Trans*mediation:
Exploring Trans Experience Beyond the Mirror of Representation

by

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Abstract

"Trans media" usually describes the representation of trans people in media. While trans media have garnered many important critiques for their representations, such analyses tend to overlook the problems of representation inherent to trans phenomena themselves: If "trans" describes *movement*, how can it be represented? And if trans media resist representation, what *are* trans media, and what else might they do? This thesis investigates these questions through the author's affective encounter with several media objects made by trans creatives, including an artificially intelligent image generator, a short experimental film, and a Twitterbot. Using a theoretical framework of trans embodiment and new materialist media theory, the author argues that the performative processes of mediation embodied by these media—termed *trans*mediation*—articulate trans experiences beyond the limitations of representation. Trans*mediation creates opportunities to communicate the experience of shifting subjectivity while skirting cisnormativity, offering novel possibilities for trans expression, recognition, pleasure, and community.

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While it too is limited by the restrictions of representation, this thesis is grounded in an understanding of phenomena as part of an always-shifting assemblage—an ontological position from which itself is not exempt. In other words, this thesis only came to be because of the hard work, support, and possibility-making of many people, beings, spaces, and structures, the extent of which I cannot possibly do justice in trying to name here. *Thank you.* It is a privilege to be entangled with you.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1. Introduction: Feeling Trans Representation

> *I'm a child, sitting cross-legged in a vaguely circular ring with my fellow classmates. It's quiet. I'm waiting for the hot breath of the person beside me to whisper in my ear—sometimes a close friend, and other times a total stranger. Either way, it would involve my companion struggling to articulate a phrase to me through their contagious giggles. Once they said their piece, I would then turn to the person on my other side to repeat what I had heard, purposefully making room for the message's mutation, and almost always struggling through giggles of my own.*

This vignette from my childhood is a blend of the countless times I played "telephone," a game of miscommunication where a set message is whispered from player to player. The message changes with each mishearing and mispronunciation until it returns to its origin and the extent of its mutation is shared with the entire group. Telephone is a game of both interpersonal intimacy and playfulness towards transformation: It is not at all about preserving the original message but instead changing it through shared whispers and laughs, passed along from person to person until the whole group has contributed to its often nonsensical and humorous transformation.

In a direct reference to this game, J. Rosenbaum's (2020) conceptual artwork *Frankenstein's Telephone* draws upon gender diverse stock photos not necessarily for intimacy, play, and transformation, but instead to explore the cisnormative biases built into artificial intelligence (AI) systems. To do so, *Frankenstein's Telephone* randomly selects an image from The Gender Spectrum Collection, a set of stock images and captions featuring trans models in everyday categories such as "lifestyle," "relationships," "technology," and "health" (Figure 1), and runs its caption through a series of neural networks. The system (1) reads the caption to generate a new image using

the ATTN GAN network, (2) divides and categorizes the contents of the image using the DeepLab algorithm, (3) feeds the image classifications to the SPADE-COCO network to generate a new image, and then (4) creates a new caption based off the generated image using the im2txt neural image caption generator. *Frankenstein's Telephone* reveals its results to the spectator as the process loops, showing the distancing of its outputs from its origin and stopping when it can no longer identify any people in the images it generates (Figure 2).

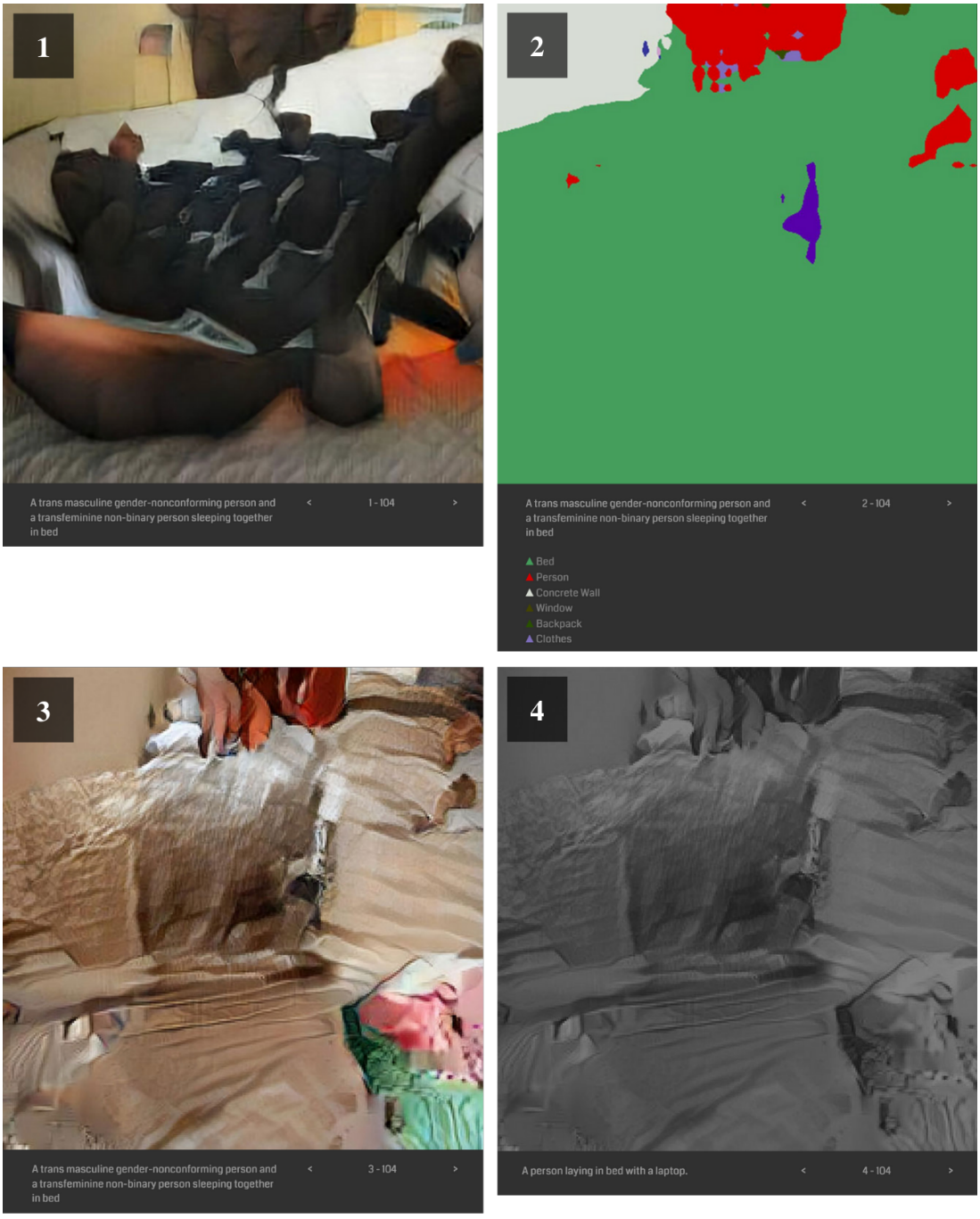
Figure 1

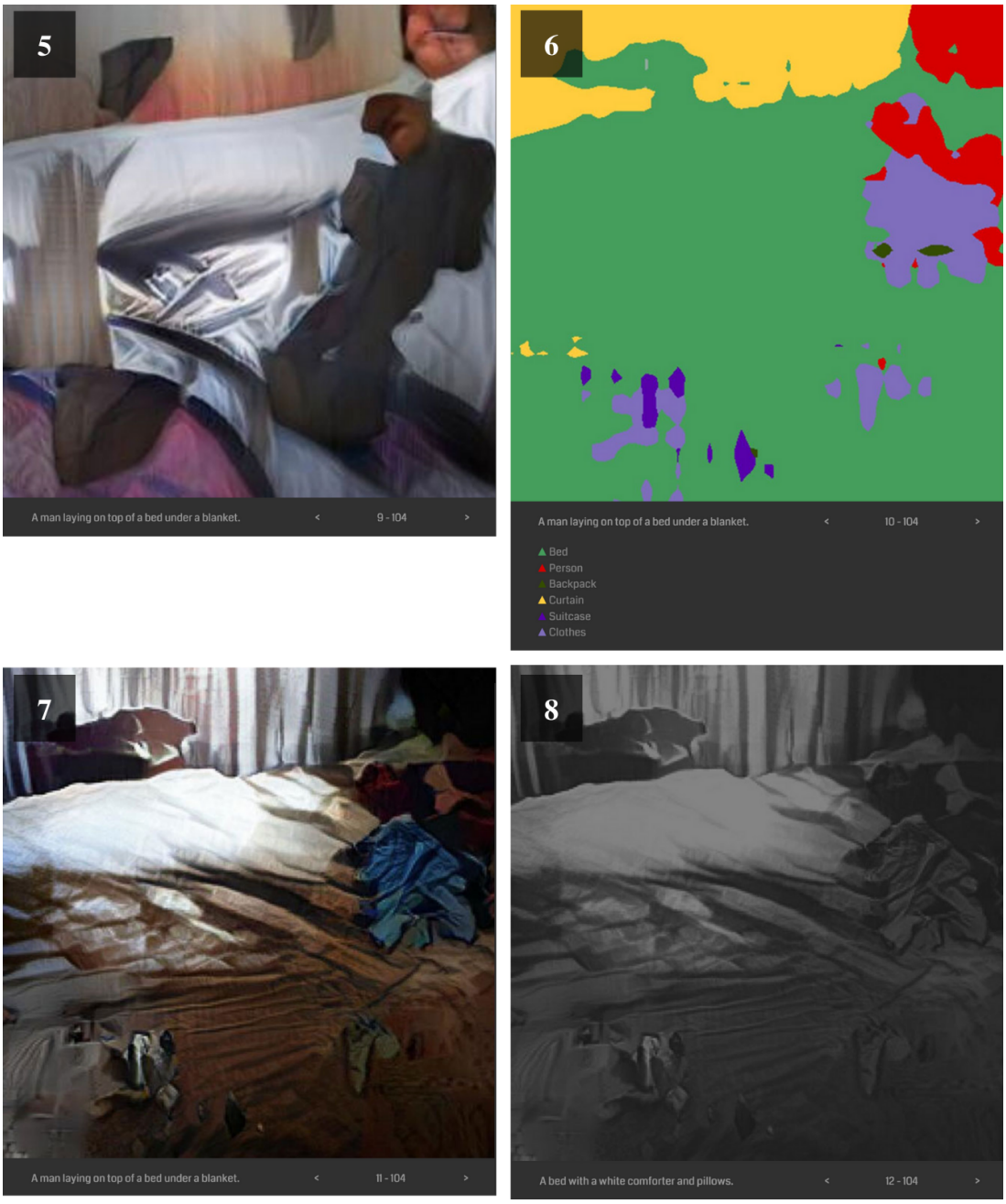
An example of a stock image and its caption from The Gender Spectrum Collection

Note. Screenshot taken from VICE (2020a). Caption transcription: "A transmasculine gender-nonconforming person and a transfeminine non-binary person sleeping together in bed."

Figure 2

The first two loops (steps 1–8) of Frankenstein's Telephone*'s image generation, derived from the caption of the image in Figure 1*





Note. Original screenshots taken from Rosenbaum's (2020) dedicated website for *Frankenstein's Telephone*. See Appendix for caption transcriptions.

Much like the children's game, *Frankenstein's Telephone* produces strangely garbled images and captions that vary drastically from their origin, often misgendering,

misrepresenting, and otherwise misidentifying the subject of the original photo—sometimes even as objects rather than human beings, as Figure 2 demonstrates.[1] Describing these results, Rosenbaum (2020) insists that "[t]he discomfiting images of computer generated humanity calls to mind the story of Frankenstein's monster, a narrative that many queer people, especially transgender people, identify with. The real monsters are the people behind the scenes that unconsciously perpetuate bias" (para. 4). *Frankenstein's Telephone* is thus an effort to unveil cisnormative societal biases and encourage their correction by using more diverse image datasets to train future iterations of AI.

This goal for better trans representation is one shared by The Gender Spectrum Collection, *Frankenstein's Telephone* source imagery. The Collection is a repository of images aiming "to help media outlets better represent members of these communities as people not necessarily defined by their gender identities—people with careers, relationships, talents, passions, and home lives" (VICE, 2020, para. 2). Produced in 2019 by multimedia artist and trans woman Zackary Drucker in association with GLAAD and the identity-focused media group Broadly (now VICE Media), The Collection is listed under an Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives 4.0 International Creative Commons license to encourage others to use its images "widely and responsibly" (VICE, 2020, para. 5). It has been lauded for "breaking binaries" (Allen, 2021, para. 5) and

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[1] While the Gender Spectrum Collection also depicts much racial diversity in its gender diverse photos, it does not describe skin colour or ethnicity of the models in its captions (a decision which itself requires reflection beyond the scope of this thesis). Consequently, the AI in *Frankenstein's Telephone* often renders its images of "people" using light, white-passing colours and references to western cultural norms and objects. This demonstrates the significant racial bias in machine learning as well as the cisnormativity the project critiques. See Benjamin (2019), Noble (2018), and Richardson et al. (2019) for more insight into the racial biases encoded into contemporary technologies and their significant social consequences.

offering “a more gender-inclusive view of the world around us” (CBC Radio, 2019, para. 2). Together, Rosenbaum’s (2020) artwork and The Gender Spectrum Collection strive to pave the way for good trans representation in not just journalistic content but also the very technologies by which much content is generated, circulated, and consumed today.

But there is something about these trans images, texts, and technologies—trans media—which makes me pause. As a white settler transmasculine person, I wholeheartedly agree that more diverse images of trans people need to be represented in media in ways that are not stigmatizing or stereotypical, an issue that continues to haunt us despite the significant and difficult work from trans people like Drucker and Rosenbaum. And likewise, I also think that AI training must be made more diverse if we do not want to replicate the biases that are already pervasive in these media—although, following the caution of Black theorists of technology like Ruha Benjamin (2019) and Simone Browne (2015), I am wary of what these AI might be used *for* with the ability to recognize and generate imagery of trans subjects. Still, while my values align with the intentions of *Frankenstein’s Telephone* and The Gender Spectrum Collection, I am for some reason much more drawn towards the brain-bending images of “trans people” (or, sometimes, the entire lack of people at all) generated for *critique* by *Frankenstein’s Telephone* than its source material in The Gender Spectrum Collection. Through their mess of shifting misidentifications, these media *feel* more representative of my own, telephone-like trans experience with gender—an ongoing experience which, while personal, is also always constructed through my relation to others.

My strange dissonance between my values and affective reactions to these uncanny trans images generated for critique makes me wonder: What even *are* trans

media? What do they look, sound, and feel like? How can they be described? Do trans media need to produce "good" trans representations, and if so, what do these "good" representations do—and what are their limits? In her introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader,* Susan Stryker (2006) argues that trans phenomena question the modernist epistemology that considers there to be an inherent connection between a referent (the sexed body[2]) and its meaning (gender identity). By rearticulating the connection between the body and its represented image of gender, trans phenomena demonstrate a failing of the epistemological "mirror of representation" which conceptualizes representation as an accurate reflection of the world (Stryker, 2006, p. 9). If trans phenomena disrupt the mirror of representation, how can gender diversity be represented at all—by humans *or* by AI? More broadly, how can media (be they words, images, or other forms) ever present possibilities for articulating and complicating trans experience, without relying exclusively on the mirror-like representational practices challenged by trans phenomena?

These questions bring me to explore the history of trans media and the methods by which they have been analysed. To be clear, I am using "trans" in the broadest sense possible, recognizing that not all non-cisgender people identify with the term. Here, "trans" is a prefix that refers to a movement between identity categories (Stryker, 2008a; Stryker & Currah, 2014), or, as C. Riley Snorton (2017) describes it, "more about a

[2] I write "sexed" because "sex" is a discursively constructed category assigned to bodies. Sex is always already unstable and ambiguously defined by a combination of physical factors like externally visible genitalia, secondary sex characteristics, chromosomal makeup, and hormonal ratios, among other factors, demonstrating the fluidity of its boundaries (Bettcher, 2014; Stryker, 2006).

movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival" (p. 2), than an exclusive label.[3] It is with this disorienting movement of trans in mind that I explore the difficulty and possibility that trans presents to the production and analysis of trans media and consider an alternative: that this understanding of trans is perhaps best expressed not through representation, but instead through the media work's very mediality—the contextual media functions (Straw, 2015) of certain objects which I have come to describe as the process of trans*mediation.

So how does *Frankenstein's Telephone* use the problem of representation as a form of trans expression through trans*mediation? There are a few answers which help characterise trans*mediation and structure the argument of this thesis:

1. Trans*mediation is foundationally about movement, understanding "trans" as the movement between categories—frequently the categories of gender, but also other aspects of identity and even life itself. Although it produces static images, the shifts generated through *Frankenstein's Telephone*'s looping algorithms embody the shifting movement of trans, cutting and stitching media forms together to create novel rearticulations of identity.
2. This movement of trans*mediation is performative. *Frankenstein's Telephone* does not just express change through its representational content (although this too is important), but also through the very aspects of mediation which come to structure the piece. Like the cuts and stitches of trans bodies and/or identifications, trans*mediation uses the movements of

[3] Simultaneously, I am steadfast in my opinion that everyone should have the ability to use whatever label they feel fits them best—an opinion which can be productively held in tension with this open definition of "trans."

its materiality to contribute to a media object's meaning in conjunction with its content. Trans*mediation thus enacts the representationally expressed movement through its very process of mediation.

3. The performative movements of trans*mediation function affectively. The strange affinity I feel with *Frankenstein's Telephone* is this felt sense of trans*mediation, an affect of difference from cisnormative society. The particularities of trans*mediation's affects are subject to the various contexts of its encounter, potentially generating a sense of expression and recognition for those of trans experience—and a sense of possibility for others open to the potentials of trans movements.

In its AI-driven movements between captions and images, *Frankenstein's Telephone* performatively changes genders in its "monstrous" misidentifications—quite unlike the static but representationally gender diverse imagery in The Gender Spectrum Collection. As Rosenbaum (2020) writes, many trans people identify with Frankenstein's monster, often because Frankenstein's monster expresses rage towards the villagers who only see him as a monster rather than as the equally complex and constructed being he is (Stryker, 1994). The monster demonstrates that we are *all* constructed as we become sexed and gendered—both trans and non-trans people alike—and thus warns against the false logics used to justify prejudice towards those of us who are seen as "unnatural" for our rejection of our gender assignments (Stryker, 1994). Coming into my own gender took literal decades of discomfort, depression, and denial because of the way that trans identities are considered unnatural and monstrous by much of society. I find myself resonating with *Frankenstein's Telephone* not because of this experience of socially-imposed

monstrosity, however, but because I feel my hard-won efforts to 1) embrace change and movement—becoming constructed in ways that fit who I am—are 2) expressed in the piece's looping, mediating processes of transformation and misidentification, 3) productively generating a sense of trans recognition and possibility.

Frankenstein's Telephone is thus not just a poignant critique of AI bias, but also playful and expansive trans media expression which opens a space for the felt possibility of trans movements. This feeling makes trans*mediation useful for those who already know themselves to be trans, as well as those who have never felt they could be anything other than what they have always had reflected back to them in mainstream media. This reframing of trans phenomena's fundamental incongruity with representation from a problem to a solution identifies an alternative mode of politically charged trans expression which, as I demonstrate throughout this thesis, many creators already use to articulate their trans experiences.

To give context to trans*mediation, I begin by exploring early analyses of western trans media in Chapter 2. Like the discrimination faced by Frankenstein's monster, these analyses argue that trans phenomena have been largely represented in mainstream western media since the 1950s as monstrous, deceptive, and confused villains and victims alike, all of which ultimately suggest that trans people are not really the gender we claim to be (Lester, 2015; Miller, 2015; Namaste, 2005; Serano, 2007). Also like the creators' goals in making The Gender Spectrum Collection and *Frankenstein's Telephone*, analyses of these media generally argue that harmful representations contribute to a broader cultural misunderstanding of trans identity, denying the importance or even existence of trans life and making it difficult for trans people to express themselves

accurately if at all. Many have thus laboured to rewrite and de-pathologize these representations of trans subjectivity, striving to produce "good" trans representations as a solution to "bad" ones through the centring of trans voices in their production (Keegan, 2019). These efforts are extremely impactful and have also helped diversify trans media to include some limited representations of racialized trans identities. Still, many trans people argue that representation remains a problem: While more mainstream media feature and are made by trans subjects today than ever before, they still largely depict trans subjectivity as white and affluent, and the suggestion that society has reached a "transgender tipping point" (Steinmetz, 2014, para. 1) in the quality and quantity of its representation ignores the strife that many trans people continue to face socially and politically (cárdenas, 2015; Feder & Juhasz, 2016; Tourmaline et al., 2017). Further, many critiques of media made by trans people undermine and objectify the ways that trans people choose to represent themselves and reinforce the need that trans subjects must also be "good" to be culturally present (Billard et al., 2020; Billard & Zhang, 2022; Keegan, 2020a; Keegan & Horak, 2022).

In response to these difficulties, some transgender studies scholars are coming to argue that the social inequalities associated with trans representation cannot be solved by more or better representation (Keegan, 2020b); rather, the distinction between "good" and "bad" representation is a false problem in that it "limit[s] the understanding of the complex and multifaceted phenomena and processes by imposing clear-cut distinctions and categories all too early" (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 2). Reflecting on this notion alongside media studies' assertion that media have a more complex relationship with society than being simply "good" or "bad", I use Chapter 3 to reframe the problem of

trans representation through the overlaps of trans and media theory to develop the concept of trans*mediation. I argue that paying attention to the functions and processes of mediation itself presents an alternative approach where media are not just representationally trans but performatively so. I explain my method of developing this concept and analysing media which exemplify trans*mediation, starting "in the middle of things" and feeling my way through my many trans media encounters while taking copious notes along the way.

Having explained the concept of trans*mediation, Chapters 4 and 5 explore its function in two media works. Chapter 4 examines the expressive capacities of the short experimental film *Silver Femme* (Reano, 2020), focusing on the cuts and stitches in film, gender presentation, and gender subjectivity which performatively constitute the film's form and its message. These movements of trans*mediation trouble the divide between representation and materiality, challenging the validity of the "realness" of both the film and its characters' shifting genders. *Silver Femme* thus uses trans*mediation to reframe the possibilities of trans representation as more than a static reflection of the world; instead, it understands representation as something produced *with* its own film's material processes, embodying movement by referencing its own shimmering, mediating processes in its articulation of a shifting gender identity.

If *Silver Femme*'s trans*mediation is an earnest expression of trans experience, Genderbot's trans*mediation playfully pushes against the cisnormative boundaries of gender to generate novel possibilities for gender performativity and trans community-building. Chapter 5 examines the function of this Twitterbot, a piece of software that generates tweets (Veale & Cook, 2018) in its claims of freshly made "genders" every

day. Recognizing Genderbot's failure to genuinely perform gender demonstrates its value as a playful form of trans*mediation. Thinking through the value of trans play, I thus argue that Genderbot's failed gender performatives are still useful for the people who encounter its tweets, which are often quite sensory and affective despite being effectively nonsense—or, as I come to call them, (non)sense.

These two examples of trans*mediation, while radically different, demonstrate the way that media can express and generate trans experiences through their movements, shifting out of and crystalizing into moments of difference which performatively enact trans phenomena. In so doing, these media demonstrate the myriad of ways in which trans people are producing media through the very process of mediation itself, circumventing the constraints of media meant to mirror reality and instead opting to co-produce it through their media works. My hope is that recognizing trans*mediation does not to just identify and name a particular mode of trans media creation, but also demonstrates the value of its function—the felt sense of "trans" that it generates and communicates. Trans*mediation is important for the future expression and recognition of trans experiences as well as the possibilities it can create for those who might also recognize a particular *feeling* from certain media, but who did not understand what this feeling is or what it might offer them. Trans*mediation can thus present new opportunities for the shifting of subjectivity in ways that may not have been imaginable before, bringing trans pleasure, recognition, and an opportunity for community-building.

2. Literature Review: The Study of Trans Media, Yesterday & Today

2.1 Early Analyses of Trans Representation

Trans media are seemingly everywhere today, from the vicious flip-flopping of legislatures threatening the lives of trans people (Freedom for All Americans, 2022) to high-tension Twitter threads arguing over the transphobic diatribes of comedians (Factora, 2021) and authors (Romano, 2019). Stryker (2008a) dates the increase in mainstream media attention on trans issues to the highly publicized transition of Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s, a sensation which popularized and made legible the term "transsexual" in America. According to Stryker, the increasing prevalence and reach of media and the growing cultural understandings of gender and sexuality has resulted in an awareness of the presence of trans people in western society today more than ever before. Still, mere awareness of our presence does not necessarily mean trans people are accepted or treated equitably. *Positive* visibility and representation are thus an avenue by which political changes for trans people can be made (Tourmaline et al., 2017), as the goals of both The Gender Spectrum Collection and *Frankenstein's Telephone* suggest. This notion brings the broader visibility of trans phenomena into analysis for its subjective quality, especially in popular, highly visible audiovisual media such as Hollywood film and television.

While trans media have always been diverse in format—including magazines, books, music, and poetry to name only a few—most early studies of trans media focus on mainstream audiovisual media for their representative qualities and specifically explore the harms of stereotypical trans representations. Ruha Benjamin (2019) explains that the term "stereotype" originates from the plates used to make duplicates in printing, later

coming to mean an "image perpetuated without change" (p. 106) before adopting its currenting meaning as a trope or belief about a particular group. Stereotypes are useful to consider the "default settings of technology and society" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 106) and their position towards these groups. The stereotypes in many of the films and television shows do not just paradoxically present trans—by definition movement and transformation—as an "image perpetuated without change," but they also diminish trans issues, mock trans identities, and flat out deny that trans people actually exist in the process (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Lester, 2015; Miller, 2015; Serano, 2007).

Specifically, these stereotypes deny trans subjectivity by underlining the idea that "physical sex" is a stable referent for gender identity, reifying the mirror of representation despite the way that trans phenomena challenge this concept (Stryker, 2006). One example is the use of "the reveal," a common narrative technique used to "make public the 'truth' of the trans person's gendered and sexed body" (Seid, 2014, p. 176). This usually involves the character undressing—sometimes willingly, other times violently—to reveal their "true" sex. The reveal insists that gender is defined by the body's visible genitalia, which must always be referenced and thus knowable even if only through the euphemism of gender presentation (Bettcher, 2012; Stryker, 2006). Consequently, the reveal is a trope that insists that trans gender identities are inherently deceptive (Seid, 2014; Serano, 2007). For example, Julia Serano (2007) describes how the plot-twisting reveal of the trans woman character Dil from *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 1992) is met with revulsion from her cisgender heterosexual partner, leading him to slap her upon her undressing. He then proceeds to vomit, repulsed by both her trans body and his own (incorrectly) assumed proximity to homosexuality—underlining the notion that Dil is not

a woman at all. While Dil's reveal is used for dramatic tension, Paul Martin Lester (2015) notes that the same reveal scene also serves as a comedic punchline in other films, listing examples such as *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (Shadyac, 1994) (which parodies *The Crying Game* directly), *Soapdish* (M. Hoffman, 1991), and *The Hangover Part II* (Phillips, 2011).

In other comedies, Serano (2007) describes the presence of the "pathetic transsexual" (p. 36) stereotype where a character who does not "pass" as their claimed gender to either the audience or the other characters. She names Roberta in *The World According to Garp* (Hill, 1982) and Bernadette in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliot, 1994) as examples, noting that their gender "failure" is intended to be evident to the audience as a form of comic relief. Following the logic of the reveal, the message of the pathetic transsexual is that the character is deceiving not others but *themselves* about the "truth" of their own gender—that is, the visible sexual characteristics which identify them to the audience as transgressing gender norms in the first place. This positions the character as pathetically pathological and thus a source of ridicule for the audience and often other characters in the film as well.

In other cases, gender non-conforming stereotypes have been used with the intention of generating horror amongst the audience (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2012; Koch-Rein et al., 2020). For example, GLAAD (2012) finds that at least 21% of scripted television episodes between 2002–2012 featuring trans characters cast

them in the role of a killer or villain.[4] These characters are often portrayed as psychopathic villains or sexual predators who deceive straight people into apparently homosexual relationships, echoing Dil's partner's disgusted reaction to her reveal. Popular examples include Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), Norman Bates in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), and Ava Moore in *Nip/Tuck* (Murphy et al., 2003–2010), all of whom use transsexuality to trick cisgender people into becoming their victims, positioning gender non-conformity as a dangerous threat to society (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2012; Koch-Rein et al., 2020).

It is no coincidence that every example listed so far is a trope that specifically targets transfemininity. Serano (2007) writes that trans people who fall on the feminine side of the binary gender spectrum are hyper visible not just because of their gender non-conformity, but also because of their femininity. While transmasculine people tend to be invisible in mainstream representation—an erasure that can contribute to its own harms, such as reducing the resources available to transmasculine people and limiting our ability to exist at all—this vicious intersection of transphobia and misogyny ("transmisogyny") explains why so many of the examples above focus on the characters' sexuality: They reflect the assumption that femininity exists to be sexualized (Serano, 2007). Transmisogyny is further compounded when one considers how these stereotypes are

[4] The television analysed in GLAAD's (2012) study include episodes and non-recurring storylines with trans people aired between 2002 and 2012 that are a part of GLAAD's media archive. This quantitative approach to representation is limited in that it relies on solely the media collected in GLAAD's archive and may omit experimental or independent media. It also forces complex and fluid concepts such as "trans," "villain," and "victim" into exclusive and countable categories. Still, I cite this study to offer a general sense of the mediascape and its representations—or, at the very least, a glimpse into the conversations surrounding this mediascape.

shot through with white supremacy, putting racialized transfeminine people in a triple-bind.

These representations—whether pathetic or deceptive, comedic or horrific—contribute to the denial of trans subjectivity, reduce trans people to their apparent sex, and actively contribute to the physical violence against trans people. These connotations can be damaging for trans subjectivities not just in the case of their internalization, but also as their transphobic messages are adopted by legal systems and society to justify attacks on trans people and shift the blame to victims (Lester, 2015). For example, a "trans panic defense" (much like its gay panic counterpart) was used in court to justify the first-degree murder of Gwen Araujo in 2002 (Bettcher, 2007, p. 44). Araujo's murderers were excused of their hate crime on the defense that Araujo had engaged in "sexual deception" as a trans woman, a "crime" that follows many stereotypical trans representations in film and television, and was considered equivalent to rape by the courts (Bettcher, 2007, p. 47). The use of this defense both in the courts and outside of them has been especially harmful for trans women, racialized trans people, and trans sex workers (identity categories which can also overlap) because of the intersecting harms of misogyny, white supremacy, poverty, and criminalization (Bettcher, 2007; Serano, 2007; Tourmaline et al., 2017).

In a more sympathetic although no less stereotypical turn, these harms have also become reflected in trans media representations themselves. The trans victim character, which was featured in at least 40% of the television episodes GLAAD (2012) catalogued, is another stereotype where the trans character is tormented by their own pathological predicament and defined by discontentment and violence against them. The character is

usually distraught with their own body and becomes a victim of transphobia when their body inevitably betrays them and reveals their trans status (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2012; Koch-Rein et al., 2020). Consider Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce, 1999), for example, or the numerous trans victims throughout the span of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Zuiker et al., 2000–2015) who are killed because they are recognized as trans (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2012; Koch-Rein et al., 2020). While this trope acknowledges the severe reality of anti-trans violence—like Gwen Araujo, Brandon Teena really was murdered because of his gender—its prominence reduces trans people to the violence against them. Even if the trans character is not murdered, they are depicted as afflicted by the pathological disorder that is their trans subjectivity. Much like common and likewise problematic storylines about disabled people (Black & Pretes, 2007), this approach exclusively defines trans people by their bodies and centres their storyline around efforts to change themselves at all costs, presenting trans lives as inherently unlivable (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Koch-Rein et al., 2020; Westbrook, 2012).

Whatever specific affect these tropes intend to generate amongst their audiences, these stereotypes rely on a denial of trans existence and punish any transgression of gender norms as repulsive, dramatic, hilarious, horrific, or sad. In so doing, these stereotypes destabilize the "threat" that trans identities present to cisgender people by reemphasizing the static "truth" of sex as determinative of gender identity.

2.2 Making Trans Legible

This stereotypical visibility of trans identities is often explained by scholars and activists as a part of a larger problem with the production of trans media: Despite the historic

presence of trans people in filmmaking (Horak, 2017),[5] these stereotypical media are generally not made by trans people themselves (Namaste, 2005). For example, Viviane Namaste (2005) describes that at the time of her writing, out trans people face an "outright refusal of access" (p. 42) to institutional media spaces such as film festivals and news media. She draws on her own experiences with news media to also assert that when trans people *are* given access to media production, it is usually for the sake of entertaining non-trans audiences. These trans media made without trans people spectacularize our lives as plot points rather than actual lived experiences—a dramatic reveal, a source of comic relief, or the cause of conflict, for example. Further compounding this spectacularization is the way that these trans and gender non-conforming characters are frequently portrayed by cis-identified actors, suggesting that trans people are only in costume as their gender rather than actually living it (Miller, 2021). Namaste (2005) thus argues that these issues with trans media need to be understood "systematically, which is to say in relation to questions of power and control over access to representation" (p. 45). Trans production and representation are thus closely interlinked by the notion that the more trans people involved in the process of cultural production, the better quality trans representation will be.

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[5] Trans people have always been here, far before the term "transsexual" was ever established in medical literature or news media (Stryker, 2008a). This includes our presence in media. In her tracing of trans people behind and in front of the camera in the history of film, Laura Horak (2017) offers a valuable glimpse into trans cinema and trans lives, some of which contribute to the contemporary shaping of the meaning of gender, and others which are "indistinguishable from those made by cisgender people" (p. 16). These observations and analysis are useful for examining the shift of gender identities, practices, and the legibility of related terminology through time in the west, especially as trans phenomena became simultaneously more visible and less favourably recognized in this society.

Many trans people thus advocate for a "nothing about us without us"[6] attitude that has become a guiding rule to making "good" trans representation today, in mainstream media as well as other forms of knowledge generation such as scholarly research and medicine (Hale, 2009; Keegan, 2019). As Jacob C. Hale (2009) writes in his rules for writing about trans people for non-trans people: "Approach your topic with a sense of humility: you are not the experts about transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or trans ____. Transsexuals are" (para. 2). Stryker (2006) explains this shift moving from trans-as-object to trans-as-subject as foundational value of transgender studies, as

> Transgender studies considers the embodied experience of the speaking subject, who claims constative knowledge of the referent topic, to be a proper—indeed essential—component of the analysis of transgender phenomena; experiential knowledge is as legitimate as other, supposedly more "objective" forms of knowledge, and is in fact necessary for understanding the political dynamics of the situation being analyzed. (p. 12)

This is not to say that trans people have "better" knowledge than non-trans people; rather, it is to emphasise the value and importance of speaking from one's own unique situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Stryker, 2006). By foregrounding this value, transgender studies scholars recognize the body as "the contingent ground for all our knowledge, and all of our knowing" (Stryker, 2006, p. 12), a ground which shifts depending on the subject and their experiences producing such knowledge and areas of expertise.

The slow acceptance of trans actors, writers, producers, and other creators in mainstream media has helped redefine trans representation on our own terms. These changes do not stem from happenstance. Significant critique, activism, and ultimately

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[6] The term "nothing about us without us" gained popularity in disability studies (see Charlton, 1998) but has also been used to inform the representation of other marginalized groups.

labour have been undertaken by trans people—especially trans women—to expand the socio-political realm of gender legibility and to redefine trans as an actual, socially legible identity rather than a stereotype, gag, or abomination (Gill-Peterson, 2020; Stryker, 2008a; Westbrook, 2012). For example, trans actress, singer, talent manager, and producer Ann Thomas began her management company Transgender Talent in 2015 to help connect other trans actors with Hollywood roles (Horak, 2021). As she explains in conversation with Laura Horak (2021), a significant part of this work is focused on educating non-trans screenwriters and casting directors on trans identity to better protect actors and ultimately humanize trans representations.

This work makes a difference: A content analysis of scripted U.S. television in 2017, five years after GLAAD's 2012 study, shows that trans characters are more likely to be written and played by trans people, and as a result are more likely to have complex, humanizing storylines that focus on more than just their transition or gender (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Shows like *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan et al., 2013–2019), *Sense8* (Wachowski et al., 2015–2018), and *The Fosters* (Paige et al., 2013–2018), for example, all cast trans people to play trans characters and show a marked change from "bad" trans media—the media that Cáel M. Keegan (2019) cheekily describes as what "we endured during the bad, old days, before we had a marginal amount of control over how we were represented" (para. 4).

Education of non-trans people and the social legibility of trans subjectivity thus become frequent rationales for the importance of "good" representation. Like Thomas' work, Sam Feder's (2020) entirely trans-made documentary *Disclosure* turns a critical eye on the dehumanizing history of trans representation in Hollywood to help draw

attention to existing representation's failings and construct "transgender as a knowable category of personhood" (Westbrook, 2012, p. 43). This not only expands the career possibilities of trans actors in Hollywood, but also intends to bolster the life possibilities of trans people in society through the education of non-trans people of who we are and how we should be treated. As *Disclosure*'s trailer describes, "[s]ince 80% of the population have never met a transgender person, all they know is rooted in media depictions, which are predominantly problematic and have rarely included participation by actual trans people. *Disclosure* is aimed at that 80%" (*Disclosure the Film*, 2020, para. 4). This logic, which is also echoed in GLAAD's (2016) *Media Reference Guide*, suggests that media representation matters because it educates non-trans people on trans subjectivities, creating "the potential for deeper knowledge and understanding of the experiences of members of the group than would be possible through direct social interaction" (Miller, 2021, p. 270) and thus meaning that good media representation is critical for trans issues to gain social and political support.

It is with this purported connection between representation, social legibility, and trans rights that *Time* magazine declared 2014 to be the "transgender tipping point," a new civil rights movement "poised to challenge long-held cultural norms and beliefs" (Steinmetz, 2014, para. 1). Focusing on Laverne Cox and her role in *Orange is the New Black*, the article celebrates trans media successes and offers an introduction to trans terminology to educate others on what transgender and its many related terms mean. In doing so, *Time* contributes to the expansion of trans legibility and suggests that the current moment is one that recognizes trans identities and voices as valid and prioritized, especially media representation. Another article from *Time,* published six years later,

features Elliot Page on the cover, explaining that trans masculine and nonbinary representations are now also beginning to tip into the realm of visibility (Bendix, 2020). This ongoing narrative suggests that since trans people are generally accepted and recognized as who they say they are in mainstream media, they are also recognized as such in society more broadly—meaning that transphobia and anti-trans violence are, if not over, at least significantly reduced.

2.3 Reframing Trans Representation

2.3.1 "To What Point Are We Tipping?"

Despite these hard-won developments in trans media production and representation, many have vocalized their suspicion towards the claims of a "transgender tipping point." micha cárdenas (2015) argues that the metaphor of a tipping point into trans civil rights not only implies that the fight for people of colour's civil rights is over, but also that it presents the existence of trans people as a new phenomenon. Trans people have always been here and have been both in front and behind the camera dating all the way back to silent film (Horak, 2017). Further, in an interview with Alex Juhasz, Feder (2016) also questions who is receiving such purported civil liberties. Here, Feder explains that the idea of a trans tipping point suggests that today's media have helped *all* trans people thrive, while they have only tipped the favour for a few based on other factors of identity such as race and class. Feder thus asks, "[t]o what point are we tipping? Visibility of whom to whom? Social justice for whom?" (Feder & Juhasz, 2016, para. 8).

Unpacking the consequences these questions strive to illuminate, Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (2017) write that

> when produced within the cosmology of racial capitalism, the promise of 'positive representation' ultimately gives little support or protection to many, if not most, trans and gender non-conforming people, particularly those who are low-income and/or of color—the very people whose lives and labor constitute the ground for the figuration of this moment of visibility. (p. xv)

While media can educate and "construct, reinforce, and challenge existing social definitions of gender" (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017, p. 215) and thus help make significant political change for some trans people, this same visibility continues to reduce trans people to a particular image—usually a representation of trans as a linear movement between binary points only available to those affluent or white enough to pursue it (Tourmaline et al., 2017). The harms of this limited representation become especially poignant considering the simultaneous rise of trans visibility and rates of violence against trans women of colour, whereby reported murders in the United States doubled the year *after* the so-called tipping point (cárdenas, 2022; Tourmaline et al., 2017).[7]

Mainstream trans media thus continue to risk instrumentalizing the people they depict as teaching tools for non-trans audiences, even (especially) when including intersectional trans identities and voices (Keegan, 2016a; Tourmaline et al., 2017). This displaces the pleasure of trans audiences and instead continues to prioritize the education of non-trans people. Consider *Pose* (Murphy et al., 2018–2021), a recent television series about New York City ballroom culture in the 80s. Created by Ryan Murphy (who also created the "bad" representational content of *Nip/Tuck*) but written, produced, and cast by numerous Black and Latinx trans people—including talent such as Janet Mock, Angelica

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[7] Part of this paradoxical statistic can be attributed to a greater number of trans victims being recognized as trans rather than as the gender they were assigned at birth. This does not erase the fact that racialized trans women are being murdered.

Ross, and Michaela Jaé Rodriguez—the show has been lauded for creating "seismic shifts" in Hollywood (Stamm, 2020, p. 619) and was awarded the GLAAD Media Awards' Outstanding Drama Series (Nordyke, 2019). Laura Stamm (2020) warns, however, that despite its cultural importance and much-needed representation of trans history, *Pose* rests on the suggestion that both AIDS and ballroom culture no longer exist and the subsequent connotation that they are no longer a "threat" to society today. This creates "a sort of safety valve for viewers who would otherwise not want to see HIV+ trans women on their prime-time channel lineup" (Stamm, 2020, p. 622). "Good" trans representation may have important political goals, but by that very fact it is often tamped down for white, middle-class cisgender audiences and thus prompts the question of who such media are made to benefit (Keegan, 2016a). As Eliza Steinbock (2022) writes, "I, too, hesitate to cheer when trans bodies are seen and celebrated for the capitalist ends of offering differentiation in the media consumption of bodies. This does not make trans expressed (or perceived) bodies safer" (p. 173). Rather, it makes trans bodies another resource for the gain of media industries. Horak (2021) asks: "In an industry devoted to profit, not social justice, what is the place of trans people and why?" (p. 22).

To further complexify matters, some suggest that the very visibility of this correlation between trans representation and anti-trans violence continues to perpetuate this violence. Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013) argue in their figuration of trans necropolitics that the lives and deaths of racialized trans women continue to "act as resources—both literally and metaphorically—for the articulation of visibility of a more privileged transgender subject" (p. 71). This extraction of trans subjectivity has acute impacts not just on the stereotypical definition of trans people as victims of their bodies

and of society, but also to the individual detriment of trans subjects, especially those who are of colour. Laurel Westbrook (2021) writes that even as "good" trans visibility is used to counter anti-trans violence in activism, for example, it tends to depict trans lives through "narratives of pain instead of pleasure, which can seriously impact group members' sense of self" (p. 6). It is with these problems in mind that Tourmaline and her coauthors (2017) write that while visibility can be a door to rights and resources—especially when trans people have access to their own representations—it can also be a trap, where representation expands the social definitions of gender but is still strangled by vicious frameworks of oppression.

2.3.2 Do "Good" Media Make a Good Society?

Communication and media studies is founded on exploring the connection between communication and society, understanding media as shaping the relations between people (Peters & Pooley, 2012). One perspective on this relation is that good communication is critical for a good society, the same logic used in the vie for non-stereotypical trans representation. This connection between "good" media and social injustice is evidently not so direct, however, and the troubling of its narrative is by no means new. Numerous marginalized groups have also worked to address a history of harmful and stereotypical media through improved representation and have encountered similar issues, including the representation of Blackness (Wallace & Andrews, 2021), femininity (Bray & Colebrook, 1998), queerness (Tongson, 2017), and disability (Fox et al., 2018; Samuels, 2003). Like trans media representation, the representation of these groups in media is argued to be important for the broader cultural understanding of the group but has been critiqued for continuing to amplify otherwise privileged voices and erasing any identities

who differ. Also like trans representation, this visibility tends to re-emphasize the victimisation of the group, if only to depict their ability to triumph over adversity (Elsaesser, 2019).

Beyond the unique difficulties of trans phenomena and representation, this broader pattern of problematic visibility demonstrates how media are far more complex than simply being carriers for "good" or "bad" representation. Communication and media studies scholars have pushed back against the notion of media having direct effects on society since the 1940s, with alternative models recognizing that audiences and context also play a role in the messages being communicated (Peters & Pooley, 2012). Stuart Hall (1973), for example, argued nearly 50 years ago that media messages are impacted at all stages of the communication process, including not just the production but also the circulation, distribution, and consumption of media. Further, each of these "linked but distinctive moments" (Hall, 1973, p. 41) in the communication process are also impacted by their own contexts and power structures such as frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure. While "good" trans representation *is* necessary to make trans people visible and thus politically relevant, it does not guarantee that these media will be interpreted charitably or even seen by an audience that needs to learn about trans identities in the first place. Instead, a media studies response to the problem of representation might consider the broader contexts of representation and complicate the relationship between media messaging and their individual, group, and broader societal effects.

2.3.3 Who Says What's Good, Anyway?

While not specifically referencing the scholarship surrounding the complexity of media effects, an emerging response to the critiques of trans-made but still problematic media argues that in addition to centring trans voices in the production of media, trans voices must also be centred in their *interpretation*. Trans media representation is often analysed through the lens of feminist or queer theory rather than trans theory, and while transgender studies is related feminist and queer studies, it is still disciplinarily distinct (Billard et al., 2020; Billard & Zhang, 2022; Keegan, 2020a). Consequently, these non-trans interpretations can sometimes present dismissive or hostile responses to trans phenomena and can counter the value of trans media for trans audiences themselves.

For example, TJ Billard and Erique Zhang (2022) describe how feminist media analyses often use a hierarchy of patriarchal domination to evaluate their representations; by this metric, "[m]isogynist representations are 'bad' and those that oppose it are 'good.'" (p. 195). Trans phenomena, however, are challenging to place in this hierarchy as they fundamentally disrupt the solidity of the category "woman" upon which many of these approaches rely (Billard & Zhang, 2022; Keegan, 2020a). Some models of feminism which rely on the mirror-like attachment of the gender category "woman" to sexual characteristics like the ability to become pregnant thus deny all types of trans people their identities and essentializes them to their assigned sex. Through this rhetoric, trans women's complex relationships to misogyny are dismissed (Hines, 2019) and trans men become interpreted as butch lesbians or women attempting to escape misogyny (see Shrier, 2020 for a recent example). On the other hand, trans people outside the gender binary such as nonbinary, genderfluid, and otherwise gender non-conforming people are

frequently erased from the conversation of trans identities entirely. This model of feminism is usually described as trans-exclusive radical feminism and should not be confused from typical radical feminism, which Williams (2016) argues has always been trans-inclusive.

Queer media analysis presents its own conflicts. While queer studies emerges from the intersection of sexuality studies and feminism and thus shares the same disciplinary "parentage" as transgender studies, transgender studies holds its own understanding of gender as situated in the body. This leads Stryker (2004) to describe transgender theory as "queer theory's evil twin" (p. 212), having developed in the shadow of its sibling and often ignored, even in the study of specifically trans phenomena. Trans phenomena question the very gender categories that early queer studies use to define homosexuality, echoing its rocky relationship to women's studies (Keegan, 2020b; Stryker, 2006). While this was a bigger problem with the early definition of queer studies, queer studies today is now largely invested in the deconstruction of *all* gender and sexuality categories, leading to the pedestaling of trans phenomena as the ultimate form of queerness (Billard & Zhang, 2022; Keegan, 2020b).

In terms of evaluating trans media, queer theory thus often assesses media which destabilize the gender binary as "good" and those which reinforce it as "bad" (Billard & Zhang, 2022). As Westbrook (2012) writes, "[a]lmost always, scholars come to the conclusion that transgender identities and practices, despite having the potential to destabilise, actually stabilise gender" (p. 58). This theoretical approach can lead to trans identities in media being interpreted as a metaphor for queerness at best, or themselves transphobic at worst (Horak, 2017). For example, McLaren and coauthors (2021)

describe a paradox between the greater acceptance of binary trans people on television and the reification of gender norms, writing that in these trans representations, "the definitional boundaries that establish the mutually-exclusive poles of the binary thus remain unchallenged and continue to be harmful" (p. 189). Kay Siebler (2012) extends this argument to learning about trans identities more broadly, writing that "[t]he Internet, television, and film are the primary ways these transgender-on-the-way-to-transsexual identities are codified—and learned. Because no messy identities (those outside the gender/sex binary) get screen time, people adopt the belief that transitioning defines trans identity" (p. 76). Even *Pose* has been critiqued for its transfeminine characters' efforts to pass as cisgender women, "effectively acting as a proxy for how successful they are at performing femininity" (Billard et al., 2020, p. 4499). While some aspects of these critiques are valid—there *is* a lack of nonbinary representation in mainstream media today, and gender norms *can* be oppressive—their use of queer gender deconstruction as criteria for the evaluation of trans representation risks critiquing the hard-fought presence of trans men and women in media and objectifying other types of trans people for expressly queer, rather than trans, means (Keegan, 2020b).

These interpretations have consequences. Critiques of trans-made media using queer and feminist theory quickly devolve into critiques of trans identities and the ways trans people choose to represent themselves (Billard & Zhang, 2022). This issue of adjudicating trans identities through their media presence is becoming especially salient today as media made by self-identified trans people are now being produced, shared, and consumed on an unprecedented scale through platforms like YouTube (Horak, 2014). Horak (2014) argues that these media not only offer an outlet for autobiographical

expression, but also help generate widespread communities that can literally save trans lives. She thus emphasizes that despite their many problems or the potentially "bad" representations they may offer, these media can be incredibly valuable for trans people and should not be so quickly disregarded. To do so can be literally fatal as trans people, especially racialized trans women, are denied safety, subjectivity, and community for the so-called problematic aspects of their identity.[8]

Further, adjudicating trans phenomena for their ability to destabilize or normalize gender risks ignoring the presence of hegemonic systems of oppression and disregards the potential critical offerings of "bad" trans media, as well as valuable insights from the lived experiences that trans people choose to share (Billard & Zhang, 2022; Keegan & Horak, 2022). While the disconnection between sex and gender identity characterized by trans identities means they have the potential to both stabilize and destabilize gender *norms*, Westbook (2012) emphasizes that trans identities "do not challenge the idea of gender itself" (p. 58)—and thus do not hold any weight as being "good" or "bad," however one's gender identity aligns.

"Good" trans representation is thus precariously positioned on multiple fronts. While necessary to make trans people visible and thus politically relevant, it also risks tokenizing and reducing the complexity of trans identity as well as making racialized and/or transfeminine people more easily targetable. Further, from some feminist interpretations, trans representation presents *too* much gender destabilization, apparently

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[8] Even if these critiques tend to stem from queer and feminist perspectives, this does not excuse trans people from being the source of such problems. See Natalie Wynn's (2020) critical (and highly entertaining) feature-length video essay on the cancelling of trans individuals on social media by members of their own community.

undermining the hierarchy of patriarchal domination and thus problematizing the concept of gender to the detriment of cis women. From some queer interpretations, however, trans representation does not destabilize gender categories *enough*, as binary trans identities apparently uphold gender norms to the detriment of queer and nonbinary identities. Trans-made media are caught in a no-win situation, our "good" representations—once hailed as pivotal to trans liberation more broadly—quickly tipping backwards into the territory of either inconsequential or actively harmful, the likes of which changing depending on the form of evaluation used.

Reflecting on this paradoxical ability to uphold and undermine gender norms simultaneously again demonstrates how trans phenomena resist representation. As Sandy Stone (1992) writes in her foundational *Posttranssexual Manifesto*,

> For a transsexual, as a transsexual, to generate a true, effective, and representational counterdiscourse is to speak from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes that have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible. How, then, can the transsexual speak? (p. 164)[9]

Trans phenomena thus question the meaning of "good" or "bad" representation in the first place. By disrupting the connection between the indefinite category of sex and gender identity and expression, "trans" breaks the link between the assumed referent and its signified—the relationship which Stryker (2006) terms the mirror of representation, as introduced in this thesis' introduction. Recognizing this characteristic of trans phenomena thus challenges the validity of the trans reveal or the pathetic transexual tropes, as well as

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[9] This question is an indirect reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) essay "Can the subaltern speak?"

the applicability of queer and feminist analysis towards trans representation. As Steinbock (2019) argues, a commitment to representation is a misguided goal for trans people, for

> Thinking in terms of representation gives into a Platonic version of mimesis where a re-presented version of gender—a copy—would be judged by some long lost original. Thus, a theory of gender that reduces it to either being a representation or the act of representation is accompanied by the problem of relegating trans expressions to being false copies, or falsely identified with an original masculinity or femininity. (p. 138)

Attempting to evaluate trans representation as "good" or "bad" can only resolve trans phenomena as false, deceptive, and fundamentally inhuman—what Stryker (2006) calls "'bad' by definition" (p. 9), or what Keegan (2020b) describes as "indefinable and monstrous objects that threaten the taxonomies of the western scientific episteme" (p. 72). In the face of such a state, Keegan (2019) asks: Do we even want to be good?

2.4 Trans Analyses of Media

Fortunately, the study of trans media does not end here. In response to the difficulties of trans representation, many transgender studies scholars are now recentring transgender theory in their approach to and analysis of media, looking beyond reflections to consider what other aspects of trans phenomena may be found in media and what they might do (Keegan, 2020b). This requires foregrounding trans embodiment in analysis, which in turn releases the definition of "trans" from its origin in western medicine to the

experiences of trans people themselves (Spade, 2006; Stryker, 2006, 2008a).[10] For some like myself, the redefinition of trans means dropping "gender" from "transgender" to emphasize the prefixal aspects of "trans": the movement between categories rather than the movement to a particular kind of gender (Snorton, 2017; Stryker, 2008b). Some add an asterisk to refer to the "inherently unfinishable combinatorial work" of trans* (Stryker & Currah, 2014, p. 1), much like the use of a wildcard character in a search engine. Trans* thus becomes "prepositionally oriented," whereby "trans* is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes through which thingness and beingness are constituted" (Hayward & Weinstein, 2015, p. 196). Christina Sharpe (2016) adds that the asterisk also helps recall not just the range of embodied "trans*formations" (p. 30) but also the many Black lives who have been pushed to the margins or footnotes of history, an assertion which cárdenas (2022) expands to include all trans of colour lives. In my usage here, I hold the asterisk's meaning throughout my use of "trans" even in the typographic mark's omittance, employing it when a reminder of trans' potentials is especially necessary—an effort to keep its valuably jarring presence from becoming too habitual.

A transgender studies approach to trans media, then, means centring lived trans experiences and definitions and reconceptualizing what trans media are and how they should be analysed. Like its open-ended asterisk suggests, the embodied, relational, and processual capacity of trans* defies representational logics of indexicality (Steinbock, 2019). Scholars in transgender studies have thus begun approaching media through a

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[10] For example, the shift from "transsexual" to "transgender" in the early 1990s reflects this change from within trans communities, where trans activists like Holly Boswell and Leslie Feinberg began circulating the term to include other forms of gender diversity that may not rely on medical transition (Stryker, 2008a). It is only with activist work like this that the formation of transgender studies was possible.

serious engagement with "the limits of representation as a unifying political strategy" (Keegan, 2020b, p. 73) to consider what "media scholarship informed by transgender studies—and, more broadly, by the experiences and insights of trans people and scholars—*could* be" (Keegan & Horak, 2022, p. 166 emphasis in original). This open-ended possibility recalls Tourmaline and her coauthors' (2017) efforts to hold the trap/door paradox of trans visibility in tension through their use of *trapdoors*, "those clever contraptions that are not entrances or exits but rather secret passageways that take you someplace else, often someplace as yet unknown" (p. xxiii). Where might they lead, and what might they create?

2.4.1 Revisiting "Bad" Trans Media

One outcome of the recentring of trans theory in media analysis is the perhaps unexpected return to mainstream media made by non-trans people. It may seem strange for transgender studies to return to these traditionally "bad" trans media; however, for communication to take place, audiences must interpret a message as meaningful in some way, presenting an opportunity for audiences to read against the dominant or intended meaning and instead engage in "the pleasure of resistance" (Hall, 1973, p. 54). This means that revisiting trans representations made by non-trans people can be valuable to analyze from the position of the resistant trans spectator.

Until recently, however, there has been little research investigating the meaning-making processes of trans audiences. Even the "transgender gaze," a concept developed by Jack Halberstam (2005) and situated in queer theory, describes how film can generate a feeling of trans experience for non-trans audiences. Centring transgender studies' valuation of lived experience and embodied knowledge, however, numerous trans

scholars and critics have shared their *own* gazes and readings of mainstream media. Valérie Robin Clayman (2016), for example, uses autoethnography to "analyze and challenge the transness of current Hollywood trans moving images, the effect they have on my subjectivity, and to open the discourse up to new readings of what are trans moving images" (p. 31). Her analysis centres the trans body rather than the media image to offer an important critique of several mainstream trans representations in film, including many of the examples previously mentioned in this chapter. Other trans autoethnographies turn to mainstream media that do not necessarily represent trans phenomena at all. Examining a '90s advertisement for milk and the sci-fi flick *Under the Skin* (Glazer, 2014), Keegan (2016b) identifies media which, for him, bring "an impossible life into representation" (p. 36). This "trans phenomenology" describes media experiences which open up the "closed phenomenological horizon of binary gender" (Keegan, 2016b, p. 27). Other trans scholars and writers find similar resonances between mainstream media and their own experiences, offering radical readings of these works. For example, Stryker's (1994) rereading of *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818)—which Rosenbaum (2020) indirectly references in *Frankenstein's Telephone*—questions the meaning of a "natural" body in a an essay considered foundational to transgender studies. Also in the horror genre, Merlin Seller (2019) reads their own gender dysphoria into the video game *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014), and Emily VanDerWerff (2020) finds transfeminine representation in the film *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019). Others describe how some trans fans reimagine their favourite characters as trans themselves (Vena & Burgess, 2022). These readings centre trans embodiment and theory to offer a "transing"

(Stryker et al., 2008) of cisnormative media, reinventing these media into a new, radically trans forms.

2.4.2 Alternative Trans-Made Media

The centring of trans embodiment in media analysis also expands potential research objects from mainstream trans-made media to include more alternative media forms. This move not only expands the dominant conception of trans media, but it also echoes Sandy Stone's (1992) insistence that trans requires its own genre, "a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored" (p. 165). These trans-made experimental films (Horak, 2017; Rosskam, 2014; Steinbock, 2012; 2019), web series and vlogs (Horak, 2014), books and autobiographies (Prosser, 1998; Chu, 2017), zines and blogs (Barnett, 2015; Fink & Miller, 2014; Lodge, 2017; Regales, 2008) and pornography (Bronstein, 2020; Steinbock, 2014; 2019) not only present an opportunity to consider a broader array of trans self-representation, expression, and definition, but they are also becoming more prevalent and diverse as media production and distribution methods become more accessible for trans creators (Horak, 2014).

This shift also encourages transgender studies scholars to look to the many forms of non-visual media which have been largely missing from previous discussions of trans representation and visibility. Representation, Hall (1997) reminds us, includes images but also language, abstract concepts and even emotions which stand in for things in the world and are communicated using shared cultural codes. As such, trans representation occurs

not just in film and television, but also in perhaps unexpected places, like an ice sculpture of a prophet from ancient Greek myth (Corfman, 2020).[11]

Studying the production of media by trans people through transgender studies approaches and values is thus less about evaluating the moral quality of the work than about considering the expression and "crafting of transgender identity" itself (Vaccaro, 2014, p. 97). For example, experimental trans filmmaker Jules Rosskam (2014) describes turning to nonlinear narrative structures in his films because they are what he uses to understand himself and the world around him as a trans person. By challenging the normative structures of mainstream cinema through his own trans embodiment, Rosskam demonstrates how film can be used for novel modes of trans expression.

Of course, these experimental and alternative media are not without debate or critique. Experimental media tend to have a limited audience, and efforts to reach a greater number of people often return to discussions of how these media can educate non-trans people on trans identities (see Horak, 2021). Critically, however, this approach stages the conversation through the experiences and voices of trans people themselves and the theories we generate to understand the world around us.

2.4.3 Trans Technologies

If some trans media studies are turning to trans audiences, there is also a growing attention to trans users of media technologies. This movement away from media content

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[11] This highly specific example refers to S. Brook Corfman's (2020) analysis of Cassils' (2013) performative artwork *Tiresias.* In this work, Cassils stands with their body pressed against an ice sculpture of a male-presenting torso identified as Tiresias, the blind Greek prophet "cursed" to live as a woman. Corfman argues that Cassils' use of their own body heat to melt the ice throughout the performance decentres the visual bias of much trans media and instead focuses on touch and heat exchange as useful affects to express the relationality of embodied trans experience.

(visual or otherwise) and towards the intersections of technological systems and trans subjects considers instead how "gender biases influence the development and design of technology itself" (A. Hoffman, 2018, p. 6) as well as the way that technologies come to act as a "network of electronic communication prosthetics" for the gendered body (Stone, 1995, p. 35). For example, Rena Bivens' (2017) investigation of Facebook's user gender coding finds that despite the many options for gender that users are presented, the platform's database re-categorizes these users into a binary system of male and female for the sake of delivering advertisements. This binary categorization strategy shapes how users are viewed by both technical systems and people, and extends to other social media platforms (Bivens & Haimson, 2016) as well as other types of technology such as airport security scanners (Costanza-Chock, 2018). These findings are important because trans phenomena "extend and challenge our understandings of big data and the relationship between gender and technology in important ways" (A. Hoffman, 2018, p. 11); as data become "bigger" and more important to our understanding of the world and one another, it is crucial to recognise the manner in which biases in technology can seriously affect trans lives in perhaps unexpected ways, often contributing to what Dean Spade (2015) terms "administrative violence"—that is, the material harms of legal and administrative systems which become perpetrated against trans people in our day-to-day lives.

Technology does not need to be designed with cisnormative biases, however; trans competency can be encoded through sociotechnical design choices (Costanza-Chock, 2018). This brings many to advocate for new, socially informed design practices for trans people. For example, Sasha Costanza-Chock (2018) encourages an intersectional, non-reductive ontological approach to AI system design, and Alex Ahmed

(2018) develops a framework for a trans competent interaction design to address cisnormative biases in app development (see also Haimson et al., 2020). Unintentional but effective trans design competencies have also been recognized in the way that trans users interact with particular technologies: For example, research on Tumblr tagging practices suggests that the micro-blogging platform is well-suited for trans users to collectively form their own terms and folksonomies outside of cisnormative discourses (Dame, 2016; Oakley, 2016). In fact, Oliver Haimson and coauthors (2019) argue that Tumblr was a "trans technology" because Tumblr's technological affordances allowed users' identities to change over time and created social networks amongst users separate from their family and other friends.[12] Media which facilitate the circulation of trans discourses, ideas, and other forms of trans media are important for the development of trans communities and subjectivities, but care must be taken to ensure these media support trans users rather than subject them to further violence.

2.5 A Trans* Media Theory?

These novel studies of trans media are methodologically diverse and each offer a unique understanding of what trans media are and what they can do. What unites them is the way they each centre the voices and experiences of trans people in their analysis, an important shift that follows transgender studies values of embodiment and helps circumvent the

[12] Haimson and coauthors (2019) emphasize, however, that Tumblr can no longer be considered a trans technology since its shift in community guidelines in 2018 prohibited any "adult content" on the site. This loosely defined term has been enforced sporadically by the company but contributed to dissolving trans communities and erasing resources and personal data as accounts were banned and content was removed (Bronstein, 2020; Haimson et al., 2019). The importance of content policies on a trans technology like Tumblr demonstrates that trans technologies are not exclusively about technical form but also how these forms impact the content they circulate.

evaluation of trans media within a simplistic framework of "good" or "bad" representation. At the same time, this does not mean that representation is unimportant. Analyses of trans-made alternative media often consider what creators have to say about gender through the representational content of their work; trans authoenthnographies and phenomenologies understand trans spectators as bringing their own agency to their encounters with media representation; and trans technologies often employ representational practices in their design. Rather, a transgender studies approach to media analysis allows trans scholars and critics to consider how representation can serve trans people directly, either through their own making, by reading against the cisnormative grain, or through the design of particular technologies.

Being theoretically grounded in transgender studies, each of these analyses recognize trans* phenomena as embodied, processual, and relational, whether they are represented in the media object or a part of the media object's user or audience engagement. But do these same characteristics not apply to media themselves? Understanding media as exclusive objects rather than part of a broader relational process of mediation, representation, and interaction can risk foreclosing the many factors which both inform and are informed by media and their functions (Kember & Zylinska, 2012; Starosielski, 2019; Straw, 2015). What might be made evident when considering the *media* of trans media as working with, supporting, and even bolstering their trans characteristics? How might media theory, which, like trans theory, contemplates the movements between subjects and objects, time and space, and the power and instability of categorical distinctions, offer another dimension to the recognition and analysis of trans media? How might they speak with each other, and, to echo Stryker's (2006)

aspirations for transgender studies in terms of media: What previously unseen trans media might they recognize?

Reflecting on the opportunities for engagement between transgender studies and media studies, Steinbock (2022) makes the radical claim that "[t]rans studies is media studies, and media studies is (or could be) trans studies" (p. 170). This mutual constitution of trans and media studies "requires their thinking together—looking at their interpenetrations—in order to expand the vocabularies and abilities of each field to envision mediation and embodiment, how they co-operate and their stakes" (Steinbock, 2022, p. 170). Despite the contemporary flourishing of transgender studies and its many novel and important analyses of media, there remains a need to explore the theoretical implications of thinking both fields together. As Steinbock (2022) continues:

> Transgender studies inherently thinks in terms of media through its consideration of the body as a medium of expression, but media studies does not as yet foreground embodiment. Might media studies adopt a more capacious understanding of medium as any means by which something is expressed, and consider the body a prime form of media? (p. 170)

I agree there is a dearth of research that seriously engages with both fields and their "interpenetrations." At the same time, I cannot help but question Steinbock's dismissal of a great deal of work in media studies. Embodiment may not be a common keyword or grounding value in media studies like it is in transgender studies, but that does not mean it is pushed to the wayside, either. Marshall McLuhan (1964) proposed an understanding of media as simultaneous extensions and amputations of the body over half a century ago. More relevant, however, are the many scholars who engage with the intersections of gender and embodiment in technology and media. Numerous feminist and queer scholars working in science technology studies (STS) understand gender and technology as

coproduced through sociotechnical means, challenging the division between body and media (Faulkner, 2001). For example, Donna Haraway (1985) uses the figure of the cyborg to complexify the relationship between bodies and technology, questioning the boundaries that separate these categories, and by extension, the categories used to oppress groups such as gender, race, and sexuality. This is because, for Haraway (1988)—and for transgender studies more broadly—all knowledge is embodied or "situated," confronting the possibility of any "objective" claims to truth or reality. Other thinkers in and surrounding feminist STS have expanded these ideas in a plethora of directions; for example, Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch (2019) emphasize how disabled practices of interdependence and collective access are a form of crip technoscience, and Jules Gill-Peterson (2014) considers the intersections of race, and trans identity, and technology through hormonal therapy.

While most STS is generally interested in the *production* of sociotechnical configurations, bringing the specifics of media theory into analysis helps consider the communicative and symbolic aspects of technology in these discussions by recognizing that situated *interpretation* is also a part of these configurations (Wajcman & Jones, 2012). This brings numerous media theorists to recognize the body as itself a medium of experience and expression, counter to Steinbock's (2022) assertion (Alaimo, 2008; Kember & Zylinska, 2012; Peters, 2015; Wegenstein, 2010).

While it remains separate from queer and feminist theory, the field of transgender studies is directly informed by this foundational work in the overlapping spaces of queer and feminist STS and media studies. As Stryker (2006) writes, transgender studies "emerged at this historic juncture as one practice for collectively thinking our way into

the brave new world of the twenty-first century, with all its threats and promises of unimaginable transformation through new forms of biomedical and communicational technologies" (p. 8). Indeed, while they do not always explicitly reference media studies, several transgender studies scholars conceptualize trans media through the theoretical insights of both transgender studies and media studies. This includes Steinbock (2019) themself, whose book *Shimmering Images* considers how the material cuts and sutures of film editing can express qualities of trans embodiment, and Keegan (2018), who also brings the materiality of film media into his analysis of the Wachowski's body of work by considering the resonances between the bodily affects of trans phenomena and film. Beyond film, cárdenas (2022) too looks towards the use of algorithms by trans of colour artists to express their experiences and make social change. Each of these approaches offer specific theoretical intersections of transgender and media studies, and their thinking is explored in more depth to valuably inform this thesis' analysis in Chapters 4 and 5.

Despite the media-adjacent origin of transgender studies and these ongoing works, the theoretical insights of media studies and transgender studies are more divergent in literature than one might expect. Following leads from both these fields, then, the next chapter thinks through the theoretical and methodological interpenetrations of transgender studies and, specifically, STS-informed new materialist media studies, recognizing both of their engagements with embodiment, relationality, and ongoing processes as critical to what could be a trans media theory. What might it mean for trans* media to be bodies of knowledge which shift and move as trans phenomena? What might it mean for trans bodies to be media, communicating experiences of gender, identity, and

everyday trans life? How might this shape our understanding of what trans media are, and what they can do? These questions are politically important interventions into the function of trans media and suggest a possible way out for the many trans people who find themselves backed into corner with the limitations of representation—in both media creation and consumption practices. Further, these questions are also critical for those who may not have yet imagined the possibility of gender as something other than what they have always seen it represented to be—something which moves with and mediates embodied experiences, making space for alternative ways of being in the world.

3. Theoretical Framework & Methodology: Trans*Mediation

3.1 Thinking Past the Mirror of Representation

The term "media" and its singular form "medium" have etymological roots in the Latin term for "middle," referencing their role connecting senders and receivers of information (Guillory, 2010; OED, 2022). John Guillory (2010) argues that the concept of media as it is known today only emerged in the late nineteenth century with the emergence of new communication technologies and emphasis on the physical components necessary to make communication possible. This telling alludes to the interest in materiality and its connection to culture found in some media studies—an interest especially salient in the theoretical frameworks loosely gathered under the tern "new materialism."

New materialism draws from a diverse array of theoretical debates in philosophy, cultural studies, and STS, often contradicting and challenging each other and sometimes rejecting the term new materialism entirely.[13] Their unifying aspect, however, is that although they reject claims of any objective "truth," they also express a concern that cultural studies today are perhaps *too* cultural in that they sacrifice the material world for one solely made of discourse, language, and representation. As key new materialist theorist Karen Barad (2003) writes: "Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter" (p. 801). Connecting new materialism explicitly to feminism, Stacy Alaimo (2008) similarly argues that "[p]redominant paradigms do not deny the material

[13] Some theories commonly sheltered under the new materialist umbrella may include material feminism (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008), speculative realism (Harman, 2012; Meillassoux, 2009), and object-oriented ontology (Bogost, 2012; Morton, 2013), to name only a few.

existence of the body, of course, but they do tend to focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced, which casts the body as passive, plastic matter" (p. 237). This concern over the loss, or at least muting, of matter in exchange for discourse is a frequent motivator for new materialist thinking in media studies. Lisa Parks (2015), for example, writes that physical media infrastructure, or "the stuff you can kick," is "typically relegated to the fields of electronic or civil engineering or urban planning and is thought of as irrelevant to or beyond the purview of humanities research" (p. 355). New materialist media theory encourages a turn to this "stuff" to consider its part in media's social and discursive aspects, explaining that mediation occurs through both cultural and material techniques (Parikka, 2012).

To be clear, new materialism does not privilege the material over the discursive—although, as some have pointed out, it is not always successful in avoiding this pitfall, and at times the newness of its own materialism and the anti-materialism it critiques are overstated (see S. Ahmed, 2008; Lettow, 2017). Still, new materialism strives to re-introduce the material world to that of discourse by challenging the dominant western dualisms that inform their separation from the start, such as the material/discursive, subject/object, natural/cultural, referent/referred, and sex/gender, for example. These dualisms emerge from the two common modernist epistemological paradigms which Barad (2003) names as scientific realism and social constructivism. Informed by the Cartesian split of subject/object, both these paradigms understand the material world as mediated by knowledge, with "true" knowledge reflecting the world as it "actually" is. Where they differ, however, "is on the question of referent, whether scientific knowledge represents things in the world as they really are (i.e., 'Nature') or 'objects' that are the

product of social activities (i.e., 'Culture')" (Barad, 2003, p. 806). These understandings of the "external world" ultimately demonstrate how debates between social constructivist and scientific realist epistemologies are themselves a false dualism, both conceptualizing truth as a mirrored representation of the world "as it is," reflected either by discursive or material phenomena.

Barad (2003) argues that this "[r]epresentationalism is so deeply entrenched within Western culture that it has taken on a commonsense appeal" (p. 806). Much like its continued presence and impact on the reductive positioning of "good" and "bad" trans media, the common reliance on the mirror of representation to determine "truth" and "falsity" in these seemingly oppositional epistemological paradigms reveals their similarities and thus the inappropriateness of their opposition. This also demonstrates how *both* these epistemologies are challenged by trans phenomena, either understanding gender as an index of sex (in the case of scientific realism, sometimes called gender essentialism and echoed in trans-exclusive radical feminism) or of culture (in the case of social constructivism and echoed in some queer studies). Instead, trans phenomena "point the way to a different understanding of how bodies mean, how representation works, and what counts as legitimate knowledge" (Stryker, 2006, pp. 8–9), requiring an alternative epistemological approach than scientific realism or social constructivism which instead recognizes the entanglement of materiality and discourse. By challenging the false dualism of representation, new materialist media theory and trans theory both promise such an alternative paradigm.

3.2 The Performativity of Gender & Media

Transgender studies turns to performativity as an alternative to the mirror of representation which deems sex and gender to be reflections of each other (Gerdes, 2014; Stryker, 2006). Performativity was coined in J. L. Austin's (1962) speech act theory and popularized in gender studies by Judith Butler (1990). It describes actions that come into being through their expression, or, for Butler's (1990) purposes, the way that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 33). Gender performativity has been fundamental to transgender studies because it releases gender from its determinative relation to the sexed body, instead recognizing the importance of embodied knowledge (Gerdes, 2014; Stryker, 2006). Just as media technologies are materially necessary for but not exclusively determinative of communication (Vismann, 2013), the body also is materially necessary but not determinative of gender expression. This does not mean that gender is a "mere" performance or social construction either; rather, a performative theory of gender recognizes that neither the material body *nor* cultural practices are independently determinative of gender, as both are inseparable from and inform each other (Butler, 1990, 1993). From this perspective, gender is open and mutable, its boundaries defined through their performative enaction (Butler, 1990). Gender expression is thus "directed at others in an attempt to communicate, is not subject to falsification or verification, and is accomplished by 'doing' something rather than 'being' something" (Stryker, 2006, p. 10). As a performative, gender is a claim of who one is based on what one does, made possible by living or "doing" one's own embodied experience of gender in the world.

Alongside its formidable impact on transgender studies, performativity has also been useful for new materialist theories and their similar challenges to representation. Like trans theory, Barad's (2003, 2015) new materialism understands phenomena as performative and thus co-constituted by both the referent and the referred.[14] This presents phenomena as entangled and processual, coming into being through their engagements—processes of mediation—which enact their very boundaries. Barad (2003) describes these performative moments of differentiation as "agential cuts" into ongoing processes. The cut, which we will encounter in more depth in Chapter 4, "enacts a *local* resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy" (Barad, 2003, p. 815, emphasis in original), bringing phenomena—any category, description, concept, object, or other form of difference—into being from their entangled and otherwise indistinguishable processes.

For media studies, new materialism helps conceptualize media as dynamic, nonlinear, and lacking inherent boundaries and properties (Natale, 2012; Parikka, 2012;

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[14] These theoretical overlaps between trans and new materialist theory are not without their own engagements: Barad (2015) later turns to Stryker (1994) to adopt the prefix "trans" as describing the movement of phenomena as they are cut and shaped into new forms. Barad (2015) does not, however, expand on any trans thinkers other than Stryker's (1994) *Frankenstein* essay—which, while foundational to transgender studies, does not constitute a serious engagement with the field itself. Embodied knowledge is a key value of transgender studies, but swaths of work from trans scholars continue to be omitted in the study of trans phenomena. This becomes a significant point of critique for many trans scholars. Consider Andrea Long Chu's argument that "*trans* is doing zero theoretical work in [Barad's] essay; it is employed here purely as an au courant garnish on the same argument Barad has been making for years" (Chu & Drager, 2019, p. 111, emphasis in original). She makes a similar claim about Butler's (1990) work in *Gender Trouble*. In response, Halberstam (2020) argues that while Chu and her cowriter Emmett Harsin Drager make a good point, they also ignore much work in the emergence of transgender studies and erase the overlapping queer and trans identities of both Butler and Barad. I see this tension as a consequence of transgender studies' efforts to establish itself as distinct from other fields while also being interested in the mutability of identity. My hope is that this integration of transgender studies, materialist thought, and media studies does not erase their important distinctions but instead shows how they can usefully come to support and construct each other.

Starosielski, 2019). Working from Barad's agential cut, new materialist media theorists Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012) conceptualize the distinct qualities of media objects as only coming to exist through cuts in their ongoing relationships with other phenomena. These are acts which Will Straw (2015) characterises as intermedial due to the way they cut them from individual processes of mediation to produce new, collective boundaries together. Media are thus *also* performative*,* produced in their "relations without pre-existing relata" (Barad, 2003, p. 815). This shifts representational conceptualizations of media as reflecting reality (mirroring nature or culture) to recognizing media as performative practices in themselves (Barad, 2003; Kember & Zylinska, 2012). As performativity dictates, the fact that no media pre-exist another means that the notion of "true" and "false" media—media which supposedly represent the world "as it is"—cannot stand (Kember & Zylinska, 2012; Starosielski, 2019). It is thus much more constructive not to question the "truth" of media but, like gender, instead consider their functions, exploring what they *do* in the world such as processing, storing, and transmitting cultural expression (Straw, 2015; Wagman & Young, 2019).

For Kember and Zylinska (2012), this new materialist understanding of media performativity expands media theory to recognize that "mediation is a vital process, one that produces rather than merely constructs the real" (p. 67), where "mediation is, like time (or, indeed, life itself), both invisible and indivisible, [and thus] any attempt at its

representation must ultimately fail" (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. xviii).[15] Counter to Steinbock's (2022) assertion that there is a lack of embodiment in media studies, new materialist media theory opens the field up to consider greater areas of inquiry including the performative capacity of life and the body *as media*. For example, Bernadette Wegenstein (2010) argues that the body is unique in that it is both a medium for experience and the medium through which experience comes to know itself. This weird, first- and third-person phenomenology is further complicated by technology where devices like implants, prosthetics, and cameras collapse any clear distinction of where such a process begins and ends. For Wegenstein (2010), this means that the body is a medium that is produced in its relations with other entities, "not as a static object, an inviolable 'natural' entity, but as a dynamic process" (p. 21). Taking a similar position, Kember and Zylinska (2012) conclude that "we have always been technological, which is another way of saying *we have always been mediated*" (p. 18, emphasis in original). Through such a processual and relational perspective, bodies, subjects, technologies, and knowledge are all media, objects with "'medial' functions" (Straw, 2015, p. 137) which come into being together through their ongoing relationships rather than a supposed connection to the "natural" or the "real."

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[15] Reflecting on this vitality of media and drawing on much of Deleuze's work, Kember and Zylinska (2012) differentiate their vitalism from that the "Deleuzianism" they characterize as uncritically engaging with movement for movement's sake (p. 182). Instead, they argue that "an affirmative vitalist philosophy needs to be exposed to, and engage with, a critique" which relies on the always impermanent differentiation and distinctions of ideas, as opposed to the "nebulous cosmic soup that has the same viscosity and temperature for everyone everywhere" that they write many vitalists fall into (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, pp. 181–182). The importance of differentiation in trans*mediation is explored further in the discussion of cuts and stitches in Chapter 4.

Again, this understanding of the tangled relation between bodies and technologies in media theory echoes critical concepts in transgender studies, where "somatechnics" refers to the inextricability of the culturally defined body (*soma*) and the techniques of its definition (*technē*) (Stryker, 2006). Whether described as somatechnics or bodily mediation, both new materialist media theory and transgender theory recognize that technology and knowledge are not separable from bodies; rather, they co-constitute one another and thus cannot be described as having a true or false connection to nature and reality. These similar epistemological commitments, rooted in performativity, shows new materialist media theory and trans theory as well-suited for engagement.

3.3 Trans*mediation

There is thus a precedent for media theory to foreground embodiment in its new materialist approaches, and these approaches already make similar theoretical commitments as trans theory by also relying on process-oriented relations like performativity to resist exclusively representational logics. Thinking through trans and media theory together, then, presents an opportunity for them to inform each other in what I term trans*mediation.

Trans*mediation encourages a continued departure from evaluating trans media through static representation or supposed indexicality, and instead asks *how trans phenomena can be enacted performatively through the processes of mediation*. The open possibilities of an asterisk, which connects "trans" and "mediation" and recalls the movements definitional to both concepts, differs significantly from "transmediation," another concept in media studies that describes the movement of content across rather

than through media forms (Freeman & Gambarato, 2019).[16] Instead, the process-orientated conceptualization of trans *as* mediation (and, likewise, mediation as trans) offers a mode of expression that usefully combines trans and media theory to resist analyses focused exclusively on representation and its "good" or "bad" qualities.

This does not erase representation but, fittingly, transforms it, refiguring representation to not only describe but also *act* on the material world (Wegenstein, 2010). Consider metaphor, a cultural technique which is by definition an abstracted representation: Through a new materialist lens, metaphor is an experience mediated through something else, making it a part of the material process of mediation (Flynn, 2016). As McLuhan (1964) writes, "all media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms" (p. 64). This thinking places the medium transmitting the metaphor in the subject position of the transmission, demonstrating the co-constituted agency of the individuals involved in its transmission and the medium itself (Vismann, 2013). Representation has a performative capacity, and to deny this capacity is only to create yet another false binary between performativity and representation (Kember & Zylinska, 2012).

Trans*mediation thus moves not beyond representation but beyond evaluating the supposed *realism* of representation to instead consider how, *as a process of mediation, representation can perform the very trans phenomena they strive to describe.* The media which engage in processes of trans*mediation are therefore trans not necessarily because

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[16] While transmediation has been productive especially for studies of fan culture, the culture industry, and media globalization, its understanding of media is too rigid for my purposes here. Transmediation understands media as separate but translatable, rather than understanding media as always relational and thus always embedded in other forms, as my articulation of trans*mediation does.

they represent trans phenomena, or because they are made or interpreted by trans people. While they can include all these media, they are trans because their own performative, ongoing mediation enacts aspects of the categorical boundary-making and movement of trans*. Trans*mediation thus presents a trapdoor to trans representation that has been in the medium all along and might still take us to "someplace as yet unknown" (Tourmaline et al., 2017, p. xxiii).

3.4 In Medias Res

Some thinkers have used new materialist media theory to consider how media open a multitude of trajectories in each moment which challenge the notion of linear process (Natale, 2012). This returns us to media's etymological roots as the "middle" and the simultaneous meaning of trans* as an open movement between categories, suggesting the difficulty of finding a starting point to begin this formulation of trans*mediation. Rather than a particular origin or narrative of progress, an analysis of trans*mediation must start from within its entanglements, *in medias res*.

Wendy Chun (2011), a media studies scholar whose work focuses on networks and algorithms, writes that *in medias res* "means we can only begin with things—things that we grasp and touch without fully grasping, things that unfold in time, things that can only be rendered 'sources' or objects (if they can) after the fact" (p. 177). It is from the middle of mediation, the "things" that are media, that we come to "grasp and touch" mediation, and only from this touch that we can possibly come to know it. It is perhaps then not so surprising, then, that Jeanne Vaccaro (2014) describes that "[t]he handmade is a methodological orientation [….] a haptic, affective, theorization of the transgender body, a mode of animating material experience and accumulative felt matter" (p. 96). An

analysis of trans*mediation is itself handmade, starting from the midst of messy entanglements with media like *Frankenstein's Telephone* to animate this research.

Indeed, Laura Marks (2018) writes that attention to affect in aesthetic encounters shifts analysis from focusing on representation to what a work does to the viewer. Keegan (2018) also describes trans experience as affective, "an inherently subjunctive relation to what is considered real, to what can be commonly sensed" (p. 3). "To survive," he adds, "transgender people have had to craft imaginaries that sustain our desire to become, our belief that we might come into perception differently" (Keegan, 2018, p. 3). These sustaining imaginaries are a part of what trans*mediation *does* for those who encounter it and is thus a useful thread to feel out and follow to find its instances and understand its functioning.

All this is all to say that I began this research from the middle, with the uncertain feeling, grasping, and shaping of my hands and the media within which I am already entangled. This means my own embodied position is critical to this research, including my identity as an Anglo, queer, transmasculine, white settler working from within a Canadian institutional setting, as well as my personal preferences, media consumption patterns, and social networks. I echo Stryker (2008b) when she writes that

> my intent is not to attribute any particular importance to certain events simply because I, rather than someone else, participated in them. The goal, rather, is to open a critical space within which subjectively perceived phenomenological experiences can offer evidence for more widely applicable statements about the relationship between embodied subject and material environment. (p. 39)

I thus hope my work here can serve as a farmhand, turning the fertile ground at the intersection of transgender studies and media studies where others seeking to explore their own varied trans media encounters can grow.

While trans*mediation is not rare or new, its lack of definition means that my criteria for this research began with only the vague feeling that there are some media which express trans differently than typical and usually mainstream audiovisual trans media which focus on representation—the media I kept being recommended by those who knew me as trans person, but that I personally found little resonance with or interest in. Instead, I began purposefully searching for—feeling out—additional media encounters which *did* resonate with me, like *Frankenstein's Telephone*, generating a felt sense that I would come to describe as an affect of trans*mediation. As I searched, I was simultaneously describing how these media felt to me and theorizing about what made them different. As new materialism media theory and trans theory suggest, this was by no means a linear process, and I continuously shifted back and forth between different media encounters and my understanding of what they might be and do. I followed threads in one direction ("Perhaps it is only non-visual media which felt this way?") only to hit a dead end that required moving backwards ("That can't be right, because this illustration definitely *feels* trans to me") or a knot that pulled me into a new direction entirely ("Why am I getting this feeling from a song made by someone who definitely is not trans? Is it a thematic choice? A structural aspect?"). As John Durham Peters (2015) puts in his introduction also titled "In medias res": "Every spot I found to dig in collapsed beneath my feet, revealing another cavern of unmastered materials […] Every site yields another link" (p. 9). It is by feeling and falling through these media and their ongoing processes of mediation that this research takes place.

Eventually, my recursive zigzagging led to my development of three criteria to help me refine my search and select my objects of analysis. The first has already been

established: that these media must not rely on representation to be considered trans media. The second criterion was much more difficult to specify: that I only consider media made by self-identified trans people. This was a tricky decision because it emphasizes the need for trans creators to be publicly out, many of whom are not, often for reasons including safety and protecting their livelihood. It also assumes a particular solidity to identity that runs counter to this project's very understanding of trans* as movement, change, and differentiation. My reasons for the decision to include only trans-made media, however, are also two-fold. First, they are a humble but still important attempt to highlight the work of trans artists and creators who are often overlooked and undervalued, and second, it prevents myself from being the sole trans subject in this media encounter. While the media which perform trans*mediation do not necessarily need to be made by a trans person, I hope to emphasize the new materialist assertion that audiences, producers, cultural techniques, technologies, and other entangled factors are formative to every media encounter (Kember & Zylinska, 2012; Vismann, 2013). Omitting media not made by an out trans person disperses the embodied authority of trans experience across both production and audience, as well as in the process of mediation itself.

The third criterion was that the particular form of these media did not matter. Although this research occurred entirely through digital means due to the COVID-19 isolation measures in place at the time, I came to realize that I could not put a strict boundary around what types of media can exemplify trans*mediation. This is because I follow Kember and Zylinska (2012) in their new materialist understanding of media as the temporarily solidified forms cut from the process of mediation in their engagement

with other phenomena. I thus consciously expanded my media engagements to include a wide variety of trans-made media which I had access to, including social media, forums, blogs, artists spaces, virtual talks, lectures, readings, poetry, literature, and film festivals in my effort to explore trans*mediation. I also spoke to my own trans friends and community for their thoughts and media recommendations, several whom have their own artistic practices and are avid media consumers. This research, which must occur *in medias res*, cannot be done alone and I am hugely appreciative of their support and thought-provoking discussions.

Throughout, I made a point of engaging with these media with curiosity and an openness to being shown what they were and what they did. I paid careful attention to the punctuating affects generated through these encounters, searching for media which *felt* trans based on my own experiences with such a feeling. I kept a record of those which held an affective "stickiness" (S. Ahmed, 2004) using a folder of screenshots, images, videos, and a list of links. Outside of my purposeful research, I often also ran into examples "in the wild," the everyday digital trans spaces I exist within outside of my work. I used cloud-based storage to synchronize the media I found across personal and work devices. I also regularly revisited this research folder to re-encounter the media which stood out to me. Many lost their affective stickiness as I continued to develop my thinking around the concept of trans*mediation and were put aside. I then made a point of revisiting those which remained while "asking" them clear questions: What factors inform my encounter with them? What does it feel like? What do they do in this encounter, and what do they *not* do? Are there any communities surrounding this media object? If so, in what ways are they engaging with it?

Following Vaccaro's (2014) notion of a handmade trans methodology, I made a point of slowing down my analysis by recording my observations by hand as I was experiencing them and making detailed notes for each media encounter, describing my thoughts and feelings as they came up through the tactility of pen and paper. A cross between notes from the media "field" and journal entries, these descriptions strive to present the overlapping observations of the media object and my affective response in its encounter. Again, this was not a linear process—while I usually began my notes with my immediate thoughts about the object, I allowed my attention to wander to aspects and questions about the object which interested me, often jumping from thought to thought and revisiting previous notes, writing secondary comments in the margins. For example, when a particular aspect of these media felt important, I would revisit these moments repeatedly, then pull back and experience them in the context of the broader piece. These notes became the foundations for the following two chapters, which I share in italics (often as epigraphs, but sometimes interruptions) to help explain my own experiences with these media.

While I recognized the need for a variety of media forms, I made special effort to consider the role of visuality in these media. As the literature review in Chapter 2 demonstrates, studies of trans media have been heavily dominated by film and television, especially for their visual elements. Visibility and visuality continue to be important to trans media, but as writers such as Corfman (2020) and Vaccaro (2014) argue, the visual is not the only sense useful for trans expression—although, as some scholars of visual media argue, the senses are not always so easily separated either (Mitchell, 2005). This consideration brought me to two media examples which I found useful to explore the

concept of trans*mediation together: the experimental film *Silver Femme* (Reano, 2020) and a Twitterbot named Genderbot (Fletcher, n.d.). *Silver Femme*, the focus of Chapter 4, is a film that differs from most of the examples of trans media shown thus far due to its experimental form. The film is conceptually rich, offering several overlapping examples of trans*mediation through the cuts and stitches of its audiovisual aesthetics which are used to express trans experience. Moving from Chapter 4 to Chapter 5, an analysis of the text-based Genderbot, expands trans*mediation to demonstrate how it is not exclusive to audiovisual media, nor to individual expressions. This movement to Genderbot bridges the occularcentric history of trans media studies with a more expansive understanding of media found in new materialist media studies, specifically focusing on the playful affects Genderbot generates through its tweets and the potential they offer for trans identity- and community-building.

These following two chapters thus describe and analyse my encounter with these two very different media forms and consider their performative capacity for articulating trans phenomena and generating a particular sense of trans*. In doing so, I demonstrate how, through trans*mediation, these media do not just represent but actually enact trans experiences, presenting a form of trans expression which many trans creators already employ to radically challenge cisnormative media practices, from their production and circulation to their interpretation and analysis.

4. The Moon & The Finger That Points to It:

Materiality & Mediation in *Silver Femme*

> *The resonant notes of a harp come through my speakers, each plucked string layering over the last. The titular words "Silver Femme" scrawl across the screen in a curling script. Film grain dances around the swooping letters. The words disappear, and only the shimmering moon is left in their place.*

The dreamy, analog aesthetic of this title card (Figure 3) sets the tone for *Silver Femme,* a short experimental film directed by Nico Reano (2020) and made by a small but entirely trans cast and crew.[17] *Silver Femme* follows the tale of a nameless narrator (played by Jimena Lucero) as they recall an evening shared with a friend or, perhaps a lover. As the narrator describes their efforts to express their shifting sense of femininity to their companion, a figure (also played by Jimena Lucero, but who is never resolutely identified as the same person as the unpictured narrator) is shown in a flickering collage of film frames, posing for the camera in several intricate outfits and then finally in the nude. Rather than settling on a fixed term or form to describe the narrator's gender and the figure's body, however, the film articulates their movements and changes through its performative mediation. *Silver Femme* is thus a film not just about but also *made up of* trans movements, possibilities, and changes, as expressed in the subjects' genders and the film's own shimmering trans*mediation rather than relying on the limited expression possible through exclusively representative approaches.

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[17] While Reano notes the trans identities of their team—including a poet, stylist, makeup artist, and harpist—in their festival statement (*Silver Femme*, 2020), she does not list their names.

Figure 3

The layering of Silver Femme*'s title card*

Note. Frame captured via laptop screenshot (Reano, 2020).

This chapter uses *Silver Femme* to explore how trans*mediation can function through its many cuts and stitches in the process of mediation. Cuts and stitches differentiate media objects from their ongoing mediation and bring them together into new forms, permitting media to embody the fluidity of subjectivity, embodiment, and gender presentation. These processes of trans*mediation allow trans artists like Reano and her team to performatively express changes in gender subjectivity in their work, moving beyond the mirror of representation and instead treating representation as a mediated experience with a performative capacity—transforming the very phenomena it strives to describe. In addition to offering an outlet for expression, this strategy of trans*mediation also opens a space of trans possibility for others who encounter their work. Trans*media like *Silver Femme* are thus not just a trapdoor to representation to which only trans individuals may have the keys, but to any audience who knocks on its door, open to explore wherever it may lead them.

4.1 Material Shimmers

> *I stare at the dark mirror of my laptop. A grainy rectangle cuts into my reflection. It doesn't fill the screen entirely, and the small size of the frame and its analog aesthetic are jarring on my display. I squint to see the image. It seems to be a shot of the sky over a building, hardly discernable through the film's flickering light leaks and pastel blue vignette. On top of the shot comes a second, slightly smaller shot of a full moon, topped by yet another even smaller shot of an over-exposed sky peeking through tree branches. All three overlapping frames zoom in on their subjects at different speeds, the movement highlighting their layered edges.*
>
> *I'm no longer trying to discern the images being displayed, which seem almost incidental compared to their treatment. Was this made using analog film, or were these grainy effects added in digitally afterwards? In other words: Is this film "real," or are its aesthetics "fake"?*

During my first encounter with *Silver Femme* (at the 2021 Seattle Queer Film Festival, attended virtually via my laptop from the comfort of my own bed), I was immediately struck by the film's low-resolution film grain, light leaks,[18] and overlapping frames. Before the title card sequence even ended, this analog aesthetic had me guessing the details of the film's production. Are these effects "real," that is, derived from the actual use of analog film? Or are they added digitally in post-production using filters and other algorithmic effects?

Silver Femme's many collaged frames vary in aspect ratios, sometimes using the 4:3 ratio of 35mm film but other times taking on the contemporary widescreen 16:9. Sometimes, these widescreen frames are in a portrait orientation, suggesting they were filmed on a smartphone. Looking further into Reano's work shows similar aesthetic choices but does not reveal their methods, although she does refer to the film as a "digital

[18] A "light leak" refers to the aura-like flares and overlays caused a hole or crack in the body of the camera, which allows light into the typically light-proof container holding the photosensitive film.

ode to the moon" in her director's statement (*Silver Femme*, 2020, para. 1).[19] Thinking through this question, however, I came to realize that attempting to discern the "realness" of *Silver Femme*'s aesthetics relies on the very representational logics that trans phenomena disrupt. Assuming a grainy aesthetic to be a "real" effect of analog film compared to the "fake" effects of digital overlays echoes the common assertion that a "real" gender identity and presentation must mirror the sexed body, meaning trans identity must be "fake." Further, it denies the possibility of *Silver Femme* being filmed using a blend of analog and digital technology.

> *In my first viewing, I cannot help but notice the grainy picture framed by my high-resolution laptop screen. I check my internet connection, but it is strong. This is not a technical issue but a purposeful aesthetic choice. As I rewatch, I switch to using headphones so that the harp and the narrator feel even closer, the sounds playing directly into my ear. Still, the visual grain and audio static makes their mediation obvious.*

Rather than asking whether its aesthetic effects are "real" or not, then, I came to a more productive question: What do these aesthetics *do* for the film? This reframing brings me to consider the film's materiality, which is what spurred the question of the film's "realness" for me in the first place. Its unexpected grain, light leaks, overlapping film frames in various aspect ratios, and layered audio tracks immediately point to the fact this *Silver Femme* is, well, a *film,* be it analog, digital, or both. Many films strive to reduce the disjunction between the world and their image, relying on detailed special

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[19] While not the topic of this chapter, it may also be worth considering how one of the first ever pieces of science fiction cinema is also a short film about the moon, Méliès' (1902) *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, as there is a rich relationship between sci-fi and trans phenomena due to their future-forward orientations. For example, see the contents of micha cárdenas and Jian Neo Chen's (2019) co-edited issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* titled "Trans Futures."

effects and camera angles which stand in for the audience's gaze in the scene. *Silver Femme*, however, *stresses* its role occupying this in-between space, highlighting and experimenting with its own mediated relationship to the audience. If the screen is a window into another world, the many layered frames of *Silver Femme* point the viewer to this window itself as an inextricable part of this world, beginning with the layered lunar shots at the start of the film and continuing through the rest of its run time (Figure 4). The slow panning of the camera, contrasting colour washes, sounds of the ethereal but unpictured harp, and the sporadic light leaks that highlight the edges of each frame do not just encourage the viewer to literally observe the moon, but also to the cinematic finger that points to it. By emphasizing the materials of its own production, *Silver Femme* expands the non-realist formal strategies of much queer and feminist cinema to present an alternative to cisnormative narrative strategies (Rosskam, 2014; Smaill, 2017). It embraces the role that film itself plays in this articulation of trans experience: a performative construction of the film's message through its very expression, a form of trans*mediation.

Figure 4

The finger that points to the moon

Note. Frame captured via laptop screenshot (Reano, 2020).

The idea that the materiality of film and trans expression can be co-produced is not by any means new. In fact, Stryker traces this relation back to film's invention. In an interview in *Disclosure* (Feder, 2020), she describes a scene from D. W. Griffith's (1914) *Judith of Bethulia* where Judith seduces an invading general in order to decapitate him in his sleep. As Judith brings her sword down on his neck, the film cuts to outside the tent, where a eunuch character is dispersing the guards trying to get inside. This scene, says Stryker, is one of the first uses of a cinematic cut to advance a story. She argues that it is no coincidence that "the figure of the cut trans body, the eunuch who's been castrated or emasculated, who is a cut figure, presides over the invention of the cinematic cut" (Feder, 2020, 0:09:34). For Stryker, cinema and trans phenomena are connected in ways that help

express each other through their shared use of the cut, the material process of producing difference and thus the potential of becoming otherwise.[20]

As Stryker insinuates, the cut is thus not just closely tied to the production of cinema (consider the film director's shout of "cut!" or the film editing process—which once took place in a cutting room, although is now more likely to happen in Final Cut Pro) but also with the production of trans embodiment. Centring her own trans experience, Eva Hayward (2008) describes "returning to my own bodily knowledge—carnal logics—of pain and possibility, my own experience of becoming transsexual as a welcomed cut" (p. 71). In doing so, she flips the typical association of gender affirming surgery with castration to describe cutting the body as a creative act with a transformative potential for trans subjects. Stryker (2008b) does similarly, elaborating on the creative possibilities that become enacted through surgery, as the "bodily wound functions to create a space of subjective fulfillment […] It is thus not memberlessness itself that is desired, but the subjective experience of transformative growth in which absence becomes the space of possibility" (p. 45). While some feminist scholars describe the surgical cut of gender-affirming surgeries as a destructive tool of patriarchy that attempts to artificially replicate the "naturalness" of cisgender womanhood, the cut is not inherently violent nor patriarchal (cárdenas, 2022; Steinbock, 2012; Sullivan & Murray, 2009). Following the insistence from transgender studies and new materialism that bodies and technology are inextricable instead shows the surgeon's cut as actually opening the category of "women" to rightfully include trans women (Sullivan & Murray, 2009).

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[20] Stryker (2013) is also in the process of creating a film titled *Christine in the Cutting Room*, which focuses on Christine Jorgensen's own relation to filmmaking and considers the way that cinema lends itself to trans expression through its cuts.

Further, it demonstrates the cut's creative potential by separating and creating new entities from an ongoing process of trans life itself (cárdenas, 2016; Kember & Zylinska, 2012; Steinbock, 2012). Thinking through the many trans people who choose to have surgery, the cut is not so much violent as it is a necessary step on the path to change and growth (Steinbock, 2012).

Following Barad's (2003) notion of agential cuts, which performatively enact phenomena's boundaries, the cut here is thus creative in that it differentiates and makes space for change, be it in a film's narrative or to produce a change in embodiment to better align with one's felt sense of gender identity. Many trans subjects elect not to undergo any medical transition at all, which may seem to exclude them from this mode of expression. However, recalling new materialist theory recognizes the entanglement of material and discursive phenomena—intertwining individual subjectivity, cultural techniques, and material practices together. The cut thus "operates on a number of levels: perceptive, material, technical, and conceptual" (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 71), including the change in identification the trans subject experiences upon recognizing they do not identify with the gender they have been assigned at birth. This cut in subjective identification is a part of life itself, whereby

> the practice of cutting is crucial not just to our being in and relating to the world, but also to our becoming-with-the-world, as well as becoming-different-from-the-world. It therefore has an ontological significance: it is a way of shaping the universe, and of shaping ourselves in it. (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 75)

The creative potential of the cut creates difference, be it within the frame of an image, the shape of the body, or the self-realization of the subject. This difference makes space for

change and is thus particularly useful to conceptualize the prepositional character of trans* in its open-ended orientations (Hayward & Weinstein, 2015; Stryker et al., 2008).

But change is not just replete with cuts, as cárdenas (2016) points out. Rather, it relies on both cuts *and* stitches, first creating the possibility of differentiation and then enacting this difference into new forms (cárdenas, 2016). The cut and the stitch are both necessary to make transformation possible, both altering the body and the film to permit it to "heal" in new articulations. The cut and specifically the stitch thus describe "a poetics of object making as well as a process of making new concepts" and facilitate the transformation definitional to trans phenomena (cárdenas, 2016, para. 8). Further, cárdenas also reminds us that the stitch is a method often associated with sewing, maintenance, and repair; labours often assigned to racialized women living in poverty. This connection leads her to describe the cut and stitch a form of trans of colour poetics.

Steinbock (2019) also explores the capacity of the cinematic cut and stitch (or, to use their more medicalized term, suture) to express trans phenomena further in their book *Shimmering Images*. They argue that

> the cinematic cuts and sutures between the visual and the spoken, between frames, and between genres are delinking and relinking practices of transfiguration […] film constitutes a medium for transitioning, thereby eliciting modes of perceiving disjunctions that are advantageous to trans studies. (Steinbock, 2019, p. 2)

Cinema operates through disjunction and conjunction between individual frames, overlays of image and sound, and mixtures of genre. For Steinbock (2019), this makes cinema "the art form most suited to a politically advantageous comparison with transgender forms of embodiment" that "reroutes the emphasis on sex/gender difference through aesthetics" (p. 6). They conclude that cinema can usefully express a transgender

aesthetic as a "shimmering" between these cuts and stitches, as transgender bodies also cut and splice the assumed linkages such as those between physical sex (in its many instabilities), visible gender presentation, and subjective gender identity (Steinbock, 2019; Stryker, 2006).

This shimmering is a part of *Silver Femme*'s performative emphasis on its own materiality. In addition to its flickering analog aesthetics, its focus on silver literally echoes this materiality. Cinema is steeped in silver: The metonym "silver screen" refers to the projection screens which were once embedded with silver to increase their reflectivity and thus the image's vibrance (Gordon, 2013). Further, these screens would be grooved (that is, lenticular) to reflect as much light from the projector as possible to its audience (Gordon, 2013). This means that the viewing angle, itself a cut into the process of mediation through the act of observation, would alter the projected image. This history speaks directly to Steinbock's (2019) suggestion that "if trans is not identified as either/or, but depends on the 'angle' of the subject's gaze emerging in different contexts, then the slight modifications of gender could be likened to the nuanced space of the shimmer" (p. 10). A shift in viewing angle on a lenticular silver screen changes its image, producing a visible shimmering between forms. Beyond the screen, silver also forms the shot captured by film as its silver halide crystals undergo a chemical reaction with light to form the opaque part of a negative, the small particles of silver actually creating the film grain seen throughout *Silver Femme* (Case, 2001). Even if these effects *are* added in post, digital media themselves rely on the conductivity of silver to transmit data and operate switches which make digital editing possible (Gurevich, 2018).

Silver is thus an important material for film, bridging analog and digital forms and flickering between light and its lack, information and its absence. It falls on neither side of these binaries because it belongs to neither, instead mediating the space between material and representation, visible and invisible, on and off, the effects of which change depending on one's engagement with it—through observation, chemical reaction, electrical signals, and even physical touch if we are to consider the polishing of the silver screen. Silver is thus particularly suited to emphasizing the shimmering movements of cinematic trans*mediation which *Silver Femme* embodies, refusing to resolve into any one category but instead moving between them in its interactions with other phenomena.

4.2 Embodied Presentation

> *The figure appears in their own small frame. They gaze down at me from their high perch, knowingly glamourous in their ornate red dress and diadem. Another frame appears opposite the first, featuring the same figure from a different angle, still watching the camera. Cut to another frame, this time featuring the figure in a white bathing suit at a construction site, and then to them standing tall in a tan suit in an underground parking garage. They pose and make eye contact with me/the camera as the narrator recounts attempting to describe their gender to their companion.*
>
> *In the final scene, each of the figure's presentations flicker onto the screen at once, their overlapping frames bringing their many different selves together. I can't help but think of my camera roll full of selfies. Like the figure, my photo grid shows my changing face engaging with itself, making eye contact with me and touching one another through the edge of each photo. There's a particularly uncanny experience to recognizing yourself in the image of something that you never really were in the first place.*

The scene following the title card introduces the figure, who connects the film's materiality with their trans body. They appear in many overlapping frames, cutting into each other and the black space of the screen (Figure 5). These frames create a patchwork

quilt on my laptop from which the figure stares at me in their various presentations and locations. While this filmic strategy shows the figure in many times and places simultaneously, there is still a particular order to their appearance: They first appear in gauzy red outfit with an elaborate diadem, then a white one-piece, and then the tan suit; around halfway through the film, they are replaced with shots of the figure in a purple taffeta dress and then in silver body paint. It is also only in the last few seconds of the film, after all the presentations have flickered onto the screen at once, that the figure then appears in the nude, standing in an Edenic garden (Figure 6).

Figure 5

The figure in red

Note. Frame captured via laptop screenshot (Reano, 2020).

Figure 6

Stitching past and future

Note. Frame captured via laptop screenshot (Reano, 2020).

This assemblage of cuts and stitches of the figure in their frames performs the temporality of transition throughout the film. “Trans time,” as a second hormonal puberty might suggest, is not always linear; at the same time, it also does not necessarily enact the temporalities of antifuturity and asynchronicity found and valued in queer theory (Horak, 2014). Rather, the temporalities of trans phenomena tend to move towards futures of gendered realization, but also with moments of revisitation in a backwards movement Julian Carter (2013) describes as folding. These pleats in time allow the trans man, for example, to look “back toward a past in which the trans man was a man all along” (Carter, 2013, p. 136). This paradoxical temporality cannot be visualized through the singular image or typical linear narrative but instead requires, like the trans subject, a cut and stitch between images and moments to indicate their difference and thus change. Unlike the binary of “before” and “after” photos—which insinuates that transitions have

a definite start and end point—*Silver Femme* visualizes this change through its variety of images which remind me of my own selfie gallery, where a mix of faces look back at me through the screen that are wildly different, but always my own. These collaged frames do not just represent but performatively enact the temporal process of transition in its vaguely linear but folded temporalities. They visualize the paradoxical impossible possibility of looking back to see oneself as changed, but also as one always has been (Carter, 2013; Keegan, 2016b, 2020b); a narrative that requires experimental form like that found in *Silver Femme* to be adequately expressed (Rosskam, 2014).

Amongst their various presentations, it is the figure's most striking outfit of sparkling crystal and silver body paint that ties them most directly to the silver materiality of the film. Their body and presentation fold into one another, eyes blinking through bejeweled eyelashes and peering out from under a sparking fringe of crystal; trembling acrylic nails run over shimmering fabrics, which in turn, reveal glimpses of silver skin (Figure 7). The figure turns their own body into a silver screen, emphasizing the performative relation between their gender presentation and their body analogized as the projected image onto the silver screen, an embodied representation that does not mirror "reality" but instead performs itself into being.

Figure 7

The silver femme

Note. Frame captured via laptop screenshot (Reano, 2020).

The figure's shift between unpainted and painted skin literally modulates the visibility of their brown skin in addition to performing the figure's shimmering expression of gender. This movement is one often used by trans women of colour, which, while not necessarily involving the painting of skin, includes practices which allow one to "pass" as white (Nakamura, 1995) and cisgender to escape the intersecting violence of white supremacy and transphobia. As cárdenas (2015) describes:

> Passing is gesture that brings the contemporary racialized trans subject into an analogous relationship with the flickering digital signifier, where the performative utterance of making one's body be read in a certain way reveals both its mutability and reveals that one's body can be a sign with more than one signifier, like the digital image. (p. 2)

This performative mediation materializes trans of colour experiences. Using the necessity of the film's own materiality to express its image as a form of expression, the figure's gender and racial presentation are also equally entangled with their body.

> *I sit in bed with my laptop resting on my recently surgically flattened chest, a position only possible for me because of the cut of a scalpel and the healing capacities of stitches and sutures. As the figure poses on my screen, they rise and fall in time with my breath.*

The figure's presentations are also entangled with my own body. Our encounter, mediated through our bodies, the film, my laptop, and various cultural practices, question where one body or technology begins and another ends. In doing so, the film and the figure perform their trans*mediation together: They shimmer between the cuts and stitches of referent and representation and deny the possibility of resolving them as either, instead demonstrating that they come to enact each other. *Silver Femme* thus understands image and materiality as co-constituted through the figure's silver skin/screen, and by extension, my own affective response. There is no presentation or experience without the body, just as there is no cinematic image or audience without the screen. Neither the film's imagery nor the figure's gender or racial performativity can be resolved as "real" or "fake," as both their material aspects and their represented images bring each other into being, in all their temporal paradoxes.

4.3 Speaking the Unnameable

> *"I was glad / You treated me neither like a boy - like a girl / You never used a pronoun when talking about me," says the narrator. I can't help but remember asking my partner to avoid using pronouns for me when I first began questioning (or hypothesizing, to use the narrator's language) my gender, and how much it meant to me that he did so. It made a space of possibility for me to realize what gender felt like for myself.*

I use “they” to refer to the narrator throughout this chapter despite the pleasure they describe with an absence of pronouns at all (Reano, 2020, 01:34). As much as I wish to honour this pleasure, it means I must either awkwardly repeat “the narrator” or decide on a pronoun for them. I have erred for the gender-neutral pronoun “they,” although this is no less problematic: Words are media representations, cuts in the flow of mediation that create moments of difference. Filmmaking may heavily rely on the metaphors of the cut and stitch, but so too do other forms of media. Consider the print house, where the “bleed” or overprint is cut from a folio which is then stitched together to form a book. (I too shape this chapter through a heavy reliance on digital cuts and stitches in my word processor—or, more accurately, cuts and pastes, a sticky and perhaps more ephemeral alternative to the stitch.) This means it can be challenging to find a word which accurately cuts a description of trans* phenomena as they move between categories. What does one call oneself while hypothesizing one’s gender? No words seem quite adequate, always feeling overly reductive and static. While we might grow to identify with a particular term, this rarely happens overnight.

Instead of settling on a particular label for themselves, the narrator’s words cut and weave a variety of ambiguous, formless terms and metaphors as they describe their gender to their companion. They call their gender a hypothesis, “far removed from our physical circumstances” like the trans “silver femme” of the moon “flipping through her phases” (Reano, 2020, 02:13). Like the figure’s shimmering presentation and non-linear temporality, the narrator uses movement to work around the reductive specificity of a singular term like a particular pronoun or word for their gender, stitching their words together into sublime forms and ideas as they tell their retrospective narrative of sharing

their gender with their companion. The ethereality of their gender hypothesis—a possibility, not a definition—is further emphasized by the celestial harp playing throughout, its plucked notes cutting into the air and trailing into each other and the narrator's words.

Following the rest of the film's aesthetics, the narrator's words flicker onto the screen in subtitles that appear in time with their voice. Also like the film's aesthetics, the narrator's unexpected metaphors and ambiguous descriptions of identity draw attention to their language's own mediating role in gender expression as they tell their time-folding story. The narrator's words cut into the air and are then stitched together to form new articulations: Rather than feeling like a man or woman, they "feel divine" like their mother's "glazed ceramic angels" (Reano, 2020, 01:00), "a middle / a fume / a possibility" (01:44), a "shapeshifting soul that has a home in altering latitudes" (02:44). Accompanied by the figure's flickering presentations, the narrator's words point to the fluidity between categories, not male, female, nor even the broad specificity that "nonbinary" offers. Rather, their terms are not even fully conceptualizable as a solid physical form despite referring to their embodied gender. The narrator thus makes an emphatically trans suggestion through these "astronomical concerns" (Reano, 2020, 02:41): that, paradoxically, gender is both physically formless while also quite material; it is incommunicable while both sensed in the body and carrying particular social meanings.

Keegan (2020b) describes paradox, which the presentation of the figure also embodies through their temporal plurality, as a method "drawn directly from transgender experience: the impossible possibility of living one life in two genders or the illogical

project of seeking to be recognized as a gender one already is" (p. 70). Like the narrator's own paradoxical musings, Peters (1999) also draws on angels to explore the paradox of communication, where mediation simultaneously increases the distance between two entities while also bringing them closer together through communication. As bodiless celestial messengers, angels are a model of perfect communication unhindered by the specificity of the body and media objects, "effortlessly coupl[ing] the psychical and the physical, the *signified and the signifier*, the divine and the human. They are pure bodies of meaning" (Peters, 1999, p. 75, emphasis added). The angel's lack of body also means they cannot sensibly be sexed, a notion which is as difficult to conceptualize as being a "pure body of meaning." The narrator's efforts to describe their gender identity through comparison to their mother's divine ceramic angels and other celestial terms, highlighted by the sound of their voice floating amongst the notes of the harp, suggests their own desire to evade the necessary specificities of differentiation that media and embodiment demand on their gender identity.

These moments of differentiation are necessary for the co-production of all media, embodiment, and phenomena (Barad, 2003; Kember & Zylinska, 2012). To embrace this paradox as Keegan (2020b) recommends means reconceptualizing the understanding of mediation a tertiary process dis/connecting two or more separate entities. New materialist media theory does exactly this, recognizing mediation as a wholly interconnected process with no purely independent entities but instead phenomena which are co-produced through cuts in the process of mediation. This means that the paradox of mediation is a false problem: Rather, the *movement* of mediation is a part of its very message, never indivisible from its material processes or the bodies who send or receive it. It is through

the unexpected and rotating assemblage of terms, the movement of language itself, that the narrator finds space to express the nonlinear narrative about their changing subjectivity. They are less concerned with the individual specificity of each term than their capacity for transformation when stitched together. Their monologue, then, is a shimmering articulation of shifting gender identity, formed by words variously cut into the process of mediation and stitched together into new, fluid articulations.

4.4 An Assemblage of Shimmers

> *In the film's last moments, the narrator says over the harp's arpeggio that "When I'd see you again / my body, still mine / would be all the unsaid things that night / a blip in time." As they speak, the screen flickers rapidly with a series of frames featuring the figure in a variety of their presentations. The screen finally rests on three images of the figure standing naked in an Edenic garden. In each shot, their genitalia are covered, and they hold their chin high.*
>
> *For all the difficulties people exploring their gender identity can have with nudity (gender dysphoria is no joke), I can't help but think that they look both proud and comfortable in their skin and the greenery that surround them.*

Unlike the many trans representations which rely on nudity to reveal the "real sex" of the trans body, *Silver Femme* uses this reveal to underline the embodied fact of the trans* body itself, as natural in its change and performance as the scenery that surrounds it. The figure's nudity shows their embodiment as inherent to their identity but not determinative; it impacts but can never offer any certainty of their sex, gender, or trans status. Their body is somehow "all the unsaid things that night," a time-folding "blip" reflected in the many cuts and stitches of mediation throughout the film (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Silver Femme*'s final frames*

Note. Frames captured via laptop screenshot (Reano, 2020). Closed captioning reads: "my body, still mine / would be all the things unsaid that night / a blip in time."

Film may have its own specificities, but Kember and Zylinska (2012) explain that *all* media are cuts or temporary "fixings" of ongoing processes of mediation. This is why "it is impossible to speak about media in isolation without considering the process of mediation that enables such 'fixings,'" including everything from the technical processes that make material change to the discursive conventions that give them meaning (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 21). The cut and stitch are thus also critical to new materialist media theory because they differentiate the components of entangled processes of mediation to produce the media object, "a conceptual and material intervention into the 'media flow' that has a cultural significance" (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 23). Indeed, new materialism has its own shimmery metaphor of diffraction which (literally) illuminates "the indefinite nature of boundaries" (Barad, 2003, p. 803) as they are made and changed, highlighting the places "where the *effects* of difference appear" (Haraway, 2020, p. 466).

While the metaphors of the shimmer and diffraction both rely on light, the concept they represent applies to all mediation and is thus useful to consider the formal embodiment of trans* in any form of media, visual or otherwise. Roland Barthes (2005, as cited in Steinbock, 2019) uses the shimmer to describe the nuances and changes of affect, which in turn inspires Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010) to describe affect theory as "an inventory of shimmers […] a passion for differences as continuous, shimmering gradations of intensities" (p. 11). Shimmering is not tied to cinema or light but *movement and change, however it can be sensed*.

It is thus not just its filmic qualities which enact the shimmering cuts and stitches in *Silver Femme*, but all aspects of its mediation, including its many overlapping frames I encounter on my screen, the materiality of its production, the figure's various outfits and

poses, the narrator's carefully chosen words, the harp's delicately plucked strings. These cuts into the flow of mediation produce moments of differentiation throughout the film stitched together to create a nonlinear narrative of change, embodying the movements of trans* phenomena and of transformation itself. *Silver Femme* does not just contain shimmers: It *is* shimmers. Its continued emphasis on the disjunction and rearticulation between referent and representation, shown not just in visuals but also sound and its variety of materialities, refuses the certainty of any category, image, or strictly linear narrative, undermining the binary logics of real/fake, before/after, and visible/invisible that are so often used to both dismiss and target trans people. By stitching these disjunctions together, Reano (2020) uses *Silver Femme*'s own mediation as a performative avenue for trans expression. Rather than attempting to represent trans experience or existence as a particular image or concept, then, *Silver Femme* stitches together its many cuts in the flow of mediation to create a politically advantageous mode of expression through which the trans* subject might speak outside of the cisnormative mirror of representation.

5. Playful (Non)sense: Genderbot's Infelicitous Gender Performativity

> *"Today's gender is the sound of a dial-up modem." This is a rapid transformation from six hours earlier, when today's gender was "the smell of basement and jasmine." I might not understand what a gender that smells of basement and jasmine might be, but my dysphoria gives me a good indication of what a gender that sounds like a dial-up modem feels like.*

These two "genders," "the sound of a dial-up modem" and "the smell of basement and jasmine," are tweets from a Twitter account titled @genderoftheday (Fletcher, n.d.). @genderoftheday is a Twitterbot, a piece of software that generates tweets (Veale & Cook, 2018). If *Silver Femme* shows the possibility for expression in trans*mediation, this Twitterbot demonstrates the interpretive possibilities presented by such expressions.

Affectionately named "Genderbot" and adorned with a purple, white, and green genderqueer flag in its profile, this Twitterbot has been tweeting out a new "gender" four times every day since 2018. Its creator (or "botparent") Misha Fletcher (n.d.) writes in the bot's bio that they made Genderbot to "outsource our feelings about gender to a bot, which I think should free up a lot of mental space for other things." While Fletcher's notion of outsourcing feelings of gender to a bot may be facetious, Genderbot *does* seem to do something productive for trans people: Many of its growing follower count (over 79,500 as of April 2022) identify as something other than cisgender in their public Twitter bios. The growing popularity of Genderbot and its rhetorical similarity to other "gender of the day" blogs and memes made by out trans people—some dating back to 2014 (Gender of the Day, 2014; r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnnns, 2017)—suggest a resonance between the format embodied by Genderbot and some trans people's interpretations of its meanings.

In this chapter, I argue that this resonance is because of the playfulness of Genderbot's algorithmic trans*mediation on Twitter. Like *Silver Femme*'s (Reano, 2020) shimmering materiality, Genderbot is also performatively trans, each tweet a cut into its mediation and stitched together on its Twitter profile. In Genderbot's case, however, this performativity is more explicit than metaphorical, as Genderbot changes its "gender" with each new tweet. If *Silver Femme* uses its own performative process of mediation as an earnest expression of the figure/narrator's moving gender identity, Genderbot uses this performativity as an opportunity to play with the limits of gender expression itself. This echoes the experiences shared by many trans people, who often challenge these boundaries in everyday life and in moments of play (Stone, 1992). Indeed, Twitter has been conceptualized as a media space where the self is performed and social identity can be played with (Papacharissi, 2012), although the use of Twitterbots in this process has not yet been considered. Exploring this idea as a form of trans*mediation, I investigate Genderbot's material configuration which determines the generation of its tweets. I also consider my own affective interpretation of these tweets, as well as the responses of others who engage with Genderbot's posts as made visible through Twitter metrics. Reflecting on the way that Genderbot moves between algorithmically formulated "gender" categories on Twitter brings me to argue that Genderbot enacts transness, pushes gender boundaries, and, in its encounter with others on the platform, becomes part of an affective network of performative trans play. To follow the metaphor throughout this thesis: *Silver Femme* makes a trapdoor visible, and Genderbot articulates one playful space to which it may open.

5.1 Playing With Gender

> *From Genderbot's bio: "Genderbot lets us outsource our feelings about gender to a bot, which I think should free up a lot of mental space for other things." How can a Twitterbot "outsource feelings," especially feelings about gender? What might this outsourcing of feelings about gender do?*

Reflecting on the difficulties of trans expression presented by Stone (1992), Stryker (2006) argues that transgender studies is a space where "new performative utterances, unprecedented things to say, *unexpected language games*, and a heteroglossic outpouring of gender positions from which to speak" continue to be made possible (p. 11, emphasis added). In terms of transgender studies' broader goals, then, there is a productive space to be made at its intersection with games and play. Bo Ruberg (2022) has recently turned a critical eye to this intersection, calling for the need to "[draw] out the value of ludic spaces for identity exploration and trans worldmaking" by centring trans voices and embodiment in the study of trans games and play (p. 200).

While some studies have considered the growing quality and quantity of trans representation in various video games (Shaw et al., 2019; Thach, 2021), fewer have considered mediated play and the possibility its presents to explore identity. In a refreshing articulation of transgender studies and media theory, however, Whit Pow (2021) turns to Jaime Faye Fenton's playful mediation and "unmediation" of the Bally Astrocade, a video game system of her own design, to think through trans media and what they can do. By physically generating glitches in the system (slamming her fist on the Astrocade at random intervals), Fenton introduces a playful randomness to the system, or what Roger Caillois (1961/2001) names as *alea* in his sociology of play. This play takes place less in the game or media object and more in Fenton's interaction with

the system. In other words, Fenton's play is not so much dependent on the static notion of the Astrocade as a gaming device, but instead manifests in the processes of mediation that surround this device. By focusing on Fenton's physical glitching of a media object of her own design, Pow (2021) embraces the centring of trans embodiment in their conceptualization of media, seeing media and embodiment as co-constituted and ongoing processes. Play is one form of interaction with these processes.

This notion of play as processual and entangled follows existing new materialist approaches to games. For example, T. L. Taylor (2009) argues that games are "lived objects" and thus must be explored by paying attention to the many actors involved in their construction and their interrelations, including "the technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard)," along with the surrounding social worlds, institutional structures, and cultural techniques (p. 332). Like media and those who encounter them more broadly, games and players cannot be so easily separated; it is in their entangled interactions that they come to constitute each other (Gekker, 2021; Jayemanne, 2017; Taylor, 2009). This not only presents an opportunity to centre trans embodiment and subjectivity-building in play, but it also points to the ways that play can be performative. For example, Darshana Jayemanne (2017) argues that games are made up of a series of performative expressions of play, co-constructed by the encounter of player action and game structure. Like gender, this understanding of performative play conceptualizes both the player's body and game media to be necessary, but not determinative, of the process of play. Rather than *outsourcing* our feelings of gender to a bot, then, understanding Genderbot as playful suggests that it perhaps helps "insource"

these feelings, contributing to their performative expression through embodied encounters with its tweets.

Jayemanne (2017) also points out that as performatives, neither gender expressions nor expressions of play can be evaluated as true or false. Instead, they are considered either successful or unsuccessful depending on the performative act's contextual conditions. This success is what Austin (1962) calls felicity, or the "'happy' functioning of a performative" (p. 14). Felicitous conditions may include occasion, competence, authority, completeness, and/or intention (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990; Jayemanne, 2017). Regarding gender, Stryker (2006) describes felicity as little more than a claim of who one is based on what one does, where a "woman, performatively speaking, is one who says she is—and who then does what woman means" (p. 10). The "doing" of felicitous gender performativity is central to trans subjectivity; a trans person's gender performativity is felicitous because they are the authority on and live or "do" their own experience of gender.

With play, however, performative felicity is significantly less important or even desired. In fact, Jayemanne (2017) argues that it is in games' *infelicitous* performances that games *become games*, as it is in the "obvious anti-realist elements that not only highlight the playful or non-earnest nature of the acts performed in the game but also convey many different structures of performative judgment necessary to felicitous play" (p. 2). While I am hesitant to put any weight on a differentiation between "realist" or "anti-realist" elements—a binary conceptualization which is rarely helpful for trans theory, as Chapter 4 suggests—this notion of "anti-realist elements" echoes the attention *Silver Femme* places on its own materiality in its trans expression. Unlike *Silver Femme*'s

earnest self-reference to its medium, however, Genderbot's is playful, its gender performativity is *knowingly* infelicitous or unsuccessful. As a Twitterbot, Genderbot effectively performs its algorithm with each "speech act" or tweet. Considering Genderbot's outputs as performative gender expression is useful here precisely in that it *cannot* meet the performative conditions to be successful. Genderbot cannot have a gender, despite its ability to express one; it is not an embodied subject.

Understanding this failure (or perhaps glitch) in Genderbot's performative gender expressions as *infelicitous* presents Genderbot as an opportunity to *play* with the rules of gender expression. Austin (1962) may condemn infelicitous performatives as "not so much false as void" (p. 20), but Jayemanne (2017) argues that it is in these infelicitous performatives that *play* emerges by drawing the player's attention to the framing of the media object as a game. He writes that

> frames involve not a simple binary (a 'magic circle' between play and nonplay), but various types of ludic felicity. If Austin characterizes such framed performances as 'in a peculiar way hollow or void', it is possible to extrapolate this in a non-pejorative sense: as the opening of ludic spaces. (Jayemanne, 2017, p. 38)

Infelicitous performances present opportunities for play with the rules of everyday life. They present a ludic space where the rules of felicitous performance—such as those which construct intelligible gender categories in cisnormative society, for example—can be challenged, shifted, renegotiated, and otherwise played with. Infelicitous performativity creates a ludic space where one can recognize and safely play with the rules of gender. Genderbot's playful genders can thus serve trans efforts to challenge cisnormativity, enabling one to explore their own gender subjectivity and develop a sense of trans community with others through playful trans*mediation.

5.2 Generating a Ludic Space

> *I am met with a plethora of "genders" while scrolling through Genderbot's feed. They vary in length and complexity, some only one word (February 12, 2022: "Today's gender is queer") and others an entire phrase (February 11, 2022: "The gender of the day is a happy ghost in a drowned civilization"). How many genders has Genderbot made? Do these genders ever repeat? Or, to get to the point of these questions: Where are Genderbot's limits?*

Gender performativity suggests that gender can be usefully considered a set of situational discursive rules which determine the success or failure of a particular gender performance. Approaching Genderbot as a form of trans*mediation thus presents an opportunity to challenge these rules through its infelicitous or playful gender performativity in its mediating processes. Genderbot's infelicitous performativity carves (again a media-making cut) a ludic space on Twitter for gender games, a space where gender expression can be explored beyond the rules that structure the success of gender expression and thus determine which genders are "real" and socially intelligible.

One question that this presents is to ask, where do Genderbot's performative boundaries lie? Twitter itself plays a role in the shaping of these boundaries, where its material affordances allow certain ways of interacting on the platform and disallow others. For example, Zizi Papacharissi (2012) describes how Twitter's "always on" (p. 1992) presence creates a form of context collapse that blends public and private life and encourages networked sharing. As a result, she argues that Twitter becomes a space where individuals perform their private identity publicly, informed by the networked connections that Twitter's suggestive algorithms and trending topics present to the user. Twitter's Application Programming Interface (API) also dictates how Twitterbots like Genderbot can function on the platform, creating opportunities for play as well as rules

and boundaries around the extent to which these bots can operate (Veale & Cook, 2018; Vismann, 2013).

In addition to the material (if digital) borders of a ludic space, however, "space" is also a mathematical term that describes a set of things in common. Tony Veale and Mike Cook (2018) use "space" to describe the set of outputs produced by generative machinery like Twitterbots, which is not only the technical term for these outputs, but also "something we can navigate and something we are eager to explore" to consider what Twitterbots can do (p. 59). While Twitterbots are often quite simple pieces of software, it can be difficult to parse the inner machinations of a generator just from viewing its outputs. Rather, they argue that it is by looking at outputs collectively—Genderbot's space, which takes form on its Twitter feed—that we can begin to find patterns which can suggest how the bot is structured and details about what it has created and has the *potential* to create (Veale & Cook, 2018). Looking at how Genderbot is structured on Twitter—its materiality—can thus help trace the boundaries of the ludic space it generates.

For the sake of a manageable first exploration into Genderbot's space, Figure 9 cuts a relatively tiny space from Genderbot between March 29th and 30th, 2022. Even from this small sample of eight outputs, several rhetorical patterns begin to emerge. For one, the tweets open in one of two ways, being "Today's gender is" and "The gender of the day is." Secondly, Genderbot's genders include many adjectives, such as "creative," "spectral," "old," "listless," and "ugly." Third, non-human *things* seem significant, with one object ("cardigan") and several animals—mythical and worldly, in groups and alone—making an appearance ("faun," "a sord of lyrebirds," and "mole"). And last,

Genderbot also includes numerous specific sensations (“the smell of old books,” “the smell of mango,” “the sound of a children’s choir,” and “the smell of pipe smoke”) and abstract sensations (“happiness,” “optimism,” and “focus”).

Figure 9

A sample space from Genderbot between March 29th and 30th, 2022

Note. Screenshot from Genderbot’s feed (Fletcher, n.d.). See the Appendix for transcript.

While this tiny sample is by no means representative of all Genderbot's tweets, it does hint towards the vastness of its space. It also demonstrates the way Genderbot generates this space using entangled processes of mediation. This begins with an algorithm made up of a corpus and semantic grammar. A corpus is "a body of text or a database of information" used in a generator—in this case, the verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs used by Genderbot (Veale & Cook, 2018, p. 56). Selections from the corpus are placed into the bot's grammar, a template which "captures both syntactic and semantic constraints for generating a new linguistic artifact" Genderbot (Veale & Cook, 2018, p. 67). Here, the medium expressing this grammar—Genderbot—adopts the phrase's subject position, complicating the attribution of each tweet (Vismann, 2013). Are these tweets to be cited to Fisher, or to Genderbot itself? Further, Genderbot's union of corpus and grammar occurs through free web service called "Cheap Bots, Done Quick!" (CBDQ) which in turn relies on a tool called Tracery. The assemblage of attribution expands, as Fletcher uses CBDQ to create Genderbot, while CBDQ is made by independent game designer v buckenham (who, incidentally, also uses they/them pronouns), and Tracery is made by professor and game designer Kate Compton. Even before viewing its outputs, Genderbot's algorithmic grammars demonstrate the entangled qualities of media, subjectivity, cultural practices, and sovereignty (Vismann, 2013).

Tracery takes randomly selected words from Genderbot's corpus, organized into groups like "adjective" or "animal" called symbols, and connects them using rewrite rules to create outputs (Compton et al., 2015). For example, the rewrite rules from the first tweet of March 29th might appear as "The gender of the day is a #adjective# #objectnoun#." Even from the small space sample analysed so far, it is evident that

Genderbot has several rewrite rules and appears to have a sizeable corpus, especially since Genderbot's Twitter feed is vast and always growing, with thousands of tweets as of this writing and four more generated every day. This vastness is part of the Genderbot's trans* appeal: A cisnormative understanding of gender boasts only two paltry options assigned at birth, with perhaps some variations on the binary if one is being generous. This tight space does not provide much room to move at all, let alone play. Genderbot's space, on the other hand, is expansive and characterized by play. In fact, viewing Genderbot as a system gestures towards exactly how big its ludic possibility space can be, a space which includes "every single possible artifact a generator can produce, along with the probability of production for each one" (Veale & Cook, 2018, p. 59). With multiple rewrite rules (sentence templates) and symbols (groups of words in the corpus) of unknown sizes, Genderbot's possibility space is huge.

A formula from Veale and Cook (2018) can help put the size of Genderbot's possibility space in context. This formula simplifies Genderbot down to a corpus of 20 words, grouped into two lists—10 for #word1# and 10 for #word2#. Streamlining Genderbot to a single rewrite rule combing two words from each list, such as "Today's gender is #word1# and #word2#," Genderbot would have a possibility space of $10^2 = 100$ expressions—a far cry from the usual two options. Adding adjectives expands this number again, where a list of 10 adjectives integrated using the rule "Today's gender is #adjective# #word1# and #word2#" increases this number by a factor of 10, or $10^3 = 1{,}000$ possible "gender" articulations.

Genderbot presents a vast number of ever-changing possibilities for what gender can be outside of cisnormative conceptualizations, constructed through collectively

entangled processes of mediation and alluding to the expansive field of possibility that trans* represents. While Genderbot's outputs are not successful gender expressions—Genderbot does not actually know, feel, or identify as any gender at all, and as such its performative expressions are "void"—the vastness of this void, where playful, nonsense "genders" have room manifest, generates a ludic space where expression can move, stretch, and be challenged collectively to imagine ways of existing beyond the limits of cisnormative conceptions of gender.

5.3 From Nonsense to (Non)sense

> *While many of Genderbot's tweets feel ridiculous (December 8, 2021: "The gender today is an alarmed porcupine with a glove"), some feel surprisingly profound. "Today's gender is the sound of nails on a chalkboard" (also from December 8, 2021) sure* feels *like my experience with gender dysphoria. Others feel poetic: "The gender of the day is a dark moon" (December 3, 2021) makes me think of my gender's invisible but continuously felt presence, pulling at me like the new moon to form the ocean's tide.*

Just as there are an assemblage of tools and actors in Genderbot's creation, the tweets it generates are also a part of its assemblage, as are those who encounter them. It is in this interpretative encounter, which can occur purposefully on the user's part or perhaps as a suggestion from a friend or Twitter algorithm, that Genderbot's nonsense "genders" gain meanings. These meanings are always dependent on the many contextual factors surrounding the encounter, including not just how the individual finds the tweet but also the way they understand the words assembled by Genderbot. The semantic grammars built through Tracery make Genderbot's gender expressions decipherable despite being effectively nonsense. Semantic grammar allows Genderbot's tweets to be interpreted by human actors as meaningful within this ludic space. Like any other bot-generated phrase,

these tweets can be more or less meaningful depending on the person reading them and the context surrounding the randomized text. These human interpretations of Genderbot's outputs "imparts an additional flavor to the whole, making it more than the sum of its parts" (Veale & Cook, 2018, p. 58)—a layering of play which takes place on material, technical, individual, and cultural levels. Encountering a tweet from Genderbot that *feels* like it speaks to one's own experience of gender, or perhaps inspires one to imagine gender more expansively, transforms Genderbot's "gender of the day" from nonsense to what can be more accurately conceptualized as (non)sense: nonsense made meaningful through its affective, sensory capacity.

While these affective resonances vary from person to person, they are not entirely random, either. One of the factors that impacts Genderbot's affective capacities is the type of words which are included in its corpus and the many personal and cultural meanings attached to them. Recalling the space shown in Figure 10, many of the terms in Genderbot's corpus are physical and abstract sensations and affects ("the smell of old books," "the smell of mango," "the sound of a children's choir," "the smell of pipe smoke," "happiness," "optimism," and "focus.") The adjectives in this space can also be considered types of feelings, such as "creative," "spectral," "old," "listless," and "ugly." This emphasis on sensory terms is significant for Genderbot's entire ludic space. Looking beyond this limited selection of outputs using a Twitter analytics tool shows that of Genderbot's 3,200 most recent tweets, the most frequently used words (beyond "gender,"

"today's," "day," and "today") are "smell" and "sound," with several adjectives following suit (see Table 1).[21]

Table 1

Genderbot's 15 most used words

Word	Number of instances
gender	3195
today's	1482
day	523
today	529
smell	503
sound	384
covered	96
spectral	61
distant	47
murderous	41
cosmic	39
foreboding	37
ghostly	36
wild	34
ominous	34

Note. Data from Social Bearing (2022) Twitter analytics.

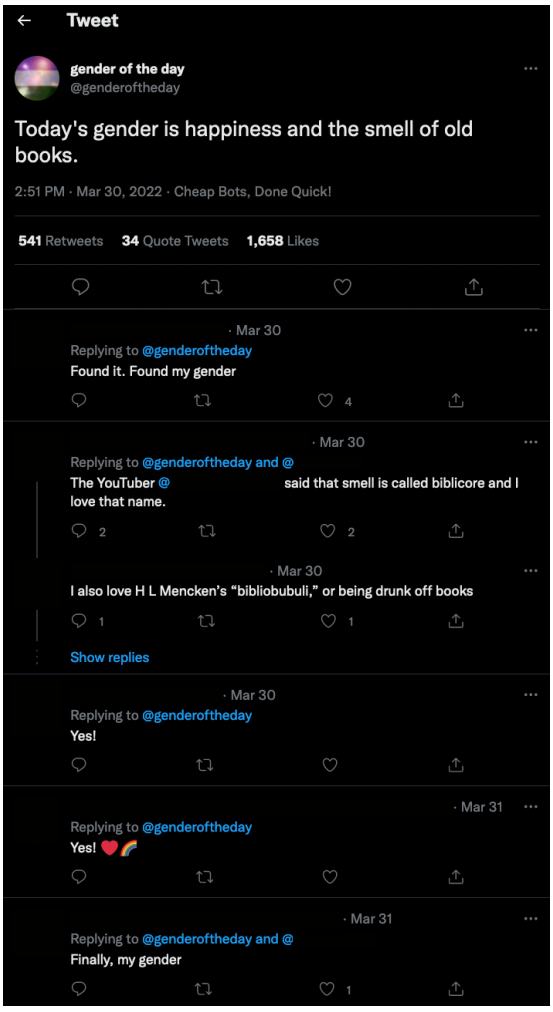
These sensory tendencies of Genderbot's outputs are not incidental. Notably, the most popular post from the sample space uses these sensory terms in two different ways, "happiness" and "the smell of old books." Responses to this "gender," shown in Figure

[21] Notably, "taste" is not amongst Genderbot's top words despite also evoking the senses. I hypothesize that this is a purposeful choice on Fletcher's part to avoid some taboo or otherwise unsavory phrases, especially in considering "taste" in combination with certain animals, for example. As Veale and Cook (2018) explain, "we cannot anticipate the unintended meanings that can slip into a bot's outputs, meaning just about anything can happen. Just as our generator does not know when something is a poetic reference, it also does not know if something is inappropriate or offensive, or worse" (p. 59). Caution must be taken to avoid such possible outputs.

10, include comments like “Yes!” “Finally, my gender” and “Found it. Found my gender.”[22] By turning to smells and sounds, many of the “genders” tweeted by Genderbot emphasize the felt dimension of gender outside of its visuality and the visual’s accompanying problematics.

Figure 10

Responses to the most popular tweet of the sample space in Figure 9



[22] Although these replies are publicly available, the ethics of using public tweets in research is murky (see Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). This thesis opts to omit usernames to follow the common research practice of taking special precautions when working with vulnerable groups like trans populations.

Note. Screenshot from Genderbot's Twitter feed (Fletcher, 2022). See the Appendix for transcript.

It can be tempting to ask what a gender such as "happiness and the smell of old books" means, even if claimed playfully. Sara Ahmed (2004) encourages us, however, to ask what affects *do* and how they become stuck to particular objects, bodies, and signs. The affects produced in an encounter with Genderbot's tweets can encourage or dissuade engagement with its performative trans play depending on the affective resonance of its outputs with the individual. This can be seen in the many responses to Genderbot which comment with affirmation, feelings of recognition, and similarly playful responses. Genderbot's most popular post, "Today's gender is no" (Figure 11), prompts a feeling of refusal in several users, with one trans-identified user commenting that "I'm feeling it so deep in my bones it's unreal" (Fletcher, 2021). In some cases, Genderbot's tweets can feel like relatable metaphors for trans feelings of gender which not only defy visual representation but defy any conceptualization of gender at all.

Figure 11

Select responses to Genderbot's most popular tweet

Note. Screenshot from Genderbot's Twitter feed (Fletcher, 2021). See the Appendix for transcript.

The affective dimension of Genderbot's tweets demonstrates how gender (and its absence) is often understood as an embodied feeling for trans subjects, a feeling found "deep in my bones," as the user shares. Describing this sense as a trans phenomenology, Keegan (2016b) reflects on his ability as a youth to develop a "nascent sense of transgender possibility" (p. 32) using mainstream media which unintentionally supported the movement between genders. He later adds that "[t]ransgender phenomenology is rooted in the desire to make perceivable a feeling of gender that others have not (yet) witnessed" (Keegan, 2018, p. 2). For Keegan, the sensory capacities of trans media can make "sensing transgender" possible, opening the field of gender possibilities for the audience. This expands gender beyond cisnormative understandings of gender as binary and fixed to what the body looks like, and instead recognizes gender as "defined and constituted by *what I feel* and not simply *what others see"* (Salamon, 2014, p. 154). Genderbot's expansive and sensory ludic space presents a plethora of opportunities for readers to encounter terms that may resonate with their own sense of gender, potentially contributing to a playful sense of trans possibility. This does not mean that Genderbot encourages one to identify as "happiness and the smell of old books." Rather, I am suggesting that Genderbot turns the seriousness of identity claims on their head, playfully releasing the need for gender labels from their cisnormative stranglehold which demands gender expression be definite, earnest, and unchanging.

The ludic space opened by Genderbot's mediating process can also encourage readers to engage with Genderbot's performative trans play collectively. As Ahmed

(2004) writes, "emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (p. 119, emphasis in original). Several responses seen in Figures 10 and 11 include elaborations on the gender of the day, sometimes offering alternative terms for the feeling being described, and other times making similarly playful jokes and comments such as speculating on what pronouns someone whose gender is "no" might be ("Pronouns are N/A," offers one user, riffing off of the use of the forward slash to separate pronouns in writing). Some users tag other users' handles, adding comments like "thought you'd appreciate this." In so doing, these users engage in performative trans play in the ludic space made by Genderbot (and its associated assemblage) and encourage others to join in on the fun. These comments and responses, while frequently off-handed and unserious, demonstrate a collective, embodied play with the cisnormative boundaries of gender, encouraging the development of both trans subjectivities and communities through their playfully affective resonance.

5.4 Performative Trans* Play

> *I can keep scrolling the feed, but there are a lot of tweets I'm not interested in. For example, the animal references don't really do anything for me, although some people seem to find an appeal. As a follower of Genderbot, however, every once and a while one of its tweets in my feed will catch my attention or be shared with me by a friend—a refreshing moment of bot-generated playfulness amongst and contributing to the online chatter.*
>
> *Here's one I encountered recently: "Today's gender is tiredness and the smell of fir trees," November 29, 2021. It brings me to the boyhood I both did and didn't have, a family trip to Algonquin Park. Dry orange pine needles are trapped in my socks and stuck to my sappy palms after a long day in the woods. The setting sun shimmers between the tree branches, shining a warm gender euphoria into my eyes. It's both a memory and a dream.*

There are many constraints to Genderbot. Genderbot's "genders" can feel repetitive with its many animals, smells, and sounds. As immense as their possibility spaces might be, generators often have problems with their ability to have perceptibly different outputs (Compton, 2016). Compton (2016) calls this the "10,000 Bowls of Oatmeal" problem, where one "can easily generate 10,000 bowls of plain oatmeal, with each oat being in a different position and different orientation, and *mathematically speaking* they will all be completely unique. But the user will likely just see *a lot of oatmeal*" (para. 48, emphasis in original). Perceptual differentiation, where the user feels that the outputs are different in some way, can require that Twitterbot corpuses and grammars be updated after a while and their possibility spaces expanded—as various as their outputs can be, Twitterbots are finite. Further, as resonant as many of these "genders" are for some, Genderbot's performative trans play does often fail to engage human readers. These problems are to be expected—Genderbot is by no means aware of what it produces or how these outputs are received by its readers, and even Fletcher, who wrote the corpus and semantic grammar for Genderbot, can only control its outputs to an extent.

Still, the failure of Genderbot to create perceptibly unique "genders" which resonate with readers makes its successes that much more meaningful, especially when encountered unexpectedly, scattered throughout other tweets in one's feed or shared by a friend. Not only can these "genders" feel like they speak to one's own experience but knowing that they come from an improbable source like a bot makes them that much more intriguing.

Most importantly, however, is that Genderbot demonstrates one way in which trans*mediation can explore the development of trans subjectivities and communities

through its playful gender performativity. Trans existence is not a game, but it can certainly be a lot of fun. Media are one way to share these moments of trans joy and play. Despite its limitations and rather banal presence, Genderbot's trans*mediation offers an opportunity to engage in an ongoing creative reflection on gender and identity beyond the limitations of representation, both individually and as a community, through the performative failure of its algorithmically generated "genders." This is an opportunity which should not be so quickly overlooked, especially amongst the everyday conditions that can leave trans people fighting for survival. The potential for play through trans*mediation is thus not to erase or distract from the presence of these conditions but to instead focus on the very things which can help alleviate them through the strengthening of trans community and identity.

6. Conclusion: Evolving Trans*mediation

A year after their public unveiling of *Frankenstein's Telephone*, Rosenbaum's latest piece expands their focus on the intersections of AI generated imagery and gender. This work, titled *Set in Stone* (Rosenbaum, 2021a), is a series of AI-generated "marble" faces. At the beginning of the piece, the AI is trained to generate idealized masculine faces. These faces melt into each other, shifting with their various characteristics but remaining on the masculine side of the gender binary. The AI is then introduced to an idealised feminine dataset, which results in the faces shifting towards the feminine side of the binary (Figure 12). In doing so, the machine becomes trans, learning new ways to generate gendered faces that do not rely exclusively on idealized masculinity or femininity but instead combine them into new articulations—the cuts and stitches of trans*mediation. As Rosenbaum (2021a) writes in their artist's statement, "the marble starts to give way, non-conforming self-expression, colour, and joy emerge as the gender becomes unfixed, non-binary […] The artwork evolves as the machine learns that there are multiple genders and gender expressions" (para. 1). Like *Frankenstein's Telephone,* the machine performs the movement of trans, its form literally shifting genders and engaging in trans*mediation.

Figure 12

A sample palette of faces from Set in Stone

Note. Image from Rosenbaum's (2021b) online portfolio.

Also like *Frankenstein's Telephone*, I find myself much more drawn to these slightly uncanny faces as a representation of my trans* experience, especially in their collective mosaic display. While I do not see my own face, I do see my own facial

changes in *Set in Stone* more than in any image from The Gender Spectrum Collection, for example.[23] Unlike *Frankenstein's Telephone*, however, my recognition of *Set in Stone*'s trans*mediation is not just my own interpretation of the piece. Although they do not name it as such, Rosenbaum (2021a) purposefully uses *Set in Stone*'s trans*mediation to explore their own trans experiences, remarking that the piece "examines what the gender shift looks like and what transgender and non-binary self-expression and self-aware aesthetics are beyond biological essentialism" (para. 1). The piece helps articulate the ever-shifting movement of trans, computed through image recognition algorithms and projected on the wall (when seen in person) or recorded in a timelapse video (when viewed online), and potentially generating the felt sense of trans movement among those who encounter it.

Trans*mediation is a concept which helps articulate the ever-shifting movements of trans phenomena which resist mirror-like representation. The trans artists who engage with the process of trans*mediation thus utilize these articulations to express their experience with their own trans identities. For those who encounter these media such as myself, they can open up moments of recognition and contribute to trans community-building through shared experience, or possibly encourage them to think about gender and identity in ways that challenge the cisnormative ideology which permeates western culture. Trans*mediation thus centres trans identity and serves to benefit trans people, a necessary shift in theorizations of trans media. But it also invites non-trans-identified individuals into its fold. Life *is* trans*, mediated and changing with every moment. This

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[23] That being said, I do find their white marble form connotes a neoclassical aesthetic rooted in white supremacy which does jar my affective resonance with the piece (see Nelson, 2020).

trans vitality—to use the term in Kember and Zylinska's (2012) lively conceptualization—inherently resists indexical representation. Trans*mediation can be useful for all those looking to express and explore any kind of change, from describing one's transition and hopes for the future within the cisnormative constraints of language, as *Silver Femme* does, to Genderbot's ongoing generation of a playful gender space online.

This is not to deflate the political ramifications of trans*mediation for trans people. Rather, it imagines a future where the distinction between transgender and cisgender identities is not a source of inequality—a future where gender need not necessarily be assigned at birth, or if so, is commonly accepted as open to change and variation rather than condemned as monstrous and deceptive, a reason for harm, or an identity that requires ongoing specialized education to exist in the world.

It is difficult for me end this thesis because, as Carter (2013) writes regarding the embrace of transition, "this essay can't finish with a conventional conclusion because the medium it engages works against tidy endings" (p. 141). Trans*mediation inherently resists such tidy endings, as *Silver Femme*'s time-twisting final scene and Genderbot's ongoing gender-making reminds us. Rather than a tie a bow here, then, I would like to hand you the threads of this thesis and encourage you to trace them for yourself. Where else might trans*mediation be articulated and recognized? And what else might it do?

7. Appendix

7.1 Figure 2 Transcript

Caption for image 1: “A trans masculine gender-nonconforming person and a transfeminine non-binary person sleeping together in bed”

Caption for image 2: “A trans masculine gender-nonconforming person and a transfeminine non-binary person sleeping together in bed”

Caption for image 3: “A trans masculine gender-nonconforming person and a transfeminine non-binary person sleeping together in bed”

Caption for image 4: “A person laying in bed with a laptop”

Caption for image 5: “A man laying on top of a bed under a blanket.”

Caption for image 6: “A man laying on top of a bed under a blanket.”

Caption for image 7: “A man laying on top of a bed under a blanket.”

Caption for image 8: “A bed with a white comforter and pillows.”

7.2 Figure 9 Transcript

March 30: “Today's gender is a creative, spectral faun.”

March 30: “Today's gender is happiness and the smell of old books.”

March 30: “The gender of the day is a sord of lyrebirds.”

March 30: “Today's gender is focus and the smell of mango.”

Mach 29: “The gender of the day is a listless mole.”

March 29: “Today's gender is optimism and the sound of a children's choir.”

March 29: “Today's gender is the smell of pipe smoke.”

March 29: “The gender of the day is an ugly cardigan.”

7.3 Figure 10 Transcript

Genderbot's tweet, from March 30: "Today's gender is happiness and the smell of old books."

Anonymized response: "Found it. Found my gender"

Anonymized response: "The YouTube @[redacted] said that smell is called biblicore and I love that name."

Anonymized response: "I also love H L Mencken's 'bibliobububli,' or being drunk off books"

Anonymized response: "Yes!"

Anonymized response: "Yes! [red heart emoji] [rainbow emoji]"

Anonymized response: "Finally, my gender"

7.4 Figure 11 Transcript

Genderbot's tweet, from March 1: "Today's gender is no."

Anonymized response: "Already hitting"

Anonymized response: "accurate"

Anonymized response: "@[redacted] thou"

Anonymized response: "Ooh a personal fave [black heart emoji]"

Anonymized response: "Hey that's my gender!"

Anonymized response: "@[redacted] thought you'd appreciate this [sparkle emoji]"

Anonymized response: "So fucking true"

Anonymized response: "I approve"

Anonymized response: "I'm feeling it so deep in my bones it's unreal"

Anonymized response: “Hey! That’s me!”

Anonymized response: “Pronouns are N/A”

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