

Lund University
Department of Sociology

Medicalizing Me Softly: An Autoethnography of Refusal



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Master's Thesis in Social Studies of Gender 30 Credits
SIMZ-22
Spring Semester 2022
Supervisor: Marta Kolankiewicz
Word Count: 21,091

Abstract

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This autoethnographic study explores intra-community discursive boundary constructions around the category of transgender articulated by truscum trans men on Reddit. It does so through reflections on how the author negotiates the medical model of trans, his own gender identity, the medico-juridical interlock governing access to trans healthcare and trans livability, and tensions of closeness/distance to those they interview. Semi-structured and email interviews with truscum trans men are used to examine participants' negotiations of the medical model, definitional disputes over transgender/nonbinary, medical transition technologies, and their subject position as truscum. Through the lens of transnormativity, poststructuralism and the medical model, the construction of the transsexual subject is described. The study finds truscum trans men on Reddit use the category of transsexual strategically to construct sameness in opposition to what is perceived as difference of non-normative/nonbinary trans identities, and therefore, as not trans. Truscum is articulated as a response to the medical model and a subject position entailing an affective/emotional dimension in providing care and community. Truscum subreddits, in building echo chambers, serve the function of simultaneously detaching from and articulating a critique of dominant trans discourse. A metaphysics of refusal, aided by the concept of liminality, is proposed, in which the author refuses to stabilize the category of transgender in tension with their interview participants' conceptualization of transgender.

Key words: transmedicalism, truscum, transnormativity, nonbinary, autoethnography, refusal, liminality

Popular Science Summary

This moment of trans activism and studies is characterized by a push for self-determination, legal reform, and de-pathologization. But while being trans (roughly an experience in which one does not identify with the gender assigned at birth but, as I will argue, much broader than that) is gaining more visibility and representation, there also appears to be increased anti-gender, conservative backlash and the cutting down of trans rights. More so, tensions within the trans community become apparent – and definitional disputes over who gets to claim the label and experience of trans are the focus of this autoethnographic study.

Truscum, an online articulation of transmedicalism, is a subject position and response to the medical model that draws on medicalized narratives of the body, transitioning, the requirement of gender dysphoria and gender binarism. Truscums, merging the derogatory “scum” with “true transsexual”, come together on truscum/transmedicalist subreddits online. Through my own autoethnographic reflections on navigating the medical model of trans, and the difficulty of nonbinary gender recognition in cisnormatively *and* transnormatively structured spaces I make visible the norms structuring and medicalizing trans identities. Four semi-structured interviews with truscum trans men are used to give insight into how truscum is constructing boundaries around the category of trans and participants’ emotional dimension in detaching from dominant trans discourse and activism while remaining online on truscum subreddits.

My autoethnography both demonstrates a valuable way of knowledge production through situatedness, and the tensions between closeness/distance in relation to my interview participants constructing transness differently. Throughout the text, I discuss the strategic use of the category of transsexual by truscum men to delineate borders between them as really trans and others as not trans. In using the platform Reddit, truscum is strategically placing itself into an echo chamber in opposition to dominant trans discourse and activism. I also find that to those agreeing with the trans experience predominantly being connected to gender dysphoria and medical transition, truscum subreddits provide an important online community that gives care in the form of passing tips and medical transition knowledge.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Marta Kolankiewicz for her support and guidance, from the very first draft of this idea to what stands as the final version. Thank you for, always, giving me just the right push and allowing my creativity to flourish. Thank you for telling me “not to worry so much about science”, because I do, in fact, worry about science a lot. And for introducing me to the beautiful ambiguity of liminality in a much more theoretically informed way.

Thanks to Fran and Frederik for their mutual support, ‘study’ sessions that turned into chats, coffee and walking a dog, and sitting with the collective question of ‘What Do I Do With A Gender Studies Degree?’ And thank you, Fran, for lending this thesis a final eye when I could hardly tell anymore what the reader needed.

Thanks to Rosa for letting me find refuge with her in Germany, more than once, but during a critically stressful time writing this thesis. Your friendship is, and has always been, a sacred place. Together we might productively expand on psychoanalysis and gender identity in the future.

Above all, I am indebted to Lucas, Themis, Rick and James who shared their reflections, perspectives and insights for this project. Without your trust, I could not have written this thesis. I admit it has not always been easy to sit in conversation, but to remain in dialogue appears crucial nonetheless.



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Prologue: What Awaits

Initially, I thought I would write this project differently. Initially, I wanted to lead you through my thoughts in a linear manner, but now I understand that theoretical reasoning does not always happen in such a way. Initially, I really wanted to keep myself out of this project as much as possible as I was afraid of what might happen if I opened the box I labelled ‘Yet Another Sorry Transgender Tale’. Except, what really happened – what awaits you – is not (I hope) that this text has become a sorry transgender tale, but a tale of contradictions, ambivalences, difficult conversations, a trace of my own gender crisis, and the negotiation of what consequences the medicalization of one’s identity might bear. And now, after writing this text, I still sit uncomfortably. It is no longer a physical discomfort – for that one I know just who to call to provide my endocrinological ‘cure’ – but a metaphysical one. I have untethered myself from those proteins curling up to form a string of DNA so many times that I am in free flight, only occasionally I seem to dip and flare up against myself. Those are the moments in which I turn to the matter of this project – I turn to my phone, open Reddit and look for truscum subreddits. I try to find comfort in reading about other trans people’s pain. *Check: I am not alone.* But I have not always sought this kind of comfort on truscum subreddits.

There was once a time in which I was scared of those who call themselves truscum (and I will turn to discuss the meaning of truscum in a bit). This story is about what has happened since – about the conversations I ended up having with trans people that come together on truscum subreddits, and how my position, where I stand – in relation to myself and them – has changed. I decided to talk to, and largely focus on, trans men, not since I am arguing transmedicalism to be solely relevant for transmasculine people, but due to my own positionality. I also chose to include personal memories, anecdotes, reflections closely tied to negotiating the consequences of medicalization in my own life, as well as how those intersect with my identity which is at once a white transmasculine one and much more than that. Rooted in feminist epistemology and the importance of *situating* one’s knowledge (Haraway, 1988), I argue it would have not been my place to write such an intimate narrative also concerning transfeminine perspectives in closer detail, although future research on such would be appreciated. I argue, instead, that there is a

specificity of transcum men on which I will focus more in Chapter Four. Time and time again, throughout the process of writing this story, I have been grappling with the question and doubt of whether it is even my place to write about transmedicalism from a transmasculine perspective. The sentiment of *maybe I should just leave these young men alone* runs strongly through my mind even now, and this discussion will be picked up again in *Interlude: I Sit Uncomfortably Almost All the Time*, paired with my tension between ethical and political accountability, closeness and distance.

I fold myself into this text through an autoethnographic design because I want you to be invested in my story and the stories of those I spoke with. However, you might find this piece calling for a different kind of investment than other academic texts. Perhaps it cannot entirely be judged by traditional criteria of generalizability, validity, and reliability, but rather the extent to which it remains in dialogue with verisimilitude – invoking in you “a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 282). Ultimately, it is not up to me to decide how you will read this text but I do hope that my storytelling can be “akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature” (Ellis, Bochner, 2000, p. 744). I want to be “[m]aking work that *becomes*, like a perpetual horizon” (Holeman Jones, Adams, 2010, p. 213). Work that defies. Work that opens up, breaks apart, comforts *and* troubles. Work that scatters me, that scatters you; work that stitches back together differently. Work through which I am inviting you to *see* me, to see the ‘I’ in my semantics. But remember, I am inviting you in, not coming out to you. My storytelling is also one about refusal, and the vulnerable contradictions that come with defying to be subjected to the cis gaze while producing an intimate trans narrative. I am not your spectacle; the people I spoke with are not your spectacle. Turn towards yourself.

Chapter One



September and Thereafter

It's a sunny late September day in 2020, and I could almost forget autumn is about to arrive. The world seems to move very fast lately, every week my coursework for university shifts as new theoretical perspectives are being introduced to us on hundreds of pages. I have just started studying my master's programme – the one my parents discouraged me to opt for, yet I somehow felt necessary to pursue. The summer before my semester starts, I hear about transmedicalism and the term *truscum* for the first time, circulating on my Instagram feed. It is not the first time I am making contact with what lies behind those words, but the first time I recognize there is an entire concept for it. I am spending that summer with – what I would in retrospect call – gaslighting myself into believing that I am *not trans enough*. To discover, during such a vulnerable time, that there seems to be a group of trans people who would revoke my already shaky sense of nonbinary authenticity, feels terrifying. That summer, I do not yet have the trans studies literacy, I do not yet know the comforting words of Sandy Stone (1987), Susan Stryker (1994, 2006, 2017), Dean Spade (2003, 2015) – well, nowadays even Michel Foucault (1978) gives me comfort in naming processes of normalization I have always struggled with and against. *Comfort*, too, is of course a somewhat misleading word – really, reading most of my course literature is distressing while at the same time empowering. The comfort I am talking about lies somewhere in between. And yet, somehow, in the passing of the months, I have come into my identity by way of intellectualizing, by way of academia – a sort of difficult ambivalence-ridden relationship between who I am as a trans person standing critically towards research on trans people, and what is expected of me to produce, to articulate, in a research setting. I shift between closeness and distance, both to my discipline and transmedicalism, inspired by Esseveld and Eyerman (1992) who discuss methodological challenges in studying social movements one disagrees with. Not only is analytical *distance* from those/that which one studies necessary, but so also provides *closeness* an ethnographic avenue for understanding the phenomenon. Such shifting, however, does not remain without methodological consequences; consequences I will return to throughout this text.

But in this moment, in my lover's apartment, I find temporary distraction from these thoughts, a moment of quiet and peace. We sit down on his sofa, everything here is second-hand but well furnished. He's got some good sense of interior design. One of the more shallow things I like

about him. We both have a hard time eating enough lately, I get through the day on caffeine and nicotine – my only vices, as I like to jokingly say. Now we shove some sandwiches down, I can feel my stomach appreciating me trying. He opens his laptop, browsing through YouTube to find a video to watch while eating (not solely concentrating on food helps). I recognize a lot of the videos that pop up on his home feed. The transmasculine YouTube bubble. As a growing body of research on LGBTQ+ communities online (Bronstein, 2020; Cavalcante, 2019; Dame, 2016; Darwin, 2017; Fink, Miller, 2014; Haimson et al., 2021; Horak, 2014; Jenzen, 2017; Lucero, 2017; Massanari, 2017; Miller, 2019; Oakley, 2016; O’Riordan, Phillips, 2007; Raun, 2016) has shown, social media platforms such as YouTube and Tumblr, and the internet overall, play an instrumental role in community building, sharing recommendations and information on community-specific questions, and connecting particularly queer youth across geographical borders. Both Horak (2014) and Raun (2016) talk about YouTube as a platform on which trans youth are positioned as experts through documenting their own experiences with coming out, their journey of accessing gender affirming healthcare, and transitioning. While Horak (2014) mentions the risk of trans vlogs reproducing normative ideals of binary transitioning, medicalization, slim beauty standards, as well as an overwhelming whiteness, such personal narratives also provide hopeful vignettes of livable trans futures. I, too, have browsed YouTube, typing in keywords such as ‘transgender’, ‘ftm transition’, ‘nonbinary’, ‘testosterone’, and watched hours of personal video material, with the “talking head” format (Horak, 2014, p. 574) illuminating my sleepless nights during the first wave of pandemic restrictions in spring 2020.

Now in September, seeing his own search history in front of me, I find myself smiling, suddenly appreciating the novel ease of our connection. My gaze wanders to the thumbnail of a video about transmedicalism – bright blue colors, a face, both a trans and a nonbinary flag, and a question mark. Given that much of the dispute over claims to transness within the community appears to circle around the apparent rift between binary and nonbinary trans identities (Dame, 2016; Darwin, 2017), the video captures such symbolically by framing the debate around the two flags. I chuckle. He turns to look at me with a quizzical look.

“I wonder,” I start, suddenly cautious, “does anyone even talk about transmasculines beyond the Internet? Does it actually matter?”

“It sure does,” he replies. There seems to be a mutual understanding that we can flick past the usual explanatory rounds of *truscum* – *who, what, where did they come from?* That’s the magic of t4t conversations; we can cut right to the chase.

“You know,” he continues, sounding a bit wary and turning to look away, “I kinda used to be one myself.”

Silence. I swallow my last piece of food, studying his face, this face I’m only just beginning to get to know. He shifts uncomfortably, now looking at me. Questions start forming in my mind. Above all: Am I safe here? Does he *get* that I’m nonbinary? Then, I am wondering whether to trust him in saying he *used* to be. What makes one gravitate towards truscum content? What makes one cast it aside again?

“But,” he says finally, cutting through the silence, “I just didn’t get what being nonbinary is. Some years ago, the vibe on YouTube was different. There was a lot more of that stuff out there, it was easier to find. Now I see more of those videos,” he points at the thumbnail on his laptop – the video critiquing transmedicalism.

“So, did you also harass nonbinary people online?” I joke, although none of this is funny.

He scoffs. “Of course not. I’m just fucking sad the waiting queues for gender clinics are so long.”

Truscum, Transmed, Tucute, Trans: Moving Through Categories Pt. 1

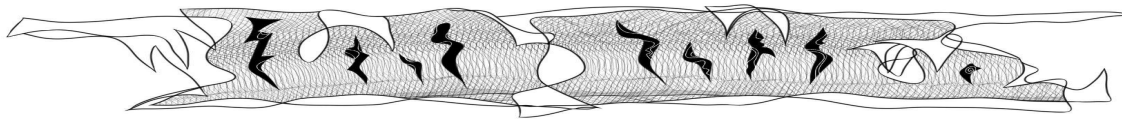
Some weeks after the conversation above, we are asked to draft a potential thesis idea. Already, I am reading up on trans history, queer theory, feminist methodologies. It is a quiet and dark covid winter, emotionally challenging on just about all fronts. Reading Stryker’s *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage* helps a little. I circle around her words until they become my kind of trans lullaby, melancholically comforting. Around this time, I part ways with my boyfriend, the ex-truscum, feeling guilt-ridden, sad, and angry. Transgender Rage, I think, is what gets me through the days. And then there’s that one sentence that I cannot seem to let go of: “*I’m just fucking sad the waiting queues for gender clinics are so long.*” Dude, I think, I fucking feel you. And I hear this exact thought repeated on

truscum subreddits, over and over again, reasoning it were nonbinary people's fault for "clocking up the queues" everywhere, not just in Sweden.

As I am pondering whether and how to navigate Sweden's state-sanctioned halls of gender affirming healthcare in these months, I feel as though my body is being pressed through the threadmills of administrative procedures, psychiatric assessments, referrals and lastly put to sway within an extended limbo of waiting times that has been critiqued by research on transgender healthcare in Sweden (Linander et al., 2017; Linander et al., 2019). Through browsing the internet, reading research articles and conversations with my previous boyfriend, I am prepared for the long wait, hearing the words *it will take a long time to access hormones* echoed seemingly everywhere. When I eventually seek a meeting with a psychiatrist for writing me a referral – to become the infamous nonbinary person "clocking up the queues" – she immediately tells me, yet again, that *it will take a long time*.

In the meantime, I begin to seriously think about what is going on on truscum subreddits, and how I can situate myself in relation to such. And I return now to the question of *truscum* – *who, what, where did they come from?* In their discourse analysis of the Tumblr trans community, Jacobsen et al. (2021) discuss intra-community disputes over the category of transgender, providing a first glimpse at the emergence of both truscum and transmed (short for transmedicalism and used in online discourse). According to the authors, transmedicalists "refers to trans people who believe that dysphoria is required to identify as transgender" (Jacobsen et al., 2021, p. 7). Truscum, used both as a hashtag on Tumblr and, as you will see, for labeling specific subreddits, stands as the sibling to transmedicalism, combining the derogatory "scum" with "true transsexual" and has been reclaimed by truscums online as a positive label (ibid, p. 8). Truscum, in choir with transmed, draws on legitimacy from the medical model of transness; a model rooted in early 20th century medical (psychiatric, endocrinological and surgical) innovations as well as interventions ultimately constructing *the trans(sexual) subject*, both providing the possibility for (normatively performing, binary, heterosexual) trans people to medically transition *and* rendering the trans body deviant, pathologized, othered through the disciplinary employment of narrow assessment/treatment manuals (see, for instance, Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon* [1966] or *Standards of Care* [1979, 2001]) inscribing the diagnosis of gender identity disorder, now gender dysphoria or gender incongruence. "True transsexual" too, written

into truscum, discursively links back to 1950s-60s American medical research in which physicians established the category “true transsexual” (read: binary, heterosexual, showing persistent distress over one’s assigned gender). Around six decades later then, truscum is employed online to mark its legitimacy in response to *tucute* – referred to as “anti-transmed” trans people in Jacobsen et al. (2021). The figure of the tucute (“too cute to be cis”) is constructed in opposition to and against truscum. Implied is the “wrong body” narrative (Engdahl, 2014) according to which one is *born into the wrong body* without choice – for who would choose to be trans if one could be ‘normal’? Such a narrative further closes the understanding of trans towards more fluid, conceptual, emergent conceptualizations of (trans)gender embodiment (Johnson, 2016). While truscum translates into a binary, dysphoric, medically transitioning trans category, tucute is perceived as a non-dysphoric, non-medically transitioning category – a category that, indeed, is (seen as) *not really trans*. Seemingly a distinctly binary either (true trans)/or (fake, hence, not trans) position, I ask myself the nonbinary question of where, according to truscums, I can be located?



Intermezzo: Who You Will Read About

I talked to Lucas (20), living in New York/US; Themis (33), living in Athens/Greece; Rick (28), living in Oregon/US and James (19) from the US. Lucas, Themis and Rick spoke to me via Zoom, whereas I emailed with James over a couple of days (and I wanted to allow for the

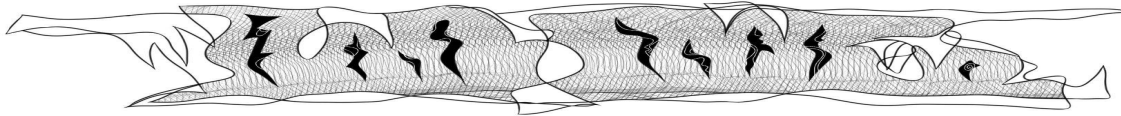
option of emailing depending on each person’s comfortability). They described themselves as men (James) and male (Lucas, Themis), with only Rick including the prefix “trans” in parentheses to man. Each of them responded to my call for participants posted on truscum subreddits with prior permission

from the subreddits' moderators. I will refer to these subreddits mostly in plural throughout this text, as there are multiple ones with slightly differing populations (e.g. for trans men, for trans women and, interestingly, for nonbinary people). The conversations I had with Lucas, Themis and Rick via Zoom lasted 1 to 3 hours in which we touched upon their journey onto truscum subreddits, adopting (to various degrees) the term truscum for themselves, their definitions of transness, the conditions governing access to gender affirming healthcare in their respective countries/states, and intra-community definitional disputes over the category of 'transgender', among other topics. While I initially set out to conduct semi-structured interviews, I soon fell into following only a loose template of questions, also sharing reflections on the questions myself. Employing a feminist methodology that, through constant reflexivity, strives to disrupt power imbalances and hierarchies between *researcher* and *researched* inevitably present during the interview setting (Detamore, 2010; Linabary, Hamel, 2017; Leavy, Harris, 2019), I hoped a conversation-style and my own, active engagement through sharing and relating to their stories opened up the possibility of not

merely constructing Lucas, Themis, Rick and James as The Researched. I myself am as much The Researcher as I am The Researched, and I feel the harmful legacy of research done on, much less with, the trans community casting a long shadow (Rachlin, 2009; Stone, Hale, 1997-ongoing; Vincent, 2018). Vincent (2018) elaborates on the heterogeneity of trans populations with consequences for the extent to which trans people respond positively to different terminology and identity labels. One runs the risk of offending or alienating trans populations when not familiar with community-specific terms. For instance, my using 'transmasc' in my call for participants online was entering into a field of contestation. In declaring my search for 'you [that is] a trans man or transmasc', I hoped to not fix identities on the transmasculine spectrum, however I am aware that 'transmasc' is a disputed term on truscum subreddits, perhaps causing alienation more so than building trust. The term 'transsexual', too, offends some while others find recognition within it. Knowing which terms to employ, and to which end, is a tricky matter, and not necessarily made easier by my own status as a trans researcher. Such also extends to my opening question about gender identity during the

interview, and the differing responses I got. Here I felt compelled by the scientific practice of collecting demographic data to ask, in doing so maybe molding the men I spoke with into data, while realizing that

their responses were telling in and of themselves (e.g., in only Rick using ‘trans’), and my question *fixing* gender.



Truscum, Transmed, Tucute, Trans: Moving Through Categories Pt. 2

When Lucas reaches out to me via one of the truscum subreddits, he mentions how important he finds this topic and the apparent lack of research there is. I agree with him and we schedule a meeting for our Zoom interview sometime in March 2022. Having read previous literature on transmedicalism that predominantly focuses on platforms such as Tumblr (Dame, 2016; Jacobsen et al., 2021) or YouTube (Miller, 2019), I am curious to explore whether and to what extent Reddit’s transmedicalist/truscum subreddits provide a particular, possibly different, place/function for disputes over claims to transness and how such are negotiated online. I am also interested in investigating against which perceived danger truscum as a project is operating, as well as how discursive boundaries between them as ‘really’ trans and others as not trans are constructed. In presenting some material below, I do not wish to sketch out fixed, stable definitions of truscum, transmed, tucute but to give space to the interpretative, subjective meanings each of the men I spoke with has brought in.

Lucas, that night, has his camera off while his voice resonates deeply through my laptop’s microphone. Before talking to Lucas, I had only emailed with James and experienced the challenges of email interviews expressed by Linabary and Hamel (2017) – how my phrasing of questions felt somewhat off, slippery, not precise enough and without the immediate possibility of reformulating or checking whether my question was sufficiently understood by the other person. As a result, James’ answers became short. What particularly irked me was also that,

through the email format, I struggled to allow for conversation between us; it remained a semi-structured interview, a different quality of data.

Now, I am eager to talk to Lucas about his relationship with what lies behind truscum. When I ask him what truscum means to him, he says:

I would define it as, I guess, really just, really just the whole dysphoria thing and wanting to protect everybody on both sides of this journey. So not wanting people to undergo a transition that would end up harming them in some way, and also wanting to help the people that would be harmed without it.

He then elaborates on what he means by “the whole dysphoria thing” in adding:

Just the whole requirement of needing that gender dysphoria, which I think a lot of the time – people conflate body dysmorphia – which a lot of people unfortunately have – with gender. And really, I would more call it sex dysphoria personally. Just because I think that using sex and gender to mean the same thing can just make it more confusing. So I would define that as: You need sex dysphoria, you need to not feel aligned with your sexual characteristics in order to transition – which is, you know, what I see being trans is, is being the transition part.

Lucas here draws on the requirement of gender dysphoria, also mentioned by Jacobsen et al. (2021) and Miller (2019) as a definitional aspect of transmedicalism. By invoking gender dysphoria, being trans is again linked to the medical model. In marking a distinction between *sex* and *gender*, stating that “you need sex dysphoria”, the authority of biological research constructing both sex and gender as biological and distinct, is used to argue for trans as a *medical condition*, whereby the diagnosis of gender dysphoria grants recognition and validity to being trans within the logic of the medical model. This type of recognition, however, remains tightly tethered to having to undergo evaluation, subjecting oneself to the “(bio)medical gaze” Linander et al. (2017) describe in their research on trans-specific healthcare in Sweden – a recognition that is dependent on being granted by health professionals. Lucas also touches upon the, somewhat seen as intrinsic, link between being trans and desiring to transition – transition here understood within a distinctly medical realm. A temporal dimension of transness becomes apparent in which the process of transitioning is undertaken to move (or be moved *by* hormones), not merely ‘from one gender to the other’, but to transition, *through transitioning*, out of, to *detach* from, the category of trans. Trans, as a “facet of my identity”, becomes something Lucas later admits he is uncomfortable to be reminded of.

In developing the concept ‘transnormativity’ Johnson (2016) defines such as “the specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender people’s presentation and experiences of gender are held accountable” (pp. 465-466). Transnormativity, in drawing on the medical model both legitimizing and pathologizing trans identities, serves as a script through which trans narratives and experiences can be communicated. However, in doing so, one risks entering “the paradox of passing [as cisgender], which not only perpetuates the sex-equals-gender binary, but also maintains that to appear or identify as trans is, in fact, to *fail* as a trans person” (Vipond, 2015, p. 29). Such a sentiment resonates through Lucas describing how his friends, when he disclosed his trans identity to them, neither reacted negatively nor afterwards remembered, as “it just didn’t make sense [for him to be trans]”.

Asking Themis about what truscum means, he starts laughing and says, “to be honest with you – I don’t know.” On my end of the connection, I smile but am reminded of how truscum appears to be an articulation of, and within, transmedicalism that takes on an online ‘persona’ or standpoint (not so much a distinct identity according to those I spoke with). Consequently, a certain degree of technological accessibility and community-specific lingo literacy is required in order to participate on truscum subreddits (one that I, too, had to acquire). Themis admits he is not very well versed in the discursive descriptions of truscum and tucute, but finds his own understanding, nonetheless, in truscum being “just the voice of reason in the sea of really obscure opinions”. To me wondering what exactly makes this voice reasonable, he responds:

I think the fact that, like, some people kind of want to keep things on the more scientific approach. Like, it is a problem. Thankfully science has sorted it out. We get what we need. We match the body to the brain. That’s it, that’s the story. Rather than just having, like, the trans experience like an identity experience.

Themis here categorizes “some people” that adhere to the “more scientific approach” (the medical model of trans) as truscum in opposition to supposedly “obscure opinions” articulated by non-truscum, ‘tucute’ people. To draw on “reason” as opposed to ‘absurdity’ is strategic in constructing the ‘tucute’ as “obscure” and fundamentally *unscientific*. Themis phrasing transness, perhaps more directly than the others, in terms of an “issue”, “being born in the wrong body”, a “problem” to “fix” by way of transitioning as the only cure (a playbook already most ‘wonderfully’ written by ‘experts’ such as Harry Benjamin or Robert Stoller), is especially difficult for me to confront *and* sit with throughout our conversation. In shifting between

closeness and distance, I chose to follow Esseveld and Eyerman's (1992) advice in not entering into an ideological debate during the interview. However, *after* the interview, during the analysis, the question "How can one analyse without taking a stand?" (Esseveld, Eyerman, 1992, p. 233) keeps vexing me and I cannot disavow *my* stand that is as much informed by Bettcher's (2009) First-Person Authority as is Themis' – whose fellow, albeit different, First-Person Authority as trans I *also* cannot disregard.

Rick, that I talk to some weeks later and whose cat jumps into camera view during our conversation, responds to my question about what *truscum* means by saying:

So as far as truscum is... I guess for me I feel that dysphoria can come in many different, I guess, forms, right? And I believe that dysphoria is kind of a sliding scale kinda thing for everyone, right? They experience different levels of dysphoria physically, socially, whatever. For different circumstances and with different contacts, and parts of their body. But I do believe that dysphoria, regardless of your gender identity, does need to be a requirement, I guess, for falling under the trans label. Or at least medically transitioning. So, yeah. That's it for truscum for me.

While Lucas and Themis both focus more on the physical experience of dysphoria, consequently also talking about physically (medically) transitioning, Rick differentiates between different types of dysphoria here; nuances that are at interplay in navigating a, in many contexts, strictly (binary) gendered social, cultural, medical and juridical world in which cisheteronormativity (Bradford, Syed, 2019) regulates how bodies and modes of living can be thought of. According to Johnson (2016): "At the institutional level, cisgender or cis should be understood as an institutional space that was designed for and privileges cisgender people and cisgender experiences of gender" (p. 467). But as aforementioned, not only need trans people respond to and negotiate cisnormativity, but also transnormative idealisations that work, as Bradford and Syed (2019) argue, as a "master narrative" for trans people, structuring trans embodiment alongside a hierarchy in which the normatively respectable, dysphoric, transitioning body assumes conditional superiority. I argue *conditional* since recognition is still built into wider cisnormative structures that marginalize the trans body.

Trans is set against the constructed norm of cis, by using words such as "fully" or "the opposite" when Lucas talks about ideally transitioning "all the way to cisgender, as close as it can possibly be". But, within cisnormativity, can trans ever become something else, when not the center but a condition characterized by a lack, indeed, by what it is not? I echo O'Shea (2018) in asking: "Do

we, should we, always write trans as the de-legitimized ‘other’ to cis and can we think ‘gender’ without conflating it as cisgender?” (p. 15). It appears, within what cisnormativity provides, we cannot.

*

What rings in all conversations is the assumed *sameness* of transness that bears recognition. Sameness stands in tension with perceived *difference* of other trans identities; a thought I will return to throughout the text. Truscum becomes *the* trans experience; constructed as binary, universal, generalizable, recognizable through the experience of gender dysphoria and desire to transition. In wearing the vision of truscum, whoever else (tucute) appears unable to perform their transness along narrow lines of medicalization, diagnosis and passing (as the ‘opposite’ gender), and does not adhere to or is not sufficiently able to be read by the disciplinary script provided by transnormativity, is *not* trans.

Chapter Two



“Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieved the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb birthed us both.”
(Stryker, 1994, p. 247)

The First Verdict: Oh Gender Judge, Hear Me Out

During my meeting with the psychiatrist who eventually ends up writing me a sorry email, apologizing for the long waiting time until accessing gender affirming health care, she looks up at me and suddenly smirks, asking, “Have you ever thought of self-medicating hormones?” Then she backtracks, quickly adding, “I won’t include your answer in my report, I’m just personally curious.” As though that makes me feel any less under scrutiny. I feel the biomedical gaze (Linander et al., 2017) directed right at me. Your curiosity is not benign. Your benevolence is a cloak under which the medico-juridical powerhouse is grinding my bones. And yet, I will give you what you expect of me, I will be the creature you seek to see in me. But I will also remind you, as has Stryker before, that “[y]ou are as constructed as me” (Stryker, 1994, p. 247). What separates you, what separates her, from me is the pen I hear scratching over paper, taking notes on my life, my pathway, what sad cause has led me to be right here. And so I smile, feigning composure, and say, “Only sometimes. It’s not really something I’m considering right now. I’d like to do it the public way.” She then nods and I wonder whether this was the right answer. Assessments are a difficult, precarious thing, rendering me vulnerable when, really, it is not my *transness* that causes vulnerability – it is the *gaze* with which I am met.

*

In the course of our interview in March 2022, I ask Themis about the trans law reform that Greece passed in 2017, and whether he could tell me a bit about it. Eventually, I confess that I find calling the new law “self-identification” contradictory since legal name and gender marker change still require undergoing a court hearing during which a decision is being taken by a judge (Katsiveli, 2021; Papadaki, Ntiken, 2022). Admittedly, I am personally agitated by the tight interlocking of medicine and law. Themis responds to my irritation about a judge’s power to cast decision over your gendered realness by saying:

The thing is that for me it’s not the fact that the judge decides on who you are and what you do. But it’s the basis on what they decide that. Because at the end of the day – yes, it’s shit that you have to go to courts, I don’t understand it either [...]. But the point is that – okay, you wanna judge if that person is male or female. That’s fine. But what do we judge it on? If the law doesn’t require you to provide any papers, how do you know that I am who I am? Because even though I was basically the second person going through the new system and my lawyer was the guy who actually wrote the new system – I just told him –

he says, oh no I don't need any papers. He got the papers because, you know, it's his job, but he says: 'Oh no, I'm not gonna give them any papers.' And I was like: 'I don't give a shit if you give them the papers, the papers are here, have them'. It's totally protected in terms of data. No one will speak about it because that's the law. So I don't give a shit. If you want them – take them. They actually make the decision faster because it's not gonna take you any more seconds to think about it. But that's the thing – the judge now doesn't require any documents. So they make a decision based on what you look like, perhaps. And what do they do? People would go – okay, nonbinary person would go fully dressed as female or as male – whatever they wanna represent – and then, they would go fully binary and then the judge would say: 'Oh yeah, I can see you're a girl or I can see you're a guy'.

Apparent in Themis' narrative becomes the impossibility of recognition for nonbinary people before the law, exacerbated only by the pressure to perform one's gender, whether binary or not, according to the medico-juridical script provided. Although I understand Themis' urge to use the "papers", referring here to prior psychiatric assessments, in order to accelerate his own process of legal recognition, I wish to highlight the bizarre structures underlying the necessity of proving one's own gender by way of a court hearing. Bizarre here stands as a synonym to *oppressive*, really. When describing his experiences with psychiatric evaluation, Themis also tells me about meeting his psychiatrist who aids him in the medico-juridical process in Greece. According to him, she gives him "the first verdict". *Funny*, I think, *I too have gotten that "first verdict"*.

A year earlier, in spring 2021, I spend weeks circling around the possibility of meeting my own gender judge, flanked by guards of the gender police on each side. What I have written about theoretically in my course papers before – the law governing trans livability and recognition in Germany, my home country – now turns into an acute, material reality. Around the time that I receive a letter (*thank you, psychiatrist*) from Psykiatri Skåne, stating that "för närvarande har vi lång väntetid till första besöket, cirka 20 månader", I cast my attention towards Germany and ponder the possibility of financial expenses, psychological assessments, and a court hearing in which I am expected to normatively perform my gender under the watchful eyes of the German state. Germany provides a particular pickle for me, not least because Foucault (1978) could not have written a script more accurately describing how the law, infused with biopolitics, (dis)allows the fostering of trans lives in my home state.

In *The History of Sexuality (Vol 1)*, Foucault traces back the emergence of *biopolitics* since the 17th century; one or, indeed, multiple forms of regulatory (state) power operating in, on, through the body of the population the state seeks to govern and discipline. In such, "the body [is]

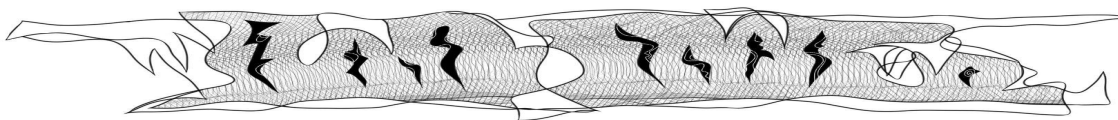
imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). Biopolitical power, according to Foucault, takes over from pre-17th century forms of state sovereignty over the body by way of exercising the right to kill, diffusing now disciplinary power into the investment of “life through and through” (ibid). No longer is the ancient “right to *take* life or *let* live” exercised, but replaced by “a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (ibid, p. 138). Power operating through the body of the law is productive of, in this case, juridical institutions being incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses, i.e. medical, psychiatric, administrative, distributing the “living domain of value and utility” (ibid, p. 144).

The trans body in Germany is recognized by The Transsexual Act – a legal document conditioning first name and gender marker change that came into effect in West Germany in 1980 (TSG, 1980). Having been revised since, not least due to pressures by trans activism pushing for depathologization (De Silva, 2018; Groß, Steinmetzer, 2007), the Act still discursively as well as administratively draws on medicalized transsexuality narratives of assessment, diagnosis/disease and cure. Delimiting even binary trans people’s agency, first-person authority, and recognition, the Act requires prior costly psychiatric assessments casting decision upon a trans person’s gendered authenticity along tropes of cis- and transnormativity, passing and gender dysphoria. The possibility to think within a nonbinary frame appears here to completely slip away. In using a Foucauldian understanding of power, I argue the Act is not merely recognizing and naturalizing trans bodies, but – through the law – the trans(sexual) body is *constructed*: as binary, misaligned, in need of or already medically ‘corrected’ and, hence, worthy of recognition. From this poststructuralist view, juridical power appears to merely *produce* what it claims to *represent* (Butler, 1990); sex and gender become regulative categories and the (trans) body imbued with normative expectations of biomedical intervention, gender binarism, and cisheteronormativity present within the ‘medico-juridical powerhouse’ I have mentioned before. Against this backdrop, trans activism in Germany has long sought legal reform, culminating in a proposal for the Self-Determination Act, promising self-identification and nonbinary gender recognition, to supersede the Transsexual Act, perpetuating pathologization. The Self-Determination Act was, however, ultimately rejected in parliament in May 2021 (Siegessäule, 2021).

Themis', Lucas', Rick's, James' and my medico-juridical contexts are all slightly different, with the US currently witnessing legal attacks on the provision of medical transitioning tools while trans as a category gains more visibility, and the Greek law reform providing a new, although still limited, avenue for trans livability. But the antiquated German law and its critique I discussed above, too, folds itself into this particular moment of trans activism, characterized by a shift between increased pressure exercised by trans activism to depathologize transness, recognize nonbinary identities, and the simultaneous normative absorption of the (binary) trans body into the law while anti-gender backlash is working to undermine the category of trans as a whole (TGEU, 2021). The trans response to the medical model which is at once embedded into a legal model also needs to be read as a production of fear of losing rights. And although the target against which trans is operating is, as I will argue further below in more detail, not to be held accountable for, the fear is one that resonates with me.

In these months of 2021, however, my trust and patience with state-regulated trans law and healthcare is slowly eroding. And I ask myself the question Spade (2003) has asked himself in considering the strategic deployment of stereotypical trans narratives during psychological assessments: “What are the costs of participation in this selective recitation? What are the costs of not participating?” (p. 20).

So with all that I know now, how can I not refuse?



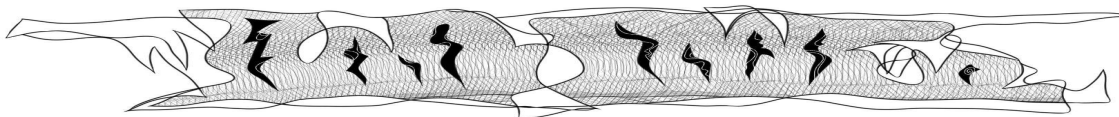
A Note on Methodological Refusal: Autoethnography

Autoethnography produces knowledge that draws on closeness to the text (Ellis, 1995) and, for me, involved avowing my emotions, my imbrications, my entanglement, how

“stuck” (Lundberg, 2021) in the content of my research I am without being fixed. I agree with Richardson (2000) in stating that “writing is also a way of ‘knowing’” (p.

923), generating through the inquiring writing process knowledge that not only is scientific but ultimately *matters*, moves, and breaks with positivist epistemologies. Autoethnography attempts to bridge autobiographical with scientific writing, connecting the personal with the cultural and social (Ellis, Bochner, 2000), and indeed, in recalling the popularized feminist slogan *the personal is political*, so too is autoethnographic writing political, so too is my trans narrative. Even more so, written within autoethnography is *refusal* – refusal of traditional, orthodox methodologies, and instead a move towards “fluidity, intersubjectivity and responsiveness to particularities” (Holman Jones, Adams, 2010, p. 197). Autoethnography is, as Holman Jones and Adams (2010) argue, a *queer method*, disrupting taken-for-granted ways of knowledge production, the

relationship between researcher and researched, power relations and normativities slipping into the research process all too easily. This is not to say questions of ethics, power and accountability play no role in my autoethnographic writing – on the contrary, I wish to highlight that no discussion about methods can be held without a troubling sensitivity of one’s own, *my*, situatedness, and how my vision is not only informed by where I stand epistemologically and ontologically, but also visible throughout this text. It is through refusing the “God trick” (Haraway, 1988) of speaking from nowhere and everywhere at once while speaking *for* everyone, that I strive for methodological transparency. As a method, a way of knowing then, autoethnography provides a queer opportunity to refuse generalization, one-size-fits-all templates and tight-knit boxes.



A Burden Attached, A Gift Refused

It’s late February 2022 and I am trying to contact people to talk to for this project, staying up late to chat with them in their time zones. To pass time, I am calling my mum who I suspect to be

still awake, sitting downstairs in my parents' living room. She picks up, and eventually our conversation starts circling around a possibility I had not thought of before.

"I'm not sure this government is going to be able to do the trans law reforms it set out to do," my mum starts, sighing. She here alludes to the Self-Determination Act initially rejected in parliament but promised to pass with a new majority situation. Before, we just discussed the usual topics – covid, German vaccine mandates, anti-vaxxers, war, and somewhere in-between my grandma's cancer, only to round up by delving into our newest novel recommendations. Phone conversations are truly bizarre amalgamations.

On my end of the line, I smile at my mum's usual pessimism. And beneath it, I sense her concern and love for me. "Although I actually trust their good intentions with this one," I eventually respond. Hell, I am thinking right away, *trust* is a big word in relation to the state.

Expectedly, my mum scoffs. "Sure, but I'm worried it won't be quick enough for you."

"Oh you know," I give back, feigning nonchalance, "I can always stay in Sweden longer. And there's a new law reform underway here, too."

A pause. Then my mum says, "Well, why don't you get Swedish citizenship then?"

I have, by now, chosen another path to access gender-affirming healthcare, irrespective of both the Swedish and German state. Sometimes, I still remember my psychiatrist's question about whether I'd like to self-medicate hormones, and I chuckle silently to my lie – although I chose a private provider, with every day that my medical bills keep piling up, I am one step closer to flipping the proverbial table, drawing on t4t community support in order to get my hormones. However, while undoubtedly a somewhat empowering disentangling from normative expectations and gender performances under the law, I am these days also simply refusing to think as far as my parents do in terms of a future that keeps creeping up on me; a future in which my legal gender remains unchanged still. To ease my worries, I draw on theories on refusal instead.

Refusal has been conceptualized in a varied manner, for instance by Simpson (2014) discussing refusal of citizenship and sovereignty of the Kahnawà:ke people in her decolonial ethnography. Such refusal, not only practiced by the Indigenous peoples, but also methodologically by the author herself in refusing to tell, to give the reader, to adhere to orthodox structure, ultimately leads Simpson to articulate her "politics of refusal". Weiss (2016), on the other hand, discusses

refusal as abstention in the case of Israeli military service refusal. While abstention is often seen as passivity, such can also open up an “investment in another possibility”, turning away from the state. Weiss (2016) further goes on to elaborate on the ways in which state forms of recognition are tied to hegemonic norms structuring, as well as, diluting more radical potentials of refusal. For to enter into, e.g. state-sanctioned trans healthcare, one inevitably is confronted with having to adhere to cis- as well as transnormative structures governing possibility, access and livability (Spade, 2003). In abstaining, however, one might find an “antipolitics” to the state – albeit not a romanticized notion of resistance. Such a path is, as none of the authors suggest otherwise, still fraught with difficulties, but perhaps in allowing oneself to *do* refusal, and to do it differently, one can dare to imagine new possibilities while laying bare the regulatory structures within which one is embedded. Mcgranahan (2016) distinguishes between refusal and resistance, marking refusal generative of (re)producing community anew, as the turn away from something also provides the generation of something new. According to the author, “To refuse can be generative and strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another” (p. 139), and written within refusal is a distinctly political nature. As Mcgranahan (2016) goes on to discuss, “Refusal is often part of political action, of movements for decolonization and self-determination, for rights and recognition, for rejecting specific structures and systems” (p. 320).

Theorizing of refusal can, further, be drawn back to Marcel Mauss’ ethnographic work in which he develops refusal as the cutting of social relations with consequences for the exchange within societies – an exchange he describes as a process in which: “Everything passes to and fro as if there were a constant exchange of spiritual matter, including things and men, between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes, and the generations” (Mauss, 1990, p. 14). Notwithstanding the long colonial ethnographic tradition in which Mauss is situated, and to which I mark my strong opposition, employing the notion of “the gift” appears theoretically useful for the purpose of my own refusal. A gift, as Mauss (1990) writes, is always “received ‘with a burden attached’” (p. 41). The burden here being the “obligation to accept” the terms upon which the exchange is built; however, I have never agreed upon these terms, regulating and governing trans bodies towards cis assimilation and gender binarism. In entering into the biomedical contract with the state, I am to accept my being navigated through the sterile halls of psychiatry and endocrinology, and I am to reciprocate the gift so graciously extended to me by

normatively performing my gender according to the scripts provided. And I *could* – I could tell you my Transgender Discovery Tale, spread my legs a little wider on the train, talk a little deeper, go drinking beer with The Boys instead of painting my nails. But I refuse.

At play here are two dimensions of refusal: to refuse another citizenship – to return what is constructed my birthright; and to refuse adopting, and subjecting myself to, a pathologizing discourse constructing my identity as aberrant. Both remain imperfect, wobbly, at times inconsequential. For to reject the gift of citizenship only to trade it with another, not less regulatory, process of acquiring citizenship is not quite the new, radical possibility sketched out by writings on the topic. And to turn away from a state-sanctioned healthcare system to subscribe to a private provider would make the Neoliberal Economist, chipping away at public services, quite happy, I am convinced. In my attempt to navigate all those possibilities, I become the neoliberal, rights-imbued, economically privileged transgender figure that ultimately can afford to cast their eye another way. But as inconsequential as my refusal might be, it stands as an antidote to how the state allows transgender embodiment to be imagined; devoted not to refashion trans livability according to a neoliberal, capitalist-driven market model of privatization. But perhaps in refusing to accept, “declaring war” (Mauss, 1990, p. 13) to exactly the tightly locked mechanisms of biomedicine and law that disallow trans livability as trans liberation.

Troubled, however, I am by the thought of medical dependency.

Interlude:

I Sit Uncomfortably Almost All the Time

My interview with Themis happens to take place on March 31 which I know as Trans Day of Visibility (TDoV). Halfway through our conversation – one that bounces between trans healthcare possibilities in the UK and Greece, questions of who gets to speak on and represent trans matters publicly, and whether it wouldn't be most beneficial for transsexual people to split the T from LGBT – he pauses and says, “Today, I think today is the trans visibility or whatever”. A day that, to me, is so loaded with political significance, although perhaps partly rendered performative, is here summarized as “trans visibility or whatever”, which stipulates my thinking about the tension between detachment from dominant trans discourse ringing in my conversations with trans men and my own involvement, indeed, attempt at participating in trans studies and discourse through writing this project. Later that day, I flick through Instagram, somewhat exhausted already. TDoV is meant to be a hopeful reminder of trans livability, of trans futures. Still, a strange collision of posts appears on my feed, a mixture of pictures of the ongoing war in Ukraine – and happy, smiling trans people. I sigh and close the app on my phone again, but my fingers are itching and I start to wonder about visibility translated into *representation*, positionality, ethics – all of which are considerations for this project while at the same time thoughts that span well beyond the space of my thesis. Eventually, I scribble down notes that serve as an entry point for thinking about reading my enduring discomfort as, really, a conversation about (research) ethics:

When in conversation with trans men, I find myself walking on such thin ice, like Lundberg (2021) says too, always juggling my own positionality - *all that I am and stand for* - and what's expected of me in a research setting. Research 'on trans people', too, holds such an ambivalent space within myself. I feel the dissonances with my own discipline reverberating through my body; *I sit uncomfortably almost all the time*. In this discomfort I learn a great deal about myself. I actively seek out the spaces within myself that trouble me, **the internalized thoughts that have been fed to me** since I can remember. I often think about quitting everything and becoming a painter in the woods; being a stealth trans man like many of my thesis 'participants'. I think about what it might mean to be ~~a feminine man~~, *to allow myself to flourish* without judging myself for 'betraying' the nonbinary in

me that has given me such comfort in the last few years - to allow myself to even think about the possibility ~~I might be a gender non-conforming man~~. On this TDoV I cannot give you trans joy, although **my life is full of joy, love and community**. All I have to offer is open-ended questions, the unknown and in-between, the ambivalences, and a good amount of trans rage. What I know for certain though is that we cannot stop talking, for otherwise the cis voice will always ring louder.

That night, as I am trying to fall asleep, I watch the clock on my phone turn to midnight; it's April 1 now, *goodbye trans visibility (if you've ever been around)*. I wait for sleep that does not arrive, turning around in my bed, and pondering again why I felt such intense discomfort during my three hour long conversation with Themis at one point and was able to laugh with him at another. I also think about what propelled me to share some of my difficult, gnawing feelings of shame about my own identity when I talked to Lucas some weeks ago. In the months leading up to writing this project, I have often wondered about my positionality –

What conversations can I have with other trans people while disagreeing? How will I be read, at times rendered vulnerable, an outsider, at other times gaining trust through shared experiences? What will it do to me to subject myself to transmedicalist thoughts intellectually and emotionally for months? How will I translate, and present, parts of this community to academia? What are the

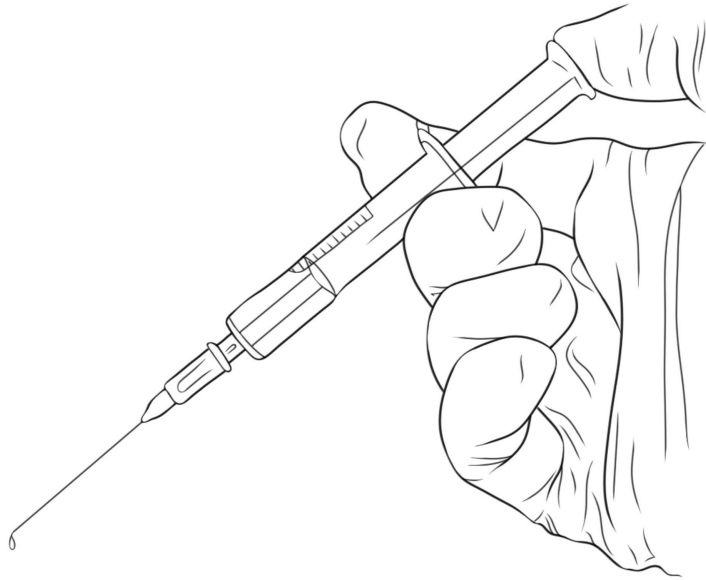
consequences of reading, and writing about, transmedicalism through my “partial vision” (Haraway, 1988)? How can I commit to feminist ethics, disrupting power imbalances, striving for “internal accountability” (Paechter, 2013) towards those I spoke with while understanding the harm written into transmedicalism?

– and my insider/outsider status that is shifting constantly (Merton, 1972; Wilkinson, Kitzinger, 2013) throughout my interviews. Meadow (2013), in reflecting on the interpersonal research process, states: “Gender could render me suspect, ally, or even data, depending on who was on the other side of my table” (p. 473), and so did gender render me all sorts of different things, sometimes differently within a matter of minutes. During the interview with Themis, he eventually pauses again, stopping himself, then saying:

That's the thing: Because we just met, I don't know your opinions. I mean, I can definitely see your pronouns [they/he] but I don't know your opinions on things. I don't know how far is too far. That's always, like, I'm thinking: 'Okay, did I say something that was upsetting?'

Within his question, I read also the question that Camminga (2018) has been asked in their research on transgender refugees in South Africa, stating: “In almost every interview at some point I was asked ‘but what are you?’” (p. 282). To name oneself, to denote one’s location, through, e.g. pronouns or disclosing one’s identity, can at once feel empowering and vulnerable, can also foster the kind of mutuality and trust upon which feminist ethics are built, but is never without consequences within the “hybrid insider/outsider” status (Paechter, 2013). And so I did elaborate on my shaky identity, caught somewhere in-between being a man and nonbinary, to Themis, validated still through my medical transition. While literature on ethics in trans research highlights the importance of *not* closing, not fixing, the category of trans – a category remaining necessarily open to fluidity, subjectivity, self-determination – and warns against imposing identity labels upon one’s participants (Camminga, 2018; Meadow, 2013, 2016; Stryker, 2006; Stone, Haley, 1997-ongoing; Valentine, 2003; Vincent, 2018), echoing within *truscum* is the bordering, the closing of *who counts as trans*. Ethically, I remain committed to those I spoke to/with; politically, my commitment is to expand a field critical of normativities and pathologization. Haraway (1988), too, warns of romanticizing the standpoint articulated from a marginal position; the *truscum*’s standpoint is not innocent and refuses to fold itself into a dichotomy of oppressed/oppressor, margin/center.

Chapter Three



I heard he sang a good song

and so *I came to see him,*
I did indeed *listen for a while*

telling my whole life with his words:

born in the wrong body
disorder, defect, disease
fix, correct, align

I heard he sang a good song

he's not Cauldwell, not von Krafft-Ebing
they say
he had a style
rolling his cigar, tightening his collar, smiling even
'So you're unhappy with this female body of yours
do not worry
no no
I can help
provide the cure if I must'
they say
he had a style
'I can help
provide the cure if you need'

Medicalizing Me Softly With His Tools

(After Roberta Flack's 'Killing Me Softly With His Song')

Testogel 16.2 mg/g: I get up, reach for the cabinet in my bathroom, press the pump releaser, cool gel drips on my hands, seconds later only the smell of alcohol on my shoulders remains. Today is my 6 months mark, making it around 182 days of the same routine. I wish I could say I feel those beautiful poetic proteins toiling in my bloodstream, but more than feeling, I *see* – they crawl towards the surface of my body; my skin blemished, hair plenty, muscles defined. Really ridiculous, I think, is this the meaning of manhood? Masculinity is a simple thing, throw in some testosterone and you become Jason Statham, trace the breaking of your voice and you sing like Leonard Cohen. *Medicalize me softly*, I chant to myself. *Make me soft, break me down, let me grieve a past I did not get to live in boyhood, let me hug the girl that did not know where to turn. Give me strength, but beware of imposing. Give me confidence, but keep me in check. Allow me to open the doors I thought remained forever shut before, but do not eradicate my past. Medicalize me softly, but do not suffocate the spark of who I remain. Still myself, still whole, never fractured. Medicalize me softly, but do not kill.*

*

As I am writing up this project in May 2022, news about customs restrictions in Sweden and Finland related to the import of controlled substances, such as testosterone, are making its way to me through virtual trans channels in Sweden. For around three days, I lose all my resolve. The thought of typing down words about medicalization seems bizarre all of a sudden; profoundly triggering, to say the least. Turning this experience, *my* experience, into a vignette of theoretical reasoning appears not just nonsensical, but almost as though I am exploiting, exhausting, myself for the purpose of this thesis. I cry a little while writing my medicalization chant above, each tear an ironic reminder that – yes – men do cry, yes – researchers do cry, and an affirmation of all the ways in which I am, still, very much alive and able to feel. My dependency on medication has not yet killed the spark; it is merely something I need to come to terms with.

But it also signifies the complicated double-bind that medicalization, and more specifically access to trans healthcare, entails. According to Johnson (2016), responding to the medical

model of transness appears necessary for trans people, regardless of their desire to medically transition. Truscum is one of such, collective, responses – a response that, although articulated from a marginalized position within cisnormative structures, works to order one’s experience along the axis of dysphoria-diagnosis-transition-passing. Within trans communities, then, the truscum response seems to not be articulated from quite such a marginalized position, but folds itself into the transnormative master narrative (Bradford, Syed, 2019). Truscum is a category, and a subject position, not only rooted in the medical model, but also one whose articulation is *intersubjective*. When messaging with Lucas before our interview, he mentions not to be “the most radical of truscums”, whereas Rick admits to be quite new to the online truscum discourse. Processes of positioning oneself, as I am aware throughout positioning myself for this project, happen in relation *to* – to what is perceived as the mainstream trans discourse pushing for depathologization and self-determination, to arguments ringing the loudest on truscum subreddits, to ‘tucutes’ some have had uncomfortable experiences offline with before.

But against which perceived danger is truscum operating? It appears two-fold: a supposed dilution of the category of transgender/transsexual through questioning the legitimacy of the medical model, and wider structures of transphobia and anti-gender backlash against which truscum is weaponizing its own legitimacy as “true transsexual”. Look just at the US, the context of Lucas, Rick and James, that is currently witnessing an, perhaps, unprecedented assault on trans and queer rights, not to mention the attack on wider reproductive rights (and dominant pro choice/pro life discourses further often invisibilize transmasculine and nonbinary identities).

Dependency on medical technology and diagnosis, *the tools that medicalize us and our identities softly*, renders vulnerable. Remember the notion that once pained me so much – how nonbinary people supposedly clock up queues for accessing trans healthcare? Such a response works to antagonize different parts of the trans community when the culprit is the subduing medico-juridical powerhouse against which even the truscum’s bones are grinded. However, to me inquiring what is perceived as scarcity mindset in which nonbinary people seem to take away resources from ‘those really in need’, Rick says:

Yeah, kinda like ‘oh there’s not enough hormones or surgeons to go around’ [laughs]. Which is – I mean I know there are hormone shortages, I’m not sure about estrogen but for testosterone there have been shortages here and there. But I don’t think it’s necessarily

– I've never experienced it to the point of where I've been in that mindset, where it's like 'someone's taking hormones from me'.

He then continues to say, “it’s not their [nonbinary people’s] fault that there’s a shortage”. Lucas, on the other hand, negotiates this sentiment in the following:

I don't really subscribe to that. Yeah, I think that, I don't know... maybe it's possible. I would have to see some more concrete evidence to believe it. I think that it's more just as a whole this – [laughs] I mean, I also, I have a lot of issues with the healthcare system, especially in America as a whole. And I think that it's an issue of the healthcare system. I don't really believe that these [laughs] – that there is some great conspiracy theory of people hoarding hormones. It's more just that people are not really at that point of accepting full sex transition and maybe it's more so... But yeah, I don't – it really rubs me the wrong way when people say stuff like that cause it just seems to be misunderstanding the root of the cause, the root of the issue.

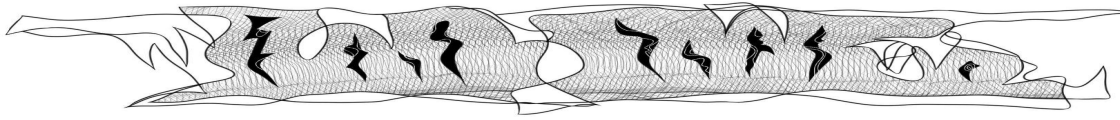
Lucas, who also does not fully believe in the *non*-existence of nonbinary people – but mentions again that “more evidence” could be provided to change his mind – here touches upon “the root of the issue”. In discussing the consequences of medicalization, access to healthcare and depathologization, a look at not merely the medical but the *social* model can be helpful. However, whether Lucas would agree that a turn towards the social model might be written into this “root”, I remain in doubt of.

Krieg (2013) discusses the “catch-22” in which trans activism is situated when working towards the removal of pathologizing diagnoses from the ICD and DSM *while* ensuring trans people’s free access to medical transition technologies. Mentioned is Argentina’s 2012 legal reform making legal name/gender change and access to trans healthcare possible without requiring the medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria, however, in the same instance, critiquing the law for its disallowance of nonbinary gender recognition. Notably, a similar approach is promised by Germany’s Self-Determination Act (should it ever pass in parliament). While far from an ideal legal text, Argentina stands as an example for how to think one (binary) articulation of self-determination, as opposed to Themis’ Greek legal context. Krieg (2013), however, proposes more generally how crip theory, seeking “to make the problematic hegemonics of ability visible” (Krieg, 2013, p. 43), can aid in navigating the tricky ‘nature’ of pathology-diagnosis-provision. In arguing solely to problematize transmedicalism, the author mentions the risk of reproducing wider stigmatized mental health discourses – and I wish to mark that understanding one’s own transness as medical condition is *not* a problematic thing in and of itself (nor on me to judge), but

when used structurally to revoke someone else's gendered authenticity, a difficult dilemma emerges. The social model of transness, drawing on the social model of disability, then starts from the premise that the individual is situated within a *culture* that employs the pathologizing vision, not the pathological individual within a 'healthy' culture. Krieg (2013) wishes to suggest "that instead of locating dysphoria in the individual, it is located in society" (p. 46), without however having to negate the experience of gender dysphoria, nor univocally diminishing the importance that access to medical transition technologies still plays to large, although not all, parts of the trans population.

*

The "root", my dependency on those tools and issues of inaccessibility, lies not in more people actualizing transition-related technologies, but in the structural disallowances, pathologization, indeed – as in the case of Swedish customs restrictions – *criminalization* of substances. The social model provides a flip, turning the tables; a poststructural avenue of folding back the margin onto the center. Another such instance of folding back lies in compulsory heterosexuality, which according to Butler (1990) who draws on Foucault (1978), produces homosexuality and queerness through rendering heterosexuality as the invisible norm, the core, against which any aberration is defined. Crip theory draws on compulsory heterosexuality, making visible how ableism, too, is produced by compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006). Transsexuality, then, is produced along similarly interwoven lines of cisheteronormativity, constructing the trans body as deviant.



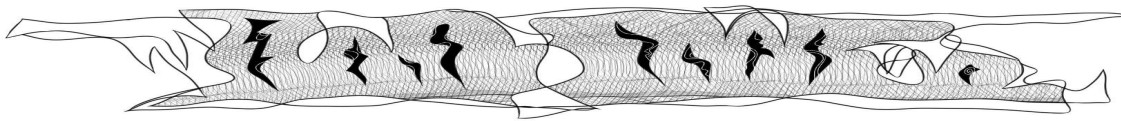
Another Wobbly Line: My Poststructuralist Analysis

In making my standpoint visible throughout this text, I have attempted epistemological and methodological transparency. However, the closeness that the subject matter provides, although a form of knowledge production, also confronts me with analytical challenges when studying a group of people to which I belong (trans) and do not belong (truscum). Poststructuralism aided my analytical distance without detaching myself and speaking from no place. Through employing a poststructuralist analysis I was able to deconstruct the categories of sex, gender, transgender, transsexual and truscum, understanding categories such as sex and gender as socially constructed. *Deconstruction*, in a poststructuralist sense, denotes the reversal and displacement of binary oppositions, revealing “the interdependency of seemingly dichotomous terms” (Scott, 1988, p. 37).

Poststructuralism, further, departs from a critique of structuralism in which knowledge is situated within the norm, whereas the norm produces a supposed ‘truth’ with exceptions from the norm considered deviations, i.e. the norm of the cis body against which the trans body is read as deviation. Rather than supposing a morally ‘good’ norm, poststructuralism attempts to fold the limit/margin back onto its core, where “the limit is the core” (Williams, 2005, p. 2). Additionally, poststructuralism appeared helpful as it does not presuppose the limit to be defined in opposition to its core, remaining wary of dichotomies and binary divisions. To destabilize the norm, the core, is here a *positive* disruption in its own right (ibid). Such an epistemology folds itself into Stryker’s (2006) discussion of transgender studies as “(de)subjugated knowledges”, disrupting, denaturalizing and rearticulating normative linkages assumingly to exist between biology and

sexual difference. Subjugated knowledges, that Stryker (2006) wishes to *(de)subjugate*, historically are “types of knowledge that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges, naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges” (ibid, p. 12).

This, too, speaks to my trans autoethnographic narrative that seeks to make visible the particularities, fluidities of knowledge production. It does, however, stand in tension with my participants’ conceptualization of sex, gender, and transgender.



Sexing Me Softly With Her Wand

Boundaries around the category trans appear to be constructed not merely to disavow nonbinary identities’ ontological validity and existence in general, but more specifically to question whether nonbinary (and often those are perceived as ‘non-transitioning’) identities can call themselves *transgender* at all. As a response, both Lucas and Themis draw on the usage of ‘transsexual’ for themselves, marking their distance to identities housed under the trans umbrella, i.e., transgender and nonbinary; perhaps not surprisingly, considering *truscum*’s etymological origin.

For Lucas, the term *transsexual* does not represent merely a ghost from the past, but is a term “that’s still heavily in use and that’s still very important to a lot of people”. He describes how the usage of the term entails a strategic aspect in constructing distance between himself and other (trans) people he does not agree with:

I prefer it a lot. Just cause I feel like as far as definition goes it just makes more sense. You’re not really changing your gender, you’re changing your sex. And you’re having sex replacement surgery and sex hormones change. I think that it just is a better fitting definition. I know that some people have negative connotations with it. And I understand

that more for trans women cause I know there's been more negative connotations with the word transsexual for women. But I think it just makes more sense to me. I also – it really gets rid of the people who I don't wanna associate [laughs] myself with. I even, I had something that I posted or something that said 'transsexual' in it and somebody said 'oh, content warning for outdated terms' or something. And it just felt [laughs] so disrespectful. If it bothers you, then just don't interact with it.

Whereas for Rick its association feels somewhat “dirty”, not least due to the past (and contingency) of pathology ringing with it. James writes that

there is a slight difference between transgender and transsexual, transgender focuses on the gender part of being trans and transsexual focuses on the sex/assigned sex at birth part of being trans. I personally believe that you need gender dysphoria to be both/either transgender and transsexual, but that's it.

Themis, on the other hand, elaborates lengthily on the use of transsexual:

I would use it because it's kind of the same thing. I think that being transgender kind of, like, includes the snowflakes as well. But being transsexual is just mostly the binary side of things. I definitely use it for myself basically. And in Greek, actually, I think in English it's the same thing – people say gender reassignment etcetera. I can say that as well sometimes. Sometimes I say just sex change. I don't care. Because at the end of the day, if we think about it – it's a change. Because you don't reassign it from the beginning. It's not like you become, let's say, like an avatar where you don't have any gender characteristics and you assign new ones to you. You had already characteristics and then you remove them and put something else on top. So you don't reassign – you change. But anyway, it's just a game of words. But I think that especially the term transgender, it also includes the people that have all of the weird identifications. I think transgender people who actually don't have any kind of doubt or any kind of other ways of describing themselves or whatever – they don't have a problem with the word transsexual. Because at the end of the day, from one gender you go to another. [...] I mean, nonbinary people – I would understand why they use transgender. Because if I approach it linguistically as well – trans is a state of movement, right? You are in transition, in transportation, you are in a movement. Actually, it makes more sense to me to think of nonbinary people as transgender because they are moving from one to another, I guess, or they're in – I don't think that they settle somewhere unless that's not the case of course. [...] In that sense I think they should be the transgender people. And then anybody else who's on the binary spectrum – they go from a to b and vice versa – they should be the transsexual people. That would make more sense to me instead of everybody saying 'no, saying transsexual is transphobic'. How is it transphobic?

To which I reply, “It has sort of this medical history attached to it.” Themis then says:

Which makes sense! [laughs] That is the other thing – to me, a nonbinary person, can they be transsexual? I don't think that they can. In the sense of what is the destination? So I know that definitely medical intervention happens but I don't know if it falls under the transsexual spectrum in the sense of it has a shape and form and it goes to a completely different shape and form, right? [...] It's definitely a play of words but at the end of the day, the only people that normally should use transgender is literally nonbinary people [laughs].

Fine then, I think, problem solved, nonbinary people are trans after all. But of course, the waters become even murkier when entering into the debate of transgender/transsexual. Not least due to the fact that, for Lucas and Themis, gender (and, by extension, sex) is not a category understood as socially constructed. While both say they do not agree with this constructivist, poststructuralist turn, Lucas and Themis are able to draw on transsexuality narratives, “sex change” and “sex replacement surgery” to solidify their gendered realness. *Transsexual* becomes not merely a strategic boundary signifier, but also a script through which to understand and express what they phrase as “medical condition”. Perhaps somewhat misconceived since, the constructed dimension of gender is often linked back to Butler’s (1990) concept of “gender performativity” in which gender is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, 1990, p. 34). Gender, regardless of cis or trans, is here “always a doing” (ibid), always a striving for gaining intelligibility within a cultural matrix regulating so tightly those modes of gender embodiment recognizable. Gender, as Butler (1990) continues, is

“the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.” (ibid, p. 45)

Gender performativity should, as the author themselves argues, ultimately not be read as the negation of realness, but rather as the reminder of the constitutive structures underlying the formation of the body, and the gendering, indeed sexing, of the body *as* [insert: female, male]. Within such a narrow realm of “cultural intelligibility” (Butler, 1993) – the sex/gender binary – little room remains for non-normative, nonbinary identities; some wriggle room remains for the transsexual body, but only if such escapes itself, moves through the deployment of medical technology outside itself, places the surgical cut on the inscription site to mold anew the body no longer transsexual.

Still, the gnawing question of ‘biological sex’ remains. And I can feel my chromosomes arming up against the mere idea of such. In multiple instances of feminist organizing, seminars and workshops, I have witnessed the almost taken-for-granted attitude voiced as “Oh yes, gender is a social construct, sure, sure – but let us not talk about sex”. Well, *let* us talk about sex. You stopping just short of daring to deconstruct the gender essentialist’s magical wand of ‘biological sex’ rings too dangerously close to the trans exclusionary radical ‘feminist’s’ hashtag ‘sex not gender’. Indeed, you become J. K. Rowling par excellence. And while I agree that, maybe, the term transsexual – although haunted – is not automatically transphobic, not only does it depend on who employs it (Lucas and Themis using it for themselves is something I will never disavow), but so also it locks sex within a binary erected so solidly there appears no way through. And so I do question the foundational myth of biology molding chromosomal and hormonal differences into such neat categories as ‘male’ and ‘female’. I ask myself the question of what, exactly, is liberatory about feminism phrasing a woman’s experience in terms of being an ‘adult human female’. And certainly, within the logic of the sex binary and gender-critical narratives, I too am nothing but an ‘adult human female’ – those tricky XX chromosomes of mine seem to betray me every time even if my voice does not anymore. Locked between a rock and a hard place, no amount of testosterone in my blood, no surgical cut, will ever break through the fixity of my body for as long as sex works performatively on it to “materialize sexual difference to consolidate [cis]heterosexual imperative” (Butler, 1993, p. 2); and for as long as this discursive, material power is not understood to be productive of inscribing not merely gender, but sex, onto the body. No liberation is to be found here; on the contrary, I wish to highlight the danger of holding onto a myth of ‘biological sex’, of binary sex categories – categories already debunked by biologists such as Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2019). This is where I understand the term transsexual to resonate with transphobia on a meta-theoretical level, possibly not so much within a conversation between trans people consensually calling one another or themselves transsexual. To draw on the construction of sex and gender does, then, not turn the transgender and/or transsexual figure into merely ‘performing’, much less being, their gender. It is rather telling of the productive forces underpinning how any kind of gender embodiment can be thought of. It is, indeed, the opposite of revoking a trans person’s gendered authenticity; it is reminding of how each of us does their gender, and does it differently, and

although we might fail to conform to cisnormatively structured ideations, we do not do our gender wrong. It is, again, opening up the possibility of refusal.

But perhaps this can be located as exactly the problem – for in transcum sentiments rings the notion that some people do their gender – *as transgender* – wrong. The discursive division between transgender and transsexual in which Themis eventually grants nonbinary people the category of transgender, however will not grant transsexual, only furthers an argument placing the “true transsexual” as superior, as the only real trans experience. Again works the assumed sameness of experience – understood through the medical script provided by transsexuality: dysphoria, diagnosis, hormones, surgery, passing – to leave the nonbinary, non-normative, non-transitioning person bereft of authenticity. Lucas tells me that he has sometimes been approached by other trans people asking for advice – a shaky situation, undoubtedly, in which I myself also feel uncomfortable when conversations circle around giving medical advice. However, Lucas says somewhat disdainfully:

I've had multiple experiences of someone sending a trans person my way and saying 'oh, give him advice'. And sometimes, it is somebody who, you know, is really trans and is really struggling and I'm willing to give advice even though it makes me a bit uncomfortable just to be reminded of that facet of my identity. And then, a lot of the time it is somebody who just, you know, is not at all [laughs] gonna relate to my experience.

Not only is being trans here intrinsically read as ‘struggle’, but also is another’s transness first questioned, set and compared against one’s own experiences. Only the trans person that appears able to narrate their transness according to a transnormative script is perceived as “really trans”. To judge someone else’s gendered, ontological validity is probably not only quite simply impossible, but as you will see later in more detail, also dangerous. Invoked is the ‘gender police’, the ‘gender judge’, casting judgment not unlike those medical professionals gatekeeping access to trans healthcare in the 1950s and 60s. Far removed is such an argument from understanding that I can ultimately only speak with final authority of and over my own *embodied knowing*. This is not to say that categories lose their importance or definitional power, nor that everything becomes relative – an argument, interestingly enough, used by both gender-critical ‘feminists’ and critics of poststructuralism, although perhaps informed by different intentions. As it stands, neither is the category of ‘woman’ erased (as it is the gender-critical’s worst nightmare), nor is the striving for trans self-determination eradicating the category of ‘transsexual’ – the transsexual is alive and well, as Lucas and Themis remind.

On the topic of whether non-transitioning identities can still be considered trans, Rick seems to fight an internal battle over “not wanting to police” other trans people, and says:

It's hard because I feel like to use the label trans you should experience dysphoria in some way. But I'm also kind of torn because I don't necessarily want to police people. But at the same time I view being trans kinda like a medical condition, right? But then at the same time, some people do have medical conditions and they don't do treatments for it, right? So it's – it's a little bit of a tough situation that I still have to work through with how I really feel about that. I mean you could, I guess, I don't know it's though – it's tough. Because some – I know some people on truscum argue, for example in the case of those who identify as nonbinary – I know some argue that nonbinary people aren't real for some reason. And so with their ideas I wonder – with their view point – if it could be possible to, you know, be nonbinary but not necessarily use – I guess that's why they have – I've been noticing recently that there's been a – on Reddit – that there's been an increase in the term transsexual. I don't know if you've seen that or not? And so I feel like that might be kind of a good middle-ground kind of thing. Whereas those who do not feel the need to medically transition could go by the transgender label. Whereas those who do have the need or want to medically transition and identify their, I guess, gender identity with more of, like, a medical condition could use the term transsexual. 'Cause that's what I've been noticing – I don't know, I've just been noticing that. That some people are like: 'I don't like using the word transgender because of a, b and c.' And some were like: 'I prefer to use transsexual because it identifies it as a medical condition'. So there's that. So I think the way around that for me would be to just kind of create – I mean I know divisions aren't always good – but I feel like the use of separating transsexual and transgender might be a good middle-ground. Because I do know – I don't wanna police people. If they do wanna be part of the trans umbrella and use that term, they can use that term.

He here gives me a breath of fresh air, and reminds me of the degree of heterogeneity behind truscum subreddits. Reddit's anonymous forum structure provides the opportunity for what I have called acting “unhinged” during my conversation with Rick, to which he laughingly agrees. While I recognize many of the points raised in the conversations from previous discussions held online on various truscum subreddits, I notice how, when voiced in direct conversation with me, they are already phrased less rigidly, less angrily. We humanize each other, if but for the duration of our talk. And still, I have a difficult time with what, particularly, Themis chooses to share with me.

But, on a second thought, let me reconsider my previous phrasing ‘the transsexual is alive and well’. Maybe the transsexual is alive, but not doing quite so well.

The Temporal Twist of Posttranssexuality

Around three decades after Stone wrote her *'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto'* (1987) as response to transphobic attacks against her, and Prosser (1998) giving a lengthy critique at a time in which trans studies was in its infancy, the turn of the 2020s marks a moment in trans activism and scholarship, as well as within trans communities, i.e. truscum, to revisit these two trans scholars. While trans activism globally pushes for self-determination, legal reform, and depathologization, the truscum response also needs to be understood as a reactive force, at first glance perhaps paradoxically folding itself into the narrative of transsexuality-disorder-diagnosis-cure. But as a community largely articulated online, truscum also makes apparent the tension still present in trans studies and activism; the ongoing identification that transsexual bears to some, while seemingly receding into background noise within dominant trans activism. Despite me writing about transsexuality as a medical category, I do not wish to eclipse the material and discursive subject position that it also entails. Not least due to my interactions with truscum men, I understand transsexuality to be a “category of/for the present” (Drager, Platero, 2021, p. 418). And perhaps, as Drager and Platero (2021) note, a category, like *transvestite*, “more vulnerable than ever to long-standing stigmas with a new temporal twist” (p. 417). Transsexuality is an *uncomfortable* category; one that makes me shiver as much as I understand the contingency of identification tied to it. It is a category that has traveled through the biomedical needle, across decades and geographical borders, written within treatment manuals, as much as it has been articulated dialectically by and with trans communities as not just medical but also social and material (Drager, Platero, 2021).

Stone (1987), in her textual analysis of (auto)biographical trans accounts and medical journals, defines “the essence of transsexualism” in the “act of passing” (Stone, 1987, p. 232). Perhaps somewhat hyperbolically, she states that “[u]nder the principle of passing, denying the destabilizing power of being ‘read’, relationships begin as lies” (ibid). A strong critique against the necessity of cis-passing, Stone sees in passing a “denial of mixture” (p. 231), having to account for plausible stories to medical professionals, friends, co-workers etc. How to tell, for instance, a plausible story for one’s surgical scars when being stealth? While I disagree with understanding non-disclosure as *lie*, I read in Stone’s conceptualization of becoming “posttranssexual” also refusal – refusal to hide, to reproduce narrow scripts of medicalization, to

understanding medical transition as a cut under which the body emerges anew. To become “posttranssexual” entails, for Stone, imagining a world in which passing is no longer deemed important, calling for a “re-envisioning of our lives” (p. 232).

Prosser (1998), similarly to Drager and Platero (2021), argues against the ‘post’ that Stone’s posttranssexuality entails, stating that: “In pushing past a transsexual narrative (‘post’), in ceding our claims to sexed location, we relinquish what we do not yet have: the recognition of our sexed realness; acceptance as men and women; fundamentally, the right to gender homes” (p. 204). Prosser further critiques Stone’s call against the importance of passing: “Fundamental to posttranssexuality is the belief that political subjectivity for transsexuals requires not simply a revision but a refusal of sexual difference – of what has been transsexuality’s very purpose: passing, belonging, attaining realness in one’s gender identity” (p. 203).

Passing, in choir with being (or having the opportunity to be) stealth, is a sentiment running strongly through the conversations with Lucas, Themis, Rick and James. And also often entailing an acute dimension of safety/danger. Rick tells me, frustrated over the nonexistence of gender-neutral bathrooms in his context, that he has experienced profoundly uncomfortable situations in which his non-passing did, indeed, become a problem within a cisnormatively structured space such as the bathroom. The bathroom is a site of contestation, not least within transmisogynistic constructions of trans women as ‘perpetrators’ encroaching on women’s spaces. Passing is to James “one of my top priorities”. For Rick it is “top tier important”, however he adds that desire to pass or not should not validate someone else’s gendered realness. This is where Stone’s discussion about passing can, indeed, be helpful in reminding that the aforementioned “paradox of passing” (Vipond, 2015, p. 29) is tied to dominant notions of binary gender and transition, reliant on cisnormativity. I argue, a discussion about how necessarily dependent cis-passing constructs the trans person as vulnerable to *not* passing, always centering around cisnormative gender embodiment, can and should be had without losing sight of the personal dimensions of desire, reaching Prosser’s “gender homes”, and safety passing provides; indeed without rendering the binary trans person who desires to pass anachronistic. And who is to say the nonbinary person does not, also, desire to pass?

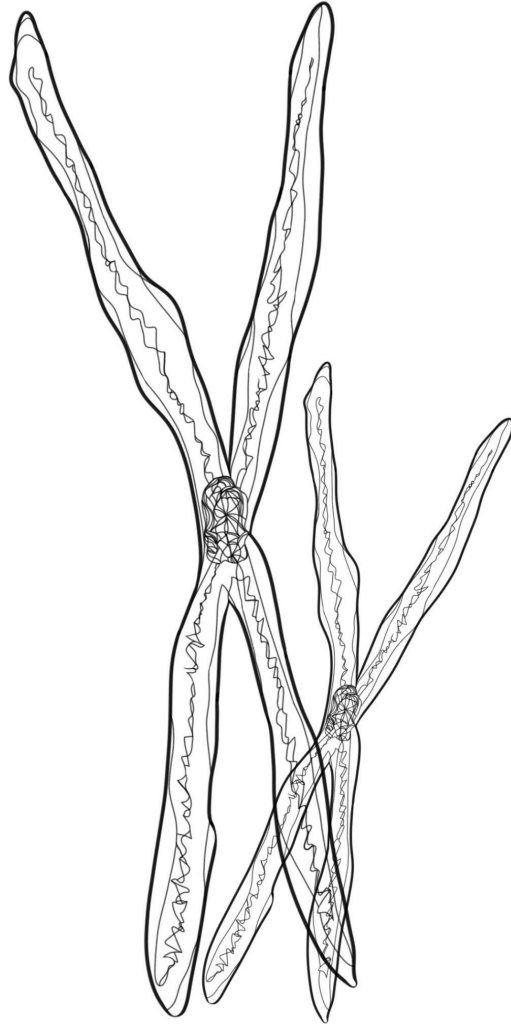
The ‘post’ in posttranssexual entails perhaps more of a theoretical exercise, envisioning that which appeared even more difficult to formulate at the time of Stone writing at the end of the

20th century. And the ‘post’ should not be understood, as Prosser warns, as “reading transsexuality as history” (Prosser, 1998, p. 203) with transgender subsuming all forms of gender identification and variance. Similarly, debates about ‘post’ in postcolonial and postmodern thinking provide inspiration. As Hall (1995) writes about Shohat’s (1992) critique of the ‘postcolonial’ as too politically ambivalent, leaving unclear whether this ‘post’ denotes a space chronological or epistemological, so too can the ambivalence of “posttranssexual” be read as a productive space, linking to Bhabha’s (1994) discussion of the shiftiness of in-between, *third*, *liminal* spaces that also provide possibilities for thinking about identities anew. Without fixing transsexual and posttranssexual, the ‘post’ here can speak to the emergence of identities *and* tensions within communities. ‘Post’ does not merely have to refer to an ‘after’ but can stipulate thinking about ‘going beyond’. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) discusses the extent to which the term ‘queer’ can be refunctioned – queer too has a haunted, derogatory history, although presently gaining positive resignification. Perhaps just like ‘queer’, transsexual can never be fully owned, “just redeployed, twisted, queered from prior usage” (p. 173), however its discursive power – and one that the transcum takes on to construct sameness/difference – still echos. Transsexual and transgender, ultimately, can coexist and be in conversation with one another, and within trans discourse I am willing to sit through the discomfort that transsexuality provides. However, I argue transsexuality loses its innocence when wielded as superordinate in relation to other trans categories. The transsexual body, from the transcum perspective, is the emblematic construction site in need of fixture. Trans, within the logic of transcum, does not only translate into the necessity of experiencing dysphoria. Trans is not something to simply *be* – indeed Themis disagrees with “the trans experience like an identity experience” – but something to *have*. Trans, invoking the requirement of gender dysphoria, intrinsically translates into a state of movement (and not a meta-physical but a physical one) through medical transition, made pertinent through dysphoria. The transsexual, and hence, transitioning body can never rest, never be, until the final (cis) form and shape, aided by medical technology, is reached. And is it not, while ambivalently giving recognition, also powerful to hold a certified medical diagnosis? Is it not providing a script through which to, ultimately, make sense of one’s own disorientation? It is, as aforementioned, one response to the medical model. And one in which I am as much complicit as I am trying to wriggle myself free. Trans invokes *desire* – and not the others-fetishising-trans-people-kind, although that one also, regrettably, exists – but desire to

cross, move, change, relocate. No relocation holds more authority than the one sanctioned by the endocrinological needle, the surgical cut, the gender judge. Against such power, how can the only socially transitioning ‘tucute’ figure prevail? Constructed is the (medically) non-transitioning, nonbinary ‘tucute’ as *in lack of* – in lack of even more than the “true transsexual” one. The “true transsexual” has, through medical diagnosis, accepted the desire to change. The ‘tucute’, however, remains in lack of having such desire as it is understood through the lens of medically transitioning.

But is it really the nonbinary that is meant when ‘tucute’ is employed? And might there not be another dimension entirely at play in understanding why, and how, one ends up on truscum subreddits?

Chapter Four



Speaking on Care and Harm: From Where the Truscum Stands

When Lucas opens up his understanding of truscum through a discourse of protection – protecting both those harmed by what is considered a ‘trend’ of identifying as transgender and those ‘really’ transgender from not being able to access trans healthcare, I immediately think: So *this* is interesting. I admit my surprise, not during the interview, but later in re-reading my transcript. His sentiment marks a turning point in my analytical thought in which I move *closer*, not farther, again. In order to understand the complexities involved in why one logs onto Reddit’s truscum spaces, I have to ask the question of what such spaces provide that other ones do not. In tension are two subject positions and responses to the medical model; often they are played out online, but they are also present offline.

I ask Lucas whether he has always considered himself a truscum, after I shared my own alienation in relation to corporate pinkwashing, neoliberal absorption of the ‘queer subject’ into the market driven by profit, and my own sense of shame in my identity preventing me from participating in marches and parties often present during Pride month. He says:

I think that it relates to what you were saying before. You said you’ve felt bad for not being prideful and I was saying that too. I think that it’s really – yes, I think that I have always been. But I just didn’t, I felt like it was wrong. And that I was being unkind to others and, you know, all that.[...] I feel like I have really tried so hard to make people on the internet not get angry. And now that I’ve deleted all my social media except for Reddit if you count it as that, and now that I’m just so removed from the internet, I feel that I’m actually having logical conversations with people [laughs] again, if you can even believe that that can happen. And just that has gotten me to a point where I just feel like I can be more open about my opinions and I don’t have to say ‘yeah of course you don’t need dysphoria, of course this, sure, yeah’. Even if that makes me feel like ‘ugh, that doesn’t seem right, that seems dangerous to say’.

He here, sarcastically, touches upon the Internet as a site of discursive tensions, in which algorithms structure visibility of information. Far from being a democratic, egalitarian space, the Internet, as aforementioned, also provides a crucial opportunity for connecting queer and trans youth. However, Lucas describes often encountering infographics dissecting the category of trans, arguing for an openness and fluidity not requiring gender dysphoria. He also mentions how, in the past, he has sometimes felt compelled by his peers to share these infographics and the internal tension such caused for him. Reddit, on the other hand, offers an already delimited online space – the truscum community – with set descriptions of for whom this space is intended,

i.e. all trans people believing one requires gender dysphoria. Similarly to how I have observed perspectives to resonate less aggressively when voiced in direct conversation with me, truscum subreddits, and subreddits overall, can produce what Massanari (2017) has termed “toxic technocultures” in which “retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race [are demonstrated to] push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism” (p. 333). Although there is a certain heterogeneity of truscum perspectives, with especially nonbinary being debated differently, the move onto Reddit in which dissent does not need to be endured to the same extent, is strategical and affective. So to return to my explorative question of whether Reddit’s spaces provide something distinct from Tumblr and YouTube in Chapter One, it is not coincidental that truscum finds home on Reddit. Above Lucas constructs the social media platforms he has frequented before, through the use of sarcasm, as not “logical” in opposition to “actually having logical conversations with people” on Reddit; although he later also mentions that, ideally, he would like to seek out offline face-to-face conversations with older trans(sexual) people. Reddit is also a placeholder in the seeming impossibility of offline trans community truscum agrees with; a function of both detaching from dominant trans discourse while remaining with one foot in.

Truscum, and reasons for joining truscum subreddits, also entails an emotional and affective dimension, not merely a response driven by theoretical, discursive intra-community disagreements. Lucas opens up his explanation of truscum not only through a frame of double-protection, but also through him “being less harsh” on himself in *allowing* himself to claim truscum, a category now providing internal coherence while knowing of the reputation truscum has to others telling him not to “listen to those [truscum] people”.

I am also reminded of James who writes, “needless to say that it [truscum] is a very friendly and open community”, and James mentions too not to be involved in trans discourse beyond his activity on Reddit; a condition again speaking to truscum’s detachment from dominant trans discourse, as well as the movement, through transitioning, away from transness. The degree to which another, maybe less normative, trans person feels welcomed or protected by truscum positions is of course nonetheless debatable. And as an online community built around the tricky critique of *other* trans communities, becoming, almost, a community that does not quite need to draw *on community* (refusal here thought differently) and solidarity across difference for political

strategizing through the use of the state-sanctioned medical model, truscum also does not set out to be particularly “friendly” or “open” to *others*, despite James – speaking from where the truscum stands – reading it differently. However, Lucas, Themis and Rick all tell me of their experiences in queer meeting groups and their sense of alienation, causing them to recede from these *physical* spaces. Rick, for example, says:

I used to be part of my university's LGBT space but ended up leaving because it was starting to get to the point of even if you're trans or not, being, identifying as a binary man actually started to feel, like, kind of like you were... I don't know, kind of like you were a spy or the enemy – I don't know, it was a weird feeling [laughs] I got. I would go in there and sometimes I'd just get the weirdest looks from people – maybe I had something on my face [laughs] – I don't know, I just had some instances where people would literally just talk about how toxic – like I get toxic masculinity is a thing but they weren't talking about just toxic masculinity, they were saying things like 'oh you know all men are bad' or 'all men are predators' or assholes, you know. Just 'insert stereotype'. And then when you try to be like, 'well, you know I identify as a man', they would then just be like 'oh well you're trans, it's different'. And I'm like [laughs]: I don't wanna be different!

Constructing masculinity as the bogeyman in a narrative of “all men are bad” does certainly not provide the nuanced, intersectional feminist analysis necessary to address axes of domination, patriarchal privilege and heterosexism. And to see trans men as, indeed, *lesser* men does leave a bitter aftertaste. Hegemonic norms of masculinity (Connell, 1995) presently exist and require negotiation, not least by trans men that are neither automatically lesser (and then, perhaps, more feminist) men, nor universally rejecting hegemonic ideals of masculinity. I, too, am negotiating my masculinity and feel conflicted when sitting in conversations with long-term friends slipping into the “all men are bad” narrative. I, too, wonder where exactly is my place in resisting patriarchal, cisheterosexist structures of oppression during March 8, still often framed as International Women’s Day – and the necessity of separatist spaces is one I understand, however when, more progressive, March 8 events phrase their inclusion of trans men in terms of excluding *cis* men, I sit with the ambivalent question of how, exactly, trans masculinity is misconstrued. Although in this project I focus on truscum men, truscum and transmedicalism is not a category solely inhabited by trans men (and I will discuss the nonbinary truscum in a bit). However, there appears to be a tension, stipulated perhaps by truscum’s more materialist understanding of gender, of being a man in this case, between embracing masculinity and trans men’s place in the queer/ feminist movement. Abelson (2016), in conducting semi-structured interviews with trans men in the US, explores the multiple responses trans men articulate to

feminisms, adopting and/or resisting, discussing how certain feminist spaces practice hostility in relation to trans men's engagement, in the form of their gendered realness as men (as in Rick's case above) *and/or* as trans being denied, consequently being ostracized. The truscum man, then, does not become the "son of the movement" (Noble, 2006), but the antagonistic caricature of toxic masculinity, seeking out Reddit instead – also a distinctly masculinized space (Mueller, 2016). But there seems to also be a slippage in Rick reading toxic masculinity – the performative aspect of gender: masculinity – as toxic *manhood*, the materialist understanding of gender: man. Men and masculinities become enmeshed until meaning the same, not least through Themis, when responding to my question about what makes a man a man with another, rhetorical, question: "How can you be a man without having testosterone?" Such is a perspective echoed in more traditional work on 'sex role theory' according to which men and women (and as the subtext reads, there is no room for the nonbinary, almost none for binary transness, here) are being *socialized* into appropriate roles of behaviour (Haywood, Mac an Ghail, 2003). Traces of a gendered essence, to be found in constructing too high or low testosterone levels as the culprit for aggression, 'effeminacy', failing or succeeding as men, serve here too in mixing men and masculinities. And drawing all too heavily on the importance of 'socialization' is also, as I would like to point out, a dangerously transphobic argument, employed for instance in constructing trans women as 'really socialized as (dangerous) men' – and at work in constructing trans men as 'really socialized as (non-threatening) women', or lesser men. It is perhaps, instead, worth asking the question that Stewart (2017) put forward: "What is (a) man, not embodied but philosophically?" (p. 285), a question whose nonbinary liminality provides comfort to me in not exactly knowing, not fixing.

But it appears the truscum man carries a sense of loneliness, exacerbated perhaps by the possibility of passing and being stealth, culminating in Rick getting "the weirdest looks". Lucas, who is so irked by other (trans) people not being able to relate to his experience, says that truscum subreddits provide a space for him to discuss transition-related questions and experiencing dysphoria:

I would say that I mostly go there just because I feel like there's really very few places where you can actually talk about medical transition and talk about dysphoria and not have to have somebody say 'oh you don't need to, like, you're still a man if you don't do this'. And it's... yeah, but I want this. I'm trying to seek it out. It just feels like the only space where I can actually interact with people who I know for certain are not going to

say those things and are not going to be someone with a vastly different experience than mine.

Similarly, Rick tells me that he likes post entries focusing on passing tips, as well as celebratory posts talking about having overcome a personal challenge that their dysphoria posed:

I just like reading about other people when they talk about – I don't know if you've seen some of the more positive posts that people post, like when they come out they're like 'hey I've started HRT [hormone replacement therapy] and I no longer feel this certain way' or 'hey I'm excited I'm getting surgery'. Those ones are not as common unfortunately but, you know, I prefer the updates where people talk about a piece of dysphoria being lessened or moved because I have noticed that, in some spaces, if you talk about – that are not like truscum – I've noticed that when you talk about dysphoria in other subreddits that are LGBT+ you do sometimes get the odd commentator who will then start, like, maybe arguing or commenting about how, like, you know, like 'just love yourself' - which it's important to love yourself but when you have dysphoria it's really hard. I don't want someone to just be like 'just love yourself' [laughs], I just want them to be like 'yeah, glad you don't feel as dysphoric'. Or there's a couple people who have tips or ask questions related to transitioning on truscum. Someone will be like 'hey do I pass?' or 'hey I'm struggling with this, how can I minimize my –'... like some people talk about how to dress to minimize their hips. Like someone was talking about clothes. I like those posts! Those are nice! [smiles] I mainly join just to be with a group who just believe dysphoria is required to identify as – I guess for medical transitioning. But as far as the tucute hate goes – it's kinda low on my radar.

This is where I can relate with Rick in having seen such posts, and understanding the dimension of care and community that is built in truscum subreddits. Through “network separation” (Haimson et al., 2021, p. 349), the anonymity provided by knowing one’s physical acquaintances are not present, a sense of safety and openness to share emotionally difficult and private details of one’s lives is constructed. Such is also the reason for why I, as a researcher, wanted to minimize any disruption caused by posting my call for participants as much as possible. Lucas, Themis and Rick all position themselves differently to discussions held on truscum subreddits, sometimes rejecting (as in the ‘nonbinary people take away resources’ narrative), sometimes adopting (‘tucutes narrow the public image of what it means to be trans dangerously’) opinions. However, Reddit also allows for the creation of an echo chamber (Gaudette et al., 2021), aided by its up- and downvoting algorithm that will increase the most popular post’s visibility while decreasing visibility for less popular posts in each specific subreddit. Not surprisingly, considering truscum subreddits are a response to not feeling heard, or seen, in dominant trans activism and discourse. But Rick also touches upon the “tucute hate” above, and it is time I elaborate on this category.

What's Behind the 'Tucute'

My friend and I take a long walk through Frankfurt. Way to save public transportation money. Besides, the sun is shining, promising spring in late December 2021. Our conversation trails along lazily, sometimes we simply walk in silence. It's not uncomfortable, but rather the sign of a long and intimate friendship. We can relax together. In my mind, I start humming *Enjoy the Silence* by Depeche Mode. Eventually, we enter into a posh neighborhood with beautiful apartment buildings, well taken care of balconies, plant pots on the porch that will show colorful flowers in spring. Then, my friend points to a row of windows above a pharmacy across the street.

"That's where my endocrinologist is," she says. We both look at each other and then start laughing slightly. Old white cis men providing hormones. We jokingly call her endocrinologist Harry Benjamin, the 21st century reincarnation of *benevolence*.

Then we continue, starting a conversation about legal gender marker change in Germany. I admit my ambivalences with the nonbinary category ('diverse') that is provided by the law, although often almost impossible to attain due to its intended use for intersex people, and in need of prior medical-psychiatric assessment. Interestingly, conversations on truscum subreddits about whether to grant nonbinary people recognition sometimes falsely draw on universally understanding nonbinary identities, through the medical model, as intersex.

"Oh, so you don't want to have that option on your ID?" my friend then asks. "I'm sorry, I just kind of assumed."

"No," I give back, surprised about the passion in my voice. "I always knew I didn't want to have an 'X' or a hyphen written there. Gotta get that 'M', it feels right." Then I pause, biting my lip. "But sometimes... I feel as though I'm betraying my nonbinary side. I even feel like I'm betraying it by being on T. I'm not sure that I'm still comfortable with this label."

My friend looks at me intently. "It's okay. You don't have to have it all figured out."

"But you know what gets to me?" I start to confess, "I feel like I've been spending too much time on truscum subreddits. Recently, I read a thread about how 'all nonbinary people are just binary trans people in denial', and I nearly wanted to smack my phone through the window. But it still made me think, *am* I in denial? I struggled for such a long time to feel worthy of occupying the space of 'he' pronouns, thinking I couldn't possibly demand from people to

gender me correctly when I wasn't on T. And I know, pronouns don't equal gender. I know, there are all those eloquent scholars writing beautiful meta trans and queer theory, but this is my *life*. This isn't theory."

The degree to which nonbinary is recognized on transcum subreddits varies, as I have shown. Whether grudgingly granted the category of transgender or wobbly defined through a discourse of intersex, nonbinary has slipped into transcum subreddits not only as a ground for theoretical debates, but also in the shape of nonbinary people themselves being present and calling themselves transcum. In the years since I have made contact with transmedicalism, not only has nonbinary as a category gained more visibility, aided by dominant trans activism arguing for the openness of the wider trans umbrella, but also so have more nonbinary people taken up the critique of transmedicalism. Remember the video that popped up on my ex-boyfriend's YouTube feed – the video that set so many things in motion? It, too, was a critical response to transmedicalism. Interesting remains the question of how nonbinary people claiming the category transcum negotiate such; a question for which I did not have sufficient space in this project but to which I can give a tentative answer.

Nonbinary is no longer the sole target against which transcum is defining its opposition, which is, perhaps, alleviated by the emergence of nonbinary as a more stable category, with a nonbinary script partly available. 'Stable' here does not mean fixity, really. I rather mean to draw on the notion of being able to be understood, gaining nonbinary gender recognition, within queer and trans spaces. Nonbinary, although barely recognized before the law in many contexts and rendered invisible by gendered language (think just of my German context in which a gender-neutral pronoun option is not as readily available as the English 'they'), is in the process of being solidified at this moment of trans activism and scholarship. No innocent process, however, when incorporated into too narrow an articulation of gender variance. And similarly to the discussion about what a 'post' entails, when slipping into a dichotomy of before/after, past/present, modernity/postmodernity, colonial/postcolonial, binary/nonbinary, transitioning=trans/non-transitioning=non-trans, perhaps something gets lost in reading the transcum's boundary project as merely a reactive force against the "posttranssexual", against the non-transitioning, *the nonbinary*. And what happens with nonbinary when the 'non', too, is only defined against the center (binary) it tries to work?

The normative nonbinary figure emerges as: white, slim, able-bodied, androgynous, using they/them pronouns (in Anglophone contexts), and quite possibly medically transitioning, hence, *dysphoric*. The script further writes nonbinary as, well, simply *not binary* – a liminal space in-between that Themis, from a binary perspective, reads as “in transportation” to not “settle somewhere”. Perhaps the kind of liminality provided by the normative nonbinary subject – with one foot in the truscum’s materialist definition of trans and hence *not* rendered abject, another foot in the performative dimension of gender *not* consolidated by medical transition technologies – can also serve as a reminder of the contingency and dialecticality of transsexual/transgender, transsexual/posttranssexual. Liminality as an anthropologically informed concept has first been articulated by Arnold van Gennep (1961), and later been advanced on by Victor Turner (1969) as “units of space and time in which behavior and symbolism are momentarily enfranchized from the norms and values that govern the public lives of incumbents of structural positions” (p. 166). Liminal space is characterized by inhabiting a *peripheral* position in relation to the social structure, here the binary cisnormative *and* transnormative society. Turner (1969) distinguishes liminality between rituals of status elevation and status reversal while the “liminality of those going up usually involves a putting down or humbling” (p. 167). And whereas this kind of liminality speaks to the conditional superiority that truscum exercises over other trans identities – while indeed, through medically transitioning, *escaping* the peripheral space of gender ambiguity – I also again read a tendency in distinguishing between pre-, liminal, and postliminal state (van Gennep, 1961) to which the normative (truscum) nonbinary can perhaps partly respond but that, too, closes thinking about the possibility of *residing in*, not transitioning out of, the liminal space. But here the normative nonbinary can exist on truscum subreddits, again consolidated by the dysphoric desire to transition. Here, *I* can exist, rendered intelligible by those I spoke with. In all my worries about how I will be received by truscum users online and in conversation, I am now realizing it is maybe not the seemingly normative nonbinary figure I represent that is rejected. But it certainly causes my shifting insider/outsider position to wobble when Themis refers to my pronouns – the one thing I really do not wish to talk about but feel compelled to elaborate on. Nonbinary, more than being “in transportation”, being ‘neither man nor woman’, means refusal to me. Nonbinary, as a metaphysics of refusal, is about referring to myself as both man *and* nonbinary, and sitting with the ambiguity that gender variance allows. It is to be brother, be sibling; be son, be child; be boyfriend, be partner. It is to enter, subversively, into a liminality

breaching the category of man, the category of nonbinary; widening the use of medical tools of transition to untie testosterone from the materiality of manhood and refusing to escape the peripheral/liminal space, and to instead reside in it. It is to bend that which is imagined possible and livable, theorizing a future possibility in which modes of gender can, perhaps, be thought “outside of the text” (Derrida, 1974) – that which certain strands of poststructuralism do not grant. Nonbinary is *my* hopeful response to the medical model that seeks to produce (only) the transsexual. And so I find a way of reconciling what I mentioned to my friend above as a rift between “theory” and “my life” – closeness and distance work again to let me flourish in a gender space that refuses to be clearly defined; and no longer am I afraid of truscum positions.

The tucute, the one “too cute to be cis”, is now a category also constructed as ‘trender’, reminding of Lucas wanting to prevent young people undergoing a transition they might later regret. The fear of a growing number of detransitioners (people reverse transitioning to the gender they were assigned at birth) is something highlighted especially by Lucas and Themis, against which they, too, guard the category of trans. And difficult this again becomes, for a constructed fear of detransitioners is often a discourse used by gender-criticals – the bogeyman here is the gender clinic that prescribes hormones, and especially hormone blockers, to minors seemingly too young to make informed decisions. However, as I have shown before, the medico-juridical powerhouse is anything but benevolently granting the tools of medical transition. I read *danger* – not in more people wanting, and having the opportunity, to access trans healthcare, not in allowing trans to mean more than the lacking opposite of cis – but in incorporating and perpetuating a frame of vision that will, ultimately, work to undermine even the most normative, gender-conforming trans(sexual) person’s ontological validity. And danger, too, in reading the shifty ambivalence of this third space (Bhabha, 1994) as in tension with and the culprit of losing rights in a time of exacerbated anti-trans legislation.

To my question about whether Rick sees any harm written into how tucutes represent parts of the trans community, he responds in saying:

I don't wanna necessarily paint them as the sole reason behind, you know, harm or how the trans community is viewed. But there are some instances where they're not necessarily helping us out. It's just so difficult because I think most of the time when people paint the trans community in such a negative light and blame, and pull out tucute ideology as their reasoning behind it, is generally when they're like right-wing

conservatives, you know? So it's not necessarily people's opinions that I really value [laughs]. I don't know, that's a hard question.

He seems deeply conflicted, also due to him not wanting to “police people”. Whereas Themis, in describing his construction of the *tucute* figure, elaborates lengthily on his position:

I've even seen this on LinkedIn, believe it or not. Even on LinkedIn. LinkedIn has this feature now that they put their pronouns [on] and I don't understand it. Like, honestly. What is the point of identifying with a pronoun that nobody knows, nobody uses and what will this get you? It will get you more misgendering because you feel that you're not that gender, so probably everybody will misgender you. So, what is the point? What is the point of creating your own gender? Honestly I don't understand that [laughs]. I really don't understand that, it makes me furious. Like, you wanna get a new personality? You wanna get a new identity? What do you want? So, I think that especially because they are young people – like, I haven't seen anybody over, like, 30 doing that or, I mean, I cannot see all the people of course, but I haven't seen even one – even one. So is it a new trend? I believe so. [...]. But then [emphasis] what's the point of going on LinkedIn or on Reddit or whatever and just going into arguments about people misgendering me? Today – I think today is, like, the trans visibility or whatever – I found it on LinkedIn, okay? [laughs] And, I saw so many of those posts. Honestly, you have no idea. So many of those posts. Like, 'Hi, I want to commemorate last year of coming out as whatever gender, my pronouns are xi' - I saw xi today. Or: 'I want to commemorate my coming out as, you know, just bisexual agender', like whatever it is. What's the point? So I really believe it's the personality. I mean, I – I know that it will sound bad [smiles] but I will say it – for those, I don't believe them. I really don't believe them. I'm trying to understand nonbinary. I cannot understand it. But I respect it.

Themis touches upon the center to which discussions on who exactly lies behind the category *tucute* have moved on *truscum* subreddits – focusing less on the nonbinary figure, while constructing a, usually young/teenage, person using neo- or xenopronouns (i.e. *zir*, *xi*) and deemed ‘inventing’ xenogenders, i.e. *catgender* (but also, as Themis remarks, *agender* for instance). Whereas the dysphoric nonbinary, although Themis “cannot understand it”, is able to be partly integrated into *truscum* discourse, the often seen as non-transitioning, young *tucute* still lacks dysphoric desire to transition. Against this construction, the *tucute* appears to *also* defend themselves – definitional disputes that have been observed by Jacobsen et al. (2021) on Tumblr as “anti-transmed” vs. “transmed”, invoking transphobia in return, currently present on subreddits. It is the *tucute*'s boundary construction at play when the notion of transphobia is employed, understood by Lucas as being called transphobic “just for being dysphoric, I guess”. And not an innocent one either, I would like to remark, as the word transphobia resonates strongly, it cuts through a conversation, whether online or offline, and marks a dissonance so loud that often the deployment of transphobia is also the end of any meaningful dialogue. Again,

there are conversations that quite possibly cannot be held and should not be expected to enter into or endure from a marginalized position. But what happens now?

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Do we drift further apart, each absorbed in our respective online echo chamber in which dissent is not tolerated? What do I do now that I have written so many pages about the danger of transcum while understanding the emotions behind it? Do we cut the T from LGBT, transgender/nonbinary not to be reconciled with transsexual? Can we, perhaps, agree that access to medical transition possibilities continues, and will continue, to be crucially important to be provided non-pathologically to a lot of trans people? And that not desiring to access any of those tools does not make one less, but rather differently, trans? Can the “true transsexual”, if they wish to, not exist without wielding their medical condition as a sword with which to defend the category of trans? Can different trans political projects, as they already do, not work in specificity *and* in solidarity with wider anti-oppressive struggles? Can we not, as Butler (2015) reminds, live a good life together, not alone? And indeed without shaking hands with a gender-critical, transphobic discourse and political project that seeks to negate, to eradicate, us? Assimilation (and I am not talking about passing here) will not protect us; it merely serves to secure a conditional privilege while the most marginalized (non-normative, non-passing, nonbinary, trans migrants/ asylum seekers, trans people – and especially trans women – of colour, trans sex workers) continue to be the ones most vulnerable to violence. The state and the law will not protect us – as seen in the current US case, it seems the law is working very hard to disallow us to the point of death. Where *is* this mysterious trans liberation I am talking about to be found? It rests in the polyvocality of political projects aimed at self-determination and de-pathologization; it allows for intersectional differences to be articulated geographically- and context-specific without constructing difference as *dangerous*.

Epilogue: What Remains

Some weeks before finishing up this thesis, I am visiting a friend in Berlin. It is April by now and the trees are budding everywhere in the city, a pitoresc painting mixed with the sight of cigarette butts, flying plastic bags and discarded beer cans on the streets. As we are spending our days by hanging out at the queer bar, walking over Tempelhofer Feld and drinking beer (as one ought to do in alcohol-loose Germany), I am thinking: This is the Berlin I remember and the one I have grown such a difficult relationship to. It is familiar and yet it is not, because I hold myself differently these days. Only when the train is rolling out of the city, carrying me back to Sweden, I realize just how much I needed this weekend. The last time I was in Berlin was in early 2020, living in a queer/trans seperatist house project that took me – a young nonbinary person that had just come out – in. When I first met one of my new roommates, she told me to a) never let a cis man in and to b) always lock the door; oh, and also, sometimes the police kicks in the entrance and raids the place. Although a vibrant space, I felt profoundly alone and shaken; February gave me too much time to sit with my gender trouble. I wrote my application for the master's programme there, charged with a feeling of defiant sadness. When covid came, I knew that home was somewhere else; home was Sweden. I rushed back there to finish my bachelor's thesis, leaving Berlin like an open wound I gave the blame for bleeding. Two years later, I admit my caution when stepping outside the train in April, thinking: Berlin, what will you do to me? As it turns out, wounds can heal; scars are beautiful. I can imagine a future in this city again, although probably I will never move there for long. Berlin is where my gender trouble started, Malmö is where I grew into the man that I am today, and somewhere in-between I have written this thesis.

That weekend, my friend shows me the queer bookstore they like so much. Inside, I finally get to hold the trans poetry collection in my hands that I have been meaning to buy for a year now. I circle around the bookshelves, smiling at the titles and spot Kae Tempest's poetry collection, later gluing a piece of paper over their old name – the names we were given and the ones we choose to carry, the words by which we are addressed and the ones we identify with, these things are political to me. When I approach the cashier, putting down a big pile of books, I recognize the man scanning the books for me, even behind his mask. We start talking about the trans poetry

collection, both beaming over what beauty is hidden in-between those pages. We don't have to say it, we both know this is a conversation just between two trans people, in a space that lets us just exist. I remember hearing his name first suggested to me a year ago by a friend – “Look, a trans man wrote a book.” Look, look, it appears we are everywhere, doing research, writing books, tending to our plants, cooking food, visiting friends, living, loving. Being. And – *growing up*. With all my ambivalences, I enjoyed talking to Themis who is 33, a little bit older compared to most people on truscum subreddits and in other trans spaces. I am grateful James wrote to me, trusting me as a stranger. I laughed with Rick about how easily you can be screamed at for a differing opinion on truscum subreddits. And I confided in Lucas about how emotionally challenging the month of June, Pride, is to me.

I have written myself through my difficult relationship with the medical model of transness, the norms by which we are governed within trans healthcare, the norms by which we govern other trans people in trans spaces, wielding the notion of the “true transsexual” to claim superordinate status over others, and wielding the notion of transphobia in return. Transnormativity has helped me understand what regulates us into compliance, poststructuralism was my attempt at gaining analytical distance to what feels so personal to me, refusal my methodological approach making autoethnography possible.

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After all, autoethnography – like my transness – is a liminal space; a different possibility. Here is a suggestion to do research differently, to enter into the risky business of breaking with style and format, without losing analytical rigor through writing in a way that
refuses to
fix, stabilize and close.

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