

**“I Am Not Alone in This” :  
An Ethnographic Exploration of Transgender Community  
in Calgary, Alberta, Canada**

E. Courtney Cameron

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Supervisor: Tova Höjdestrand

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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on membership and participation in transgender (and, by extension, queer) communities in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. It is informed by queer feminist theories of gender as well as anthropological theory and methodology and is based on a two month fieldwork period with particular reliance on semi-structured interviews. It explores participants' experiences of gender policing and transgressing heterosexual norms as well as their experiences with taking part in trans and queer communities in contemporary Calgary. Further, it advances a critical perspective on ideas of transgender as a singular homogenous category or community and calls attention to gaps between queer theories of gender and the lived experiences of trans folk. Finally, it suggests how anthropological methodology could be helpful in addressing these problems and how a greater anthropological engagement with queer and transgender studies could be fruitful for both areas of study.

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## **1. Introduction**

### *Aims of the Study*

The topic of this thesis is transgender, genderqueer, and non-heteronormative gender identities or expressions and community involvement in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. It explores the situated experiences of young transgender adults regarding transgressing heterosexual norms, learning about (trans)gender, and participating in trans or queer communities in the city. The thesis is based on fieldwork carried out over two months, including participant observation and, in particular, semi-structured interviews with trans people living in the city. It is informed by queer feminist and anthropological theories.

With this focus, I seek to address the following central questions: What is it like to be trans in contemporary Calgary? How do participants encounter gender policing and heterosexual norms? What kinds of community exist for trans folk in the city? In what ways are their experiences contextually situated? And why are these questions important to (trans)gender studies, queer studies, and anthropology?

### *Note on Terms*

Many of the terms used in this paper have emerged fairly recently. Transgender and queer, for example, are socio-historically specific terms that arose primarily in the United States in response to gay and lesbian assimilationist politics and the increasingly codified vision of transsexuality (Valentine, 2007, p. 147). As such, they remain fraught, complicated, and non-universal terminologies. Some of the terms mentioned, often the terms queer or genderqueer, following recent directions in queer theory, are used by the people who adopt them to actively resist stable or authoritative definitions and instead embrace the fluidity and changeability of sex, gender, and sexuality. All of the terms, when applied to specific persons in the context of this

paper, are defined and applied as they are used by these persons themselves. I provide brief definitions of transgender and queer-related terms as they appear, but it should be clear from the beginning that not all people use these terms in the same way, a point which will be explored more deeply further on (see chapter seven, A Critical View on “The Trans Community”). The definitions I provide are presented in the ways they are used by the participants themselves or, when used generally, in what I have seen to be the most common, open, and accepted forms. Some terms that I use in this paper that are particularly central, and that may be contentious, are transgender, queer, and community. I explain my choice of terms below. These definitions also include important background information that may help to put the rest of the paper in context.

*Transgender* (or *trans*) is used throughout this paper, for theoretical purposes, as an umbrella term to denote any person who crosses outside the normative boundaries of binary (male/female) gender. This is also often seen as *trans\**, where the asterisk is used as in a search query to leave the term open-ended. This trans umbrella encompasses but is not limited to identities labelled as transgender, transsexual, trans, trans man, trans woman, genderqueer, genderfluid, genderfuck, agender, or gender-variant. Other terms that are commonly used, particularly but not exclusively in academic writing, include *non-normative gender* or *gender non-conforming* (eg. Wylie, Corliss, Boulanger, Prokop, and Austin, 2010). For the sake of consistency, I will primarily use the term transgender, in its broadest umbrella sense, in this thesis. I favour this term because it is less clinical and more commonly referenced by the participants in this study. *Cisgender* is used to refer to non-transgender identities or expressions or, in other words, “to people who do not identify with a gender diverse experience, without enforcing existence of a 'normative' gender expression” (Green, 2006, p. 247, n. 1). The prefix *cis-* is used in queer and trans discourses to signify non-trans, so that non-trans does not remain an unmarked privileged state that is presumed to be more natural than the marked state, trans (cf. Serano, 2007).

*Queer*, like transgender, is used in this paper primarily as an umbrella term to signify any person, action, or idea that is non-heteronormative. *Heteronormativity*, in turn, is defined as the social system of norms and regulatory mechanisms that privileges heterosexuality and binary male/

female constructions of sex and gender (cf. Butler, 1990; Rubin, 1984; Warner, 1991). It is worth emphasising, particularly in the context of this paper, that the inclusion of binary gender in this definition of heteronormativity is just as important, and not at all secondary, to the inclusion of heterosexuality (Stryker, 2004, p. 214; also cf. Butler, 1990). When referring to groups, unless there is cause to do otherwise, I use the term queer rather than common initialisms such as LGB, LGBT, etc. (where L stands for lesbian, G for gay, B for bisexual, and T for transgender). These are the most common forms of this type of initialism, but other iterations also exist, becoming increasingly unwieldy as they attempt to include more and more categories (eg. LGBTTIQQ2A, meaning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, two-spirit, and ally or asexual). While these initialisms have their uses, I take the now increasingly accepted view that this “alphabet soup” approach inevitably neglects more diversity than it can encompass. As Tom Boellstorff (2007) remarks in his overview, “Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology”, “This concern originates in key questions about intersectionality, inclusion, and difference... questions deferred rather than resolved by additional identity categories” (p. 18). Within such bounded, alphabet-soup formulations, T for transgender is too readily “reduced to merely another (easily detached) genre of sexual identity rather than perceived, like race or class, as something that cuts across existing sexualities” (Stryker, 2004, p. 214). Therefore, in this thesis, I choose to use “non-heteronormative” or, more frequently, “queer.” The term queer is well-recognised and commonly, if not universally, adopted among the participants in this study. “Queer” is also used in this paper to index specific discourses in academic or community contexts. These instances are marked as they arise.

*Community*, particularly in the sense of “the queer community” or “the trans community,” is a term used in this paper with some reservations. It is not intended to imply that there are any such singular, homogeneous, defined, or bounded entities. Rather it is used to invoke the feelings that participants express of having something in common based on their sex, gender, or sexuality, which differentiates them from the heteronormative cityscape around them. It is also used to invoke those places and situations in which people gather based on this commonality in order to socialise together, support each other, or learn from each other. It should be recognised that the

use of this term does not necessarily imply the inclusion of all self-identified trans people or all people who may fall under the umbrella of transgender as described above. (For more on this, see chapter three, Methodology: Ethical Considerations.) Debunking a universalised or homogenised conception of “the trans community” has become an important focus over the course of this research project (see chapter seven, A Critical View on “The Trans Community”).

### *Plan of the Paper*

To begin the paper, I discuss the theoretical entry points I have taken into this project. This includes, first, a queer feminist theorisation of gender and heterosexual norms in society and, second, a brief overview of work that has previously been undertaken on queer and transgender topics in anthropology.

Next, I discuss the methodological approach I have taken into the project, which consists primarily of semi-structured interviews, with some participant observation. I will discuss important ethical considerations involved, particularly in regard to working with a topic related to non-normative sex, gender, and sexuality. I will also position myself in relation to my research and reflect on the difficulties involved with defining myself or being defined by others as an insider in the group I am researching.

Following this are five chapters of ethnography and critical analysis. These include, first, an exploration of how the people who have participated in this study experience transgressing heterosexual norms in their daily life. Second, a discussion of how they experience community and share support and knowledge related to queer and trans topics. Third, an account of the historical and local situatedness of trans communities in contemporary Calgary. Fourth, a critical perspective on the diversity that is included or that may fail to be included by common notions of “the trans community” or the transgender category, “T”. And, fifth, a discussion of how and why

anthropological research on transgender subjects is an important project in regard both to queer and transgender studies and to anthropology.

Finally, I will conclude the paper with thoughts on the most important themes that have emerged over the course of this research project. These are, firstly, that the experiences of the participants in this project are situated in stark relief to the backdrop of a heteronormative society. This may include very negative experiences of being disrespected, condemned, or excluded -- sometimes in explicit ways, such as the use of slurs like “tranny”, and sometimes in ways that are less explicit but no less significant, such as the absence of gender-neutral washrooms in public spaces. Secondly, while trans groups and communities in Calgary are small, scattered, and still very much in the process of being formed, they are also incredibly diverse and dynamic. Those people who choose to identify under the trans\* umbrella or who are identified as non-heteronormative by others can fit in anywhere across a wide span of differences in sex, gender, sexuality, identity, expression, appearance, knowledge, behaviour, and medical and legal choices, as well as age, ethnicity, class, and ability -- to give just a bare outline. It is therefore incredibly important that a careful and critical view is taken towards any attempt to discuss trans people in a collective sense, in order to avoid homogenising what is in reality a very heterogeneous “category” or “community”. Thirdly, there is a very large and awkward gap between theory and daily life regarding transgender experiences. This is not at all to say that a queer theory of gender is a bad thing, per se. However, there is a remarkable lack of work undertaken from within the academy that purposefully focuses on the lived realities of trans folk, particularly work that is not medical or psychological in nature. This is a problematic gap, which could benefit from anthropological research about queer and transgender communities. Considering all of the critique that has occurred within the discipline of anthropology on the problems of Othering and the importance of considering emic or insider perspectives, it is my argument, and certainly my hope, that anthropological work could take part in the process of making those who are Othered by the heteronormativity of our society more familiar, accepted, and understood, instead of alienated and condemned.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter I summarise the principal theoretical frameworks that have guided this thesis, from inception to completion. This thesis is principally informed by two schools of theory that are sometimes far removed from each other: queer-feminist theory on heteronormativity, particularly the work of Judith Butler, on the one hand, and anthropological theory and methodology, privileging on-the-ground research among the people in question, on the other. In this research project I have attempted, in my own small way, to bridge both of these frameworks.

### *The Heterosexual Matrix and Debunking the Gender Binary*

An important entry point for this paper is Judith Butler's (1990) now paradigmatic discussion of how gendered subjects are constructed through discourse and the heterosexual matrix of social norms regulating sex, gender, and sexuality. While this is perhaps an unusually philosophical frame under which to conduct a ground-level, fieldwork-based anthropological study, this theoretical backdrop is significant for two reasons. The first reason is that, going into this study, it is important to explicitly recognise and critique the gender norms that exist in so-called "Western"<sup>1</sup> societies. These are the norms, almost always unquestioned, that cause trans people to be constructed as "Others" in the first place. The second reason is that there is a close, though often contentious, relationship between academic theories of (non-)heteronormativity and discourses within queer and transgender communities, with Butler being one of the most central figures in the development of theoretical understandings of transgender phenomena (Valentine, 2007, p. 166-167, 149). Several of the participants in this project, though certainly not all, as well as others in the queer or trans communities in which they take part, are already familiar with Judith Butler's work or that of trans writers and activists who draw on, engage with, or critique

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<sup>1</sup> "Western" is used occasionally throughout this paper, with reservations, as an acknowledgedly problematic term that is nevertheless indicative of the thinking that has, historically and to this day, structured much social research.

queer theorisations of gender, including Butler's work, to varying extents (eg. Namaste, 2005).<sup>2</sup> These theories have had and continue to have a notable impact on their lives, so it is important for this paper to remain in dialogue with them.

To begin this paper, then, the following ideas need to be debunked. First, that there are two natural, essential, distinct, and complementary biological sexes called male and female. Second, that different innate masculine and feminine identities, roles, and behaviours (or "genders") follow naturally from biological sex. Third, alternatively, that gender is socially constructed and not innate, but is nevertheless based or modelled on natural, distinct, and dimorphic biological sex (sometimes explained as "social sex"). And fourth, that the two sexes (male-men and female-women) are opposite and complementary and that it is therefore natural for people to be attracted to the opposite sex and only the opposite sex. In this section, I use Butler's work in particular as a way of discussing how these assumptions are highly problematic.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) works to critique categorical notions of sex and gender as either male or female, essential and innate. In order to do this, Butler delivers her theory of "the heterosexual matrix", which refers to the fundamental and pervasive social system of sex, gender, and sexuality that operates to discursively produce, naturalise, and legitimise compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender norms (p. 45). Within this matrix, she argues, "'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (p. 23). This means that in our society there are two opposite, polarised categories that are understood as coherent, legitimate subjects: first, those who are masculine male men who desire and participate in sexual relationships with women and, second, those who are feminine female women who desire and participate in sexual relationships with men. These two categories represent the ideal standards against which everyone is evaluated (p. 22).

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<sup>2</sup> There is also, it should be noted, a diverse body of work in the emerging field of "transgender studies" developing both in academic and activist circles, but it is not within the scope of this paper to engage with this literature more thoroughly.

This heterosexual system of sex, gender, and sexuality is socially constructed and not naturally occurring. Many other scholars also argue this point, taking examples from the sexual diversity present in biology, history, and other cultural contexts. For example, as Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) argues regarding the social construction of sex, “We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender -- not science -- can define our sex” (p. 3). Taking into account the wide spread of variation in combinations of chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy in human populations it is demonstrable that even sex, which is taken in heteronormative societies to be naturally, essentially, and unproblematically dimorphic, is not pre-discursively so (p. 3). This argument about the social construction of sex is similar in effect to the critique that Butler makes about ideas of innate or essential “gender identity”. As Butler argues, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p. 34). This means that making others -- and ourselves -- intelligible within the heterosexual matrix is an action we perform daily in everyday life. With the concept of performativity, Butler argues that gender is something we, as a society and as social subjects, *do*, rather than something that we, as individual human beings, *are* (p. 22-34). Through arguments such as these, sex and gender can be recognised as being much more fluid, variable, and constructed (and less natural, essential, and innate) than they are commonly represented as being in a heteronormative society like contemporary Canada.

Because some combinations of characteristics of sex, gender, and sexuality are seen as coherent within this system of norms and others are not, some gender performances are more socially acceptable than others. In this way, the heterosexual matrix functions as a disciplinary regime constituted by the “regulatory practices of gender coherence” (p. 33). The two ideal categories of subject -- men and women, in all that these categories conceptually entail -- are understood as natural, normal, right, and good, and any subject who falls outside these categories is accordingly understood as unnatural, abnormal, wrong, and bad, or even “evil”. In Butler’s (1999) preface to *Gender Trouble*, she responds to those who were critical of her original text by stating the aim of

her argument with the utmost clarity. I repeat her words here in full and echo her goal wholeheartedly in this project:

To the extent the gender norms (ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation) establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be “real,” they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression. If there is a positive normative task in *Gender Trouble*, it is to insist upon the extension of this legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible. (p. xxiv-xxv)

People who fall under the transgender umbrella, in varying ways and extents, are marked as “incoherent” within the heterosexual matrix, are regularly marked as “wrong” and “bad” as a direct result, and in this way are subject to social discipline, which can be a very negative experience. This point will recur often as the paper goes on.

Taking Butler’s (1990) discussion in *Gender Trouble* and its later preface (1999) as an entry point for this paper is motivated by a desire to expand on this project of extending legitimacy to those who transgress heterosexual gender norms. At this point Butler and I part ways, by which I mean that there are several other celebrated aspects of Butler’s work that I do not feel are as useful in the context of this anthropological thesis. Her concept of subversiveness, for example, carries with it a political and philosophical project that I find obscures rather than reveals the everyday realities of living outside heterosexual norms (cf. Wilchins, 1997; Namaste, 2005). However, what I carry into this project from Butler is a norm-critical approach to sex, gender, and sexuality; a recognition of the pervasiveness and omnipresence of heterosexual norms in the North American context; an understanding of gender (cis or trans) as a social phenomenon; and a resolve to represent the experiences and identities of the participants in this project and of other trans-identified people not as exotic, shameful, or unnatural, but as valid and legitimate. Further, I seek, in my own small way, to help fill the empty spaces left behind by such philosophical discussions of gender. It is one thing to say that there is a system of heterosexual norms and that some people fit into it less well than others, and it is another to say how this manifests in people’s daily lives.

*Queer and Transgender Anthropology in Review*

It is also important to situate this thesis within the slowly growing body of literature on sex, gender, and sexuality within anthropology, and particularly with regard to the areas of research that are variously classified as queer anthropology, gay and lesbian anthropology, or with some variation of the ubiquitous LGBT+ initialism. In this section I trace, briefly, the unfolding of anthropological discussions on sex, gender, and sexuality that have broken the ground for attention to queer and transgender subjects in contemporary anthropology. I outline the role that anthropology has played in exposing gender and sexual diversity in the global context, the anxiety expressed within the discipline over turning attention to anthropological researchers' own sexuality and the arguments in recent years about why this attention is so necessary, as well as the hesitant yet growing efforts to formulate anthropological research questions regarding (non-) normativity and sex, gender, and sexuality. It is within this disciplinary history that I situate this research project as following a small but growing body of works that can be tentatively labelled "queer anthropology". These are works that engage with topics related to sex, gender, and sexuality and also with queer and feminist theories, with questions of normativity, and with the task of debunking ideas within so-called "Western" discourses of the naturalness or rightness of heterosexuality and binary sex/gender.

For a long time, anthropology has had an important role in the development of contemporary theories of sexuality, not least in that it has produced ethnographic material demonstrating the extremely high level of diversity of global practices regarding sex, gender, and sexuality. Gayle Rubin (2002) remarks on this when she traces the development of anthropological inquiries into sexual subcultures in North America, back into the fifties and sixties, and gives thanks to those who first paved the way and brought sexuality into the accepted realm of anthropological inquiry (p. 53). As she writes:

"Anthropology has facilitated potent shifts toward ideological leveling in many registers, including the sexual, by refusing to accept Western industrial civilizations as the measure of

human achievement, by treating different cultural systems as equally legitimate, by attacking the foundations of racial ranking and the concept of race itself, by situating epistemological assumptions within culturally specific frameworks, and showing how systems of moral value are produced by particular social contexts.” (p. 18)

However, as Rubin recognises, and others also argue (cf. Boellstorff, 2007), the relationship between anthropology and gender/sexual diversity studies has been inconsistent and incomplete. Particularly, anthropological work is not always in touch with the theoretical work going on in other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (p. 17-19). Further, while so-called “Western” anthropologists have historically produced much reporting on the “strange” sexual practices of “exotic Others”, much less of this attention has been turned inward to these anthropologists’ own lives and societies.

Anthropology’s earliest contributions to studies of sex, gender, and sexuality had to do with the practices of “exotic” Others, while at the same time neglecting considerations of the anthropologists’ own positioning and of cultural contexts closer to home. Only recently has this begun to change. Michael Ashkenazi and Fran Markowitz ‘s (1999) anthology *Sex, Sexuality, and the Anthropologist*, for example, centres on an “unease” about the methodological and theoretical attempts within the discipline to ignore sexuality in anthropology, despite it being a fundamental aspect of human experience (p. 21). In their introduction, they locate the publication of Lewin and Leap’s *Out in the Field* (1996) and Kulick and Willson’s *Taboo* (1995), as representing a turning point in studies of sex, gender, and sexuality in anthropology, bringing to focus studies of non-normative sexualities that did not necessarily take place among exotic others (p.6). This shift, however, is in some ways still incomplete.

Many of the recent arguments for bringing sexuality into anthropology have revolved around the role sexuality plays in fieldwork and how questions of sexuality should be brought into anthropological researchers’ efforts to be reflexive in their fieldwork and writing practices. In the introduction to Don Kulick and Margaret Willson’s (1995) anthology, *Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, Kulick remarks on the editors’ surprise that it took such a long time for critical attention to turn to anthropologists themselves as sexual

subjects (p. 2). This is particularly surprising in a discipline noted for its commitment to reflexivity, especially considering that the sexual practices of Others have long been considered fair game. As Kulick remarks, “Sex is far from new or taboo in anthropology. Quite the opposite: anthropology has always trafficked in the sexuality of the people we study” (p. 2). This framing of “the people we study”, however, still marks “exotic Others”. Very few anthropological studies on sex, gender, or sexuality have been conducted close to home or engage in dialogue with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

There are not insignificant reasons for the way these developments have unfolded, of course, and all of these contributions have been significant in their own way. Nevertheless, there have been troublesome institutional challenges to the advancement of anthropological studies of sex, gender, and sexuality, particularly with regard to non-normative sex, gender, and sexuality (Boellstorff, 2007, p. 21). Those studies that do exist tend to focus on gay men, rather than on female gender and sexuality or on transgender subjects (p. 20). Studies that look at issues that may be considered transgender, in the sense that they involve non-heteronormative formulations of gender identities, expressions, or social roles, are most often about “exotic” or historical iterations, such as berdaches in Native American/First Nations societies (Valentine, 2007, p. 153). While these studies fill some gaps in the way that sex, gender, and sexuality are approached in anthropology, others remain.

So, while sexuality and gender, particularly in regard to kinship systems and gender roles, have long been topics of anthropological inquiry, and while recent texts have begun to call attention to lesbian and gay subjects and to question the role of sexuality in anthropological research and writing -- I am still left grasping for a queer anthropology in which to situate this research project. As a student who has for several years been trying, in my own small way, to combine the strengths of sexual diversity studies and anthropology, I have never been more confounded by the lack of connections between queer theories of sex, gender, and sexuality and anthropology. This has become particularly apparent to me as I have worked on this paper, in which it is not enough to speak just about the sex, gender, and sexuality either of the researched or of the

researcher, but where instead attention must be drawn to the entire system of sex, gender and sexuality in our (in this case, Canadian) society.

There are a few reasons for this lack of interconnections, one being that queer theory is highly philosophical and in this respect can be far removed from the everyday life that anthropological research focuses on (cf. Lewin and Leap, 2002). Another reason is that queer theory is deeply embedded in the “Western” socio-historical context (eg. Butler, 1990) and can be problematic to export into discussions of other contexts. Certainly, I do not suppose that a marriage of queer theory and anthropology would be seamless. However, I do think that the two disciplines have much more to offer each other than they have discovered so far, and much more in common than they think. I will return to this question later in the paper (see chapter eight, The Significance of an Anthropology of Transgender).

There is a body of work developing, very slowly, that attempts to address this gap, which may tentatively be labelled “queer anthropology”. This should be contrasted with “gay and lesbian anthropology” which implies a narrower range of subjects and does not indicate (as “queer” does by its association with queer studies and queer theory) any necessary engagement with norm-critical theories of sex, gender, and sexuality. In his excellent overview, “Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology”, Tom Boellstorff (2007) cautiously outlines this growing body of literature. He argues that “ethnographic work in this area can play a pivotal role in how new anthropologies will shape our understanding of human selfhood and sociality in the context of continuing technological transformation and socioeconomic inequality” (p. 27). Of particular relevance to this paper, Boellstorff locates, beginning in 1993, the first indications of a rise in anthropological research on transgender subjects. Examples include Judith Halberstam’s (1998) *Female Masculinity*, Towle and Morgan’s (2002) article “Romancing the Transgender Native”, and the work of David Valentine (2002, 2003, 2007) based on his fieldwork in New York among trans-identified<sup>3</sup> people. This new direction of research, Boellstorff says, “has provided

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<sup>3</sup> “Trans-identified” in this case meaning not only self-identified trans folk, but also people who would be identified by others as falling outside heteronormative gender boundaries and thus under the transgender umbrella (Valentine, 2007, p. 9, n.9).

important insights into how the hopelessly broad category ‘transgender’ is lived in particular historical and cultural contexts, and how it articulates with a range of domains -- from political economy to the nation, from religion to gender itself” (p. 21). He describes this new body of work as “theoretically informed” in the sense that it actively engages with queer theory and that it therefore purposefully works to challenge the presumed naturalness of the omnipresent “Western” system of heterosexuality and binary gender norms (p. 21). It is within this area that I have attempted to position this research project.

### 3. Methodology

In this chapter I outline the methodological approach I have taken in this research project and reflect on the methodological and ethical dilemmas involved. This is a qualitative study based on material collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, with a particular emphasis on interviewing due to the dispersed nature of the community and the personal nature of the topic. Here I will discuss participant recruitment and the interview process, ethical concerns regarding working with sex, gender, and sexuality, and my own position in relation to this research.

#### *Participants*

Over the course of this research project I have conducted one or more interviews each with a total of six participants.<sup>4</sup> The participants were selected based on their own self-identification as having a stake in the topic of transgender, genderqueer, or non-normative gender identities, expressions, and community involvement in Calgary. The call for participants that they responded to is appended (see appendix one, Call for Participants).

Most of the participants were engaged through snowball sampling, with particular thanks to Sasha Krioutchkova, who takes part in trans and queer communities in the city and is involved in this research project as a documentary filmmaker. Zie<sup>5</sup> has recorded several of the interviews I have conducted for use in an independently produced documentary on trans community experiences in Calgary. The fact that the interviews were not only intended to inform an academic thesis but were also being filmed for a documentary was very appealing to many of the

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term “participant” in this thesis, as per my training, in order to emphasise the active role of the participants in making this thesis what it is, as well as to avoid the negative connotations of “snitching” sometimes associated with the label “informant”.

<sup>5</sup> Sasha uses the pronouns zie/hir/hirs (for usage, compare she/her/hers).

participants. It is my hope that the documentary will be screened in Calgary and will help to bring the voices represented in this study to a greater and more local audience than will read the thesis itself. Further participants were engaged by means of open call-outs posted on the Facebook pages or in the offices of a small number of queer groups in the city (eg. the Pride Centre on the Mount Royal University campus).

All of the participants are self-identified members of the trans community in Calgary, but not all of them view their membership or the community in the same way. Also, not all of them identify as trans themselves. Some identify as genderqueer or queer, or simply as falling under the trans umbrella, without choosing the label trans to describe themselves. One is a trans partner and is herself a cis woman. Additionally, two of the participants fell outside the upper age limit I originally intended for the project (ages 18-30) by several years, but their contribution has been invaluable nevertheless.

### *Interviews and Participant Observation*

Because of the topic of this thesis -- involving non-normative identities and expressions related to sex, gender, and sexuality that are frequently the subject of condemnation and oppression within heteronormative society -- participant observation is in some ways an awkward and intrusive method. Many of the spaces that can be identified as trans spaces are, for example, support groups that are deliberately marked as safe spaces, meaning places where explicit efforts are made to make the space an anti-oppressive and non-judgemental environment. Additionally, there is cause for concern within the trans community that research will be invasive or will open the community or the participants to ridicule. With a longer period of field research and a project that was intended to have a broader impact than my own thesis, it might be more feasible to enter some of these spaces for research purposes. However, given the limitations of this research project, I chose very early on not to approach these spaces as a participant observer. I have acted as a participant observer only at a small number of open, public events, particularly those that

celebrate the queer and trans communities in the city. These include, for example, gender benders at the University of Calgary and Mount Royal University, or the (sadly) final party at the closing of Club Sapien, a queer lounge and nightclub in the city with an explicit mandate of being a safe social space for all members of the queer community.

Most of the material used in this thesis has instead been gathered through interviews. I have used a semi-structured interview approach, centred on three themes of discussion: First, participants' ways of defining and expressing their own (trans)gender identities. Second, social influences and sources of knowledge on (trans)gender identifications and expressions. And, third, community involvement and experiences of membership and belonging. The interview themes and some example questions asked in interviews are appended to this thesis (see Appendix 2: Interview Themes). These themes were developed and redeveloped throughout the research project in adaptation to the directions that arose organically in the interviews.

All of the interviews took place over a two month field research period in February and March, 2012. All material has been given with informed consent. Some of the participants are represented by pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity, while others, particularly those who are already well-known in queer and trans communities in the city, are not. The decision to use or not use a pseudonym was taken by the participants themselves.

### *Ethical Considerations*

An important ethical consideration in this paper is the avoidance of representational violence, particularly when discussing what I cautiously label "trans community". As David Valentine (2003) argues regarding his ethnographic work on the category of transgender in New York City, "the collective mode of 'transgender' is only intelligible as a 'community' in terms of [certain] activists' conceptions of a shared identity and community based on gender-variance to the exclusion of other intersecting social differences: race, class, age, etc." (p. 44). Accordingly,

many people who do not share the same academic or activist definition of transgender do not have access to or do not wish to be included in such a community. Discussing transgender as a category of persons, Valentine argues, is problematic in practice and excludes some of those who are most at risk of discrimination and violence (p. 44). Further, the uncritical inclusion of persons who do not identify themselves as a part of it “into the encompassing category of ‘transgender’ produces a representational colonization of those lives” (p. 45). The use of transgender as a category should, then, particularly within anthropology, be navigated with extreme caution and precision. It must be treated as a complex web of social connections, which has different meanings for different people occupying different social positions, and not as a simple or unproblematic category.

In order to deal with this concern, I have made every attempt possible to be clear about whom I am or am not speaking at any given time and to acknowledge the very diverse and permeable, rather than homogeneous and bounded, nature of trans communities and transgender as a social category. As the project has progressed, the issue of diversity has been brought up by several of the participants as well, in response to ideas of trans community, queer community, and norms, as well as in response to conversations about queer theory, which is seen by some participants as a growing movement with the potential to be liberating and to break down the gender binary and by some participants as approaching transgender as a philosophical phenomenon in ways that can sometimes feel out of touch with their lived experiences. Some participants hold both views, while others have very little explicit knowledge about queer theory. Trans diversity, in fact, has become one of the main themes of my analysis later in the paper (see chapter seven, A Critical View on “The Trans Community”). One perhaps inevitable gap in this regard is the lack of a more thorough or well-rounded intersectional<sup>6</sup> analysis in this paper, which is a function of the small group of participants and of the focus of the paper. Issues and intersections of gender, sex, and sexuality, as well as, to a much lesser extent, age and class, are addressed in this paper. Issues relating to race/ethnicity, ability, and other axes of social power have not arisen to nearly

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<sup>6</sup> Where “intersectionality” indicates the co-constituting and ultimately inseparable nature of axes of social power, privilege, and oppression (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 74).

the same extent during my fieldwork and are therefore not within the scope of the discussion in this paper.

Another important point in this respect, in addition to the question of the uncritical treatment of transgender as a uniform label, category, or community, is about the use of queer theory and the label queer. This is related to Jay Prosser's (1998) warnings about queering from above, or what Jin Haritaworn (2008) calls "the directionality of our queering". Haritaworn argues that, "While 'Queer' can open up an alternative methodology of redefining and reframing social differences, the directionality of our queering - 'up' rather than 'down' - is clearly relevant" (Abstract). Amidst criticisms of queer as a middle-class white discourse, Haritaworn draws attention to concerns about difference. Examining accounts of interviews with queer people of Thai descent, she asks a pointed question: "How can we bring differential positionings into community with each other without causing epistemic violence?" (§ 2.8). While this is a particularly significant concern in anthropological writing on sex, gender, and sexuality in "Other" cultures, I would argue that it has a significant bearing on anthropology close to home as well. Haritaworn's suggestion, which I follow here, is to recognise "knowledge as negotiated between researchers, subjects and epistemic communities" and the material we produce during the research process as "at least as much a function of our own positionings as those of our interviewees" (§ 2.4). This means engaging in contextualising, situating, and positioning social research in relation to the researcher and the research environment.

### *Reflexivity and Positionality*

It is always important in the social sciences, not least in an anthropological study, for researchers to position themselves in relation to their research topics. This is an important theme not only within anthropological theory but also within feminist theories of knowledge, and feminist standpoint theory in particular: to reject, as Donna Haraway calls it, "the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). Knowledge, as Haraway argues, is not

transcendent, and so “Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*” (p. 581). In this section, then, I seek to position this research and myself as researcher in relation to each other in order to research “more subjectively so it will be more objective” (Behar, 2006, p. 29).

I both am and am not an insider in the group I am researching in this thesis. I am a young adult who grew up in Calgary, who identifies as queer and genderqueer. If someone is to ask me, as has happened once or twice in recent months, whether I consider myself part of the queer community or the trans community my answer is an easy yes. However, this easy reply becomes more complicated in the context of this research. To begin with, I am regularly read by others as a cisgender woman and therefore, in my own everyday life, largely retain cisgender privilege. For this reason, I hesitate to use the label transgender to describe my own experiences, for fear of being appropriative, but nevertheless consider myself as falling under the trans\* umbrella. Further, having been away from Calgary for most of my adult life, I am not intimately familiar with the specific trans and queer communities in Calgary. So, while I do identify myself and have been identified by some participants as a member of the group being researched, at the same time I would not be at all comfortable being thought of as a representative of or for it.

Patricia Zavella (2006), in “Feminist Insider Dilemmas”, asks: “What happens when the ethnographic ‘others’ are from the same society and are members of the same race or ethnicity, gender, and class background as the ethnographer?” (p. 186). Being a member of the group being researched adds a layer of complexity and confusion to the researcher’s task. This position can provide significant advantages, like a head start on understanding and being able to participate in the discourses of the group (p. 186-187). However, it can also carry with it certain ethical dilemmas. One of these is the concern of being too familiar or too comfortable with the research topic and therefore the risks of being unable to translate for outsiders or of assuming answers from personal experience rather than asking for the participants’ own perspectives (p. 187-189). I have tried to handle this dilemma, first, by being aware throughout the research process that this may be a difficulty and actively trying to clarify, both in this paper and in interviews, what is meant by terms and arguments I would otherwise suppose I or others are already familiar with

and, second, by the recognition here that this thesis is, in all senses, a partial representation of the communities I discuss.

Another dilemma is the expectation, by either the self or others both within and outside the group, that the researcher can and will act as a spokesperson for the group (p. 187-189). I have attempted to deal with this dilemma by being clear about my research aims (as declared above) and my own positioning both here and in my interactions with the participants in this project. As Jin Haritaworn (2008) writes, “The call to positionality urges us to reflect on where we stand, to define our speaking positions and how they relate to others, especially those whom we claim speak for. This would help us avoid colonising and appropriative instances of ‘queering from above’” (¶ 1.5 ). Similarly, Zavella (2006) draws on José Limón (1989) as he confronts us with the fact that “however ‘liberating’ a narrative discourse that we propose to write, it is always one intimate with power and many of our ‘informants,’ ‘subjects,’ ‘consultants,’ ‘teachers,’ ‘friends’ know it.... We must always decenter our own narrative self-assurance lest it be saturated with dominating power” (p. 484; in Zavella, p. 189). Accordingly, it should be understood that my analysis below is necessarily a provisional, incomplete, and subjective one. It is my own reinterpretation of others’ words, which were spoken in dialogue with me to begin with. I have tried to be careful with the language that I use and in the connections that I make between my fieldwork and academic theories, particularly queer theory, but this thesis is an attempt to navigate complicated and constantly shifting ground, and so I encourage that this analysis should be read critically.

#### 4. Transgressing Heterosexual Norms

In this chapter I explore how the participants in this project experience their trans status as being marked by the greater society as non-normative or “not normal”. I describe how they confront or are confronted by heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality in their everyday lives. I also discuss how they locate themselves in relation to heteronormative discourses in different ways -- some identifying as passing or working to pass as a certain gender and others attempting to ignore or else purposefully disrupt the heteronormative system. In either case, their experiences are all situated within and against an unescapable backdrop of heteronormativity.

##### *Crossing the Borders of Heteronormative Sex/Gender*

One of the points of agreement among all of the people I interviewed for this project has been in the underlying ways in which they describe their experience as trans or in trans communities as being somehow separate from heteronormative experience. In a sense this is self-evident, but opening a research project with a call-out for transgender, genderqueer, or gender non-normative folk is one thing, a thing of theory and labels and definitions, and trans lived experience is another, a thing of personal narratives and the happenings of everyday life. What follows in this section is a way of setting the scene for the rest of the paper, by showing how the trans folk I interviewed have been aware, or have been made aware, that they were transgressing binary gender boundaries.

For example, James, a queer trans guy<sup>7</sup> in his early twenties who now works with queer youth through the Miscellaneous Youth Network and also with Fairy Tales, the resident queer film festival in Calgary, describes his experience coming out as trans like this:

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<sup>7</sup> The trans adjective in a combination such as *trans guy* simultaneously indicates a person’s trans status and their self-identified gender.

**James:** I knew when I was really young, my -- when I came out to my grandparents for the second time [as trans, after having come out previously as lesbian], they, my grandma said I'd told her I'd wanted to be a boy at five. So, I think there, there was no -- and I think with trans youth, with my experience with them, generally under a certain age, if a kid knows, they *know*, because there's no other social factors. There's no -- like puberty hasn't hit, there's no dating, sexual orientation doesn't come into it. But if a kid knows they're in the wrong body, they know. And so I knew from a really young age and I was vocal about it until it wasn't okay that I was vocal about it, so, which was a lot of my parents going, you know, 'You're eight or nine years old now, this is not okay. You're going to hit puberty soon,' which was a terrifying prospect and I just hoped it would never happen.

In this way, James' parents made it clear to him early on that there was something "not okay" with wanting to have a different sex or gender than female, as he was assigned at birth, and something "not okay" with even talking about wanting to have a different sex or gender. His experience was represented to him early on as being abnormal and he had to navigate this narrative positioning as he was growing up, learning to be silent about being different in order to handle daily life. This also meant he had to look to sources outside his family, in films and on the internet, for representations that he could identify with.

James is now active in the queer scene in Calgary, well-versed in queer theory, and turns a critical eye towards how the social and legal set-up of our society excludes and tacitly works to police and punish trans people.

**James:** So there is no protection. You get fired by your employer for being trans, there's -- I mean, you can sue them as much as you'd like, but there's no precedent. You'd be looking at basically a supreme court battle and most trans people frankly, 'cause surgery and hormones are so freaking expensive, don't have the money. It's just, they're already -- and when you start to transition, the chances that you're going to stay the CEO [Chief Executive Officer] of the oil company you work at, in Calgary this is particularly relevant, are low, right? So there are a lot of people who are working far below their education level and their accustomed pay grade to transition, because it's important. So you're just, you're not dealing with a population with just tons of cash, with boatloads of money, 'cause it's just not, it's not in the cards, the way that our culture is set up now.

Against the backdrop of this heterosexualised social context, James frequently describes himself as lucky -- lucky because, for the most part, he has been able to find good work, especially now that he is working for Fairy Tales, because he has a supportive partner, and because he was

fortunate enough to already know several people who he could go to for support and information when he was transitioning.<sup>8</sup> However, this luck stands in contrast to the fact that he was kicked out of home for being a lesbian and had to put himself through high school, the fact that it was initially very difficult for him to find information about what transgender was or to openly express his gender identity, and the fact that he has witnessed friends of his having difficult experiences with transitioning. Lucky, here, is a relative term. James is lucky in the sense that in an otherwise largely negative, conservative, homophobic, and transphobic context, he has found a lot of support and has had a lot of positive experiences in trans and queer communities in the city. This support has been very important to him and he says this is the reason he works with the Miscellaneous Youth Network, to help provide support to young people who are coming out as queer or trans now.

To take another example, one of the people I interviewed felt the frustrations of heteronormative gender policing very keenly. Kendell, a gay (trans) man in his mid-twenties, has often been made to feel like an outsider to non-trans society in very hurtful ways, facing slurs like “tranny”, having people use the wrong pronouns for him even when they know which pronouns he prefers, or being asked invasive questions about his gender identity or his body. This is one of the reasons he has expressed that has made passing<sup>9</sup> as a man very important to him, though he wants to make it clear that this is not the only reason he wants to pass. He also just identifies as a guy. “I’m a guy, I’m gay. That’s pretty much it,” he says.

One of the often unconscious heteronormative practices that trans folk encounter on an everyday basis is “gender attribution”, or the process through which we all inevitably assign gender to the people we encounter every day, based on unacknowledged and unquestioned gender criteria (Kessler and McKenna, 2006, ¶ 1). Kendell’s experience with having to actively work to pass as a man is one example of how trans folk are sexed and gendered against heterosexual norms, both

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<sup>8</sup> Transition, in a trans context, means the process of moving from a person’s assigned sex/gender to their self-identified sex/gender. This can include any combination of social, psychological, or physical changes.

<sup>9</sup> Passing, in a trans context, means to be perceived by others as a certain gender. It most often connotes successfully being read as the desired gender, though it can also occur under other circumstances.

in society at large and often also in queer circles. Kendell is very conscious of how he looks and acts in relation to heteronormative ideas about binary gender, and pays close attention to how others read his gender and respond to him. He has to operate within this system in order to pass. Here, he describes how he has purposefully organised his appearance in order to pass as a man:

**Kendell:** As you may notice, I'm slightly eccentric in my appearance. I enjoy it, but at the same time I pass better. It's weird, because for a while, like when I started out, because I thought that I would pass really well if I just wore, you know, really masculine types of clothing. But then everyone just thought I was a really butch lesbian. And I find that even now. But for some reason, even like, you know, I could walk out twice in the same day and all I would change is my outfit. When I dress kinda punk, or you know, kind of fob-ish and I really femme it up and put on the lisp and what-not, people see 'gay guy'. And whereas when I try to look like a run of your mill guy, people see lesbian and so that's partly why I do the things I do, and wear lots and lots of eyeliner. But no, I just, that was the only really striking thing that I noticed, because it wasn't something I'd expect. And of course everyone's gonna have different experiences. I have very feminine features, which probably is what makes it harder for me, but, if I ham it up, I pass better. Which is shocking to me, but to each his own.

Kendell feels successful when he is read by others as a man, even when this occurs in otherwise very negative circumstances:

**Kendell:** I'm safe downtown. When I go to the south teenagers throw beer bottles at me from moving vehicles, and shout things at me and it's interesting because like, on the one hand you see, you know, various things, but on the other hand you see obviously that, you know, as much as we'd like to think things are changing, things certainly in some people's minds are very much the same and people are certainly very closed minded about certain things. What's interesting about how -- for me being trans it sort of changed my view of certain things, 'cause whereas I never liked to have horrible hateful terms shouted at me as people throw things at me from their cars, on days where they scream 'dyke' at me I'm sad. On days when they scream 'faggot' I'm like, 'Win! Yeah! That's right! Yes, I am!'

Passing has multiple connotations for Kendell. It means he has succeeded in presenting his gender, which is validating in and of itself and which he is happy about even when he is simultaneously subject to homophobic slurs and acts of violence. It also means he avoids some of the stigma and the connotations of being abnormal that are attached to being trans, which otherwise cause him to be treated in ways that make him feel like a "freak show".

These connotations extend from experiences on the street in south Calgary into experiences in queer communities. Kendell particularly expresses concern about being a "token tranny" in queer

student groups. He characterises transgender experience, not only within heteronormative society at large, but also within the queer student circles he has taken part in on campus, as being marginalised, tokenised, and regarded with inappropriate and insensitive curiosity. He describes these queer student groups as being much more LG than BT+ (or, in other words, as being focused much more heavily on non-trans lesbian and gay issues, to the exclusion of issues affecting bisexual, transgender, and other folks under the queer umbrella).

**Kendell:** I think I would be more open [about his trans status] if I hadn't had some really bad experiences. And they were well meaning people and I don't hold anything against them personally, but it seems like the reactions I get were either, you know, of revulsion or, you know, 'Let's check out the freak show and ask you lots of personal questions because, you know, it's okay to ask *you* tons of personal questions because -- it's not like you're a person, too,' type of thing. And I know that they weren't coming from that place and I know, like I said, that they meant well, and I tried to handle it well, but it got tiresome after a while and I don't like to feel like a science experiment, so I stopped.

In this way, through being asked invasive questions, being misgendered and called by the wrong pronouns or labels, or through assumptions that he will know or will want to meet all other trans people in the city (which he says is sort of like a "zoo animal breeding program" in which trans people are thought of as "a rare species that should be put together"), Kendell experiences being marked by others as outside heteronormative society in hurtful ways, even within LGBT+ groups that ostensibly include trans folk. Most of the time, he keeps quiet about his trans status because he has become frustrated with the often ignorant or disrespectful reactions he has received, while at the same time he does not want to be ashamed about being trans. This was a contradiction that he was negotiating even while contacting me to participate in this project, which he saw as a opportunity to speak up.

Kendell's narrative shows how deeply embedded heteronormativity is in our society. As Butler (1990) describes it, the heterosexual system of sex, gender, and sexuality is a "matrix of intelligibility" and gender identities and expressions that fall outside the naturalised ideas of binary gender are read as confusing or abnormal by those operating uncritically within it (p. 24). This system is structural and fundamental, even penetrating LGBT and queer circles that nominally include trans folk and strive to get away from heteronormative thinking. Another thing

that Kendell's experience shows is that, while Butler positions non-normative gender performances as subversive, disrupting and making apparent the binary gender system, the impact of this subversion of heterosexual norms is not just political but can also be felt personally in frustrating and hurtful ways.

As a third case, Harley is a genderqueer undergraduate student in eir<sup>10</sup> early twenties ("Full label would be polyamorous, pansexual, genderqueer of the non-binary sort of version") who actively questions and confronts the gender binary, locating eir identity as *outside* of it, but still in this way, necessarily, in relation to it.

**Harley:** But it [talking about queer theory in a literary theory course] started really a discussion in class about gender and our physical bodies and I think that was -- it was one of those big 'coming out' moments for me, cause I'd talked about my gender before, but, people in the class -- it was actually surprising to me that the overwhelming majority was like, 'Wow, you know, this is cool and gender *doesn't* have to be just two boxes,' and it also brought up different societies -- I can't think of the name, but, like, there was one society example where there wasn't gender. Like, there wasn't different pronouns, like, they acknowledged that people had different bodies but there wasn't -- like, constructed separately, and there were other ones that had a third gender, sometimes four or five genders -- so people being like, 'Oh, yeah. I guess that would be okay and alright,' and then there's this one guy who's -- he's an older student, he's probably like in his early forties, and he put up his hand and is like, 'Well, what's *wrong* with just being a man? Just being a woman?' and just like a bunch of other people were like 'Well -- you know -- we're just reading about people who aren't, like intersex people, like, what's your definition of a man or woman, then?' And he was still, like, very set on the fact that people should just identify as a man or a woman and be over with it, so I put up my hand and was like, 'Look, I don't. I'm not a man or a woman, and, like, you can't tell me that I fit into one of those boxes, because I don't.' And he was like, 'Oh, well, but you do, like, have a woman's body though.' [Laughs.] I went for the shock value, like, 'Yes, I have a vagina, but that shouldn't define who I am.'

This narrative shows a couple of things. One is, again, the perceived naturalness of the heterosexual matrix. The man in the story simply cannot comprehend how someone's sex and gender could be something other than male-man or female-woman, even while others in the class, having spent time reading and learning about the issue, have begun to think of possibilities outside these boxes. Another is the way in which the matrix is omnipresent and only escapable in partial, provisional, and relational ways. Harley is critical towards the system of binary sex/gender, citing the existence of intersex people and different historical and cultural constructions

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<sup>10</sup> Harley prefers the pronouns ey/em/eir/eirs (for usage, compare they/them/their/theirs).

of gender as demonstrations of how sex and gender are not as universal or as natural as they are commonly assumed to be. In eir own life, ey chooses to actively resist identifying with or expressing gender in line with the binary. However, it is demonstrative of the pervasiveness and omnipresence of this system that Harley must define the binary (the “two boxes” of male/masculine/man and female/feminine/woman) in order to define emself as something else. Ey has to be aware of and acknowledge the reading of eir body as female and the heterosexual norm of female/feminine/woman in order to reject the interpretation of eir gender from it.

All three of these accounts, of James, Kendell, and Harley, indicate the pervasiveness of the system of heteronormativity and show how sex, gender, and sexuality are inevitably related back to it in this society. It is a matter of personal feeling, need, or choice how to interpret and deal with this relationship, and it is certainly not my intention to say that either passing as a man or woman or actively working to disrupt the heteronormative gender binary is preferable. There are many reasons for either position, not least including the question of safety in a transphobic society and the question of personal self-identification. Rather, what is revealed here is how at any given moment a person is positioning themselves<sup>11</sup> and being positioned by others in direct relation to this system of heterosexual norms, even if they would prefer not to be.

### *Envisioning Non-Binary Gender*

One of the difficulties, or perhaps opportunities, presented by the heterosexualisation of sex, gender, and desire is that it leaves people who do not feel that they fit within this system with much less of a social script to follow. While a straight cisgender person has a fairly clearly defined set of expectations for how they should look, feel, think, and act throughout their lifetime, a transgender person faces much more uncertainty, particularly, though not only, if they

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<sup>11</sup> The third-person plural (they) is used here purposefully as a singular gender-neutral pronoun. This way of speaking is more common, colloquial, and accessible than using a pronoun such as *one* or a more recently constructed pronoun such as *ze*. For this reason, *they* recurs in this function throughout the paper when not referring to any specific person with their own preferred pronouns.

identify more closely as outside the gender binary than as FtM (female-to-male, also expressed as F2M or trans man) or MtF (male-to-female, also M2F or trans woman).

Ares, who is a university student in his mid-twenties and who used to identify as trans but now chooses to identify simply as queer, puts his relationship to the gender binary like this:

**Ares:** I go by both. I don't really identify as male, like I really don't identify as female at all, but my problem is that I don't feel female but then I'm not identifying as male either so I'm kind of like -- I don't know where I can say I fit.

Ares and I connected early on over my description of my own gender identity as queer, which I called my “non-label label” in conversation with a mutual friend. Ares has jokingly referred back to it since, saying, “Yeah, as soon as someone tries to categorise me I'm just like, ‘I want to throw a big bomb in your label machine and just see everything blow up.’” He expresses both relief and frustration with identifying neither as a man or a woman nor with the label “trans” -- relief over finding a label that suits him and frustration with trying to describe himself to others. He has chosen the pronoun *he* for me to use to represent him in this study only provisionally, saying “it's difficult for me to say which pronoun to use because really I don't care.”

Harley, to take another case, is very excited about eir genderqueer status and enjoys playing with gender -- showing up to the University of Calgary gender bender in March, for example, in both a corset and a moustache (and looking fabulous).

**Harley:** I always love being airquotes ‘mis-gendered’. Like, I work at a desk that is sort of in the middle of the floor, so sometimes people approach me in the back, and because of my hair in the back I guess from the back I look like a dude, so a couple of weeks ago this guy runs up and is like, ‘Hey, hey dude!’ and he comes around the front and is like, ‘Oh, oh, I'm sorry, ma'am,’ and I'm like, ‘Don't worry! Either works.’ I think honestly the most validating thing for my gender expression is people being confused.

Harley describes emself as loving to talk about sex, gender, and sexuality with almost anyone, as long as they are willing to keep an open mind, but also as finding it sometimes frustrating to not have a more shared framework in place that can help em to describe eir experiences and identification. For example, in “a perfect world” ey would use Spivak pronouns (as used in this

thesis, ey/em/eir/eirs), but on a daily basis ey finds that this is just too difficult to maintain, because most people have never heard of these pronouns before and are not prepared to learn to use alternative gender pronouns.

Harley talks about the evolution of eir gender identity as a process, during which ey has distanced emself more and more from heterosexual gender norms and learned to be more critical of the normative regulation of masculinity and femininity.

**Harley:** I think one of the best times with that is, I was actually in Vancouver, and I had, I was wearing, like, we were going out dancing and I was feeling pretty femme-y that night, so I like I had a push-up bra and everything, but I also had like my leather jacket over it, so I guess it was enough padding that they couldn't explicitly see my breasts, and I was holding the hand of my one friend and I had my, the girl I was sort of dating, on my other arm and someone walked by and was like 'Man, that dude's got it goin' on!' and I was like 'Yes! I totally do.' So I really, I still really like messing with gender, but it's not necessarily the focus of everyday. Because, I realised that I can't control how people are going to read me, and I feel like if I put a lot of effort into presenting as *male* and I am not read that way, then that's going to be really hurtful for me. But I've also done more, I used to, when I was first exploring this, I was identifying more as gender fluid, like I would feel like a man some days and a woman some days, and something else some days, but I more have settled into the 'something else' and instead feeling -- stuff like feeling strong, and delicate, or feeling passive versus feeling aggressive or assertive, and I'm starting to, I think, less associate those with society's ideas of gender and more just associate them with how I'm feeling that day and who I am. So there are definitely some times when I will go out of my way to be a little gender -- to be gender confused visibly cause it's fun to mess with that.

Ares, too, positions himself as having had to learn to denaturalise heterosexual gender norms in order to be himself, even though he, unlike Harley, is not very familiar with queer theory, which explicitly works to debunk the idea of natural heterosexuality of sex, gender, and desire.

**Ares:** I used to be very conscious of how I presented myself based on, like, I thought, like, certain mannerisms were so feminine, and I thought that certain ways of saying things were feminine and certain ways of walking were feminine. And so I tried to really control it and avoid doing those things. But, I don't know, recently I've just stopped caring so much, because I'm just like, 'I'm gonna be me and I don't care what people think.' So it's been kind of a process for me to kind of get out of thinking about the binary and trying to fall within it and just be me.

In this way, slowly but surely, both Ares and Harley have found or created gender identities for themselves that are outside the binary gender complex of male/masculine/man and female/

feminine/woman. These identities are relational (in that they still defined by their position relative to heteronormative conceptions of gender), provisional (in that they must be adapted to suit different social contexts, different sets of norms, and different sets of personal experiences), and complicated (in that they are difficult to explain to others within the framework of binary gender and difficult to live out in all of the ways that are desired, given an everyday context where they will be read in a binary framework no matter what). These identities are also new, in the sense that they are part of an evolving set of discourses (academic, activist, and otherwise) on queer and transgender subjects. They probably would not have been described in the same ways even ten years ago, before transgender as a concept had gained the momentum that it has now -- let alone before the 1990s, when the trans identities that were available in the discourses of the day were largely limited to transsexual and transvestite (Valentine, 2007, p. 147-148). This change is a part of the shifting social narratives that are becoming increasingly open, influenced by queer theory (see also, chapter six, *Transgender in this Time and Place: Youth, Shifting Narratives, and Increasing Access to Information*). Certainly, too, the lived experiences of both Ares and Harley, who identify themselves as having non-binary gender, are somewhat removed from the theoretical envisioning of gender as something that is socially constructed and not naturally binary. Rather, their gender identifications and expressions are in constant negotiation with and resistance to the heteronormative framework that they necessarily live within.

### *Rethinking "Normal" Through Trans Perspectives*

**Harley:** I think it's a community [trans community], similar to the overall queer community, that goes through a lot of pain and a lot of turmoil, because it's a community that's pretty much defined by the fact that it's not 'normal'. Once again, air quotes for the microphones.

**Brianne:** How far you transition, whether you transition, you know. All this stuff is, you know, there isn't really a normal --

**Lyn:** Usual.

**Brianne:** Usual. Yeah, that's a bad word. There isn't a usual way to be trans, just because there is -- so many different ways to go about it.

One of the small but telling motifs that has appeared over the course of several of the interviews I have done for this project is a calculated aversion to the word “normal”. I certainly would not presume to say that every trans-identified person out there is necessarily norm-critical, but what this motif indicates to me is a rethinking going on, particularly in trans communities (to varying extents and for various reasons), of what the word “normal” implies. This, I think, has been informed both by personal experiences of being positioned as “abnormal” by the social structure of our society, as well as by varying levels of engagement with queer and feminist discourses.

Jason Cromwell (2006) describes the everyday realities of those who transgress the heteronormative binaries of sex, gender, and sexual desire as “transsituated”. By this, he means that a trans person operates within an alternate set of ideas about gender and the body than what is considered “normal” in heteronormative society, but which always stands in relation to the dominant heterosexual social norms. As he argues, “Many transpeople and many of their partners reconstruct transbodies as both normal and different. To acknowledge transbodies as normal is a disruption of the binary body-equals-sex” (p. 514).

In one instance, Harley turned this kind of reflection on transgender as “abnormal” back on it’s head, positioning heteronormativity as the thing that was scary and weird and difficult to understand.

**Harley:** And you know, what if a man, god forbid, accidentally loses his penis and testicles. Is he suddenly not a man anymore? Because he doesn’t have that organ? It’s like saying, I don’t know, if your hand is cut off, you’re no longer human. Sorry, humans have two hands, that’s just how it is, you’re not one of us anymore.’ So it’s just like, I just don’t understand that biological essentialism because you can lose parts but you’re still human, you’re still who you are, and then I would say, obviously, you can have parts, you can add parts, and still be who you are, you know? So, it’s just -- but it’s *scary* to see people who believe so, so thoroughly in biological essentialism and, I would have to assume from that, do believe in gender essentialism and gender roles and that that should be very cut and dried and that men should be like this and women should be like this.

In this way, as Cromwell (2006) argues, “Transsituated discourses are produced by transpeople whose identities, bodies, and sexual desires fall outside of the dominant discourses and even outside lesbian and gay discourses” (p. 519). So, within trans discourses, within the trans

community, not always but increasingly often, there is an evolving critique of the heteronormative “normal”.

**Harley:** I think gender is so made up that no one fits it. It’s like saying you can only be a tree if you are this tall and have this specific colour of bark and this many leaves and your leaves have to also be this specific colour and, oh yes, the fruit that you bear has to also be a specific colour and size and weight and density and, you know, this tree’s like, ‘Oh, well, I’m a centimetre taller than that.’

Importantly, though, as indicated by the opening quotes to this section, “normal” needs to be problematised in more than one sense in the context of transgender. To start, the most definitive feature of queer and transgender persons, groups, or ideas is that they are somehow non-heteronormative. In this sense, they are not considered “normal” in our heteronormative society and are in this way marked as outsiders. In this context, the heteronormative vision of “normal” and “natural” sex, gender, and sexuality (the male/masculine/man who sexually desires women and the female/feminine/woman who sexually desires men) needs to be reexamined.

However, there is also a second significant sense, which is indicated by the dialogue, above, between Brianne and Lyn, a trans woman and her cisgender partner, who are both active in the Transgender Equality Society of Alberta (TESA). In addition to the problems with the idea of “normal” in heteronormative society that marks queer and trans folk as outsiders, this exchange problematises any ideas of “normal” about or within the trans community. One example of this is the idea that there is a right way and a wrong way to be trans. Ares and I were amused to discover during an early interview that a link for a video Ares had identified with and had sent out to a friend had looped around back to me through another friend who knew I would appreciate it myself. The video, called the “trans\* enough project”, represents and rejects a series of reasons that the contributors had heard about why people thought they were not “trans enough” -- for example, not physically transitioning with hormones and surgery, not changing pronouns, or transgressing gender boundaries by, say, identifying as a man and still choosing to wear makeup or wanting to give birth. These examples violate some people’s expectations of what being trans “properly” or “normally” means, and so the video works to critique these ideas and reaffirm the validity of any and all diverse identities and experiences that may fall under the

trans umbrella. Ares was excited about the video clip because this is a problem he has encountered in his own experience.

**Ares:** When I was debating whether or not I was going to transition. I've found that there's a big expectation for you if you're trans to do hormones and surgeries and if you didn't do those things you weren't really trans and there's kind of a movement now that's starting to get more voice where it's like, 'No, you don't have to do those things to be trans. You just need to feel and identify that way. And no one can tell you you can't.' But yeah, I was talking to a couple, I decided to try and talk to a couple of the trans guys, and they were very much, 'If you don't transition and you're not wanting to be a man, you're not trans.' So, I've -- I think that's where my trans identity kind of met a very abrupt end.

In this way, the participants in this project are very aware of the heterosexual social norms around them. They position themselves, to varying extents, in opposition to these norms and are frequently critical of restrictive norms not only in heteronormative discourses, but also sometimes where they appear even in trans and queer discourses. This is both a function of their own experiences and of changing and increasingly accessible narratives of what it means to be trans (see also chapter six, *Transgender in this Time and Place: Youth, Shifting Narratives, and Increasing Access to Information*).

## 5. Experiences of Trans Community

When I was beginning this project my first interest was in focussing on the ways in which knowledge about transgender topics (for example, transgender terminologies, technologies, or practices) was learned and shared. A positively huge body of research has been conducted on the topic of enculturation into normative gender roles and behaviours and I was interested in exploring the other side of this coin, looking at the learning experiences of people who transgressed those norms. Following this theme in interviews, it very quickly became apparent that although experiences of discovering and exploring these knowledges was important, the actual process of learning was largely eclipsed in participants' narratives by the affective dimension of finding out they were not alone in the way they felt or the struggles they were facing. The acquisition of transgender knowledges was practical and often necessary, but was often also hugely loaded in terms of feelings of acceptance and support. In this chapter, I explore this link between experiences of community, information, support, and resources.

### *Access to Information, Support, and Resources*

For Harley, being part of trans and queer communities in Calgary and online has given em a sense of not being alone in eir feelings, beliefs, and struggles. Ey positions eir coming out as a slow process of realising that ey did not feel at home in either of the binary gender "boxes". This realisation was facilitated by eir engagement with genderqueer and trans blogs online, particularly on Tumblr (for example, [genderfork.tumblr.com](http://genderfork.tumblr.com), [transparrotfish.tumblr.com](http://transparrotfish.tumblr.com), or [fuckyeahftms.tumblr.com](http://fuckyeahftms.tumblr.com)), as well as engagement with Queers on Campus at the University of Calgary. These sites of community have provided support and reassurance through difficult situations like coming out to eir family or encountering transphobia<sup>12</sup> and sex/gender

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<sup>12</sup> Transphobia refers to fear or hatred directed against trans people or trans concepts, in explicit or implicit ways (compare with homophobia).

essentialism in daily life. As ey describes it, participation in these communities, particularly the more trans-centric communities online, can be difficult and painful because people are sharing narratives about depression and gender dysphoria,<sup>13</sup> which can be triggering for em, or invoke intense and difficult emotions about eir own experience. However, these communities also provide a source of knowledge, resources, support, validation, and legitimation.

**Harley:** But the positive part is -- it's so huge. I mean, getting validations for feelings that I've been having my entire life, and you know, me not feeling like there is something broken in me, it's just it's the fact that there's more something broken in society [laughs] in that you know, people think that oh, I have to, because I have a vagina, you know, basically, I have to not want muscles and I have to not want, you know, so many things and I have to be more quiet, and I have to be okay with, I mean, everything that's put on women, and it's like, 'Well, I'm *not* okay with that,' and so just hearing people who are also not okay with that. And I guess it's one of those like 'Phew! I'm not crazy,' things, but it's also like -- it can be really great to have that strength and have so many people behind you, it feels like. But it's like, 'Wow. I am not alone in this.' There are a lot of us going through this, and because there are so many of us, we're going to get through it. So, yeah. There's that.

Meanwhile, James describes his experience with coming out as trans and with transitioning as having been very lucky because he was already connected with people who could support him and who could answer questions that others, such as his doctors, could not.

**James:** I was surrounded by trans people and gender bending people when I transitioned, so really I couldn't have gotten any luckier basically. So, my transition in its entirety was not easy. I don't think there's any, there's an easy way to transition, but it was supported and I could ask questions of friends rather than doctors, which I think makes a big difference. 'Cause there are questions you just don't ask your doctor. And your doctor would have no idea what to tell you in the first place. [...] I was really, really proud of being a butch lesbian, and that identity, and I still identify as butch in a lot of ways. And that's one of those questions where it's like, do you ask your doctor if you can still be a butch lesbian? [...] But, yeah, my transition was, on the whole, really positive because I had that support and so I want to be able to be that support for people who are transitioning now, be they at seven or fourteen or eighteen or twenty-five. Whatever it is. Because knowing out trans people, or knowing people who are willing to be out with you about their trans status and answer those questions I think is really important.

In this way, James locates his experiences with coming out as trans and with transitioning as being very scary experiences that were made less frightening through participation in trans and queer communities.

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<sup>13</sup> Gender dysphoria refers to negative feelings of unease, dissatisfaction, or disconnection that a person has about their assigned sex/gender. Some trans people experience this, while others do not.

Both of these narratives position transgender learning experiences -- such as Harley's experience with learning that ey was not alone in feeling outside of the heterosexual gender binary or James' experience with being able to ask questions about transitioning of people in his community rather than of his doctor -- as existing in sharp contrast to experiences in more heteronormative social situations. The questions that Harley and James have turned to trans and queer communities to answer, both online and in the city, have been questions that are largely impossible to answer from within a more heteronormative context. Other topics that participants have turned to trans and queer communities with for information, support, and resources include questions about safe sex, finding trans-related items such as binders to flatten breasts, and making friends who will accept and understand them.

A couple of the people I interviewed have said they do not feel very deeply connected with trans communities in the sense of engaging with other trans people on a regular basis. Ares is one, for example, but he nevertheless describes his experiences with learning about transgender topics as both helpful and self-affirming. He turned to the internet, and particularly the youtube community, where many transmen post vlogs (video logs) about their transitions and where Ares discovered the youtube video discussed above about not having to be "trans enough". In this sense, even though he does not participate very actively in trans communities, he still locates himself within them and turns to them for support when needed, albeit in a less active way.

### *Community Pride in the Face of Shaming*

Another affective dimension of the process of learning and sharing transgender knowledges through participation in trans and queer communities was a sense of bonding and pride in the community. When I asked participants what they gained from participating in trans communities, following up on discussions about their own learning experiences, their answers often had to do with taking pride in themselves and in others.

**Brianne:** There's a lot that I gain [from participating in queer and trans communities]. There's, you know, perspective, gaining different perspectives from different people, there's the, you know, meeting people that you see are not quite sure where they fit and seeing that evolution in them to finding exactly where they fit is hugely rewarding. And being able to effect real change, whether it's at a government level or it's just at an individual's level of them seeing that, you know, they're okay, you know, that they're not this weird creature that nobody understands and that they should just hide away. They realise that they're more than that, that they're people and that they're wonderful and amazing and deserve everything that -- every positive thing that ever comes into their lives. It's -- yeah, it's hugely personally rewarding for me to be involved.

**Harley:** [Excited.] I read someone's blog and they just posted about how they had just gotten boxer shorts and just, 'Holy shit, new underwear,' but it was underwear that instead of, I think, the lacy underwear that their mom bought them it was boxer shorts with cartoons or something on them, but it was just like, 'Holy shit I have underwear that I feel comfortable in,' and, you know, I don't think a lot of cis people have a big transformative [laughs at word choice] experience like that, you know? Like these moments of like, holy shit, I am all of a sudden way more comfortable in living and in the world and interacting with everything around me. So it's complicated, and like, complex but it, I think it's a really great movement to be a part of and I think there's a lot to gain from and to gain from being a part of it.

So, in this way, the subject of learning and sharing transgender knowledges was often repositioned by participants as something they were intensely proud of and grateful for as a feature of trans communities.

Thomas K. Fitzgerald (1999), considering his ethnographic research with gay and lesbian groups in Sweden and Finland and his experiences in the United States, suggests that, "In a strange twist of events, homophobic societies may help create a quasi-cultural status for gay and lesbian persons where there would be no need for such if we were given full social equality" (p. 126). He also points out that this status is partial, is "quasi-cultural" rather than constituting a distinct subculture, because generally lesbians and gay men are not interested in detaching from society (p. 126). This argument, though made in a distinctly gay and lesbian context, rings true in some ways for transgender community experiences in Calgary, as well.

**James:** But the trans community, the way that it exists, is starting to formulate in Alberta because our funding got cut. Not because we want to hang out together. It's because we got screwed over. Which is how most activism begins, let's be honest. If we all were -- never had any problems getting married, or finding employment, or -- if we didn't need -- I hate when politicians say this, but if we didn't need a Pride, which is such crap, but if we didn't need a Pride, then we wouldn't see each other as much. Even queer people, right? If we were just, if we had that equitable society where everybody was just okay with everything and we just

respected each other's space -- which is never going to happen because people just can't put their egos away to save their lives but then would we need gay bars? Would it matter? Would anyone who was queer, if you didn't feel unsafe going into a straight club would we have gay bars? Like, right?

In this way, the shape of transgender experiences of community in Calgary (and everywhere else) is moulded by the socio-historical context, standing apart from heteronormative society first and foremost because non-heteronormativity is structured within this society as "wrong" or "weird" or "abnormal". This topic is explored further in the next section. However, this argument is also complicated by the situation of transgender experiences not only as liminal in relation to heteronormative society but also, to varying extents, in relation to communities and discourses labelled as "queer" or "LGBT" (see chapter seven, A Critical View on "The Trans Community").

## 6. (Trans)Gender in this Time and Place

In this chapter I explore how participants' experiences of being trans and of participating in trans communities are structured by place -- eg. Calgary as a urban setting, in contrast to rural Alberta; Alberta as a province that has earned itself a reputation for being socially conservative, in contrast to other places in Canada; or even this space or that, meaning bars, social spaces, campus spaces, and so on, as being more or less trans-centric, trans-positive, or trans-inclusive and more or less a "safe space", meaning a place where explicit measures are taken to make the environment non-judgemental, anti-oppressive, and welcoming to trans folk. I also explore the dimension of time -- including placement in relation to generation, social change, and shifting discourses on queer and transgender topics.

### *Transgender in the "Heart of the New West"*

In "Your Place or Mine: The Geography of Social Research", Michael Stein (2006) argues that *where* a research project takes place is incredibly significant to what that research reveals: "Places do not 'act', but they do contain and shape action, and may be strongly associated with it" (p. 62). Therefore a careful consideration of how a project is situated in time and place is integral to good social research, yet is nevertheless commonly neglected in favour of discussion about other factors in the research process such as methodology, technique, or skill (p. 60). This neglect is particularly problematic for anthropological fieldwork, where "consideration of place is paramount since research is conducted in settings natural to the behavior being observed, and may in fact play a part in its determination" (p. 60). Places are filled with social significance, influencing what happens there, how the place is understood, and how people orient and interpret both themselves and others within that space (p. 61). In this section, then, I reflect on the significance of the time and place in which this research project has been conducted and work to better situate the project in spatial and historical dimensions.

First, of course, it is significant to situate this project in Canada and in North America -- spatially, culturally, and discursively. The ways in which I speak about transgender in this context, where queer discourses on gender are at home, cannot be copy-pasted onto, for example, the situation of hijras in India, without significant reworking. However, what has been most interesting to me is a few steps down from this level of spatial and cultural abstraction -- from continent, to country, to city, and even to the question of this club or that one.

Calgary (branded “the heart of the new west”) has been an interesting, if slightly unusual, place in which to conduct this research project. Most published work, by far, on queer and trans topics in Canada takes place in Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver. These are large Canadian cities that, moreover, have much larger queer communities than Calgary and are situated in areas of the country that are usually considered less socially conservative. The participants in this project have largely characterised Calgary as a conservative place, but not the most conservative place, and as slowly getting better. When compared to rural Alberta in Ares’ narrative of growing up in small towns before moving to the city, he sees Calgary as much more diverse and welcoming towards him (as he puts it, “I’d probably get lynched if I went back [to his hometown]”). Others mark Calgary as a conservative environment particularly in contrast to other Canadian cities with larger queer communities, meaning not only more visible social organisations, but often geographically locatable gay or queer districts (eg. Davie Street in Vancouver, Church and Wellesley in Toronto, the Village in Montreal). In direct contrast to these cities, queer communities and trans communities in Calgary have been described by several of the participants in this project as small, scattered, and resource-poor.

Harley, for example, interprets the social and political climate in Calgary directly as the reason that there is a smaller community and fewer dedicated spaces and resources available to trans folk in the city.

**Harley:** Yeah, and even, there’s one toy store -- ha, toy store -- I go to -- I should say “adult store” -- which is amazing and is very queer positive and very kink-positive and not sex

shaming at all, and they're trans-positive too, as well. But, because, I mean, they can only have so much stock, it's just not something that comes up a lot, so they don't -- they don't have that stuff because it doesn't come up, because Calgary is so conservative. It was actually -- we were talking about this last night because that's when I tried to go and find the packer -- but it's just any city with a gay area, like Vancouver with Davie Street, stuff like that -- they're going to have a bigger queer population, and a bigger, because of that, trans population. But in Calgary, I mean, I don't know that many people who are trans and I don't think it's a very significant population so it is kind of like -- it's a novelty to me to meet someone else who's like gender queer or trans. But it's, I don't think there's a lot of stuff out there that's -- like resources -- that are in the city. Like, I know there are tons of online resources which is amazing and they've been really informative and helpful, but then there's still like, 'Man, I wish there was like, you know, a shop I could go where there are toys built for me.'

In this way, Harley positions Calgary as being comparatively less trans-friendly in relation to cities with larger queer and trans communities, though not entirely so. Much of Harley's engagement with trans communities has been online, in Tumblogs (Tumblr blogs), but this is as much out of necessity as desire. The resources just are not as readily available in the city itself. This has become a problem for Harley particularly when it comes to obtaining things like a good packer (an artificial penis), which ey discusses in the quote above, or a real binder (to flatten breasts). Ey says it "sucks that there's not somewhere I can go in the city to try on a binder, like I have to order it online and just cross my fingers and hope that it'll fit."

James also characterises trans community in Calgary as scattered and resource-poor -- just getting started.

**James:** When I have parents calling me, or I have people from the Foothills Hospital calling me and I have no doctorate, I'm not a teacher, or -- to, like, teach their staff about trans issues. Then we have a gap. We have a problem. The community is not there. It doesn't provide the educational resources, and individuals are. But it's been like that for so long that I'm like, well, yeah, it's a pretty ineffective community as communities go. You go to the gay community and you're like, 'I need a teacher,' and they're like, 'Oh, here's the Calgary Sexual Health Centre, and Outlink, and Misc. Youth, and whatever.' There are people that are set up to do that. 'Cause those questions will be asked. And the trans community is just like, 'I know this guy. He talks to everyone.'

He locates a large part of this problem as the result of an environment in which many people do not feel safe or comfortable being out as trans, without fear of violence, condemnation, ostracism, or losing their jobs, friends, or homes.

**James:** The thing about it is trans people are two percent of the population. There are the same number of trans people running around the world as there are red heads. We're everywhere. When I came out to my piercer, which is a funny story, I walked in and said, you know, 'Hey, how're you doing? How are things going?' And he, who was not a guy at the time, looked at me and said, 'Oh, you know, I'm going good. I'm transitioning, so I'm changing my name,' and I was like, 'Me too!' And we were like a month apart. We'd started transitioning at the same time. And so we connected a lot more after that and I got all my piercings from him before he went to school in Ontario, and so it was just really funny 'cause you just, I never would have thought, walking into the place I got my piercings that my piercer would be transitioning and we'd be, so -- so there's just. There's a lot of us around. So trans community is interesting because it really is split down the middle with who's out and who's not, do you know what I mean? You go to the Trans Day of Remembrance, where there's no media and any press coverage is done, like, in another room and no one will ever see your face and, yeah, there's a bunch of trans people there. But you go to something like Transcend, which is a trans celebration that's happening which is like a big party, 'cause, Christ, there's enough sad stuff. We actually need to party every once in a while. And I really don't think the attendance is going to be that spectacular, because people have to be out about being trans. And I understand why some people go stealth. Not everybody is an extrovert like me and wants to be getting interviewed or get, do you know what I mean? They just want to -- kind of want to transition and move on with their lives. 'Cause for a lot of people figuring out they're trans and going through the process is the most horrific, embarrassing, disturbing, and scary thing they will ever do, and they don't want to go back there. They're just, they're done. They're happier now. And frequently healthier now. And they're just done. Or they work in industries where it's not safe [to be out as trans].

This situation, of course, is not unique to Calgary. Rather, it stems from the heterosexual norms that underlie the entire structure of our society. Considering this, the question of situating trans communities in Calgary is made more interesting, because even where there are trans folk, they frequently may not be out or visible as trans.

One of the features of the socio-spatial situation of trans community in Calgary, then, is that a lot of what is tacitly understood as "trans community" has no necessary visible referent. When I initiated conversations about transgender community in Calgary, people tended to impute different meanings to the term, not just between different individuals but within different conversational contexts. "Transgender community" is variously positioned as an abstract idea of "the trans community" or "the queer community" ("that just floats around in the ether") or as actual groups of people gathering in a physical space. Physical trans spaces can be permanent, like the Pride Centre at MRU, or temporary, like at an event such as the Transgender Day of Remembrance, which memorialises those who have been killed due to transphobia.

**James:** But the trans community's interesting because you almost build your own in a lot of ways. Like, I feel like in Calgary you build your own queer community. There's this like 'queer community' that just floats around in the ether and then we all get together for Pride and we're all gay for a day and then we just disappear.

One of the results of this abstract and intangible quality of trans and queer community, for this research project, has been that most of the project, necessarily, centres on interviews with individuals. While I have attended events such as campus gender-benders, these events are only trans events in the sense that they put on by queer student groups, to some extent try to be trans-inclusive, and are attractive to some trans folk (including some of the participants in this project) because of the gender-bending focus. At these events, just for one night and in one space, it is acceptable and even encouraged to present gender outside the heteronormative boundaries of male-man and female-woman. People who were assigned the male sex at birth can wear dresses, corsets, heels, or make-up, while those assigned female can wear ties, binders, packers, or moustaches. Drag queens and kings take the stage. So these events are fun, maybe they even feel liberating, but they do not last long, and their victory over heteronormative space is partial at best -- the signs on the washrooms, for example, still read M and F. More trans-centric events, such as the new trans celebration in the city, Transcend, are few and far between and, at the time of writing, are still to come.

### *Trans-positive / Safe Space-Making*

Trans-friendly space is sometimes positioned explicitly as "trans-positive" or "safe" space, or space where it has been made safer -- physically, socially, institutionally -- for trans folk than it is otherwise in more heteronormative spaces. This can be a question of attitudes (for example, being respectful and aware of trans-related concerns, such as using the correct pronouns in conversation) or of the social structuring of the physical space (for example, having washrooms that are not marked as either male or female).

The question of trans-positive attitudes is a difficult one, because it involves education and awareness and therefore a little effort from everyone in the space, which is hard to ensure. However, most of the measures needed to make a space more trans-positive are ultimately very simple, having to do with basic respect for folks' gender identities and gender expressions. This means, for example, trying to use the correct pronouns, not invading people's privacy, and not being judgemental about how a person should present their gender or how they should identify.

**Kendell:** I always find it's [a trans-positive space] such a hard thing to really pin down because on the one hand if you're going to be completely politically correct you're not going to say anything ever for fear that you'll offend someone. But on the other hand there definitely is a line where you know it's not okay anymore and I think, you know, it's about intention and, you know, just awareness. For example, when I was first transitioning, before I transitioned hormonally, when I was telling people who wouldn't have known -- I was a lot more tolerant of things like wrong pronouns or kind of ignorant remarks and what not that aren't meant deliberately, negatively. So I don't think a safe space needs to be somewhere where you, you know, can't ask a question or you can't say anything or you have to be afraid of screwing it up. On the other hand now that I do pass, and now that I have many friends who all refer to me as 'he' -- if someone screws it up I'm livid.

One way this can be better accomplished is to have information on trans issues readily available within spaces that mean to be trans-inclusive. Harley, for example, has noted that one thing they likes about the Q, a queer student space on the University of Calgary campus, is that there are posters up about topics like how to be supportive of trans friends.

**Harley:** There's a lot more education and there are people who do try to educate, even in passive ways, like in the Q centre they have a series of posters that talk about, you know, important queer identities, important trans identities. What to do if you think your friend is queer, what to do if you think your friend is trans, what to do if you think your child is queer. And the last one is, or maybe it's the trans identity ones, but it has cisgender on it. And I've been in the Q probably, like, five or six times and people are like, 'Well, what is cisgender?' and I'm like, 'Well.' So it, it's cool to get discussion rolling like that in some ways, I just, I think there needs to be more done.

In this way, education and awareness can help to create a more welcoming environment for trans folk, helping to rewrite the social scripts that position non-heteronormative people as outsiders.

Spaces throughout the city are encoded in this way by the participants in this project. How safe, welcomed, and respected do they feel in that space as a trans person? Some spaces are felt to be

more trans-positive in this respect than others. For example, the now closed Club Sapien was regarded as a safer space than most other clubs and bars in the city, gay and straight, because of its explicit expectations of respect and responsibility from and for everyone there. See the club's own self-description, from its homepage:

**Club Sapien** is thrilled to have opened a new community space for the Calgary area! We openly welcome the abundant population of lesbians, gays, straight friends, allies, and all others that identify as some form of queer, because we really are all HOMO... Sapiens! (clubsapien.ca)

And here, Sapien's mission statement, found online, and previously posted at the front entrance to the club:

Club Sapien takes pride in providing a safe and exciting environment to celebrate with and responsibly serve Calgary's diverse queer community.

**Our promise to our guests:**

- Provide a safe and fun space for all community members
- Effectively serve as ambassadors within the queer community
- Continue to enrich the queer nightlife in Alberta
- Provide respectful and consistent service to all our guests

**Our guests' promise to us:**

- Contribute to the environment of fun and safety for all
- Act respectfully toward fellow guests, staff and space
- Act responsibly from start of night to arriving home safely

(clubsapien.ca)

The fact that Sapien was seen as a space that was welcoming for everyone -- a few participants have particularly noted this as including women and straight allies, as well as trans folk, though the space is certainly not trans-centric -- has contributed to regret that the club has now closed, because there are very few alternatives in the city. The closing night at the club was so packed that people could hardly move. Jokes such as one drag performer's, "What do Whitney Houston and Club Sapien have in common? Well, I'm really sad about one of them," elicited much booing and affected crying from the crowd. Inclusive and welcoming spaces are hard to find in Calgary -- and hard to lose as well.

One of the most common and fundamental concerns with public spaces for trans folk is the lack of gender-neutral washrooms. This means that if a person has to use a public toilet they must identify themselves as one sex/gender or the other, M/F. For some trans people, having to identify as one or the other is personally uncomfortable. For many, public washrooms come attached to the threat of being called out by others for using the “wrong” one, with confusion, condemnation, or possibly even physical violence.

**Brianne:** [On what she would like to see changing in Calgary.] Gender neutral washrooms would be amazing. Amazing, amazing.

**Lyn:** It would change the entire trans community’s ability to function at a social level. I mean, that you wouldn’t have to have tranny bladder<sup>14</sup> any more, that you wouldn’t have to be fearful of peeing in public. Think about that. Think about a movie, think about going out for dinner.

**Harley:** [On what makes a safe space.] There are some things in particular for me that can do a lot. Like, any place that has a unisex bathroom is amazing, ‘cause just sometimes having to go into the one with the skirt on it is like, ‘Ugh,’ like, what’s the difference between the two, you know? That’s one thing that I’m surprised Twisted hasn’t done, because everyone goes to the women’s bathroom anyways, and like men go in there all the time. Last time I went I actually I just went into the men’s bathroom cause I was like I don’t want to wade through the people who are socializing in the bathroom and then figure out where the lineup is, and so I was just like, ‘I really need to go pee!’ So I went into the men’s bathroom and, I actually had one guy walk in and like, glare at me, and walk out. And I was like, ‘Whoa!’ and I walked out of the bathroom and he like, looked at me again and then like went in, and I was like ‘Yo, sorry, but, you know, I actually don’t fit either of those two markers, so -- I’ll use whichever one I damn well please.’ But yeah. Having a unisex bathroom, even if it’s just like a single stall one and there’s like male, female, otherwise

One of the interesting things, here, is recognising how trans space is *made*. The call for gender neutral washrooms was made by nearly every participant in this project because washrooms are such a fundamental feature of public space, but washrooms marked with M and F work to exclude many trans people who may feel uncomfortable entering these gendered spaces or may be challenged by others for entering these spaces. These are spaces that are socially produced, and function to reify heterosexual gender norms. The gendering of these spaces is clearly not a matter of natural, pre-discursive fact. What this also means is that they could be changed, if the

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase “tranny bladder” refers to the necessity for or ability of a (trans) person to hold their water in order to avoid using gendered (M/F) public washrooms. This can be extremely uncomfortable and can also result in health problems.

necessary levels of respect, education, and awareness were in place -- the problem, of course, being that they usually are not.

James, on his work with the queer youth group Miscellaneous Youth, has talked about the way the group sets up events in order to temporarily produce safe spaces for the youth around the city.

**James:** I think if you sequester yourself in queer space in a city like this where we don't have a gay street, we don't have a gay- it's not necessarily particularly healthy, and the kids should be allowed to exist in the world along with every other minority and majority and feel safe. And sometimes the way to do that is take over the space for a night and make it safe. So creating spaces within the community is really important, and you do that by taking over existing spaces, not by building new buildings and hiding in them, but by going out into the world and becoming part of it. [...] I think that's mostly what it is, the two concepts that we try to get across to the kids in the largest way are, 'There's nothing wrong with you,' and, 'You deserve to be a part of the Calgary community and you shouldn't have to apologise for who you are or what you are.'

One of the ways they accomplish this, for trans youth in particular, was to plan ahead and confirm that gender neutral washrooms would be available, or that alternative arrangements could be made. In this way they are able as a community group to temporarily produce safer spaces. Even when it is possible to arrange safer spaces, however, these spaces always exist in a provisional way in a heteronormative society and, in Calgary, against the backdrop of a city that has earned a reputation for being socially conservative. Truly trans-positive spaces, in this way, are relatively few and far between and are often temporary.

### *Youth, Shifting Narratives, and Increasing Access to Information*

Just like it is important to situate social research spatially, it is also important to locate it in time as well. As Stein notes, "the meaning of a place may change over time, intentionally or otherwise" (p. 61). One way of thinking of trans community in Calgary, which was central to several participants' narratives, was the idea that trans community in Calgary is growing and that things are slowly starting to look up, meaning that they feel like trans people are receiving greater respect and recognition generally and within queer communities, despite recent setbacks

like the 2009 delisting of gender reassignment surgery (GRS) from covered medical procedures in the province. Another change, not unrelated, that has been taking place in recent years is the shift from discussions of the discrete categories bound up in the ever-expanding “LGBT” initialism towards the umbrella term “queer,” which takes non-heteronormativity as its organising principle. Several participants very consciously positioned their experiences as being in this way historically specific, situated in relation to evolving ideas and political developments.

**Harley:** I think it was Newton who said something like, ‘If I have done anything it’s only because I have seen from the shoulders of giants.’ I’m butchering that quote awfully but, you know, everyone before us did so much work that it’s -- I mean, for me, it’s hard to imagine our world without that work having been done but it’s, you know, it’s also really good to acknowledge that, you know, people before us have, you know, either just put in intellectual work or, you know, actually put in blood, sweat, and tears into making this world a better place for us. And I think the least we can do with our youth is put that into making it better for the next generation.

One part of this trend of change is that discussion and information about trans topics has already become, just in the last decade or so, much more accessible. James, who started questioning his gender very early on in his life, describes learning about the transgender concept in a very gradual and almost accidental way, with few information resources available. He turned to films, first discovering the 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry* at the age of twelve. The film is based on the real-life story of Brandon Teena, which ends in violence after it is discovered that Brandon, who identifies and has been passing as a man, is biologically female. Still without a clear idea of what “transgender” was, James felt a connection with Brandon, which was a frightening experience because of what happens to him in the film. James also turned to the internet, which at the time offered very limited resources on trans topics that have since developed immensely.

**James:** That’s [learning about Brandon Teena] when I first heard about trans people and I was like, ‘Oh, is that possible?’ And this is, this is when the internet was like up and running but not running at the, like, Wikipedia didn’t exist, like, googling something was still a really big quagmire of, like, utter crap and, you know, terrible web pages, and people were putting up their own web pages. Most of them were like, illegible, or it was just -- and finding trans stuff was really difficult, ‘cause people just weren’t using it as a resource in the same way. So, I latched onto queer stuff, though, ‘cause queer activism, early nineties, was in a good, was in good shape, and, and so I latched onto queer stuff. And there was a lot of really positive butch lesbian and femme lesbian sites, there was a lot of that, that bent that still exists, that kind of mystique that exists in the culture and so I latched onto that ‘cause it was as close as I could find to what I was looking for. Now there’s like transgays.com and all

that. There's all kinds of stuff online and there's a massive, like, youtube community of transguys that just didn't exist when I first was looking into it at, like, twelve, thirteen.

Just in the past decade or two, then, James' narrative identifies a huge change in the accessibility of information on transgender topics. Other participants in this project, whose narratives start a little later on, have had a lot more of their initial exposure to trans and queer narratives via internet resources than James did, and these resources have been easier to find. Recall Harley's participation with trans\* and genderqueer Tumblogs or Ares' experiences with FtM youtube communities, for example.

Another aspect of this change has to do with the shift towards queer discourses. James points out how the development in the shift from gay and lesbian to queer discourses has changed not only the way he structures his understanding of his own experience, but has also especially changed the situation for younger generations growing up in this socio-historical context.

**James:** I think it's starting to happen with young people though, because people are starting to figure out their trans status younger, in the same way that they're coming out younger. And they're being given that option to exist on a, on a, not on a binary but on a spectrum. And so with that you're getting a generation of kids that are not growing up in the gay clique or the lesbian clique or the trans clique or the whatever. They're growing up in a queer community as a whole. And they're going into, for example, into my youth group. There's trans kids and gay kids and lesbian kids and bisexual kids and kids who are like, 'Whatever. I'm a toaster. It doesn't matter.' They just don't have an identity or they don't want to identify or label themselves.

Queer critiques of normative gender constructs, in this way, have made a wider range of gender possibilities more available for trans folk who are coming out and coming into their own now. Several of the participants in this project are very well-versed in queer studies (eg. James, Harley, Kendell) and queer discourses penetrate the narratives of others who have not been educated or done reading in queer theory (eg. Ares). This knowledge has shaped the way they identify and express themselves -- for example, Harley's genderqueer identity and mixed, changeable gender presentation; Ares' identification of his gender as simply "queer"; or Kendell's affinity for make-up and pretty things, which he fits quite easily into his identity as a man. Those participants with the least awareness of queer theory are the oldest ones, but "queer"

has still affected their narratives in the sense of “the queer community” now being used as an inclusive umbrella concept.

In this way, the increasing availability of shifting narratives about transgender phenomena structures the experiences of the trans folks living through these narratives. On the overarching level of the trend towards queer understandings of gender and sexuality as fluid and the idea of the queer umbrella that touches on all folks who transgress the heterosexual norms of our society, as well as on the local level of a changing city-scape and slowly growing queer and trans communities, the experiences of trans folk in the city are deeply affected by the historical situation they are positioned in. In this way, the trans and queer social context has changed radically for younger people growing up and coming out today, now signifying a wider and more diverse umbrella of non-heteronormative gender identities and expressions.

## 7. A Critical View on “The Trans Community”

One of the points that participants in this project have often stressed, either in relation to their own experiences in and outside of queer communities or in concern over what a research project on experiences of “trans community” might entail, was the question of diversity. Some of the terms that are often used in trans and queer circles are “the trans umbrella” or “trans\*”. These terms are intended to be inclusive of diverse identities and to reject singular or universal definitions of transgender. The ideal of inclusivity, however, stands in counterpoint to the problem of eliding differences. This can occur with the use of the concept of transgender as a homogenous category, and within conceptual organisations such as LGBT(+) that approach transgender in this way and that may include trans only in perfunctory, tokenising ways.

### *The Trans\* Umbrella, Trans Diversity, and T for Tokenism*

Trans communities are diverse across multiple dimensions including age, ethnicity, class, ability, and so on. This is incredibly important to remember. However, the concern that came up most often as relevant to their own personal experience among the people I interviewed for this project was how trans identities are often understood by others in ways that homogenised trans experiences across different gender and sexual identities and expressions -- particularly in ways that produced restrictive ideas about “correct”, “normal”, or even “usual” ways to be trans.

**Brianne:** There’s, again there’s such a spectrum of the trans community, you know, it varies by gender identity and gender expression and sexual orientation and biology and everything else. Like it’s just --

**Lyn:** Surgical choices.

**Brianne:** Surgical choices. Yeah. How far you transition, whether you transition, you know. All this stuff is, you know, there isn’t really a normal --

**Lyn:** Usual.

**Brianne:** Usual. Yeah, that’s a bad word. There isn’t a usual way to be trans just because there is -- so many different ways to go about it.

**Kendell:** I still like to wear makeup, I still like to do drag, I'm looking really forward to Gender Bender. I'm going to be the prettiest fairy that ever there was. And that doesn't make me any less trans, and that doesn't make me less legitimate, and so, you know, both for people who are trans and people who, you know, don't know anything about trans people is that, you know, you can't expect that there is one box in the way that trans people are, and, you know, if you fit criteria A, B and C, you're trans.

These concerns were faced both within and without trans and queer communities. Other instances include Ares' identification with the youtube video about not having to be "trans enough" or James' label for "transier than thou" attitudes. (Trans)gender expression and identities can exist anywhere on a spectrum from one binary pole to the other and can sometimes purposefully defy this binary, if only in partial and provisional ways (see above, chapter four, *Transgressing Heterosexual Norms: Envisioning Non-Binary Gender*). In the very small participant group in this research project, already there are sex and gender identities ranging from MtF and FtM to queer or genderqueer, as well as a cisgender trans ally; sexual identities spanning lesbian, straight, gay, queer, and pansexual, as well as monogamous and polyamorous; a wide range of different decisions about bodies -- surgeries, hormones, temporary modifications such as breast-binding, or no changes to bodily sex at all; and different gender presentations in appearance or manner -- masculine, feminine, androgynous, mixed, fixed, or changeable. And these dimensions only outline variations in sex, gender, and sexuality -- conspicuously leaving out considerations of age, class, ethnicity, ability, and so on.

The trans umbrella overarches a truly huge range of variation, crosscutting other categories, and yet for convenience it is frequently collapsed into a single, isolated category, T, in large and ever-expanding LGBT+ configurations, and in simplistic and often tokenising ways. This has been experienced by some participants as a source of frustration. Particularly, a lack of awareness about what diverse experiences that transgender umbrella category can include undermines its usefulness as a marker of inclusion.

Several participants also indicated their frustration with being nominally absorbed, in respect to their trans identification, T, into communities that in practice were more like "LG" or "LGB" because of their lack of awareness and attention to trans issues.

**Kendell:** I have a great amount of similarity with, you know, people in the club and other gay guys and stuff, and I'm close to them and we're good friends but there's always, you know, they're not going to understand everything, they can't understand everything, and a lot of times I get the feeling that they don't want to understand or hear about it. And you know, especially when you're the only one, I don't want to be the token "tranny". I don't want to be the freak show, so I don't talk about it. And mostly, most of that's fine. I have good friends. I'm not trying to say I don't have good friends. And they're there for me and stuff, but on a certain level I pretty much feel alone still.

**Harley:** I think a lot of the people in the group perhaps maybe need to look at how they felt when they came out and -- I mean, I know I've talked to, for example, lesbians who go home and their parents are like, 'Oh, so when are you getting a boyfriend?' And they're like, 'Well, I told you last time, Ma, I like chicks.' And they still put up with that, but I don't think they necessarily connect that to the trans experience and what they're saying at the moment. So I think it's one of those situations where people aren't meaning to be hurtful, certainly, but they're still not doing everything they could be to be respectful. So -- and it's one of those times where like sometimes I can really educate people, but other times people don't want to be educated. They just want to talk about so and so [regarding earlier in the conversation, about people referring to others by the wrong pronouns and terms despite being corrected], or stuff like that, so it's kind of like, it's a bit of a frustrating spot, certainly, being part of the trans community in a community on campus which is mostly LGB, period.

In this way trans experiences can often occupy a liminal space not only on the borders of heteronormative society but also on the borders of "queer" or "LGBT" communities that , despite being nominally trans-inclusive, nevertheless often do not actively work to include all trans-identified people -- or to include trans folk at all -- in anything more than name.

### *Notions of "Community" and "Category"*

Clearly, then, ideas about transgender community (particularly in the singular and implicitly definite sense of "*the* transgender community," as opposed to the more consciously abstract sense of "transgender community" or the pluralistic sense of "transgender communities") or the transgender category (as in the T of LGBT) can be problematic and are sometimes not reflective of the lived experiences of those they mean to include. These ideas can be homogenising or tokenising, even when nominally inclusive.

One of the areas where this becomes problematic is in the way in which transgender is reified as a singular and distinct category of persons through academic discourses. David Valentine (2007) points out that “transgender studies is complicated not only by the heterogeneity of voices and the questions of embodiment and experience but also by how certain voices, experiences, and embodiments come to be understood *as* transgender in the first place” (p. 147). He reveals a very difficult question here, a chicken-or-egg question about the relationship between theorisations of transgender, trans and queer communities, and trans peoples lived experiences. Or, as he puts it:

there is a recursive relationship between transgender studies and a transgender community, one that engages an uncomfortable doubleness common to many fields of interdisciplinary inquiry. That is, even as transgender studies critically engages ‘transgender,’ its very institutionalization and naming presupposes a referent. Simultaneously, for all its critical impulse, transgender studies comes to stand as evidence *of* such a community for those concerned with its representation in the academy and beyond. (p. 166-167)

This recursive relationship is problematic because it means that there is a certain theoretical unity that is imposed on the category “transgender” from above that, even while expressly intending *not* to do so, elides what are exceptionally diverse experiences into a singular interpretative frame.

Similarly, a problem exists in the ways in which queer discourses, either on academic or community levels, can sometimes appropriate the transgender category in ways that can be tokenising. In this respect, Jay Prosser (1998) has famously argued:

One wonders to what extent this queer inclusiveness of transgender and transsexuality is an inclusiveness *for* queer rather than for the trans subject: the mechanism by which queer can sustain its very queerness - prolong the queerness of the moment - by periodically adding subjects who appear ever queerer precisely by virtue of their marginality in relation to queer. (p. 40)

Queer theory is often celebrated in trans communities, and it does perform an important task by working to denaturalise the heterosexual matrix of our society. However, the broad generalisations that are made in theory can have awkward implications in practice -- consider the idea/ideal of eventual liberation from social norms through subversion, without regard to how difficult the lived experience of this subversion can be (cf. Butler, 1990; Namaste, 2005).

Therefore, critical examination of the way transgender is structured as a category of persons in queer studies is called for.

Like the concerns raised by Valentine (2007), Prosser's argument has to do with the ways in which the experiences of persons who are marked as trans are appropriated for theoretical purposes in discourses produced by and ultimately for non-trans people, while glossing over trans folks' lived realities and in this way benefitting theory more so than the people that that theory claims to represent. This problem trickles down to the community level as well. To take a concrete example, in the context of participants' experiences with on-campus queer groups, calling the group "LGBT" or "queer" certainly looks up-to-date and politically correct, but if in effect insufficient steps are taken to reduce transphobia, increase awareness of trans issues, and be respectful of trans folk in the space, then who does this nominal inclusion really benefit? This is why, for example, Harley has been so happy to see trans awareness posters in the Q Centre on the UofC campus -- because even when not everyone is up to speed yet and education about transgender still needs to take place, that effort is at least a good start, and one that is not always found in so-called LGBT and queer spaces, let alone in the rest of society.

A further concern is the problem of drawing the lines in the sand that separate communities, cultures, or categories too strongly. Thomas K. Fitzgerald (1999) provides a useful analogy when he navigates his experiences with the limits of reflexivity and particularly "the limits of trying to share a common identity with those being researched" by critiquing common metaphors of identity (p. 127). He describes his turn from the metaphor of a "cultural outlaw" that positions gay and lesbian identities, in his example, as separated from the dominant heterosexual culture to "the conservative and analytical metaphor of social stranger, which attempts to avoid the fervor of exclusiveness and separation while recognizing the realities of social complexity in the cultural construction of sexual identities" (p. 127). A social stranger, here, signifies "someone who does not fit in socially because she or he is perceived to be different from the norm -- not one unacquainted with the culture" (p. 119) What Fitzgerald points to, then, is a problem similar to what is encountered when transgender is positioned as an identity category either wholly

separate from dominant heterosexual society or as wholly contained by “LGBT” communities. Rather, transgender occupies a liminal position on the borders of both these groups, but does not exist wholly separately from them, either.

**Kendell:** It’s like, you know, ‘I like the colour blue, you also like the colour blue *obviously* we’re going to be best friends!’ and like for example, like, every time someone finds out , you know -- there’s a few people I guess that are known around the city -- and they’re like, ‘Oh, do you know so-and-so?’ And I’m like, ‘Why would I?’ They don’t go to the university. I don’t have classes with them. I don’t have dealings with them. I mean we’re just people, type of thing. So, I don’t know. And maybe it’s because -- like, I know that a lot of trans people do really identify as trans, as opposed to anything else -- but that’s never really been it for me. I just sort of view it as a, sort of, mode of getting where I want to go type of thing. I’m just the same as any other guy I just had a bit of a different way of getting there.

It is in regard to the problematic ideas discussed here that several of the participants in this study have expressed frustration with people expecting trans folk to be a particular way, or queer and LGBT groups and communities including transgender in name (T) but not in practice (eg. activism for trans rights, education and awareness on trans issues, and other trans-inclusive practices as previously discussed). These problematic ways of thinking can translate into negative experiences in daily life for those they affect. While T for transgender functions to conceptually include transgender people in LGBT groups and the queer umbrella overarches the trans one in the same way, these categorisations do not translate in daily life to any singular, bounded, homogenous, or isolated community, identity, or experience. This kind of essentialism, of course, is a chronic problem with identity politics generally and is a central reason for the current general discursive shift away from LGBT+ initialisms (see, for example, Budhiraja, Fried, and Teixeira, 2010). This discursive shift is one that structures trans community experiences (for a brief example, see the discussion above in chapter six, *Transgender in this Time and Place: Youth, Shifting Narratives, and Increasing Access to Information*). However, this shift is only partially realised and ideas about transgender as a singular category or community are still experienced on the ground-level in ways that are frustrating to some trans folk and that can neglect or obscure the diversity of transgender experiences.

### *Retaining Positive Senses of Community*

Despite these problems with ideas of transgender as a singular community or category, it should be stressed that, for most participants, engagement with queer or trans communities and having a sense of community belonging was felt as deeply positive, rewarding, and important to their lives across multiple dimensions -- personal, political, and social. What participants referred to as the community they felt they belonged in varied. Ares, for example, describes himself as feeling less like he is engaged with any campus-based, city-based, or overarching queer community, but rather that he has his own circle of friends who support him in his queer gender identity. Others reference campus groups at the University of Calgary or Mount Royal University, community organisations, or broader concepts of an overarching community or culture, extending to encompass anyone who is trans or queer. In this way, in many senses, it is often more appropriate to employ phrases such as trans (or trans-inclusive) “communities” or “groups”. However, the abstracts of “the trans community” and “the queer community” as well as “trans culture” or “queer culture” occupy powerful and important positions in people’s narratives, even while individuals’ experiences of transgender and of trans community differ greatly.

**Lyn:** It’s easy enough to pull like a dictionary type definition of community as, you know, a gathering or a group of people that have common interests or common backgrounds. For me, community is who will stand together, play together, fight together. Community is people that understand me. When I talk about my queer community there’s as many -- it bugs me that we need to identify allies, I understand why we do, but there’s as many allies in my queer community as there are queer people. I have allies that identify as queer. Yeah, for me, my queer community is anyone that will stand shoulder to shoulder with me and be willing to understand the issues, be willing to have a voice with them, I don’t even care if the issue impacts you directly. If your heart and your mind say, ‘I get it, and you’re right, that’s wrong,’ then that’s my community.

**Lyn:** Yeah, that’s queer culture. Queer culture is everything we’ve ever done to be what everyone else is already, do you know what I mean? It’s -- it’s everything that you have to do, have to learn, have to produce in order to be proud of who you are with no shame and no apology.

**Brianne:** -- And parties.  
[Everyone laughs.]

In this way, broader ideas about queer and trans community are still relevant, even while they ideally should be more critically employed. In fact, the heterogeneity and high level of internal

debate and critique was sometimes positioned as one of the positive features of queer communities and queer culture.

**James:** Queer culture is just so new that I think it's still this roiling mess that will continue to be challenging. And so I think queer culture is undefined in the sense that it refuses to agree with itself enough to be defined in the first place. And I think that's healthy. I think that's the way it should be.

Or, recall Brianne's comment:

**Brianne:** There's a lot that I gain [from participating in queer and trans communities]. There's, you know, perspective, gaining different perspectives from different people, there's the, you know, meeting people that you see are not quite sure where they fit and seeing that evolution in them to finding exactly where they fit is hugely rewarding.

In this way, "the trans community" is only a problematic concept insofar as people use or interpret it as singular, bounded, homogenous, or isolated. As an abstract, as it has often been referenced participants' narratives, it can help to provide a sense of belonging, commonality, and unity with others in the face of adversity. Certainly, it is a very common expression, and a very powerful idea, even while it is one that should be used critically and conscientiously in order to avoid colonising, appropriating, neglecting, or obscuring different people's diverse experiences, identities, and self-expressions.

## 8. The Significance of an Anthropology of Transgender

In this chapter I address the gaps that I have found in the bodies of literature on transgender available in queer and transgender studies, as well as in anthropology. I also discuss how and why anthropological research on transgender subjects is an important project going forward. While increasingly literature written outside of academic contexts is being drawn on within queer and transgender studies, often activist literature that addresses more applied topics, much of the body of literature in these areas of study is highly theoretical and can often be too removed from trans folks' lived experiences. Only a very few anthropologists have engaged in these issues so far, particularly in respect to an active engagement with queer theory and gender theory, but I argue that such an engagement could be revelatory for both areas of study.

### *To Queer and Transgender Studies*

**James:** I love queer theory and I love trans theory -- in theory, is really, is what it comes down to. Because at the end of the day, I can, I can be inspired by all the trans theory in the world, but when I'm mid-transition I still have to do things like sign a lease, get dental work done, get a job, and I can't put zir on the forms to do that.

A disproportionately large amount of the writing on transgender topics, particular within academia, is concerned with philosophy and theory more so than with lived experience. Anthropological methods of inquiry have the potential to help balance this tendency, to help ground pie-in-the-sky queer theory in empirical material, and to help make more apparent in what ways the body of theory that exists *is* relevant to trans people's lived experiences and holds promise for challenging the difficulties they face every day.

There is a significant disconnect between queer theories of gender and everyday life. Transgender people may place themselves and/or be placed by others outside the boundaries of binary gender, but our society extends legitimacy to nothing else. Confronting this, Kessler and McKenna (2000) ask the question, "Who put the 'trans' in transgender?" They identify multiple

connotations of “trans”, indicating variously “transformation” as in changing bodies, “transfer” as in moving across or between genders, or “transcendence” as in the most queer meaning of moving above and beyond gender (§ 2). “Trans” in this third sense, although attractive to gender theorists, is the most difficult to accomplish, when it is even attempted or desired, in daily life. This is because of concerns of safety, tolerance, and acceptance, and also because, no matter what a person’s gender identity or expression, they cannot entirely control the way they are read by outside observers (Transgender: Transformation, transfer, or transcendence? section, § 7). This examination of the linguistic implications of “trans”gender illustrates the disconnect between queer theories of gender and trans people’s daily lives.

Viviane Namaste (2005), a well-known trans activist based out of Montreal, levels a biting critique against the treatment of transgender topics in queer studies (several, actually, but this is one). She argues that the extreme privileging of identity in queer theory and queer politics, even when efforts are made to recognise the level of diversity represented by identity labels or to deconstruct the idea of identity itself, glosses over trans peoples’ lived realities:

“That identity is the privileged site of inquiry is evident. What is less obvious, however, are the implications of this starting point. An intellectual preoccupation with identity determines what we know about transsexual and transgendered people. So while we can read page after page on the deconstruction of the hegemonic sex/gender system, queer and transgender theory offer us absolutely nothing when it comes to the substantive issues of our lives. Don’t look to Butler to learn about transsexuals and health care; don’t hope to understand issues around transsexuality and addictions in the next genderqueer anthology, forthcoming from Routledge New York.” (p. 18-19)

The problems she expresses are fundamental and highly regrettable. David Valentine (2002) approaches similar concerns, about the abundance of academic texts regarding transgender topics that are based on *a priori* categories, from the vantage point of his fieldwork in New York City. Valentine positions anthropological inquiry as one way to help address this problem. He reports that in the social sciences, including within anthropology, “a recognition that transgender lives complicate gendered and sexual categories of analysis has required a rethinking of how to theorize and describe queer lives and experiences” (p. 225). In particular, Valentine questions the distinctions between categories such as “gender” and “sexuality” and the perception that these

categories are discrete and unproblematic (p. 226). These categories, which are employed almost without fail in gay and lesbian politics, are called into question by Valentine's own fieldwork experiences (p. 222). With this reasoning, Valentine suggests that "Queer anthropology is perhaps most valuable in the possibilities it offers for opening its own terms of investigation" (p. 240). Or, in other words, anthropology can help bridge the gap between theoretical categorisations and people's daily lives. In particular, it can help to shift the focus onto people's lived experiences and encourage knowledge production from the ground up rather than the imposition of categories from above.

As Agar (1982) describes it, "the usual language for discussing social research as a general process fits ethnography poorly" (p. 779). This is because of the ways in which ethnography is self-consciously situated in historical, spatial, social, institutional, and personal contexts and engages in detailed description (p. 780-783). Margot Weiss (2011) structures her argument for a greater anthropological engagement with queer subjects in this way "not, as is most often the case, to issue a call to queer studies for deeper or more complex theoretical understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality; social norms and subjectification; categories and their productive effects. Rather, I want to explore the desire for queer knowledge that can exceed the conceptual simplicity of our theoretical categories" (p. 650). She names anthropological methodology as the way to recognise what she says is *already known* in queer communities, "the complexity of social life -- embodiment, practice, desire -- 'on the ground'" (p. 650). Subjectivity and specificity are both the limitations and the strengths of anthropology, and they are embodied in the practice of anthropological fieldwork. These strengths are precisely those that are too often lacking in transgender and queer studies.

### *To Anthropology*

The marginalisation of anthropology in queer studies is highly regrettable. Conversely, so is the marginalisation of queer studies in anthropology. In a pointed review of three queer

ethnographies, Tom Boellstorff (2006) argues that anthropology has much to offer queer studies and that this means more than simply adding more perspectives or more voices to the fray. He emphasises instead “the possibility that disciplinarity can further the goals of queer studies toward a different effect, which one might call an effect of accountability” (p. 628). By this he means that work in academic disciplines such as anthropology, in addition to engagement with queer studies in interdisciplinary ways, can help to ground queer studies and render it subject to the ways in which knowledge production practices are made more visible through the use of well-established disciplinary methodologies. This is perhaps the best way to describe the argument I have made, above. Further, though, he calls for anthropology “to recall the pivotal place of sexuality in its own history and to strive to match the important contributions humanities scholars have made in formulating the very notion of queer studies as well as building up impressive theoretical and substantive contributions to it” (p. 629). This is the argument I will explore now.

There has, for a long time, been an awkward gap between anthropology and queer theory. This is noted, for example, by Ellen Lewin and William L. Leap (2002) who characterise the relationship between queer theory and anthropology up through the nineties in this way: “Typically, queer theorists saw invocations of ‘the real world’ as evidence of an unhealthy preoccupation with facts and data. Anthropologists, not surprisingly, were reluctant to allow their speculations to drift too far from the categories their informants understood to be meaningful” (p. 11). Interestingly, they write this as a defence of their anthology (1996) *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists* (and, preemptively, of *Out in Theory: The Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Anthropology*, 2002, where this argument appears in the introduction). This defence is mounted in reaction to a review authored by Don Kulick (1997), criticising their focus on lesbian and gay rather than queer as outdated (p. 10-11).

Increasingly, however, this argument is becoming less relevant as a reason *not* to engage with queer theory in anthropology. For one thing, queer theory, in various incarnations that are not always strictly academic, is gaining recognition, particularly in queer communities in the

English-speaking, “Western” world. Recall here Valentine’s (2007) characterisation of the relationship between “a” transgender community and the body of work called transgender studies as “recursive” (p. 166). One could also substitute “queer” for “transgender” in this argument. The relationship between queer communities and queer studies is mutual and therefore necessarily one that should be examined in any anthropological context that engages with these communities. For another, queer and transgender studies, by virtue of their critique of how “Western” conceptions of a system of heterosexual sex, gender, and sexuality are socially constructed, can help anthropology in the goal of contextualising and situating its research. The heterosexual matrix, as has been influentially described by Judith Butler (1990), is regularly naturalised, assumed, and unacknowledged. Bringing a recognition of this system into anthropological writing is significant in the processes of contextualisation and reflexivity. And, finally, anthropology should engage with queer theory simply because there is a need for it. Anthropological methodology, as discussed above, can help to address significant concerns with queer and transgender studies, insofar as anthropology stands as a critical discipline that privileges thick description and emic perspectives, and there is significant room for this kind of critical perspective in queer and transgender studies.

## 9. Conclusion

In this paper, I have taken interviews with self-identified members and participants in trans communities in Calgary as a way of gaining ground-level perspectives into the experiences of transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people in the city. Their narratives help to show how non-heteronormative gender identities and gender expressions are situated within a society in which gender is constructed as “naturally” and “normally” binary. They also indicate how this omnipresent system of norms is experienced as oppressive and how trans and queer communities can offer support, information, and resources, as well as friendship and belonging.

The participants in this project navigate this normative system on an everyday basis, being necessarily positioned by others and themselves in relation to it. However, it is *how* this process is experienced in their everyday lives that demands more attention in academia -- everyday realities like how it feels to be referred to by the wrong gender terms and pronouns, the risks of encountering violence and condemnation, or how difficult it can be, in the context of a heteronormative society, to find resources and support, to find spaces where trans folk are welcomed and treated with respect, to face others’ expectations and stereotypes of what being trans means, or to deal with concerns as fundamental as where to go to the washroom.

Calgary is a city with a relatively small and scattered trans population, in contrast with Canadian queer meccas like Vancouver, Toronto, or Montreal. Nevertheless, there are many growing sites of community for trans folk in the city, including community groups, student groups, individuals’ own social circles, and, increasingly, online communities. Trans communities, in Calgary and elsewhere, are diverse and dynamic, a fact that can sometimes be obscured by perfunctory allusions to the transgender category (T). This diversity is also obscured, certainly, in the heteronormative imagination as on the whole so few people in the city are aware of transgender issues, which is a problem that can only be solved by education and, moreover, a greater willingness on everyone’s part to be educated, aware, and respectful.

This paper opened with discussions of two theoretical frameworks, which have been both engaged with and problematised throughout. These are, namely, queer feminist theories of gender, particularly the now foundational work of Judith Butler (1990), and anthropological theory and methodology, particularly in the ways it has, historically and to this day, addressed questions of sex, gender, and sexuality. However, there is a very limited body of work that connects the two. This is troublesome because a greater engagement between anthropology and queer and transgender studies could be very fruitful and could help to reveal and explore the diversity of transgender experiences; to expose smaller-scale, ground-level problems and solutions that affect trans folks, in complement to much-discussed structural ones; and to call attention to trans voices that are censored and censored in everyday life.

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## **Appendix 1: Call for Participants**

To whom it may concern,

I am currently seeking participants for a master's thesis research project that focuses on transgender, genderqueer, or non-normative gender identities, expressions, and community involvement in Calgary. It will explore the experiences of young transgender adults, ages 18-30, in learning about (trans)gender and becoming part of trans or queer communities.

Any and all people who feel a personal attachment to this topic are very welcome to participate. Participation can mean meeting in person for an informal interview or simply completing an interview online via skype or email. I will be conducting interviews through February and March. Participants can be kept anonymous.

There is also the opportunity to be involved in a documentary on the subject, if you are interested in this as well.

Please contact me at [email address] or [phone number] for more information, and please feel free to pass this message on to others who may be interested.

With thanks,  
Courtney Cameron

Master's Programme in Social Studies of Gender  
Lund University, Sweden

## **Appendix 2: Interview Themes and Guiding Questions**

The following is the thematic interview outline I took with me, in whole or in part, when conducting interviews for this research project. It has been redeveloped multiple times over the course of the project in response to the different directions interviews have naturally taken with each new participant. Certainly not all of these questions were asked in every interview, and many other questions came up during interviews that are not written here, but this outline provides a good example of the central questions that have guided the interview process.

### *Background Information*

Thesis topic. Method, interview themes.  
Ethics, anonymity. Questions/concerns.

### *Personal Information*

Age.  
Preferred pronoun.  
Preferred label for gender, sexuality.

### *Personal Definitions and Expressions of Transgender*

Why are you interested in participating?  
How do you define your own gender identity?  
What were your formative experiences as a trans person?

### *Influences on Gender Identity and Expression*

What was the learning experience for you in coming out as trans?  
How did you learn about transgender identities and forms of expression?  
Are you familiar with gender/queer theory? How? Critiques?  
Other influences on definition and expression of own gender?  
Ways new knowledges have affected your life?

### *Community Involvement and Belonging*

What is the meaning of trans community to you?  
Feeling of community involvement? Trans, queer, city, where?  
What do you gain from community involvement?

What misconceptions do you most often find that you face? Queer community, city?  
“Queer culture” or “trans culture”? Existence, meaning, encountering?  
Trans cultural practices? Where, with whom?  
What is particular about being trans in Calgary? In 2012?  
Connection between trans/community experiences and youth or generation?

*Final Reflections*

Most difficult/best thing about being trans or joining trans communities in Calgary?  
What questions do you wish I’d asked in this interview?  
Anything to add?

Contact information.

*Thank you!!*