adult fantasy novels, such as *Euphoria Kids*, other trans authors will feel empowered and inspired to contribute short stories, perhaps, such as Fae’s “Satan, Are You There? It’s Me, Laura.” This creation of trans joy—whether it be a physical structure, a homeless shelter, a film, or a book—continues to reinforce and inspire more iterations of trans joy.

While Christian-led bigotry dominates the area, trans people can also find solace in religion and faith. For example, the Tyson House Lutheran and Episcopal Campus Ministry, located on the campus of the University of Tennessee, is an LGBT-inclusive ministry that has

members of the trans community in leadership roles. My friend, the church worker—whose first experience with gender euphoria was a mascara beard—works and lives at the Tyson House, and he is not the only trans person there to do so. Surrounded by other trans people who worship, pray, live, and learn together, my friend is able to engage with a love-based religion, without all of the bigotry that many contemporary Christians tend to uphold. Able to celebrate his identity within a religious context—such as reaffirming that God made him in His image, so it is God’s plan that my friend is trans—the church worker, too, is able to take this love and celebration of trans people and spread it through his community.

Another friend of mine—who has previously lived and worked at the Tyson House alongside the church worker—is a trans man, graduate student, and a seminarian. In an interview with him, he read to me his Testimony for Trans Day of Remembrance—the day trans people mourn the precious, trans lives lost that year—which I will include here. His testimony speaks to the power of a trans-positive and trans-affirming community, especially when one has faced bigotry from similar communities. With tears in my eyes, over this static-y Zoom call, I ask him to read it again. Taking a deep breath, he, once again, reads to me:

One of the things I love most about this community is that people here do not feel entitled to a justification or explanation for my existence. Something I have always been asked but never known how to give.

My experience was the result of the tremendous efforts of those who came before me, queer trailblazers and saints, allies of faith, and members of my own family. And it opened my eyes to what queer identity can be when not colored by the burden of shame, otherness, or self-doubt. It

can be a source of community, indwelling, and chosen family. Queer identity can be more than tolerated, even more than affirmed, it can be celebrated. All this to say, I will not be telling you exactly how I got here, but I can tell you about what I do know. And what I know is trans joy. [80](#)

Key Terms

Gender Identity

Gender Expression

Gender Binary

Nonbinary

Gender Dysphoria

Gender Euphoria

Stealth

Detransition

Trans Joy

Transnormativity

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